![digital icons — Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media](logo)

Web Wars: Digital Diasporas and the Language of Memory
(An Announcement of the
HERA Research Project,
University of Bergen)

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Abstract: *Digital Diasporas and the Language of Memory in Russia & Ukraine* is a three-year research project within the collaborative HERA-funded project *Memory at War: Cultural Dynamics in Russia, Poland & Ukraine*. Led by Dr Alexander Etkind (Cambridge University), this project zeroes in on the ongoing memory wars between Russia, Ukraine, and Poland – nations where political conflicts take the shape of heated debates about the recent past. For *Memory at War*, five European universities—Cambridge, Helsinki, Tartu, Groningen, and Bergen—cooperate to scrutinize Eastern Europe's memory wars from varying angles. *Web Wars* is the Bergen pendant, which focuses on their outlines in digital media, and Russian and Ukrainian social media in particular. This submission maps the project design, methods and research objectives.

Keywords: digital media, social media, cultural memory, history, Russia, Ukraine, language

In summer 2010, the University of Bergen launched a three-year project on memory debates in Russian and Ukrainian new media, funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA). The project is part of a larger project, led by Dr Alexander Etkind (University of Cambridge), which focuses on the ongoing 'memory war' between Russia, Ukraine and Poland. Memory at War – as the larger project is called – explores how, in these countries, political conflicts take the shape of heated debates about the recent past, and especially World War II and Soviet socialism. The Memory at War project is a transinstitutional endeavor in which the Universities of Cambridge, Helsinki, Tartu, Groningen and Bergen cooperate to scrutinise Eastern Europe's memory wars from varying angles. The

Bergen team focuses on its outlines in digital/social media, with a local project called *Web Wars: Digital Diasporas and the Language of Memory*.

Web Wars

Web Wars explores the world of Russian and Ukrainian social media, whose readers find themselves embedded in a world of digital wars, where alternative histories thrive and multifarious memories compete for position. Members of the blog community *Russia_Ukraine* quarrel over the roles of the two countries in World War II. Chatters on the memory site *Born in the USSR* debate the territorial integrity of Ukraine and the role of memory in determining the geographical bounds of national sovereignty. Participants of the social-network group *Russia♥Ukraine♥Belarus* discuss Soviet repressions in Ukraine, while groups registered on the Ukrainian social media site similar to Facebook (www.connect.ua) fight to rehabilitate public memory of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and honour its veterans. The member populations of each of these memory-related groups and chat fora are large but unknown. Discussion entries follow one another with intervals of mere minutes or seconds, and their authors post messages from all over the globe. With its speed, accessibility and accommodation of anonymity, the Internet is radically changing the way memory travels between generations and communities. At the University of Bergen, the Web Wars research team singles out and unravels these post-Soviet online vectors of memory.

Objectives

In recent years, a number of scholars have shown that new media generate innovative, formerly hard-to-unearth forms of self-expression, communication and commemoration (Van Dijck 2007; Kalay et al. 2007; Garde-Hansen et al. 2009). Contrary to what their studies might suggest, digitally 'mediated memories' (Van Dijck) are not restricted to Western European and American virtual space. New media also affect commemorations of the recent past in less explored parts of the world, such as Russia or Central and Eastern Europe. Digital media are pivotal to memory culture in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, where the past is as alive as the present. The Bergen project zooms in on web mediated memory particularly in this region, whose study requires a refined understanding of trauma narratives and post-traumatic identities.

In doing so, Web Wars focuses on Russian- and Ukrainian-language social media. While the number of Russians and Ukrainians currently accessing the Internet is relatively low for Europe, a recent survey named Russians one of the world's most active social-networking audiences (ComScore 2009), and statistics indicate a similarly intense social-media activity among Ukrainian web users (see http://ivox.com.ua/). Although their public spheres see varying degrees of political expression offline – Ukraine has an increasingly open television and print media, whereas Russia does not – the rapidly growing digital communities in Russia and Ukraine are becoming strongly politicised in equal measure (Kyj 2006; various publications in *The Russian Cyberspace Journal* 2009). In Eastern Europe, politics loom large in blog comments, social networking discussions, and guestbook entries, even when these are not specifically dedicated to history or political relations.

Users frequently evoke the traumatic past of World War II and Soviet socialism, and the Web Wars team explores their 'transnational trauma text' with a special focus on its *language*. On Russian and Ukrainian webfora, discussions of the Soviet experience acquire linguistic forms that differ substantially from pre-digital predecessors. Indeed, the technological ramifications of online communication – interactivity, user-led text production, combinations of textual and visual elements, transcoding and modularity – affect commemoration practices in radically new ways. The project will test recently developed scholarly insights into language and new media (such as those found in Rowe & Wyss 2009, and those explored by the *Future of Russian* project (see http://www.uib.no/rg/future_r)) and brings the concept of memory into the debate by analyzing how new social media technologies in Russia and Ukraine alter public and private commemorative discourse. Put somewhat differently, it examines *the online language of memory*.

The language of memory: online, that language unfolds in the 'diasporic' or emerging 'transnational' public sphere (Appadurai 1996; Fraser 2005; Benhabib et al. 2007) rather than in geopolitically confined spaces. In that diasporic sphere, nationally defined identities blur. They do so especially in Ukrainian and Russian new media: its users not only take us beyond the oral and written to novel, digital communities, but they do so while partially sharing a joint past and language. Their memory narratives intertwine and compete in a 'digital diaspora', where political opponents often exchange replies in the same language without knowing the other's offline (geographical, political, or linguistic) identity.

How does the scattered, 'diasporic' nature of online communication affect notions of Ukraine or Russia as national communities? And how does it affect processes of cultural commemoration, remembrance, and mourning? These questions are central to the project. Existing scholarship on 'digital diasporas' (Brinkerhoff 2009; Everett 2009) takes the concept literally and explores only expatriate communities. The Web Wars team revises this concept in order to break new ground, expanding 'digital diasporas' to encompass *all* web users in Russia and Ukraine.

Research Design

Delving into a practically unexplored blend of disciplines – new media studies, memory/trauma studies, and the study of Slavic cultures – the Bergen team adopts a multidisciplinary approach. In order to tackle the vast corpus of new media texts under study, it marries an expertise in qualitative cultural-studies analyses to content analysis – a social-sciences instrument that allows scholars to process large bodies of text, audio, video and image data with content analysis software (Neuendorf 2002; Krippendorff & Bock 2008). In cooperation with colleagues from Cambridge, the project utilises content-analysis software to (i) participate in the charting of Russia- and Ukraine-related memory events; (ii) identify their conceptual names in Russian and Ukrainian on- and offline media; (iii) map the references to these conceptual names in different digital media with the help of NLP software ('Statistical Natural Language Processing') (Manning & Schütze 1999); and (iv) employ the resulting charts in a cross-cultural analysis.

The project research is rooted in two theoretical notions: *mediated traumas* and *cursory memory narratives*. Crucial to our analysis of memory events is an aspect of digital comme-

moration that has not yet been the object of systematic exploration: its trauma component. The Bergen team holds that Eastern European social media are saturated with *digitally mediated traumas*. In studying these traumas, it blends the limited but growing body of scholarship on trauma narration in post-Soviet space (Wanner 1998; Etkind 2004; Gabovich 2005; Plokhy 2007; Ermachenko 2007) with recent theoretical inquiry into digital re-mediations of memory (Van Dijck; Garde-Hansen et al.).

The semiotics of online discourse are idiosyncratic. In cyberspace, abbreviations and spelling aberrations are all but the norm (Lunde/Paulsen 2009; Rutten 2009), as are the visual signs (e.g. icons, emoticons, userpics) that can accompany them. Accordingly, the Internet generates previously unrecorded strategies of commemoration. Emblematic for digital memory practices are *cursory memory narratives*, which absorb, reiterate, and transform patterns of oral and written communication (Wysse & Rowe) and then complement these patterns with iconic elements, typos, and linguistic deviations incompatible with oral discourse. Web Wars studies this transformed language within selected Ukrainian and Russian online communities, exploring its various uses in the ongoing online Memory War.

Team

Web Wars is a project that runs from June 2010 to June 2013. Principal Investigator is Dr Ellen Rutten, Postdoctoral Researcher in Russian new media at the University of Bergen. While she coordinates the project, most empirical and theoretical research is conducted by the Moscow cultural historian Dr Vera Zvereva, who is affiliated to the project as a researcher between September 2010 and September 2012. This core team regularly meets with the other Memory at War participants, as well as with a team of local colleagues, including Dr Ingunn Lunde (Professor of Russian), Martin Paulsen (Post-Doctoral Researcher in Ukrainian and Russian New Media), Jostein Bortnes (Professor Emeritus of Russian Literature), and Jill Walker Rettberg (Associate Professor in Studies of Digital Culture).

In August 2011, the Bergen team will host the conference 'Old Conflcts and New Media: Commemorating the Socialist Experience Online', where it seeks to unite leading scholars and practitioners of Russian and Ukrainian online culture. In addition, with Dutch film director Maartje Gerretsen, it produces a documentary on commemoration practices in East European new media. Together with a monograph and a series of scholarly and public articles on the topics at issue, these project outcomes will be published here and in other relevant media.

Project's websites

www.web-wars.org
www.memoryatwar.org

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