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EDITORIAL

The multiplicities of platformed remembering

Rik Smit¹ , Benjamin Jacobsen²  and Taylor Annabell³

¹University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands, ²University of York, York, UK and ³Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands

Corresponding author: Rik Smit; Email: p.h.smit@rug.nl

In October 2023, Google rolled out their newest smartphone Google Pixel 8. The smartphone received widespread media attention, especially for its new (algorithmic) features ‘Magic Editor’, ‘Magic Eraser’, and ‘Best Take’. These features promise radical flexibility, enabling users to reposition people and objects within images, enhance colours and textures, combine similar photos into one composite image in order to avoid people blinking, as well as reducing noises caused by cars or wind within videos. Although such effects may already be achieved with software such as Photoshop, some commentators have claimed that such applications are ‘merely one example of a more profound way that artificial intelligence (AI) might alter our very concept of the past’, meaning that ‘the camera roll of the future could be missing the little bits of texture that allow us to recall certain moments as they really happened’ (Warzel 2023). Yet for Shimrit Ben-Yair (Vice President of Google Photos and Google One), ‘perfecting’ and ‘reimagining’ images through generative AI ‘allow[s] you to easily enhance your memories’ and ‘get the most out of your memories’ (2023).

The example above illustrates that digital technologies, smartphone devices, and social media platforms do not only provide a space where mediated memories (Van Dijck 2007) can be stored, edited, and revisited; they also shape the ways in which these memories are (automatically) produced, collated, and how they come to matter to people in everyday life (Annabell 2023). As such, there are inevitable overlaps, disjoints, and mismatches between what a platform or digital technology provider calls a ‘memory’ and what people experience as their memories. And these overlaps, disjoints, and mismatches, we contend, are ruptures that make possible new avenues of research. Nonetheless, we claim that it is crucial to take seriously the specificity of emergent technologies, precisely because, as Bowker (2008, 26) states, ‘each new medium imprints its own special flavour to the memories of that epoch’. The memories of today are indelibly marked by the technologies of today. Media technologies in particular enable, shape, and constrain memory practices, while they have particular worldviews embedded in them, and are used in particular contexts. In short, memory technologies and their uses are political, shaping the world in particular ways. All the papers in this collection engage with the questions of how these politics of memory have become inextricably interwoven with what Gillespie (2010) has called ‘the politics of platforms’.

As a result, there is a continual need to examine the ways in which the political economy and business models of contemporary platforms and digital technologies impact upon memory making. While social media platforms have been conceptualised as

‘socio-technical, performative infrastructures’ (Van Dijck 2010), Gillespie (2010, 348) writes that ‘platform’ ‘has emerged recently as an increasingly familiar term in the description of the online services of content intermediaries, both in their self-characterisations and in the broader public discourse of users, the press and commentators’. Moreover, Helmond (2015, 1) has argued that platforms also exist as a wider technical and cultural organising logic. Proposing the notion of ‘platformisation’, Helmond states that the term entails ‘the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web and their drive to make external data “platform ready”’.

Platforms’ interest in our past is not altruistic; it is part of profitable business models that are continuously expanding in social, cultural, and economic life. This ‘platformisation’ entails ‘the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems’ (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4276). We are in the midst of a process of colonisation of our personal and collective pasts for commercial benefit and an increased dependence on the colonisers to access our ‘memories’. Platforms, as both software, infrastructure, and business models, thus enable and shape new forms of remembering and forgetting. This is what Lewandowsky and Pomerantsev (2022) in their inaugural article for this journal call the ‘Jekyll and Hyde of the algorithm’. Platforms are not neutral intermediaries in the construction of memory, whether this is cultural memory through YouTube, or autobiographical memory through a diary app. Hence, both intimate personal memories and collective forms of memory depend on and are shaped by data companies and algorithmic systems. To remember is increasingly to remember in and through digital platforms. Memories have become data and data are turned into ‘memories’ (Prey and Smit 2019; Jacobsen 2021; Jacobsen and Beer 2021; Smit 2022, forthcoming 2024).

This special collection consists of contributions that examine or touch upon what we call *the multiplicities of platformed remembering*. In the remainder of this editorial piece, we shortly introduce and comment upon eight of these multiplicities: (1) multiple forms of memory, (2) multidisciplinary, (3) multi-method approaches, (4) multiple worlds, (5) multiple subjectivities, (6) multiple agencies, (7) multiple temporalities, and (8) multiple technologies.

Multiple forms of memory

Notions such as ‘platformed remembering’ and the ‘platformisation of memory’ may give the impression that we are dealing with a singular phenomenon called ‘memory’. This is not the case. As Jeffrey Olick (2012) put it in his lecture *What is Memory Studies?*, ‘there is no such thing as memory’, precisely because ‘there is a wide variety of different things we mean by memory’. Memory, rather than a singular and fixed thing, is a holding term for a multiplicity of meanings, concepts, and approaches. Indeed, the multiplicity of memory as a concept borders on the vertiginous: collective memory, personal memory, public memory, embodied memory, working memory, short- and long-term memory, mediated memory, networked memory, and the list goes on. Is memory then a function, a socio-technical glue, an act, a process, a production? Indeed, the concept itself seems inexhaustible.

The pieces in this special collection take this conceptual multiplicity seriously. They examine the politics of platformed remembering – the intimate enmeshing of platforms and memory – from a variety of perspectives and conceptual frameworks, drawing on diverse case studies and approaches. The articles in this special issue, therefore, raise a number of questions such as: how do platforms variously shape and transform what we understand as memory? Do platforms introduce new ‘kinds’ of memory or new ways of looking at memory? Are data memories, or memories data? As such, the multiplicity of memory, rather than a hindrance, makes possible a wide variety of critical analyses and conceptual interventions.

Multidisciplinarity

Because ‘memory’ and ‘remembering’ are such elusive processes that unfold as much ‘in the head’ and ‘in the wild’ (Barnier and Hoskins 2018), multiple disciplines have engaged with their ontologies, epistemologies, histories, and empirical realities. One of the goals of this special collection is to bring together approaches from the humanities and social sciences (the ‘usual subjects’ in memory studies), but also art and computation. The reason for this is the multiplicity of memory mentioned above. Moreover, we believe that the consequences of the platformisation, datafication, and algorithmisation of memory naturally lead to a convergence of disciplines. Our objects of study – memory as product; memory as process; memory as data – and subsequent research questions demand multifaceted approaches.

Multi-method approaches

Given that memory is a holding term for multiple ideas and concepts, no one approach will be sufficient in providing both deep and comprehensive insights into the enmeshing of platforms and memory. A multifaceted problem requires a multiplicity of approaches. Therefore, the articles in this special collection are adopting a wide range of methodologies to make sense of the platformisation of memory. These range from scholars who use quantitative methods to better understand the socio-technical dynamics of networks to those who explore the discursive framings of platforms, analysing both their interfaces and company documents. While the methods in the special collection may differ substantially, it is important to resist the instrumental framing, echoing Savage (2013, 5), where ‘they are simply seen to be technically better or worse’ means of doing social research’. Instead, the value of approaching the politics of platformed remembering from a multiplicity of methodological perspectives is that ‘the focus is on the affordances and capacities which are mobilised in and through methods themselves’ (5).

Multiple worlds

Memories are constructed, performed, and contested in multiple spaces and places. Even in globally networked environments, the specific linguistic, political, social, and cultural context of remembering individuals and groups shape the what, how, when, and why of remembering. This special collection is sensitive to the multiplicities of memory contexts. The collection includes contributions that move beyond a focus on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) countries and take a majority world perspective (Raval *et al.* 2023). Thus, the collection includes memory cultures that are often overlooked with the goal of enriching our understanding of how platformed remembering plays out in specific contexts. Moreover, the contributions span different ‘sites’ of memory and experience, ranging from war to the everyday.

Multiple subjectivities

Thinking through the concept of subjectivity signals an attentiveness to entanglements of memory with the constructions of the subject position, regimes of subjectivity and technical, material and discursive processes of subjectivities. This is critical in understanding how platforms construct social categories such as race, gender, sexuality, class and nationality for remembering subjects, and how positionality shapes experiences of memory enacted through, with and on platforms. Extending the way that Reading (2016) teases out how digital cultures transform the gendering of memory and memories of gender, the platformisation of memory implicates multiple and complex intersections of social categories and subjectivities, which is evident in some of the work of this collection.

Multiple agencies

Detaching agency from human intentionality opens up possibilities to examine entanglement and assemblage of memory in productive ways. Much of the work in this collection approaches agency as distributed, recognising that memory work is performed by multiple actors without assuming these are ‘necessarily comparable actions to be flattened and made equivocal’ (Chidgey 2018, 54). Instead, there is an analytical orientation towards identifying not only the role of different actors in particular specific forms that non-human actors take but also tensions between the interests, ethics, and politics of actors.

Multiple temporalities

The production of temporality by platforms steers users towards consumption of ‘here-and-now’ in which what constitutes ‘the now’ is stretched and condensed in various ways (Coleman 2018). As this collection demonstrates, these temporal presents implicate and involve multiplicities of ‘there-and-then’, complicating our understandings of the configuration of the past, present and future within the platformisation of memory. That is, predefined memories (representations of events, people, experiences) are negotiated on and through platforms, memories are algorithmically assembled in attempts to foster connections with the past, memories are unmoored from the past in a quest to ‘perfect’ the represented moment and as the need to remember in the future intervenes in the present. Across these configurations, then, are multiple actors making claims to ‘memory’ bringing with them assumptions for how memories are assembled and conceptualised.

Multiple technologies

Memory is also made possible and comes to matter through a variety of technologies. As Van Dijck (2010, 402–403) puts it, ‘[s]ince the emergence of digital platforms, memory is increasingly defined by networked computers, which are in turn deployed by institutions or companies who (professionally) manage memory practices’. What counts as a memory in a particular socio-historical context depends upon the technologies that shape its emergence (whether that is writing, photographs, or social media). This means that in an era of multiple technologies – the confluence of data, algorithms, social media, smartphones, cloud infrastructures, and so on – there are also multiple ways of producing, negotiating, engaging with, and remembering the past. As such, a multiplicity of technologies implies a multiplicity of agencies and ways of engaging with and understanding what is meant by memory.

Beyond platforms?

As the papers show in this special issue, memory has become intimately entangled with data, algorithms, and social media platforms. The reason we began with the Google Pixel 8 is not because the issue of using algorithmic processes to ‘perfecting your memories’ is entirely new – the blurring of the lines between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ memories has been a longstanding question for memory scholars; rather, the embedded applications on the Google Pixel smartphone foreground the difficulty, futility even, of considering issues of memory in contemporary society without taking seriously the prominent role played by data-driven applications and platforms. In short, we do not simply remember on platforms or with platforms but also increasingly through platforms. Ours is a platformed memory. As such, the papers in this special collection explore this topic from a multiplicity of perspectives and methodologies.

Yet, the notion of a platformed remembering also raises the question: What memories are not connected to platforms? What sort of agency do we still have? Can one have a memory untouched by platforms? Even when we do not remember on or through a platform, remembering increasingly stands in relation to platforms. In an age of social media platforms, the unplatformed memory may somehow feel ‘authentic’, more ‘real’, untouched by the ‘artificiality’ of technology. Like the image’s relationship to reality, the unplatformed memory may be perceived to have an aura or ‘punctum’ (Barthes 1982) that is lacking from a platformed memory. However, this notion of a more real or authentic memory is a problematic fetish, because it only exists because the platform (or technological mediation more broadly) exists. Instead, we need to take seriously how memory making is intimately interwoven and entangled with that of platforms.

As Barad (2007, ix) writes, ‘[m]emory does not reside in the folds of individual brains; rather, memory is the enfoldings of space–time–matter written into the universe, or better, the enfolded articulations of the universe in its mattering’. ‘The past’, Barad continues, ‘is never finished’, precisely because ‘we never leave it and it never leaves us behind’ (ix). Similarly, the notion of platform remembering signals the impossibility of disentangling memory from the politics of platforms. In this collection, we, therefore, contend that even if our memories are not platformed they stand in inescapable relation to platforms such that one cannot stand outside the logic. The question, therefore, remains: Is there memory outside of platforms?

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R.S. is senior lecturer at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen. **B.J.** is a lecturer at University of York's Department of Sociology. **T.A.**, is postdoctoral researcher at Utrecht University School of Law.

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