

Review

Collective memory and social media

Robbert-Jan Adriaansen^{1,2} and Rik Smit³

This review examines how the field of digital memory studies analyzes social media's transformation of collective memory. We trace theoretical reconceptualizations of collective memory to concepts like connective memory and memory of the multitude, showing how platformization reshapes remembering and forgetting through algorithmic curation. The review identifies new mnemonic practices enabled by social media – hashtag commemoration, memetic memory, and digital memory activism – which demonstrates how platform features both democratize and manipulate historical narratives. We identify key challenges: methodological and data access limitations, Western-centric bias, and artificial intelligence as emerging memory agents. As social media platforms continuously evolve as primary sites for memory construction, digital memory studies must constantly adapt its approaches to understand how societies remember in changing networked environments.

Addresses

¹ History Department, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands

² History Department, Ghent University, Belgium

³ Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

Corresponding author: Adriaansen, Robbert-Jan (adriaansen@eshcc.eur.nl)

Introduction

Collective memory is inherently communicative, as it is shaped by how groups share stories, commemorate events, and construct shared understandings of the past. Over the past two decades, social media platforms have fundamentally transformed these processes and have created new modes of remembering that blur boundaries between individual and collective, past and present, human and algorithm. This opened new avenues for analyzing collective memory but also urged its reconceptualization (see [Figure 1](#)).

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Reconceptualizing collective memory

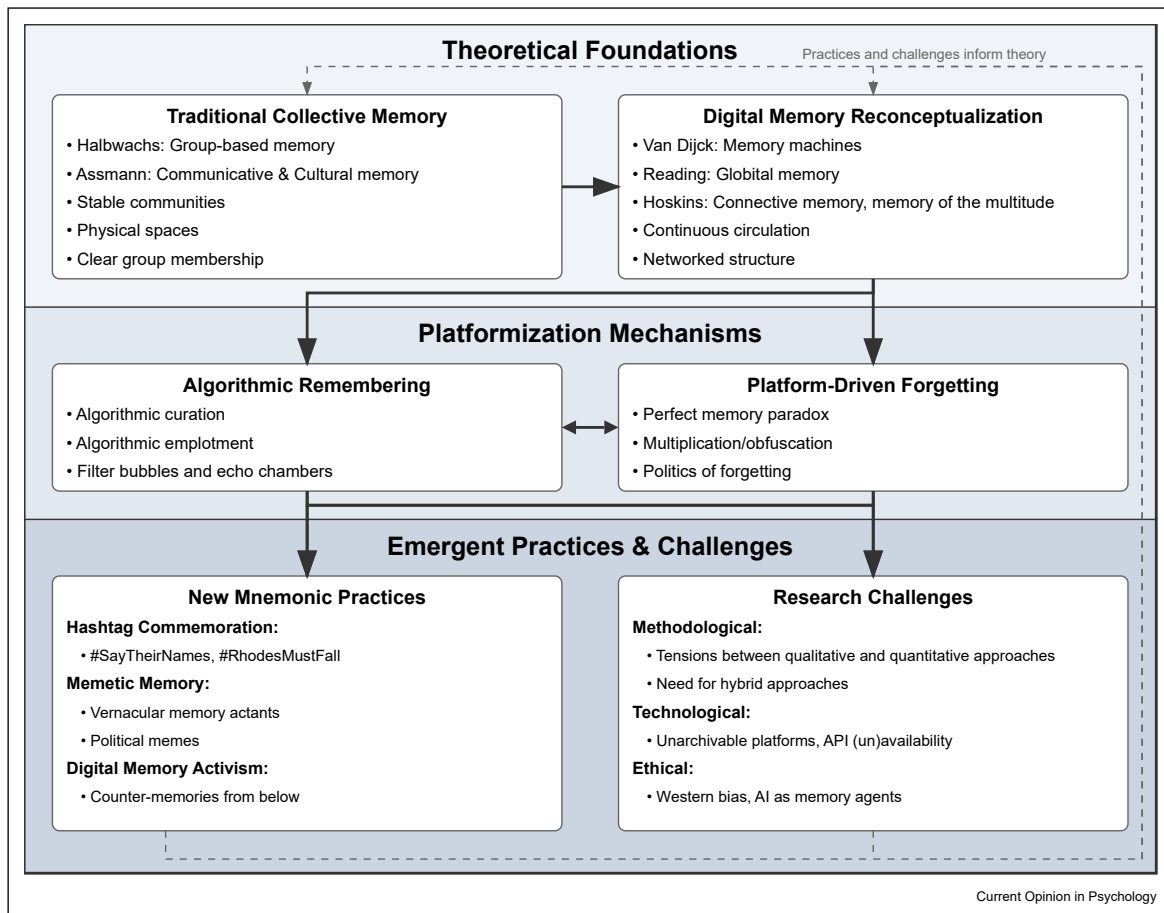
Collective memory, famously conceptualized by Maurice Halbwachs [1], posits that memories are not solely individual but are shaped and maintained by social groups. Halbwachs argued that group settings such as families, religious communities, and nations constitute the frameworks within which memory is constructed. Jan Assmann [2] further developed this idea by distinguishing between communicative memory – the informal everyday memories shared in conversation that typically fade after 80–100 years – and cultural memory – more durable, ossified and institutionalized memory crucial for creating lasting group identities that can persist across generations.

These foundational theories assumed collective memory to be bound to relatively stable communities with clear membership and shared physical spaces. The rise of digital communication platforms saw scholars increasingly challenge these assumptions. José van Dijck [3,4] was among the first to analyze this development in the 2000s. She showed how digitization changed the nature of memory objects like photographs. Contrary a physical photo kept in a shoebox, digital photos can be endlessly copied, edited, tagged, shared, and recontextualized. Computers, Van Dijck argued, shifted from being storage devices to “memory machines” that actively process and present our pasts back to us.

The implications go beyond individual memory. Reading [5] introduced the concept “global memory” to describe how memory functions at the intersection of globalization and digitization. When, for example, a video of police violence goes viral, it can become part of both a hyperlocal community memory but also of a global networked discourse about systemic injustice.

Andrew Hoskins further reconceptualized collective memory with “connective memory” [6] and “memory of the multitude” [7]. While traditional theories of collective memory imagined memory to be grounded in group processes, and constructed and stored in their narratives, practices, and institutions, Hoskins argues that digital networks do more than connecting existing memories – they change how memory works. Memory is less about storage, retrieval and broadcasting to audiences, and more about continuous circulation and transformation. The “multitude” is not simply a group of individuals, but a new social subject that embodies a

Figure 1



Framework showing social media's transformation of collective memory.

new form of mnemonic agency that emerges from the networked interactions that no individual or group fully controls.

These theoretical reconceptualizations gave way to the growing field of digital memory studies [8], which studies how memory is stored, represented, and communicated via digital media. Central to this field is understanding how social media platforms actively shape memory rather than neutrally transmitting it [9]. The concept of “platform affordances” — what platforms technologically enable or constrain and how users perceive and use the possibilities they have to communicate — becomes crucial [10]. Instagram’s emphasis on visual content and affordances, for example, fundamentally changed how memories can be formed and shared, as the platform facilitated “instant nostalgia” through its photographic filters which allowed users to document their lives through a nostalgic lens [11].

Platformization: remembering and forgetting on social media

One way to understand social media’s impact on memory is through the concept of platformization. Originating in media studies, platformization describes how cultural production is contingent on a small group of platforms and that cultural products are “malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation” [12]. Applied to memory, platformization means that our pasts are not just stored but are actively and continuously (re)shaped by the infrastructures and logics of these digital platforms. This involves how memories are archived, how diverse digital traces are assembled into new narratives, and how memories can become ephemeral or commodified, all subject to the governance and commercial interests of the platforms [9]. The effects of the platformization of memory have urged scholars to look beyond traditional human-centered models of memory. Social media platforms

can no longer be seen as static repositories or archives of memory, but are “algorithmic memory technologies,” [13] – active agents in determining what is remembered and what is forgotten [14].

A very visible form of this agency is algorithmic curation, where platforms actively select, sort and present past content as “memories” to users, often without being prompted [13,15]. Jacobsen & Beer [15] analyze how Facebook’s “Memory” feature algorithmically selects which old posts to surface as memories in a datafied way, based on engagement metrics, identified relationships, and positive content. Such features create what Jacobsen [16] calls “algorithmic emplotment,” as platforms shape narratives about users’ pasts from fragmented data according to their own logics. Apple’s “Memories” algorithmically orders, weaves together, and presents users’ past photos and videos as “coherent, frictionless narratives”. Beyond the algorithmic configuration of personal memories, platform algorithms shape the broader memorialization of events. Algorithms help content spread throughout social networks and therefore partly determine which narratives of events gain visibility and credibility [17]. This also creates risks and biases. Exposure to “fake news” can lead to false memories or false beliefs about public events [18,19]. Algorithmic curation can also create “filter bubbles” [20] in which users keep getting served ideologically aligned content, which may polarize memory and make users more susceptible to distorted narratives, such as “visual fake history” or misleading historical analogies [21,22].

While platforms change the nature of remembering, they also affect forgetting. Mayer-Schönberger [23] influentially argued that digital technologies create “perfect memory” where nothing is forgotten – a position that urged lawmakers to introduce the “right to be forgotten” [24]. However, platform algorithms also create new forms of forgetting through multiplication rather than deletion: they generate so much information that specific memories become obfuscated [25]. Moreover, platforms also conduct an active “politics of forgetting” [26] by not highlighting images that evoke negative emotions – featuring ex-partners, deceased individuals or breakups – in their memory features, but also by removing mnemonic content that conflicts with their own guidelines, such as images featuring genocidal perpetrators [27] and nazi symbolism, leaving commemorative and re-enactment [28] groups to carefully navigate their online presence. Such careful navigation also occurs as a form of subtle resistance against outright censorship by regimes that try to enforce forgetting [29], which users try to challenge by reflecting upon the process of remembering and its suppression, or by using symbolic, coded, or even satirical online content as a form of collective defiance [30].

New mnemonic practices

Despite the increased power of platforms over memory, they have also enabled a variety of new memory practices that move beyond traditional types of memory. We will highlight three examples: hashtag commemoration, memetic memory, and digital memory activism.

Hashtag commemoration is a prime example of how platform features – hashtags – allow new modes of remembering. Ruiz [31] analyzes #SayTheirNames as a digital memorial practice that functions like virtual vigils. Posting victim names in combination with the hashtag is both a personal act of remembrance and participation in a broader movement. Hashtags create what Adriaansen [32] calls “latent mnemonic communities” – memory networks that form from shared digital mnemonic practices rather than explicit group membership. Hashtags like #RhodesMustFall facilitated the spread and staging of counter-memories as students protested colonial statues [33], which indicates how hashtags have become battlegrounds for competing historical narratives.

Memetic memory represents another new memory practice. While traditional collective memory theory emphasizes stability, coherent identities and shared narratives, internet memes rely on rapid mutations and remixing of content. Memes function as “vernacular memory actants” [34] and “memorial objects” [35] that democratize historical – but also propagate specific ideological – narratives [36,37]. This memetic memory work generally uses analogical reasoning. For example on TikTok where users connect historical events with contemporary audio and videos [38], or by (mis)reading emotions in historical art pieces [39]. It particularly has a political dimension: far-right communities circulate memes to construct alternative memories that reverse victim-perpetrator roles and celebrate violence [37], Indian political memes can be seen as a form of “folk” archiving [35], and Israelis use them to satirize Netanyahu’s memory politics [40].

These political uses of memes indicate the potential of social media for activism and political mobilization. This digital activism is what Fridman [41] calls civic action “from below,” which challenges hegemonic historical narratives through social media [42]. Activists use hashtags for commemoration and the dissemination of counter-memories [43], and use platforms to create alternative archives that can document state violence and systematic injustices [44]. These practices are particularly prominent during contemporary crises, as they allow to connect past problems to present struggles that can translate into future-oriented action [45]. Conversely, populist movements exploit the same affordances to recontextualize and negotiate their versions of the past [46], using “context collapse” [47] –

where diverse audiences and social contexts merge into a single online feed – to spread what Balbino [48] calls “elastic concepts” that effectively function as empty signifiers. Balbino’s analysis of Bolsonaroist social media use shows how decontextualized views of the Brazilian dictatorship allowed supporters to simultaneously celebrate democracy and authoritarianism by filling these terms with their own meanings.

Challenges for future research

Digital memory studies still face significant challenges, as platforms keep evolving and new technologies are introduced. These challenges are methodological, technological, and ethical in nature.

There is a recent surge in interest in methodology within digital memory studies, which is a welcome development given the theory-heavy origins of the field [49]. While most empirical studies employ qualitative methods [50], quantitative and computer-assisted digital methods gain traction as they promise systematic ways to analyze vast amounts of data [8,14,32,51]. However, scholars like Jensen et al. [51] also stress that the field has been slow to fully embrace these computational approaches. Consequently, there is a growing call to find a balance with established qualitative methodologies, perhaps through “hybrid methodologies” suited for the ontologically hybrid nature of memory in the “postdigital age” [49,52]. This “hybrid way” aims to integrate the strengths of various methodologies, from close qualitative readings to large-scale computational analyses, to holistically understand memory on social media.

The question of methodology leads to more practical and technological challenges. A major issue is data access and archivability. Platforms like Facebook are often “unarchivable by design” [53], and increasingly restrict researcher access through API changes and proprietary controls. This makes it difficult to capture stable, comprehensive records for digital memory research, with platforms acting as “archons” of their own data [53,54]. This restricts the methodological options scholars have and creates biases in terms of the platforms they study. This adds to an already existing overrepresentation of Western viewpoints and platforms in studies [50,55]. More diversification in terms of types of platforms – think of the memory work on instant messaging platforms, travel diary apps or dating platforms – or geographic representation – studying platforms like WeChat, Rednote or Helo – is desirable.

Finally, the rise of artificial intelligence poses new analytical challenges. Large language models and generative AI systems can function as memory agents, trained on vast cultural data [56]. Generating content based on learned patterns, they can actually produce new versions of the past rather than simply storing or retrieving

information [57,58]. Photorealistic AI images can and will further complicate the evidential basis of memory and the documentary function of images and videos as proof of past events. However, artists also explore these technologies to create experimental memory narratives [59], and new platforms allow the creation of “digital afterlives” of the deceased as chatbots or avatars [60].

Conclusion

Social media transform collective memory from a group-based phenomenon to networked processes in which mnemonic agency is distributed across humans, platforms, and algorithms. Digital technologies enable new memory practices while raising questions about authenticity, access, and power. Understanding these changes is essential as platforms have become primary sites for the construction of memory.

Author contribution

Robbert-Jan Adriaansen: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Rik Smit:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

8. This article argues that digital memory actualizes core theoretical claims of Memory Studies – memory as process, mediated, and performative. It identifies four major transformations: the new ontology of digital archives, the shift from narrative to database forms, distributed agency between human and non-human actors, and the evolution from mnemonic objects to assemblages.
13. This empirical study reveals how young adults experience algorithmic memory technologies as intrusive, dissonant, nostalgic, and practical, leading to diverse strategies including avoidance, curation, reminiscing, and identity management. The findings show users' contradictory and nuanced engagements with platform memory features.
14. In this paper, Makhortykh argues against the traditional user-centric focus in digital memory studies. He contends that platforms themselves, with their algorithmic logics and commercial interests, are primary mnemonic agents, shaping what is remembered and forgotten. This is a crucial intervention that calls for shifting analytical focus from individual users to the power structures of the platforms, a central theme in our review.
18. This article presents a meta-analysis that synthesizes evidence on the relationship between misinformation and memory. Its major finding is that exposure to fake news has a demonstrable effect on creating both false beliefs and, more significantly, false memories about public events.
32. This article introduces the concept of "latent mnemonic communities" – mnemonic networks in which users – often unconsciously participate – that emerge from shared digital practices (like using specific hashtags) rather than from explicit group identity. It demonstrates how hashtag co-occurrence analysis can be used to map these networks.
37. Focusing on the memory of the Yugoslav wars, this study analyzes how far-right groups use memes transnationally. Ristić shows that memes are used not only for humor, but as tools for "digital memory activism" that constructs alternative historical narratives, often reversing victim and perpetrator roles.