Placeless memories: digital constructions of memory and identity

Friday 14 July 2017
Bowland Auditorium, Humanities Research Centre, Berrick Saul Building, University of York

Call for Papers

This one-day conference aims to open up discussion on the nature of memory and identity construction online and in digital formats, and explore issues concerning the use of these digital memories as a resource for scholars.

The Internet is becoming an everyday space where identities and memories are not only stored, but also shaped and negotiated. User-generated content from websites and OSNs (online-social-networks) is often considered in opposition to authorised or official forms of knowledge (academic, published, or governmental sources) and has been dismissed as frivolous, unmediated, and apparently spontaneous. There is, however, also growing interest in how user-generated content might be used in conjunction with more official forms of knowledge to interrogate the ways in which individuals conceive, communicate, and negotiate national and local histories, memories, and identities. The Internet draws people from different cultural, national, and political backgrounds into dialogue, precipitating both acrimonious clashes and productive knowledge exchange, and creating a deterritorialised forum for the articulation and construction of memory.

This under-researched area is of particular importance in an increasingly digital age, and is also timely given recent media interest in online responses to the destruction of physical sites in the Middle East and North Africa. These acts have been met by efforts to digitally preserve threatened places and objects through programs such as The Million Image Database or the crowd-sourced Facebook group Palmyra 3D Model, highlighting the role that rapidly developing technologies might play in education and preservation. Our challenge, however, is to consider the Internet not just as a tool for preserving histories, but as an emergent space where diverse memories and identities are actively shaped, contested, and negotiated in the present moment by a wide variety of different stakeholders. For the disciplines of history, media studies, memory studies, tourism studies, and critical heritage studies, the ways in which events with global reach have been hotly debated in vastly different guises across a range of online forums is of central significance.

We invite proposals for 20 minute papers on any aspect of the digital construction of memory and identity, and the use of digital resources as source material for scholars studying these issues. Suggested topics include:

1. What is the nature of digital memories and identities?

• How are memories and identities shaped online and in peer-to-peer discussion?
• How do individuals from different backgrounds or 'groups' interact with others online, particularly across historically antagonistic or fragile boundaries?
• How do people draw on – or borrow or appropriate – the memories of others in digital settings?
• How (and why) do certain historical tropes (such as references to Hitler or Nazism) become commonplace rhetorical tools in online debates?

2. Is 'online memory' different from 'offline memory'

• To what extent does 'online memory' replace, or substitute for, physical access to sites of memory?
• Are digital discourses particularly raw, spontaneous, and uncritical, as is often supposed?
• Do cross-cultural dialogues on the Internet strengthen or undermine national and local memories?
• Are these emerging forms of digital memory more ethical or 'democratic', or do they replicate the exclusion of certain groups and memories found in more 'traditional' memory forums?

3. How does the researcher approach these digital constructions of memory and use them in their work?

• How does the researcher use these new sources of knowledge?
• How do they filter the mass repositories of comments and responses on sites such as YouTube or Facebook?
• How do they manage, mediate, and process their own reactions to the sometimes highly emotive content?
• As a source of information, how do these digital dialogues differ from archival sources or ethnographic observation?

Please submit abstracts of 250-300 words to
huw.halstead@york.ac.uk by 31 May 2017

Registration is free