



Memory and media in the twenty-first century

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1 Introduction

Media shape our memories. Humans have created external records to support remembering for thousands of years, ranging from cave paintings to archives, monuments, bodily practices, and printed books (see, for example, Donald 2001; Heersmink 2024). Media are used by both individuals and groups seeking to preserve and, at the same time, shape their identities and narratives of the past. This collection on “Memory and Media in the Twenty-First Century” encompasses nine articles that focus on the interactions and transitions between different media formats and modes of remembering, as well as between individual and collective remembering. To capture the multitude of perspectives and the multilayered nature of the phenomena under investigation, our understanding of memory draws on the concept of *connective memory*, which assumes that “memories are shaped by connections between people, objects, media, and institutions” (Ekelund 2023, p. 1; for the original formulation of the concept, see Hoskins 2011).

As memory and remembering are influenced by a host of cognitive, social, and cultural factors, they have become subjects of research in several fields. However, fully capturing and understanding the connections and the interplay between the various factors involved in remembering requires an interdisciplinary approach. Attempts have been made in memory studies to combine psychology with sociology (Barnier and Hoskins 2018) as well as with political science and history (Cor-

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donnier et al. 2022). Psychological and cultural studies have both observed that cultural narratives and media representations provide patterns for organizing one's own life narrative and understanding the past (Erl 2008; Fivush et al. 2011; Wang and Hoskins 2024). Accordingly, the present collection emphasizes the connection between psychology and media studies, focusing on various media formats, from digital platforms to literature and film.

In one way or another, our contributors are all interested in “prosthetic memories,” which are acquired through individual encounters with cultural representations of the past (Landsberg 2004, p. 19). At the same time, however, they are looking at different ways in which personal memories enter the realm of public culture in various mediated forms. Media are essential in shaping this constant dynamic between individual and collective forms of constructing knowledge about the past. Thus, understanding the practices of remembering in the twenty-first century is inseparable from understanding contemporary media landscapes, which are based on the complex interactions between old and new, analog and digital media.

Although established media formats and cultural institutions continue to play an important role in individual as well as collective memories, the transformations of the digital age have created not only new possibilities but also new challenges. For instance, people living in the twenty-first century tend to preserve much more information about their private and professional lives than previous generations (e.g., Hutmacher et al. 2024a). In a similar vein, social and new visual media may have a profound impact on the way in which collective memories are created, told, and remembered. Many important questions regarding the role of media for memory and remembering in the twenty-first century remain unanswered. Our contributors explore the current state of the art and sketch avenues for future inquiry across four main areas of research located at the intersection of psychology and media studies: the (re-)constructive nature of memory and knowledge; remembering past conflicts; media archaeology and digital transformation; and memory and emotions.

2 (Re-)Constructive nature of memory and knowledge

Memories are never simple mirror images of past events but are deeply reconstructive in nature. The way in which individuals and collectives alike document and remember, interpret and narrate the past is profoundly shaped by their motives, as well as a wide range of social, political, cultural, and media-based factors. This fundamental insight is by no means new but was already observed at the very beginning of modern research on memory and remembering (e.g., Bartlett 1932; Halbwachs 1952 [1925]). Although the (re-)constructive nature of memory and knowledge is a cornerstone of contemporary memory studies, several publications in the present collection add further nuance to what we already know. Focusing on knowledge rather than memory per se, Joachim Kimmerle (2025) points out that collaborative knowledge construction means more than a pure combination of the information available to the individual members of a group. Quite the contrary: the act of bringing together individual knowledge is likely to create new insights that emerge from this exchange. Importantly, this basic idea can be applied to a wide range of set-

tings, ranging from the classroom to the creation of Wikipedia articles and human–AI interactions.

Such joint efforts in collaborative and mediated knowledge construction and memory work are exemplified in the contributions by Paul Primbs (2026) and Verena Baier (2026). Primbs analyzes user comments about two movies from 2003 and 2005 published on a digital platform popular in Russia. He investigates how the idea that the “wild 1990s” mark a strictly separate historical era from the “stable 2000s” is negotiated between the overarching political discourse, the perspective portrayed in the movies, and the reception by the viewers. Baier focuses on a different historical example, namely US activism in the context of the Nicaraguan Revolution and the subsequent US interference in the 1980s. She shows that online platforms can create a memoryscape that enables formerly connected activists, now geographically dispersed, to maintain ties, as well as to negotiate memories and collective identities based on these memories.

3 Remembering past conflicts

The (re-)constructive nature of memory and knowledge becomes particularly prominent when it comes to remembering past conflicts: Here, different groups and individuals will almost naturally hold different perspectives and different opinions, depending on which side of a conflict they find themselves. This is illustrated by the contribution of Aileen Oeberst et al. (2025), who found that the visual depictions of intergroup conflicts on Wikipedia show signs of ingroup bias, that is, they tend to present the ingroup in a more favorable light than the outgroup (for similar evidence regarding the content of Wikipedia articles, see Oeberst et al. 2020). This seems particularly interesting as Wikipedia articles are the result of collaborations and negotiations among a large number of authors and can therefore be seen as an approximation of the collective representation of certain historical events within the respective language communities.

Of course, past conflicts are not only discussed and remembered in different ways *across* different societies but also *within* different societies. This is demonstrated in the contribution by Aline Cordonnier (2026), which traces how descendants of Belgian former colonials view their families’ past and how they respond to the publicly mediated discourse about Belgium’s involvement in colonialism. As Cordonnier argues based on interviews with participants over four generations, different families as well as different members within families show varying patterns of emotional reactions, ranging from experiences of both stigma and shame to neither of them.

Given the pain and the suffering that are caused by (armed) conflicts and given that the narratives of the parties involved are often strictly opposed, the question arises of how remembering past conflicts can go beyond perpetuating existing tensions. Svetlana Efimova (2026) draws on the concept of agonistic memory (Bull and Hansen 2016), which suggests that productive conversations about past conflicts can be achieved through reflective engagement with different perspectives. Through an in-depth analysis of two graphic novels for young people, she argues that the form

of comics is particularly well-suited to combining multiple experiential and media perspectives.

4 Media archaeology and digital transformation

In the early days of media studies, Marshall McLuhan (1964) defined media as “the extensions of man.” Thirty years later, Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers (1998) developed their influential concept of the “extended mind,” using the example of a patient with Alzheimer’s who relies on a notebook as an extension of biological memory. As different media offer different ways of supporting and externalizing human cognition, the history of technology has contributed to the “co-evolution of media, cognition, and society” (Schmidt 2008, p. 153; for a recent psychological perspective how digital technologies shape autobiographical remembering, see, for example, Hutmacher et al. 2024a, b; for empirical evidence, see Hutmacher et al. 2025, 2026). Accordingly, several publications in this collection analyze the social dynamics of remembering through the historical dynamics of old and new media. As new media typically build on and refashion previous ones (Bolter and Grusin 1999), several contributors investigate the contemporary digital age through the lens of media archaeology (Parikka 2012). They focus on the relationship between old and new media in archiving, autobiographical storytelling, and social networking.

Joachim Kimmerle (2025) reflects on the shift from the archive to AI as external support for human memory, highlighting the active role of AI in reinterpreting the past. Yuri Leving (2026) investigates the shift from material to digital archives through the case study of the personal archive of the Russian poet and prose writer Anatoly Naiman, acquired by Princeton University in 2023. The archive includes material objects as well as the poet’s personal computer, raising a number of ethical and ontological questions about remembering in the digital age. Leving emphasizes the paradoxical combination of fragility and reproducibility in digitally preserved memory.

Verena Baier (2026) examines shifts in autobiographical storytelling among a generation of US leftists who transitioned from letter writing in the 1980s to blogging in the 2010s and 2020s. Gilbert Shang Ndi (2026) identifies an archaeology of modern social media in Joyce Ash’s works. The Cameroonian author, who now lives in the USA, has used both old and new media to build community, as well as to remember and reimagine her homeland during the ongoing civil war in Cameroon. Ndi demonstrates the entanglements between digital media and the poetic word, regarded as the first social medium.

5 Memory and emotions

Memories are not only cognitive knowledge structures containing information about the what, when, and where of an event; memories—and especially those deemed meaningful and important—also have an emotional value (for a review on the intersections of emotions and autobiographical memory, see, for example, Holland and

Kensinger 2010). Crucially, emotional value does not merely accompany memories; it also contributes to their formation, maintenance, and reinterpretation over time. This emotional aspect of remembering concerns not only individuals but also group identities, which can be based on shared emotional experiences such as trauma or glory (Volkan 2013). In addition, the emotional dimensions of collective memories are often actively produced and reinforced through commemorative practices, public narratives, and cultural institutions. This also means that the affective significance of past events is not fixed but may evolve as historical circumstances and generational perspectives change. In other words, the way in which emotions are experienced and expressed is shaped by social and cultural practices that have a powerful political impact (Ahmed 2004). Of particular interest is the relationship between individual emotional experiences and the emotional representation of the past in public discourse (Ahmed 2004).

The present collection includes several articles discussing “felt pasts” (Jureit 2012) among groups of various sizes. Marina Balina (2026) investigates the interplay between public history and private emotions in contemporary Russia, focusing on memories of the Soviet victory in World War II. She examines the medial, material, and narrative mechanisms of the “affective management of history” (Oushakine 2013) evident in Russian culture since the mid-2000s. The title of Balina’s article, “Making public private,” refers to a psychological process that Aline Cordonnier (2026) discusses in a different historical and cultural context—how media representations shape personal and family memories. More specifically, and as already mentioned above, Cordonnier examines the interaction between public discourse about Belgium’s colonial past and private narratives of former colonists’ descendants. Verena Baier (2026) focuses on a group of US activists whose shared memory of the Nicaraguan Revolution has been (re-)constructed through affective digital narratives.

6 Conclusion

Because of their intuitive appeal, calls for interdisciplinarity enjoy considerable popularity in academic contexts. In some cases, however, interdisciplinarity ultimately boils down to researchers from different fields independently sharing their perspectives without engaging in genuine dialogue. Against this background, the central aim of the present collection was not only to bring together scholars from different disciplines who share their ideas about the relation between memory and media but also to create a space in which the interconnections between these diverse perspectives become apparent. As the previous paragraphs have demonstrated, the nine contributions to this collection are—despite their heterogeneity—centered around several common themes. Hence, we are confident that this collection provides a good example of the productive potential of interdisciplinary exchange within the field of memory studies; at the same time, we hope that the collection will inspire further dialogue between psychological, literary, and cultural perspectives on memory and media.

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