Reports and Commentaries

3ʳᵈ GLOBAL CONFERENCE
"DIGITAL MEMORIES: EXPLORING CRITICAL ISSUES"
by Dieter De Bruyn

The 3ʳᵈ Global Conference "Digital Memories: Exploring Critical Issues" took place on 14-16 March 2011 in Prague. The conference was one of many organized by Inter-Disciplinary.Net, a non-profit research and publications network that was founded in the UK by Rob Fischer (http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/). The network is divided into three domains, each of which is further divided into three "hubs": "At the Interface" covers the thematic hubs "Evil", "Diversity and Recognition", and "Higher Education"; "Probing the Boundaries" comprises "Humanity, Hostility & Violence", "Making Sense Of", and "Persons"; finally, "Critical Issues" consists of "Transformations", "Cyber", and "Ethos". Each hub is a collection of a series of "projects" that bring together specific activities (both conferences and publications). The "Cyber" hub, for instance, not only covers the "Digital Memories" project, but also the related projects "Urban Popcultures", "Visions of Humanity", "Cybercultures", and "Videogame Cultures". Though this multitude of topics is rather ambitious for a scholarly network that is being run by volunteers, the Inter-Disciplinary.Net team seems to be successful in organizing scholarly meetings and conferences at a rapid pace, while the regular publication, after each activity, of an e-book containing the majority of the presented papers guarantees the durability of the different projects. The main preoccupation of the network lies in supporting all kinds of interdisciplinary scholarship. Its principles are equality of the participants (as opposed to traditional forms of academic hierarchy) and the "creation of self-sustaining communities of dialogue" (as opposed to the growing commercialization of higher education).

The overall aim of the "Digital Memories" project is "to examine, explore and critically engage with the issues created by the massive exploitation of digital technologies for inter-human communication and examine how online users form, archive and de-/code their memories in cybermedia environment".[1] Previous conferences on this topic took place in Salzburg in 2009 and 2010 (at the latter conference there was only a Digital Memories track

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[1] Cf. http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/critical-issues/cyber/digital-memories (accessed 2 May 2011)

within a broader conference). Of particular importance was the 2009 conference, which hosted influential scholars in the field such as Andrew Hoskins and Anna Reading,[2] and resulted in an e-book.[3] This year's conference welcomed no less than twenty-six specialists covering a wide range of topics that all pertained to the project's key themes.

Despite the overall atmosphere of collegiality and scholarly interaction during the meeting in Prague, the conference commenced with a false start on Monday 14 March. As the three delegates that together formed a panel on "Concepts in Digitising Individual and Community Memory" did not show up, the programme had to be rescheduled promptly. The first session on "Social Networking and Its Impact on Memories" proved to be one of the most coherent of the entire meeting. Bernadette Kneidinger (University of Vienna) presented a paper on the construction of regional, national, and transnational identities within social networks. Her analysis relied predominantly on an online survey of Austrian Facebook users (i.e., of their attitudes and strategies toward regional, national, and transnational identity), rather than on an examination of the socio-technical practices underlying the use of social networking sites. A similar methodology (interviews and content analysis) was used by Alessandra Micalizzi (IULM University, Milan) in her research on processing and remembering the 2009 Abruzzi earthquake through the use of Facebook groups. Her conclusion was that what these practices create at best are "chrono-digital narratives" that may function as a source for collective memory, without ever merging with it. Closer to the idea of collective memory within a digital context are, perhaps, final articles on Wikipedia. In her presentation of a large-scale project on Wikipedia pages related to traumatic events, Michela Ferron (University of Trento) stressed the importance of the socio-technical practices underpinning these pages. As the analysis of both editing and discussion pages on Wikipedia proves, final articles devoted to tragedies such as the September 11 attacks tend to display an increase of user activity during anniversaries.

The next session on "Platforms and Applications" further explored the ways social media platforms and other digital resources can be used as a tool for collective identity studies. First, Martin Pogacar (Ljubljana) discussed the potential of YouTube as a platform for remediating and repurposing the Yugoslav socialist past. As it supports a rich variety of performative and interactive strategies the platform appears to be a popular tool for political action and nostalgic commemorations of the socialist past within the current context of post-socialist nationalist exclusivism. Of a completely different nature was the talk by Véronique Montémont (Université Henri Poincaré, Nancy & Institut Universitaire de France) on the extraordinary afterlife of the early French-language digital database Frantext (www.frantext.fr). As Montémont argued, the ongoing use and enrichment of this database from the 1970s is not an act of preservation, but it helps to serve a specific research agenda; more specifically, the selective extension of the corpus (e.g., with all kind of autobiographical writings) and the presence of the powerful search engine Stella turn the database into an appropriate tool for all kinds of research (e.g., her own inquiry into left-wing discourse in autobiographical writing).

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[2] Cf., for instance, the following volume that they co-edited together with Joanne Garde-Hansen: Garde-Hansen, Joanne, Andrew Hoskins and Anna Reading (eds). *Save As… Digital Memories*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

[3] Cf. http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/DigMem-1.3d.pdf (accessed 2 May 2011)

The first session on Tuesday 15 March focused on the ways memories are subject to transformations and re-interpretations as they are being digitally (re)mediated. As Lori Kendall (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) demonstrated in her presentation, the meaning of memory documents such as photos and notecards already starts to change as they leave their analogue form for a digital one. Her exploration of the intersections between digital memory, family documents, and family history practices centred around the ethnography of a digitally created (yet distributed both digitally and in printed form) family document on one of the family members' participation in the Czech-American Sokol organization in rural Kansas. In her paper Mila Maeva (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences) presented the results of her anthropological research on online practices by the vital community of Bulgarian emigrants in the UK, and more specifically on the importance of shared memories of the socialist past for emigrants partaking in the popular Internet forum BG Help (http://bghelp.co.uk). In the last presentation Valentina Gueorguieva (University of Sofia) approached the issue of online mediations of the socialist legacy from a different angle. Through a series of examples of digital "remixes and appropriations" of the Buzludzha Monument (a now abandoned tribute to the creation of the Bulgarian socialist movement) she substantiated her claim that such "virtual" representations could be seen as a form of communicative memory, as opposed to "real" articulations of cultural memory. Yet, as some of the more profound digital creations proved, these contemporary reanimations of abandoned sites of memory certainly have the potential to become instances of cultural memory themselves.

The next session on Tuesday ("Digital Memories and Cultural Heritage") was devoted to the use of digital applications in museum collections and in history education. Merja Nummi (Kankaanpaa Town Museum) and Leila Stenfors (University of Turku) presented the results of their research on the use of collaborative media services for oral history collection by three Finnish memory institutions. Their conclusion was that no matter what shape the introduction of Web 2.0 services took, they all displayed a strong top-down orientation (from the organization toward the users, or rather, the audience). Without permitting more bottom-up (user-generated) practices, both scholars argued, such initiatives are condemned to remain unused and – eventually – forgotten. Olivier Nyirubugara (University of Amsterdam), for his part, was more optimistic about the use of digital media, and more specifically of cultural heritage clips, within secondary history education. As his ethnographic field research in a Dutch secondary school showed, the use of online clips not only made the pupils more attentive and engaged, but they also yielded particular reactions and gestures revealing profound historical thinking.

The session that concluded the second day of the meeting grouped four papers focusing on the topic of remembering war and conflicts in digital environments. Dieter De Bruyn (Ghent University) presented a series of Polish examples of World War II and Holocaust commemoration that have recently appeared on the Internet – both on Facebook and on private and institutional websites. His main premise was that "what determines the commemorative value of such online activities is, above all, their performative effectiveness". Such effectiveness, he argued, is "less dependent on the *presence* of all kinds of Web 2.0 features than on the *emergence*, out of such online performative gestures, of a collective 'memory community' or 'event'". Next, Gloria M. Boone (Suffolk University), Barbara Abrams (Suffolk University), and Linda Gallant (Emerson College) discussed the enduring importance of

iconic photos symbolizing Jewish life (and more specifically, the persecution of the Jewish population) in Europe during the 1940s for the digital transmission of Holocaust memory. Ellen Rutten (University of Bergen) provided an instructive outline of the basic premises and methodological tools of "Web Wars: Digital Diasporas and the Language of Memory in Russia & Ukraine" (http://www.web-wars.org), a Bergen-based research project on digitally mediated traumas of war and communism in the post-Soviet space. The project is part of "Memory at War: Cultural Dynamics in Russia, Poland & Ukraine", a large-scale, transinstitutional project led by Cambridge scholar Alexander Etkind. One of the first results of the project in Bergen will be the international conference "Old Conflicts and New Media: Commemorating the Socialist Experience Online" (Solstrand, Norway, 31 August – 2 September 2011). The concluding presentation by Philippe Campays (University of Wellington) included both a description and projection of the results of his artistic exploration, with digital (3-D) means, of the way in which commemorative architectures generate an effect on (and, in fact, physically affect) the body of those visiting them.

On day three of the conference there were again three panels. The first panel ("Past and New Architectures of Memory") centred around the influence that digital environments and their intricate architectures may have on how memory works and how it is being conceptualized. Carlos Henrique Falci (Federal University of Minas Gerais) presented two fascinating online projects (http://wefeelfine.org and http://www.blinksandbuttons.net) that make use of metadata to create new architectures of memories, or as he calls them, "metadata memories", which transform dispersed communicative memories (such as blog posts and digital photos) into "cultural memories in permanent construction". In his presentation Tim Fawns (University of Edinburgh) elaborated on the impact of the socio-technical practices engendered by digital photography on the process of "blended memory", a term he introduces "to conceptualize the balance of internal (biological) and external (physical, digital, or communal) memory". This balance, he argued, is likely to change as the purely representational procedures of semantic memory (e.g., an overload of photos depicting every detail of a past event) are increasingly supplanting the more active engagement of episodic memory (e.g., of one's own experiences during the depicted event). In the last paper Seppo Kuivakari (University of Lapland) presented his typology of simulation culture, which he considers to be "a specific cultural form of classification to represent cognitive interests on a physical platform utilizing achievements of modern science". As the media (the physical components) of simulation are changing, he explained, there will also be shifts in its other manifestations (its representational protocol and governing principle) and in its cognitive interests (e.g., the shift from analogy over possession to proposition).

The next panel ("New Media Formats") focused both on historical games and on game history. Daniel Riha (Charles University, Prague), who is also the leader of the "Cyber" hub, did a presentation on the controversies surrounding the creation of serious video games that recreate tragic historical events. He made clear that, while game developers are likely to be cautious when treating sensitive issues such as the Holocaust, critics of videogames often underestimate that the main focus of such games, even if they recreate painful histories, is on action and entertainment. In the other presentation of the session Jaakko Suominen (University of Turku) discussed several aspects of the practice of retrogaming – i.e., the current trend of "playing and collecting original classic videogames of the 1970s, the 1980s and the early

1990s, or using emulators for playing them". His conclusion was that this practice is a cultural form that involves more than just playing vintage videogames, and that it engenders several kinds of discourses.

In the last session of the conference ("Media Archaeologies"), Suominen introduced another aspect of his inquiries into new media history in a paper that was co-authored by Janne Mäkelä (director of the Finnish Jazz & Pop Archive – JAPA). More specifically, he presented the interesting case of a competition organized by JAPA in order to find the earliest (pre-1997) web page devoted to Finnish music. Although one may still discover traces of such pioneering work on the Internet, it appears to be impossible to systematically reconstruct even the slightest part of its history What this kind of exercises proves, the authors contended, is that if we want to start developing a more complete history of digital culture, we should "wake up and start [a] wide cooperative project for collecting, storing, preserving and studying the Internet material of the past". The two subsequent papers of the session in a way showed the flip side of this process, by highlighting the opportunities that digital technologies offer for the collection, storage, preservation, and analysis of individual and collective memories that for various reasons are threatened with disappearance. Patrick McEntaggart and Paul Wilson (University of Leeds) offered a fascinating glimpse into their ongoing project that intends to digitally preserve, remediate, and in a way even renew the communal practices of the decaying British Working-Men's Club. In the concluding paper of the conference Angel David Nieves (Hamilton College, Clinton) presented the most recent results of his scholarly and creative work on the intersections between architecture, social justice, and human rights on the Internet. Nieves is primarily interested in the role of digital archives in post-conflict societies across sub-Saharan Africa, and two of his most recent achievements include his participation in Soweto '76, A Living Digital Archive issued by the Hector Pieterson Memorial and Museum, and his creation of a second archive, Mapping Soweto, that looks more into the "spatial underpinnings of apartheid era projects".

Due to the rich variety of topics, the discussions following the paper presentations were informed by a need for more background information on the specificities of each particular project of case, rather than by collective attempts to integrate the respective conclusions and results into a series of more general assumptions and prospects for future research. While the latter kind of discussions is perhaps more likely to take place in the context of preformed panels on a single topic, the majority of the participants seemed to particularly like the open, non-hierarchical scholarly atmosphere of the conference. Also, the often very dissimilar backgrounds of the delegates (both geographically and disciplinarily) turned the meeting into a truly interdisciplinary event, yielding valuable scholarly intersections and even potential opportunities for future cooperation. The e-book collecting the majority of the papers that were presented at the conference is currently being assembled and is due out in the second half of 2011. The conference programme, abstracts, and a selection of the draft papers can already be retrieved from the Inter-Disciplinary.Net website.[4]

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[4] http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/critical-issues/cyber/digital-memories/conference-programme-abstracts-and-papers (accessed 2 May 2011)

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