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Postmemory work and the digital in Southeast Asia

Birgit Bräuchler

Southeast Asia has been witness to a multitude of violent conflicts over the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. This conceptual paper is the introduction to a special issue on 'Postmemory work and the digital in Southeast Asia' that explores how, within its distinctive historical, sociopolitical and media contexts, the digital is being used by predominantly young actors — the so-called postmemory generation — to remember, contest and reimagine violent pasts. The article aims to prepare the conceptual ground for the contributions to follow, but also more generally for future research looking into postmemory work and the digital in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Introduction: Memory work, activism and the digital

From the struggle for independence in Timor Leste to military oppression in Myanmar, Southeast Asia has been witness to a multitude of violent conflicts over the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Moreover, the region has long been defined by large-scale population movements and migration, with more than 23 million Southeast Asians living outside of their country of origin.[1] At the same time, it is home to a majority young population who are among the top users of social media globally and many of whom have not been an active part of the past violence. This requires us to approach the question of how a violent past (including its continuation in the present) is remembered by young people as part of the postmemory generation.

There are two fields particularly relevant for this special issue on postmemory and the digital in Southeast Asia: memory work and digital activism. There is a rich literature on memory work in Southeast Asia, from the remembrance of large-scale violence in the area, to the negotiation of alternative memories, to reflections on how to decolonise memory. There is, for instance, Doreen Lee's fascinating work on

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1 UN DESA, *International Migrant Stock 2020: Destination and Origin*, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2020 (https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesa_pd_2020_ims_stock_by_sex_destination_and_origin.xlsx, last accessed 18 May 2026).

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activist archives as an attempt to disrupt the dominant narrative of state archives,[2] Kate McGregor's and Ken Setiawan's important work on memory work and human rights in Indonesia,[3] and Lia Kent's studies of activist-led commemorations of conflict-related violence in Timor Leste.[4] A special issue on 'Youths, Media and Memory' emphasises that it requires in particular performative and transgenerational memory work to facilitate transformation towards more peaceful futures.[5] In that sense, and with a focus on creativity and arts, Rita Padawangi explores the role of documentary films in fostering intergenerational memory-making in Timor Leste and Indonesia,[6] Roxana Waterson reflects on theatre performances as a tool in Singapore to probe problematic or traumatic historical events,[7] and Kate McGregor and Ana Dragojlovic focus on the role of museums, films, novels and photography in fostering new forms of commemoration and addressing colonial injustices, but potentially also reinforcing colonial narratives.[8]

Along with the accelerated digitalisation of the Southeast Asian region, often taking place simultaneously with enormous political change, research has started to emphasise the role of digital technology in memory work in the region. Alexander Supartono and Alexandra Moschovi, for instance, analysed how digital photographic material from colonial archives in the Netherlands enabled artists to contest and reconfigure the proclaimed truth, authenticity, ownership and institutional power of colonial archives.[9] Birgit Bräuchler explores how social media facilitate young people's memory work after violent conflict, but, at the same time, open up space for diverging interpretations.[10] All our special issue contributions provide strong evidence for the crucial role that digital media play in facilitating but also changing the dynamics of processes of remembering. This needs to be seen as an emerging extension of the rich literature on digital activism in Southeast Asia. As Merlyna Lim has shown in her work, social media and politics are intricately interlinked in Southeast Asia, fostering both

2 Doreen Lee, *Activist archives: Youth culture and the political past in Indonesia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

3 Katharine E. McGregor, 'Memory studies and human rights in Indonesia', *Asian Studies Review* 37, 3 (2013): 350–61; Ken Setiawan, 'Remembering suffering and survival: Sites of memory on Buru,' in *The Indonesian Genocide of 1965: Causes, dynamics and legacies*, ed. Katharine McGregor, Jess Melvin and Annie Pohlman (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 215–33.

4 Lia Kent, 'Transitional justice and the spaces of memory activism in Timor-Leste and Aceh', *Global Change, Peace & Security* 31, 2 (2019): 181–99.

5 Birgit Bräuchler and Sina Emde, eds., *Youths, media and performance: How young people remember violent pasts*, Special Issue *Anthropological Forum* 35, 2 (2025).

6 Rita Padawangi, 'Rebuilding solidarity through remembering, not forgetting', *Inside Indonesia* 162 (2025) (https://www.insideindonesia.org/editions/edition-162-oct-dec-2025/rebuilding-solidarity-through-remembering-not-forgetting, last accessed 28 Nov 2025).

7 Roxana Waterson, 'Testimony, trauma and performance: Some examples from Southeast Asian theatre', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41, 3 (2010): 509–28.

8 Kate McGregor and Ana Dragojlovic, 'Decolonising memory', *Inside Indonesia* 155 (2024) (https://www.insideindonesia.org/editions/edition-155-jan-mar-2024/decolonising-memory, last accessed 18 May 2026).

9 Alexander Supartono and Alexandra Moschovi, 'Contesting colonial (hi)stories: (Post)colonial imaginings of Southeast Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 51, 3 (2020): 343–71.

10 Birgit Bräuchler, "'I can't remember how many I killed"…: Child soldiers and memory work in YouTube', *Memory Studies* 17, 6 (2023/2024): 1346–62.

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grassroots activism and the (re)enforcement of autocratic politics.[11] John Postill even ascribes to Southeast Asia 'a pioneering history' of digital activism and mobilisation, including the use of mobile phones to organise mass protests against President Estrada in the Philippines as early as 2001, which, he argues, is still not properly reflected in the literature.[12] A lot of research has been done since then on the co-constitutiveness of digital technologies and activism. This includes works on resistance and diasporic politics within and outside of Myanmar;[13] on resistance movements against environmental destruction in Indonesia through, for instance, land reclamation, large-scale plantations and mining;[14] on how Facebook pages challenge hegemonic royalist-nationalist historical interpretations in Thailand;[15] and the emergence of counter-narratives of the mass killings in 1965/66 in Indonesia.[16]

Young people as both digital natives and postmemory play prominent roles in these continuously emerging and developing dynamics, and they play crucial roles in the way digital technologies are used in memory work. As Marianne Hirsch in an interview about her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* explains:[17]

> "Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.[18]

'Postmemory work and the digital in Southeast Asia' will explore how, within this distinctive historical, sociopolitical and media context, the digital is being used by predominantly young actors — the so-called postmemory generation — to remember, contest and reimagine violent pasts. Despite the region's commonalities, the digital-postmemory-nexus plays out differently across nations and communities, from digital

11 Merlyna Lim, *Social media and politics in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

12 John Postill, 'A critical history of internet activism and social protest in Malaysia, 1998–2011', *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 1–2 (2014): 79.

13 Anas Anas and Abu Faisal Md Khaled, 'In search of a Rohingya digital diaspora: Virtual togetherness, collective identities and political mobilisation', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10, 1 (2023): 61; Megan Ryan and Mai Van Tran, 'Democratic backsliding disrupted: The role of digitalized resistance in Myanmar', *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* (2022): 1–26 (https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911221125511, last accessed 18 May 2026).

14 Birgit Bräuchler, 'Bali Tolak Reklamasi – The local adoption of global protest', *Convergence* 26, 3 (2020): 620–38; 'Artivism in Maluku', *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 23, 1 (2020): 40–58; 'Golden Indonesia 2045: Neoliberal development policies and environmental journalism', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 45, 1 (2025): 3–29.

15 Clare Veal, 'Nostalgia and nationalism: Facebook "archives" and the constitution of Thai photographic histories', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 51, 3 (2020): 372–96.

16 Hakimul Ikhwan, Vissia Yulianto and Gilang Parahita, 'The contestation of social memory in the new media: A case study of the 1965 killings in Indonesia', *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 12, 1 (2019): 3–16.

17 Marianne Hirsch, *The generation of postmemory: Writing and visual culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

18 https://cup.columbia.edu/author-interviews/hirsch-generation-postmemory, last accessed 17 June 2024.

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rights activism to digital spaces allowing young people to engage with past and ongoing violence, from the circulation of intimate memories in transnational and diasporic spaces to the restoration of memory and the challenging of hegemonic memory narratives. In most cases it comprises memory work or activism, which refers to the way actors embrace, complement, challenge, reformulate or reject local, national or international memory narratives.[19]

Whereas most countries in Southeast Asia have experienced an exponential rise in social media usage, there are still enormous divides between and within countries when it comes to internet access and infrastructure. That is something we need to keep in mind when investigating digital (post)memory in Southeast Asia as well as the fact that the region does not figure very prominently when it comes to freedom of expression, including online spaces, with most countries in Southeast Asia labelled as being in a 'difficult' or 'very serious situation' in the World Press Freedom Index Map 2024.[20] Although the region has been and continues to be exposed to a large number of violent conflicts on different scales, it is still marginalised in the field of memory studies. Historical and ethical demands on memory scholars based in the so-called West make much of the existing scholarship on intergenerational memory focus on Holocaust survivor descendants. Countries in the global south are often neglected in memory studies, with few exceptions such as Cambodia and Rwanda.[21] This special issue aims to foster a better understanding of the intimate relationship between postmemory work and the digital within particular socio-historical contexts in Southeast Asia and on specific platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. It will thus advance memory and media communication studies by providing important insights into the ways in which the digital can be used to negotiate and contend with a violent past — and ongoing violence — and where its limitations are.

This paper aims to prepare the conceptual ground for the contributions to follow — each one of them dealing with a specific empirical case in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Myanmar, Timor Leste, Vietnam, Philippines). It wishes to develop a conceptual framework that contributors can refer to and work with, but that also provides guidance for future research in the field of digital postmemory work more generally. Drawing on examples from Southeast Asia and beyond, the paper first discusses how memory practices changed through the advent of digital media. It explores notions of media affordances, algorithms and postmemory and it elaborates on how the interplay of memory, power and the digital can affect the future. The article then discusses some specificities of memory work in Southeast Asia (and beyond). It closes with a note on methodology and an overview of the special issue contributions.

19 Samuel Merrill, Emily Keightley and Priska Daphi, 'Introduction: The digital memory work practices of social movements', in *Social movements, cultural memory and digital media: Mobilising mediated remembrance*, ed. Samuel Merrill, Emily Keightley and Priska Daphi (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 1–30.

20 https://rsf.org/en/map-2024-world-press-freedom-index

21 See, for example, Susanne Buckley-Zistel, 'Remembering to forget: Chosen amnesia as a strategy for local coexistence in post-genocide Rwanda', *Africa* 76, 2 (2006): 131–50; Rachel Hughes, 'The abject artefacts of memory: Photographs from Cambodia's genocide', *Media, Culture & Society* 25, 1 (2003): 23–44.

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Alternative memories and power

Digital media have become important means to elicit, continue, witness, resolve and remember violence,[22] and they have transformed the dynamics of remembering by opening up new venues and ways to work with, negotiate, document, trigger, challenge and research (post-conflict) memory.[23] Traditionally, states were the main actors in crafting national memory and identity. To foster nation-building, they promoted *one* official history, articulated through national museums, archives and monuments, and compulsory school education. Digital media have provided them new outlets for their endeavour; there, they not only reinforce authoritative memory modes, but also silence voices that counter their dominant narrative.[24] At the same time, however, the digital enables the opening up of counter-public spheres for all political strands, from far right to far left, from pro-government to its critics, for people on the move and for those living in the diaspora.[25] With the spread of digital media, we have seen the rise of new memory agents.[26] This enabled the proliferation of alternative memories, the pluralisation of remembering specific pasts as well as the emergence of digital memorials and virtual museums.[27]

It is important to acknowledge that 'power is at the heart of nonstate memory and documentation initiatives just as much as in state-led archiving and memory making' in digital spaces, even if 'much more fluid, contested, and vulnerable'.[28] These new developments do not happen in a political vacuum, but take place within wider structures of power and economic, political and representational inequality.[29] In connection with the introduction of cell phones into Jamaican transnational social fields, Heather Horst has tellingly spoken about the 'blessings and burdens' of new digital communication technologies, which also extends to the memory-digital media-nexus.[30] Digital platforms are used by those in power and those dominated, giving space to alternative memories as well as the explicit or implicit reinforcement of 'official' histories and

22 Philipp Budka and Birgit Bräuchler, eds., *Theorising media and conflict* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2020).

23 Andrew Hoskins, ed., *Digital memory studies: Media pasts in transition* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

24 David J. Simon and Eve Monique Zucker, 'Introduction: Mass violence and memory in the digital age - Memorialization unmoored', in *Mass violence and memory in the digital age: Memorialization Unmoored*, ed. Eve Monique Zucker and David J. Simon (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 2.

25 Thomas Birkner and André Donk, 'Collective memory and social media: Fostering a new historical consciousness in the digital age?', *Memory Studies* 13, 4 (2020): 367–83.

26 Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers and Eyal Zandberg, 'On media memory: Editor's introduction', in *On media memory: Collective memory in a new media age*, eds. Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers and Eyal Zandberg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 11–2.

27 E.g. David J. Simon and Eve Monique Zucker, 'Introduction'; David J. Simon and Eve Monique Zucker, 'Conclusion', in *Mass violence and memory in the digital age: Memorialization unmoored*, ed. Eve Monique Zucker and David J. Simon (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 225–36.

28 Erik van Ommering and Reem el Soussi, 'Space of hope for Lebanon's missing: Promoting transitional justice through a digital memorial', *Conflict and Society: Advances in Research* 3 (2017): 184.

29 Emily Keightley and Philip Schlesinger, 'Digital media – social memory: Remembering in digitally networked times', *Media, Culture & Society* 36, 6 (2014): 747; Sarah De Nardi, Hilary Orange, Steven High and Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto, 'Introduction', in *The Routledge Handbook of memory and place*, eds. Sarah De Nardi, Hilary Orange, Steven High and Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto (London/New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 2.

30 Heather A. Horst, 'The blessings and burdens of communication: Cell phones in Jamaican transnational social fields', *Global Networks* 6, 2 (2006): 143–59.

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national(istic) interpretations.[31] That dichotomy exists in prominent memory studies cases like the Holocaust, but also in more marginalised processes of remembering in Southeast Asia.

The Holocaust is one of the most widely engaged with and memorised historical events of our times.[32] Digital media are used to strengthen conservative ways of commemorating the event, but its 'democratizing potential' also 'allows for creative forms of remembrance through self-expression, participation and collaboration',[33] for filling 'the void left by traditional remembrance'.[34] An outstanding example is a virtual memorial in YouTube called 'Dancing Auschwitz', where three generations of a Jewish family, including one Holocaust survivor, dance at former concentration camps to the song 'I will survive' by Gloria Gaynor. They thus aim to acknowledge the past and at the same time creatively embrace life and the future. The video triggered others to remix the footage and create a diverse and nuanced Holocaust remembrance experience, but also very diverse reactions in the YouTube commentary.[35]

Such ambivalence also shows, for example, in Indonesia. Here, YouTube is used to further circulate gory videos promoting the Indonesian government's version about the mass killings of 1965/66, continue mainstream framing of the past and foreclosing public discussion.[36] But it also serves to put forward alternative social memories and 'corrective new voices to fill missing gaps in the convoluted history of this central event of modern Indonesian history'.[37] Digital media can render marginalised and silenced memories public, but at the same time such public exposure and traceability can render those voices even more vulnerable in oppressive political climates. In countries like Indonesia and Cambodia, IT laws allow for constant state surveillance and suppression of online content that is not in line with government policies, often leading to criminalisation and arrests.[38] In Lebanon, to provide another example, a digital memorial for forcibly disappeared persons triggered fear among some of their relatives that their identities might be misused in the ongoing conflicts or that such memorials might undermine 'the quest for real action and official recognition of the missing and their relatives'.[39]

31 Mykola Makhortykh, 'Remediating the past: YouTube and Second World War memory in Ukraine and Russia', *Memory Studies* 13, 2 (2020): 157; Shanti Sumartojo, 'Tweeting from the past: Commemorating the Anzac Centenary @ABCNews1915', *Memory Studies* 13, 4 (2020): 413.

32 Andrew Hoskins, 'Signs of the Holocaust: Exhibiting memory in a mediated age', *Media, Culture & Society* 25, 1 (2003): 7–22.

33 Stephanie de Smale, 'Memory in the margins: The connecting and colliding of vernacular war memories', *Media, War & Conflict* 13, 2 (2020): 189.

34 Paige L. Gibson and Steve Jones, 'Remediation and remembrance: "Dancing Auschwitz" collective memory and new media', *ESSACHESS, Journal for Communication Studies* 5, 2 (2012): 110.

35 Ibid, pp. 107–31.

36 Gilang Desti Parahita and Vissia Ita Yulianto, 'The treachery on YouTube: The politics of memory on new media in Indonesia', *Archipel* 99 (2020): 47–73.

37 Hakimul Ikhwan, Vissia Yulianto and Gilang Parahita, 'The contestation of social memory,' p. 3.

38 Birgit Bräuchler, 'Bali Tolak Reklamasi'; Margaret Jack, *Media ruins: Cambodian postwar infrastructural reconstruction and the geopolitics of technology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2023), p. 13.

39 Erik van Ommering and Reem el Soussi, 'Space of hope for Lebanon's missing', p. 182.

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In a similar vein, Stephanie Benzaquen in this special issue shows how digital media can offer Khmers in Cambodia and the diaspora a space to articulate their memories of the Khmer Republic (1970–1975), a phase in Cambodian history that is usually marginalised in both scholarly research and official archives. But at the same time, she argues, that digital memory work strengthens rather than challenges nationalistic narratives. Other contributions to this special issue depart from a focus on official national commemoration to more decentralised and vernacular ways of remembering — with Thu Le exploring how the Vietnamese diaspora uses social media to engage in transnational communication, memory-making, historical archiving and cultural exchange to express their memories of war; John Lee Candelaria and Joselito M. Ebro Jr. discussing how YouTube provides space for the transgenerational transmission of and vernacular discourses about memories of the Battle of Manila; Kimberley Weir assessing alternative digital memories around the 1986 People Power Revolution in the Philippines; Benedict Mette-Starke analysing digital memory work on past and ongoing violence in Myanmar; and Laura Burke researching how Timor Leste's post-independence generation uses digital technology to address past inequalities and (re)create memory. In these cases, the digital proffers a venue to 'correct' history and reframe historical events. They focus on marginalised voices and, in some cases, the need of relatives of victims or disappeared persons to seek justice.

Platforms and algorithms

The rise of digital media platforms and the promotion of artificial intelligence is accompanied by new power dynamics, which has implications for our research. This is explicitly taken up by some of our special issue authors (e.g. Benzaquen, Candelaria and Ebro). I elaborate on it here as these dynamics will have to be considered in future memory research and need to inform our reading of works on digital memory. As Tarleton Gillespie and colleagues argue, algorithms 'are encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output' and 'manage our interactions on social networking sites, highlighting the news of one friend while excluding another's.'[40] Algorithms are designed to calculate what is trending, thus helping us to navigate seemingly endless data streams. They are an integral part of any digital and social media platform and feature prominently in the cultural shifts these new communication and information technologies trigger.[41] To make one's voice heard, one has to go online to find tools to amplify one's efforts. Hence social media users are motivated 'to make their content, and themselves, recognizable to an algorithm', in order to boost their content to the top of their audience's feeds or search results.[42] At the same time, however, they also integrate these tools into their daily practices and routines, 'shifting their meaning and sometimes even their design along the way',[43] which I will further illustrate below.

40 Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot, 'The relevance of algorithms', in *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2014), p. 167.
41 Ted Striphas, 'Algorithmic culture', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, 4–5 (2015): 395–412.
42 Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot, 'The relevance of algorithms', p. 184.
43 Ibid, p. 185.

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This implies that we need to take a closer look at media affordances, a concept that seeks to capture technology's capacities relative to person, stipulating that the possibilities for action are not only determined by the properties of the technology, but also the user's skills and capabilities to use them.[44] Each platform has specific affordances to mediate memories. Anne Kaun and Fredrik Stiernsted, for instance, have analysed the Facebook page dedicated to a former Youth Radio of the GDR that disappeared from the re-unified German media landscape. They concluded that 'social networking sites facilitate the production of media memories that are collaborative and take place in public', but, at the same time, platforms like Facebook follow 'a business model that is largely based on dispossession of creative expressions in the form of data that become the resource of the platform'. This can potentially have unintended consequences for the users.[45]

A good example is the Facebook feature 'Year in Review'. In one incident, a Facebook user who had lost his young daughter and who was still in mourning became severely distressed when Facebook started his 'Year in Review' with an image of his daughter amidst some partygoers, accompanied by the tag line 'Eric, here's what your year looked like!' Eric complained and his post triggered a broader discussion in mainstream media and among Facebook users. This led Facebook to put a strict filter on its 'Year in Review' generation process, 'seeking to automatically and algorithmically prevent media traces that might evoke painful memories of deceased family members and ex-partners from resurfacing on users' yearly Year in Review videos'.[46] This raises important questions about who gets to interpret our social media posts and who gets to decide when and what we shall forget — questions that attend closely to the connection of memory and power and how these play out on social media platforms.

YouTube is a video sharing platform and yet another example of a digital platform that strategically uses algorithms to promote its business interests, which is the boosting of trendy videos and comments (and their revenues) through branding and advertising. It thus, again, challenges the assumption of the ideal public sphere in cyberspace, asking for a more critical approach to digital memory projects. Rik Smit and colleagues, for instance, have analysed memory construction of the Syrian conflict on YouTube, specifically looking into the coverage of and the commentary around the chemical attack on Ghouta.[47] They were particularly interested in YouTube curating practices that are, they argue, at the heart of YouTube's affordances and technology. According to these authors, so-called witness videos are shaped and reshaped by various actors and interventions before and after uploading it in YouTube: the ideology of the videomaker, the editing process, tagging and titling, online engagement with the video, the video's adoption (and possible manipulation) by other YouTube users, and, not least, YouTube's algorithms that decisively influence which videos are found

44 Bonnie Nardi, 'Virtuality', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44, 1 (2015): 15–31.
45 Anne Kaun and Fredrik Stiernstedt, 'Media memory practices and community of remembrance: Youth Radio DT64', in *Memory in a mediated world: Remembrance and reconstruction*, ed. Andrea Hajek, Christine Lohmeier and Christian Pentzold (London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 196, 198.
46 Benjamin N. Jacobsen, 'Sculpting digital voids: The politics of forgetting on Facebook', *Convergence* 1–2 (2020): (https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520907390, last accessed 18 May 2026).
47 Rik Smit, Ansgard Heinrich and Marcel Broersma, 'Witnessing in the new memory ecology: Memory construction of the Syrian conflict on YouTube', *New Media & Society* 19, 2 (2017): 289–307.

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and watched — based on relevance, categorisation, visibility and the anticipation of what users are searching for.[48] Smit and colleagues argue that curating practices on YouTube 'are essentially political practices that structure content and anticipate search behavior', that recontextualise a decontextualised video in a new setting, and that can potentially back different claims about reality.[49] This had also become obvious in the case of Indonesia and the YouTube coverage of and engagement with the 1965/66 mass killings, where videos promoting established government narratives get to the top of trending lists more easily than counter-narratives that do not deploy the 'common' titles and tags.[50]

What this suggests is that having access to a digital platform does not imply that alternative memories are heard or 'become monumental'.[51] Often they lose out to what Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney call 'agenda-setting organisations … with the power to orchestrate public attention for particular stories or issues in the form of official commemorations',[52] or against digital platform affordances and algorithms.[53] In addition, online memory depends on continued presence, maintenance and funding, something that alternative memory agents often lack.

As indicated above, the mediatisation of people's lifeworlds results in the appropriation of digital media users' data, including their memories, by a capitalist-oriented information economy.[54] Digital media technologies provide cheap data storage and 'allow for unprecedented global accessibility and participation in the creation of (new) memories'.[55] But these very same data are subject to the specific rules of each digital media platform and their commercial interests. Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias have coined the term 'data colonialism' that conceptually combines 'the predatory extractive practices of historical colonialism with the abstract quantification methods of computing'.[56] Through its digitalisation, they argue, 'social life all over the globe becomes an "open" resource for extraction that is somehow "just there" for capital'.[57] As Margaret Jack stipulated in her work on media infrastructural restitution in Cambodia, 'post-colonial politics of the platforms (Facebook and the smartphone app) … marks a continuation of some colonial politics and the impulses of the "imperial archive" and bound the types of work that many artists do'.[58] Digital platforms are here key means to catch 'the general domain of everyday life … within the net of marketization',[59] which

48 Ibid, pp. 290–4.
49 Ibid, pp. 293, 294, 303.
50 Hakimul Ikhwan, Vissia Yulianto and Gilang Parahita, 'The contestation of social memory', p. 13.
51 Gilang Desti Parahita and Vissia Ita Yulianto, 'The treachery on YouTube', para 9.
52 Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, 'Introduction: Cultural memory and its dynamics', in *Mediation, remediation, and the dynamics of cultural memory*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), p. 9.
53 Rik Smit, Ansgard Heinrich and Marcel Broersma, 'Witnessing in the new memory ecology', p. 293.
54 Gerd Sebald and Marie-Kristin Döbler, '(Digitale)Medien und Gedächtnis – aus der Perspektive einer Gedächtnissoziologie', in *(Digitale) Medien und soziale Gedächtnisse*, ed. Gerd Sebald (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), p. 47.
55 Joanne Garde-Hansen, *Media and memory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 107.
56 Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, 'Data colonialism: Rethinking big data's relation to the contemporary subject', *Television & New Media* 20, 4 (2019): 1.
57 Ibid, p. 2.
58 Margaret Jack, *Media ruins*, p. 9.
59 Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, 'Data colonialism', p. 9.

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adds yet another dimension to the ongoing debate on the decolonisation of memory in the Global South.[60] What happens to our memories through data colonialism is a question that needs to become an integral part of future memory research.

Such concerns also extend to the mere materiality of digital infrastructures that are owned by the very same capitalist corporations. Scholars like Jack and Veronica Barassi have researched everyday struggles against digital capitalism.[61] They explain how activist media creators are very much aware of these hegemonic power relations, corporate surveillance, and capitalist exploitation and have found ways to nonetheless use the media infrastructure for their own purposes and political action, possibly undermining structures of imperialism and challenging dominant and oppressive policies and narratives. Picking up on these subversive modes of countering digital capitalism, Tiziano Bonini and Emiliano Treré investigated how gig workers, artists and social movements successfully developed tactics of 'algorithmic resistance' by appropriating and repurposing the very same algorithms that are at the core of colonial capitalism.[62]

As Barassi argues, 'the production of value online cannot be perceived merely as the production of data to be turned into a commodity. It is only by looking at the human value that activists actively produce on corporate web 2.0 platforms that we can start to appreciate the meaning these technologies have for political participation'.[63] This is equally important for the kind of memory work we are looking at in this special issue. Whereas numbers, view counts and likes are of some relevance in the arguments developed in our contributions, the focus is clearly on the work put into the restoration and sustaining of human value, including the acknowledgement of the human costs of the Battle of Manila that has been sidelined in official memory narratives (Candelaria and Ebro).

The contributions to this special issue each focus on specific online platforms, from websites to YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, and discuss their affordances in relation to the specific case they are looking at, including their limitations. They do so in relation to past and ongoing cases of violence taking place in countries in Southeast Asia that have so far been largely neglected in the field of memory studies and official remembering more generally.

Postmemory and the future

Digital media have been widely misused for specific interpretations of the past, including for the continuation of authoritarian regimes and war, mobilising jihadis, populism or fake news.[64] Accordingly, in memory studies, there has been a strong

60 Kate McGregor and Ana Dragojlovic, 'Decolonising memory'.

61 Margaret Jack, *Media ruins*; Veronica Barassi, *Activism on the web: Everyday struggles against digital capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

62 Tiziano Bonini and Emiliano Treré, *Algorithms of resistance: The everyday fight against platform power* (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2024).

63 Veronica Barassi, *Activism on the web*, p. 15.

64 Birgit Bräuchler, 'Islamic radicalism online: The Moluccan Mission of the Laskar Jihad in cyberspace', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 15, 3 (2004): 267–85; Birgit Bräuchler, *Cyberidentities at war: The Moluccan conflict on the internet* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013); Merlyna Lim, *Islamic radicalism and anti-Americanism in Indonesia: The role of the internet* (Policy Studies 18, Washington: East-West Center, 2005). Gilang Desti Parahita and Vissia Ita Yulianto, 'The treachery on YouTube'; Ewen Speed and Russell Mannion, 'The rise of post-truth populism in pluralist liberal democracies: Challenges for

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focus on negative memories and trauma.[65] It has not yet been sufficiently explored how digital media change our relationship to past violence and provide new ways to anticipate its future occurrence, not only through re-traumatisation, but possibly also through the cultural transmission of positivity and hope for a better future.[66] Laura Huttunen in her work on burial ceremonies commemorating the massacre of Srebrenica on YouTube, for instance, understands internet-based memory work as 'embedded within a larger framework of political projects that aim at coming to terms with the violence of the 1990s in Bosnia-Herzegovina'; it has 'prospective dimensions, as the circulation of past events in video format produces a site of making moral claims on the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina'.[67] Jack, whose work on Cambodia I have introduced earlier, similarly argues that the creative reconstruction of media artefacts and infrastructures (mostly done on digital tools) that was systematically destroyed during the Khmer Rouge regime 'is significant to young media creators because they capture a time in Cambodia of peace, cultural flourishing, and beauty'; it 'provides an avenue for remembrance of positive cultural histories and imagining building a better Cambodia'.[68] Ali Atef's research on small-scale archival work in Egypt shows that making these image collections publicly accessible is not only a matter of providing alternative memories of the past, but also of envisioning the future in certain ways.[69] Similarly, Andreas Bandak and colleagues have argued that image archiving of the Syrian conflict not only enables a grip on the past, but also allows for reordering in the present and future.[70]

A particular focus of this special issue is the extent to which young people reconstruct memories in digital spaces in ways that allow them to envision a (possibly) better and peaceful future. In other words, we are interested in how they include the future in processes of remembering and how they 'remember the future', which implies that memory is less about the past, but anticipation of the future.[71] Burke in her contribution to this special issue, for instance, investigates how the post-independence generation in Timor Leste remembers the past through performance, re-enactments

health policy', *International Journal of Health Policy and Management* 6, (2017): 1–3 (https://doi.org/10.15171/ijhpm.2017.19, last accessed 18 May 2026).

65 Veena Das, *Life and words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary* (Berkeley, United States: University of California Press, 2006).

66 Ann Rigney, 'Remembering hope: Transnational activism beyond the traumatic', *Memory Studies* 11, 3 (2018): 368–80.

67 Laura Huttunen, 'Remembering, witnessing, bringing closure: Srebrenica burial ceremonies on YouTube', in *Memory in a mediated world: Remembrance and reconstruction*, ed. Andrea Hajek, Christine Lohmeier and Christian Pentzold (London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 245.

68 Margaret Jack, *Media ruins*, p. 3.

69 Ali Atef, 'The affect of media-time: Reflections from a socio-cultural anthropologist in audio-visual archives in contemporary Cairo', in *Theorising media and time: Temporalities, media practices and politics of time in a digital era*, ed. Birgit Bräuchler and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (London/New York: Berghahn, forthcoming).

70 Andreas Bandak, Christine Crone and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup, 'Re-collections: Images beyond the archive', *Visual Anthropology* 37, 1 (2024): 1–18.

71 Tine M. Gammeltoft, 'Potentiality and human temporality: Haunting futures in Vietnamese pregnancy care', *Current Anthropology* 54, S7 (2013): S159-S71; Melinda Hinkson, *Remembering the future: Warlpiri life through the prism of drawing* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2015).

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and digital documentation, and simultaneously records visions of the future that challenge past inequalities through community radio stations serving as digital archives for the future. Le reflects on the ways in which Vietnamese families participate in the memory-making of the War in digital and non-digital spaces to come to terms with past violence and imagine a more peaceful future. Mette-Starke explores how young people in Myanmar use digital spaces to (re)articulate memories of past and ongoing violence and envision a shared future. Given that digital media have been praised to empower and damned to be polarising, how can they open up space and empower young people to make memory work for peace and potentially restore social relations and heal trauma, rather than promote the continuation of hate? Why are certain initiatives successful, why do others fail?

In that sense, and building on Yifat Gutman's work, we also aim to look at memory activism as a new approach to peace activism and as a means to reimagine the past for the future.[72] In this, the postmemory generation plays a crucial role. That generation is mostly constituted of young people, the bearers of the future and preeminent users of digital technology, whose active role in peacebuilding is increasingly acknowledged.[73] They were themselves not part of past violence and thus rely on mediation to connect to memories of those who were directly affected by it.[74] There is increasing awareness that those who were born during or after the violence and have no direct experience or memory of it still have to deal with its aftermath and legacy. They are 'implicated subjects', not guilty of past atrocities, but nonetheless responsible in different ways.[75] However, there is a lack of understanding of how young people's memory work in digital spaces can contribute to peacebuilding or, at least, allow for a constructive engagement with a violent past and the prospects for a more just future. Social media platforms can make memories of the past accessible to the youth of today and support young people in their fight against autocratic regimes and for democratisation.

However, as some of our contributions show, 'postmemory' is not always a straightforward category. This is the case in processes of remembrance in countries like Myanmar, where there is no end to the violence in sight and where different kinds of violent conflicts, involving different parties, overlap in time and space (see Mette-Starke, this issue). In other words, in places where the postmemory generation of a conflict either lives through its continuation or is exposed to other types of violent conflicts, the lines between memory and postmemory, or post-independence, as Laura Burke frames the generation for the Timor Leste case (this issue), become blurred.

72 Yifat Gutman, *Memory activism: Reimagining the past for the future in Israel-Palestine* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2017).

73 E.g. Moses Jackson, 'Youth and global violence: Saving history's largest generation of young people', *New Security Beat,* 9.7.2014 (2014) (https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2014/07/youth-global-violence-saving-historys-largest-generation-young-people/, last accessed 18 May 2026); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality* (New York: United Nations, 2016); Lesley Pruitt, 'Rethinking youth bulge theory in policy and scholarship: Incorporating critical gender analysis', *International Affairs* 96, 3 (2020): 711–28.

74 Hirsch, *The generation of postmemory*.

75 Michael Rothberg, *The implicated subject: Beyond victims and perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

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Digital memory work in Southeast Asia and beyond — Some features

As José van Dijck has argued, memory itself is an intrinsically mediating activity that 'acts as a go-between between individual and collective identity, between mental and cultural imaging processes, and between the past and future'.[76] Such mediating activities lie at the core of the analyses of our special issue contributions.

Change and materiality

Looking into digital media engagement of a postmemory generation, we need to consider specific affordances and features of digital media that go beyond the platform politics and economics as discussed above. In order to challenge continuing polarisation practices in digital memory work, we need to instead put emphasis on the 'dynamic, continuously changing' character of mediated memories.[77] Digital technologies allow for memory work related to wars of the past, but they also enable 'real-time memorialization' of ongoing conflicts 'that differs in its immediate and decentralized nature from earlier practices of war commemoration'.[78] Through the sharing of visuals, audios, documents and others, memories are progressively constructed on social media platforms and the possibility to constantly update, juxtapose, share and add fragments, very much promotes 'the impermanence of memories'.[79] As David Simon and Eve Zucker argue, and as I have shown earlier, digitised information is both durable and malleable, as digital data can be easily manipulated, de- and recontextualised, which shapes the way past and ongoing events are memorialised on digital platforms.[80]

Using digital platforms for one's memory work often means that, once posted, the contribution is out of one's control. As Bräuchler argues in her analysis of the commentaries of the Indonesian and the English versions of a YouTube video featuring two former child soldiers in Indonesia and how they remember the violence, the way social media posts are received depends, among others, on political and cultural contexts of social media users as well as the circulation of transcultural memory tropes.[81] Scholars working on digital memory work on the Syrian conflict have shown that images are seen and interpreted differently. Often the same images or videos are uploaded by different actors, with very different ideologies and motivations, sometimes changing or reassembling witness footage, thus shaping future memory of the events in different ways.[82] Bandak and colleagues hence invite us to engage with the 'temporality of these images' and 'the discrepant landscapes of circulation through which they move'.[83] To add to this, Atef in his work on Egyptian small-scale archives outlines the difficulties of access to platforms and resources to make personal collections public to counter dominant history narratives. As he argues, digitalising images and dealing with the

76 José van Dijck, *Mediated memories in the digital age* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 180.
77 Ibid, p. 24.
78 Mykola Makhortykh, 'Remediating the past', p. 146.
79 Elisa Serafinelli, *Digital life on Instagram: New social communication of photography* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018), p. 155.
80 David J. Simon and Eve Monique Zucker, 'Introduction', p. 11.
81 Bräuchler, "'I can't remember how many I killed'".
82 Andreas Bandak, Christine Crone and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup, 'Re-collections', p. 12; Rik Smit, Ansgard Heinrich and Marcel Broersma, 'Witnessing in the new memory ecology', pp. 290–91.
83 Andreas Bandak, Christine Crone and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup, 'Re-collections', p. 14.

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technical demands of the platforms leads to the sidelining of the important work of historical contextualisation of the archive material.[84]

There are also some other risks involved in digitalised remembering. The sheer amount of materials available online and the tools developed to 'deal' with it, for instance, may lead to the dehumanisation of individual testimonies or photos.[85] At heart is the issue of how to actually 'digest' enormous amounts of digital material. The Syrian Archive, for instance, that I will discuss in more detail below, has collected four decades of digital footage on the Syrian uprising (if we would serially string it all together). This has posed unprecedented challenges for human rights activists and legal investigators, especially when it comes to verification.[86] And whereas collecting and publicly sharing testimonies and other formerly silenced memory material might restore dignity and bring recognition to victims, it could also endanger the dignity of those depicted when content is manipulated, displaced, put into new contexts, overwritten or deleted, or when images of violence and suffering 'are linked to a globalized media and artistic market fuelled by a quest for spectacle'.[87]

Justice and reconciliation

The online sharing of alternative voices that have been stigmatised or silenced for decades has an emancipatory potential and can fill important gaps in nationalist memory narratives, but, as Hakimul Ikhwan and colleagues argue for social media engagement with the 1965/66 killings in Indonesia, is ultimately directed towards achieving justice.[88] Justice is key to many alternative memory projects online. Alternative digital spaces open up new venues to seek justice after (or during) long-term violence. Among our special issue contributors, Burke analyses the role of the digital in reproductive justice and the recording of the future for the postmemory generation in Timor Leste; and Benzaquen reflects on the articulation of silenced memories and archival asymmetries in the Cambodian case.

Huttunen in her work on burial ceremonies commemorating the massacre of Srebrenica on YouTube understands such memory work as geared towards coming to terms with the violent past and, simultaneously, 'searching for accountability and justice'.[89] Similarly, Erik van Ommering and Reem el Soussi show how a digital memorial for forcibly disappeared persons in Lebanon contributes to transitional justice, 'enabling survivors to share their stories, build collectives, demand recognition, and advocate for justice'.[90] These new ways of recollecting the past, they argue, can not only unite concerned civil society organisations and families around a shared objective, but also potentially allow for healing, a degree of closure, and, ideally, even reconciliation across former divides.[91]

84 Ali Atef, 'The affect of media-time'.
85 David J. Simon and Eve Monique Zucker, 'Introduction', p. 11.
86 Andreas Bandak, Christine Crone and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup, 'Re-collections', p. 9.
87 Ibid, p. 15.
88 Hakimul Ikhwan, Vissia Yulianto and Gilang Parahita, 'The contestation of social memory', p. 12.
89 Huttunen, 'Remembering, witnessing, bringing closure'.
90 Erik van Ommering and Reem el Soussi, 'Space of hope for Lebanon's missing', p. 168.
91 Ibid, pp. 169, 183–84.

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As indicated above, archives are not neutral technical tools to store certain material, but have clear political agendas, depending on who is maintaining and who is using them, which has implications for historical justice.[92] Most state archives build and reinforce dominant historical narratives. The digital provides important platforms to challenge such one-sided memories and interpretations. This is clearly evident in Atef's work (with the limitations outlined earlier), but also in Cathrine Bublatzky's research on even smaller-scale forms of archiving through private photographs in an exile archive from Iran, where she shows how such archives become tools of political resistance, solidarity and temporal ordering.[93]

The Syrian uprising is often described as 'the most (socially) mediated and video-recorded revolution of modern times', mainly due to the absence of any traditional media coverage.[94] In such a context, social media and online platforms have become important means to share sorrow, anger and fear, but also to express hope and the pursuit of future transitional justice.[95] An outstanding example is the Syrian Archive Digital Memory project, 'a collective of human rights activists dedicated to curating visual documentation of human rights violations and other crimes committed during the conflict in Syria', including stories of the victims themselves.[96] As Dima Saber and Abdul Rahman al-Jaloud argue, the potential value of crowd-sourced digital archives is threefold: 'its testimonial and historical, its evidentiary, and its creative value'.[97] Conceptualising archiving as a collective social practice that is accessible, transparent and replicable in the way it is 'collecting, preserving, verifying, and investigating visual documentation', the archive aims to collect evidence to hold the Syrian regime accountable for its crimes in the future, to circulate narratives about justice and potentially future reconciliation, and thus imagine a more peaceful future.[98] Whereas one advantage of social media is that content can immediately be verified or falsified by different actors, they also open the possibility for manipulation, including creating seemingly 'authentic' videos.[99] As Joshka Wessels emphasises, there is 'a difference between a "video recording" and a "legal truth" and both do not necessarily coincide' when important meta-data are missing, which has decisive consequences for the pursuit of justice.[100] Despite the archives, the battle against the Assad regime has been

92 See e.g. Andreas Bandak, Christine Crone and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup, 'Re-collections'; Birgit Bräuchler and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup, eds., *Theorising media and time: Temporalities, media practices and politics of time in a digital era* (London/New York: Berghahn, forthcoming).

93 Cathrine Bublatzky, 'Polymedia and the remediation of an Iranian conflictual past: An exile photo archive as a form of resistance', in *Theorising media and time: Temporalities, media practices and politics of time in a digital era*, ed. Birgit Bräuchler and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (London/New York: Berghahn, forthcoming).

94 Joshka Ivanka Wessels, 'YouTube and the role of digital video for transitional justice in Syria', *Politik* 19, 4 (2016): 30.

95 Ibid; Andreas Bandak, Christine Crone and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup, 'Re-collections', p. 3.

96 Dima Saber and Abdul Rahman al-Jaloud, 'The Syrian Archive Digital Memory project: Archiving as testimony, as evidence, as creative practice', *Visual Anthropology* 37, 1 (2024): 19.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid, pp. 22, 29. See also Andreas Bandak, Christine Crone and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup, 'Re-collections'; Stefan Tarnowski, 'The beginning of an idea about an end: On digital, diasporic, Syrian archives', *Visual Anthropology* 37, 1 (2024): 35–55.

99 Joshka Ivanka Wessels, 'YouTube and the role of digital video for transitional justice in Syria', p. 35.

100 Ibid, pp. 36, 50.

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lost, whereas the battle over memories, images and the (re)writing of history is still ongoing.[101]

The Syrian case seems to contrast with other cases like the YouTube memorialisation of the Battle of Manila discussed in this special issue. Here, Candelaria and Ebro confirm the critical role of digital platforms in fostering a more inclusive and multifaceted dialogue on war memories, but, at the same time, they bemoan the lack of critical engagement with the human costs of the war and a discussion that is geared towards justice and accountability.

Mobility and connectivity

New technologies, most prominently the smart phone, make our memory and our memory work mobile and connective. It is in such new memory ecologies that our memory is 'increasingly connected with, newly ordered through and distributed across complex networks of digital media and technologies'.[102] As Anna Reading puts it, it renders memory 'wearable' and connective, allowing us, at the same time, to connect to community, but also connect local and global processes of remembering.[103] What she describes as 'globital memory field extends Bourdieu's concept to suggest a memory field that exists both vertically and horizontally and that is electric, algorithmic, geographic, and psychic'.[104] The 'synergetic combination of the social and political dynamic of globalization with digitization', Reading argues, opens up a field for the 'struggle by memory agents over the assemblage, mobilization, and securitization of memory capital',[105] where remembering 'is made through an ongoing interaction between all the parts'.[106]

This is particularly relevant for people living in the diaspora to connect with one another and to remember their homeland and the past violence that has in many cases triggered their migration. David Clarke and colleagues have studied digital diasporic initiatives — the Polish Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum and Houshamadyan, a project to reconstruct Ottoman Armenian town and village life. They found that, in both cases, the sites share 'the story of a specific diasporic experience' and highlight 'a specific tale of suffering and loss … not the multiplicity of diasporic experiences'.[107] At the same time however, the way the two groups use these digital platforms is informed by the specific needs and historical background of each diasporic community, with Houshamadyan being particularly interested in the re-establishment of an Armenian cultural presence in Turkey, and Kresy-Siberia in a collaborative and participatory

101 Andreas Bandak, Christine Crone and Nina Grønlykke Mollerup, 'Re-collections,' p. 5.
102 Andrew Hoskins, 'Media, memory, metaphor: Remembering and the connective turn', *Parallax* 17, 4 (2011): 23.
103 Anna Reading, 'Memobilia: The mobile phone and the emergence of wearable memories', in *Save as… Digital memories*, ed. Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins and Anna Reading (London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 81–95.
104 Anna Reading, 'Memory and digital media: Six dynamics of the globital memory field', in *On media memory: Collective memory in a new media age*, ed. Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers and Eyal Zandberg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 242.
105 Ibid.
106 Andrew Hoskins, 'Media, memory, metaphor', p. 24.
107 David Clarke, Nina Parish, Polly Winfield and Ani Lecrivain, 'Diasporic memory practice on the Internet: Remembering lost homelands', *Memory Studies* 16, 4 (2022): 1006.

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mutual exchange of information and a dialogue between members to reconstruct family histories.[108] In their study on the Rohingya digital diaspora, Ansar and Khaled explore how exiled Rohingyas express memories of their lost home, violence, persecution and forced displacement online and how that informs their digital activism to seek virtual togetherness and justice.[109]

Being interested in how Southeast Asian diasporic communities remember and contribute to shaping memory of a violent past in their home countries, contributions to this special issue include Benzaquen, who investigates how Khmers in Cambodia and the diaspora together articulate their (post)memories of the Khmer Republic and the civil war in digital platforms, and Le, a young scholar with Vietnamese roots living in Australia, who provides an autoethnographic account of intergenerational and transnational memories of the Second Indochina War in digital and non-digital spaces. In so doing, she adds a new angle to a thriving field of Vietnamese digital diaspora studies.[110]

Remembering and forgetting

Specific to digital memory work is also the fact that boundaries between private and public, individual and collective, and official and vernacular ways of remembering are increasingly blurred or dissolving. Digital objects and memories are fluid and malleable, but at the same time they are persistent because digital traces are retrievable (or remixable) for long periods of time, rendering them reconfigurable, and thus blurring the boundaries between past, present and future.[111] Traceability raises questions of un/forgettability. Do digital technologies force us to not forget as digital dispersion makes it almost impossible to 'delete' the digital traces of the past?[112] Scholars have come up with different scenarios, from the techno-centred prognosis of unlimited storage and hence remembering capacities of digital servers, to more careful evaluations, which warn against equating the internet as a communication technology with the memory capacity of social systems.[113] New personal data guidelines such as the GDPR in Europe contribute to this set of questions by stipulating the right to the erasure of personal data from digital media platforms as the right to be forgotten.[114] As Benzaquen argues, we need to pay close attention to attempts that make people forget or reconstruct a complex past via digital traces. In her research on Tuol Sleng, the

108 Ibid.

109 Anas Ansar and Abu Faisal Md Khaled, 'In search of a Rohingya digital diaspora: Virtual togetherness, collective identities and political mobilisation', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10, 1 (2023): 61.

110 Anh Nguyen Austen, *Vietnamese migrants in Australia and the global digital diaspora: Histories of childhood, forced migration, and belonging* (London: Routledge, 2023).

111 Rik Smit, Ansgard Heinrich and Marcel Broersma, 'Witnessing in the new memory ecology', p. 292.

112 E.g. Stephanie Benzaquen, 'Looking at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes, Cambodia, on Flickr and YouTube', *Media, Culture & Society* 36, 6 (2014): 792.

113 Gerd Sebald and Marie-Kristin Döbler, '(Digitale) Medien und Gedächtnis – aus der Perspektive einer Gedächtnissoziologie', in *(Digitale) Medien und soziale Gedächtnisse*, ed. Gerd Sebald (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), p. 47; Vivien Sommer, 'Mediatisierte Erinnerungen, Medienwissenschaftliche Perspektiven für eine Theoretisierung digitaler Erinnerungsprozesse', in *(Digitale) Medien und soziale Gedächtnisse*, ed. Gerd Sebald (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), p. 63.

114 See e.g. https://gdpr.eu/right-to-be-forgotten/.

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Cambodian Genocide Museum, she suggests that social media can 'be used as inadvertent archives of Tuol Sleng. They provide accidental, unintentional material' that can be compared and juxtaposed with other sources over a longer period of time in order to, in her case, 'construct a critical visual history of Tuol Sleng'.[115]

As reflections in this conceptual paper have shown, people are motivated to engage in online memory work for different reasons. Some want visibility, some recognition (or justice and accountability), some seek intergenerational transmission, some sociability and others hope for the therapeutic effects of online memory work. Given the dynamic and continuously changing character of digital spaces, and given the technological intricacies of online platforms, we also need to ask to what extent the digital is a field of remembering *and* forgetting. It is different kinds of forgetting that crystallise out of what we have discussed so far: one linked to erasure of digital data and the right to forget; one tied to algorithmic preferences; one to the sheer amount of available data where a single piece of data can easily be forgotten; and one being enforced forgetting or silencing of memories and historic narratives that are not in line with the version promoted by a specific national regime. In particular for the latter kind of forgetting, we find various examples in this special issue, where the digital opened up the space to work with 'forgotten' memories, be it the Battle of Manila (Candelaria and Ebro), the Khmer Republic in Cambodia (Benzaquen), or vernacular memories of the 'Vietnam War' (Le).

A brief note on methodology

What follows is not a digital ethnography guide as many others have produced useful introductions on conducting research in and through digital media in the last two decades.[116] What I would like to point out in this brief note are some of the specificities that the contributors to this special issue encountered at the intersection of the digital and postmemory work in Southeast Asia and how they innovatively adapted to a rapidly changing memory and research landscape in very diverse political climates, from settings of severe surveillance by ruling regimes (Benzaquen for Cambodia) to places with still limited internet access (Burke for Timor Leste) or ongoing warfare (Mette-Starke for Myanmar), from diaspora memory strategies (Le and Benzaquen for Vietnam and Cambodia) to marginalised and dissenting memories (Candelaria and Ebro, and Weir for the Philippines).

Moving into the digital spaces that people whom we collaborate with in our research use for their memory work has implications for our own research practice and methodology and requires constant innovation and adaptation. This relates to the politicisation of social media as discussed earlier and extends to some of the memory work features introduced above, such as the highly dynamic and volatile character of digital memory work. Memory actor landscapes constantly change; these actors include ordinary media users, memory activists, governments, diasporic groups,

115 Benzaquen, 'Looking at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes', p. 792.

116 Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce and T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Birgit Bräuchler, *Cyberidentities at war*; Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller, eds., *Digital anthropology* (New York: Berg, 2012); Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis and Jo Tacchi, *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016).

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digital platform designers and managers, and others. Research on and through highly dynamic digital platforms on likewise highly dynamic processes of remembering poses a challenge to the researcher. At the same time, however, it is also a great opportunity to observe memory-in-the-making and changing memory policies as well as further deconstruct dominant memory narratives. As Benzaquen stipulates in her contribution to this special issue, the 'internet "new media ecology" makes thus available a wide range of materials that were not so easily accessible before. This "postscarcity culture" changes the conditions, practices, and forms of remembrance' through specific media affordances, and it changes the way we conduct our research. The amount of mediated and remediated material available online raises questions of authenticity and reliability, but at the same time it furthers our critical memory research in unprecedented ways.

The sheer volume of memory expressions available in digital memory spaces (text, video, audio, etc.) tempts researchers to choose a quantitative approach that often misses the nuances and lived reality of those involved in memory work and making, which is exactly what we are interested in this special issue. Most of our contributors are rooted in the social sciences, which explains the qualitative approach to our research questions. Our contributors have come up with various strategies how to filter relevant material and enable qualitative analysis of what at first sight often seems to be an overwhelming and unmanageable field, with some of them combining quantitative and qualitative tools (see in particular Candelaria and Ebro; please see individual contributions for more details).

For most of us, the research presented in this special issue is part of larger research endeavours on memory works in the respective areas, where media and digital platforms are but one means to explore ways how people construct and reconstruct memory. It is such long-term in-depth engagement with the areas under study that allows for the social, cultural, political and historical contextualisation and interpretation of memory dynamics observed in digital spaces. This renders a non-media centric approach important, where media are always to be seen, analysed and interpreted in their specific contexts and are but one aspect of much broader societal constellations and memory strategies.[117] Most of our contributions thus have a specific focus on the combination of online and offline research.

In one of our contributions, the researcher also plays an active role in the memory processes under scrutiny, using the person of the researcher and their involvement in ongoing memory work as a tool to understand better contemporary memory landscapes and dynamics. As indicated before, our author Thu Le hails from Vietnam and now lives in Australia. In her article she uses an autoethnographic approach to reflect on her own experiences of remembering the 'Vietnam War' as a member of the postmemory generation, but also on intergenerational and transnational memories of the Second Indochina War in digital and non-digital spaces more generally.

117 David Morley, 'For a materialist, non-media-centric media studies', *Television & New Media* 10, 1 (2009): 114–16.

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Special issue overview

In this special issue, we investigate the transformative potential of digital memory work with a particular focus on whether and how memory activists are able to circumvent the polarising effects of digital media to remember in ways that allow them to envision and enact a peaceful future. How do young people in Southeast Asia embrace, complement, challenge or reject national or international memory narratives through digital memory work? How do diasporic communities utilise digital media to recreate and reimagine the homeland?

With this special issue, grounded in the shared conceptual frame as presented in this introductory paper, we set out to develop a comparative perspective on postmemory work and the digital in Southeast Asia. We do so as an interdisciplinary team of scholars, based in different regions, including Southeast Asia, Europe and Australia, at different stages of our careers and relating differently to our special issue themes, united by an in-depth ethnographic engagement with the fields we study. Before inviting you to engage more deeply with our individual contributions, let me provide a brief overview of the special issue content, in alphabetical order.

In her article, Stephanie Benzaquen examines how digital platforms provide Khmers in Cambodia and the diaspora with opportunities to express their memories and postmemories of the Khmer Republic (1970–1975) that is often seen as 'a by-product of the "Vietnam War" in the hands of the Americans,' and largely neglected in scholarly research. The paper explores the digital tools available to researchers for expanding the fragmented and sparse archive of the Khmer Republic left behind by the regime and how this hybrid archive can support activism. Her analysis focuses on 30 YouTube videos about the Khmer Republic and their accompanying comments, delving into the emotional, historiographical and political aspects of online memory practices. The paper argues for considering postmemory not only as a subject of study but also as a crucial research method for creating a critical archive of this period in Cambodian history.

Drawing on ethnographic research since 2016, Laura Burke in her paper explores how Timor Leste's post-independence generation is aiming to address past inequalities through performance, re-enactments and digital documentation, thus at the same time remembering the past and recording visions of the future. Unlike Hirsch's notion of postmemory, many young Timorese have direct memories of the Indonesian occupation (1975–99). This generation engages in memory creation by re-enacting and documenting aspects of the conflict, thereby participating in a form of reproductive justice. In her analysis, Burke expands this concept, typically associated with biological and social reproduction, to include cultural and political dimensions, challenging past violence and social hierarchies. The digital plays a prominent role here. As a tool of communication and replication, she argues, the digital as a reproductive medium can serve as a space for remembering, reimagining and reproducing a more equal and just future.

Lee Candelaria and Joselito M. Ebro examine how user-generated comments on YouTube discuss the 1945 Battle of Manila, one of the Second World War's fiercest urban battles. It resulted in enormous damage to property and devastating loss of human lives, but is, nonetheless often neglected in Pacific War memory. Through a sequential mixed-method analysis, the authors uncover common themes

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in the comments, including postmemory sharing and the destruction of infrastructure, which, however, rarely connect to issues of justice and accountability. As the authors argue, such neglect of the battle's human cost in discussions of justice perpetuates its marginalisation in collective memory, underscoring a failure to recognise the event's historical and ethical significance.

Thu Le in her contribution addresses a gap in current research on the Second Indochina War (or the 'Vietnam War'), which tends to emphasise the memory narratives of notable figures and institutions, often neglecting the lived reality of Vietnamese people. Through an autoethnographic approach, the author shares personal stories from her Vietnamese-Australian family, highlighting how they use both digital and non-digital means to work with war memories in Việt Nam and Australia and, at the same time, revealing the complexities of intergenerational and transnational memories, shaped by the enduring impact of the War and the rise of global digital platforms.

In his article, Benedict Mette-Starke explores how Myanmar's ongoing, overlapping and interconnected conflicts, along with the digital realm, blur the lines between past, present and future. He investigates how postmemory is affected when it is transmitted not just through time, but also across different spaces, potentially challenging or reinforcing traditional notions of belonging. The study draws on two cases, one based on long-term fieldwork with digital rights activists in Myanmar in 2019/2020, and one on the analysis of an online video about an Ethnic Armed Organisation and its specific contextual setting. As Mette-Starke argues, they represent two different lines how postmemories can challenge or affirm preconceived ways of belonging.

And, last but not least, Kimberley Lustina Weir examines the People Power Monument in Manila, an 18-metre-high sculpture by Eduardo Castrillo, which commemorates the 1986 People Power Revolution that ended President Ferdinand Marcos' 20-year dictatorship. Erected in 1993 at the protest site, the monument is central to annual commemorations from February 22 to February 25. These gatherings serve to both remember the revolution and protest current threats to democracy, notably the return of the Marcos family to power with Bongbong Marcos' 2022 presidential election. The monument also features prominently in digital protests, with its images shared on social media as symbols of dissent. Weir explores how the monument and its digital representations mediate the lived experiences of the revolution, creating intersecting networks of memory that fuel ongoing calls for justice and democracy. Enjoy reading!

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