Digital Social Memories

Digitalization, especially of media, as a social process can be seen as one of the most important processes for the transformation of contemporary societies. It changes the ways, individuals get access to the world, it also changes the forms of communications, and it changes the (social) forms of recollecting the past.

In a first step I will outline the basic principles of a sociology of memory. This is done starting from a phenomenological and Schutzian concept of memory, that is transferred to the social. Memory is conceived as an operation that informs present processes with the remnants of past processes (knowledge). Therefore, the repeated pragmatic and situational performance with its activated subjective and social horizons is the starting point for analysis. In a second step the process of digitalization on different levels of the social is described. I will conclude, that the concept of social memory can lay out the foundations for a description of the massive changes induced with digital media.

Toward a sociology of memory

In the past decade a new variation of sociological theory and research has developed: a sociology of memory, which (re-)introduces the concept of memory into sociology (see for example Sebald & Wagle 2015, Dimbath & Heinlein 2015). Memory is used as a fundamental term for theoretical descriptions and empirical analyses of social phenomena. The focus is on references to the past actualized in current social processes as well as on references to the future, the experiential background [Erfahrungshintergrund] and the anticipational horizon [Erwartungshorizont] (Koselleck 1979). Therefore, this kind of reconstructive analysis centers around temporal relations, temporal orders and concatenations, selective actualizations out of a horizon of possibilities (which also means forgetting), social change and transformation.

Common sense takes memory as an individual psychic ability. Recollection is taken as an intentional and conscious search for the past as it once was. Instead I would propose to define memory in leaning on Schütz process of meaning constitution as a double operation supplying present courses of experiences with remnants of the past (types and schemes of experience) and generating such remnants out of present experiences. Both modes of memory operation take place in the present and only in the present. Accordingly, recollection is every present reference to our use of the past, irrespective of intentions or motives which could trigger such a reference. Recollection, even of the most vivid kind, is always a reconstruction of the past; there is no way of grasping the past as it has been.

Memories as present operations inform present processes of meaning generation. They offer form and information (or content). Meaning is the way in which humans have access to the world. There is no immediate way of experiencing the surrounding (or inner) world. In perceiving and acting we make selections out of the world and interpret them. Memories have a vital role in these operations as they offer the formed remnants of the past, generalizations in a broad sense (as means of interpretation and orientation for present perceptions and in present situations), and also as patterns of selection or relevances. Such a concept of meaning can be traced back to theoretical considerations of Alfred Schütz and Niklas Luhmann and is built on the grounds of Husserlian phenomenology, reflecting the interests of both sociologists.

If this conception of memories is applied only to the psychological or subjective domain, as Edward Casey (1987) does, for example, it would be less interesting for sociology. But if a closer look is taken at social processes, procedures and courses of action, we find many references to the past. And if we are looking at the way of processing these references, several levels, layers or planes of memories can be distinguished. All references to the past necessarily have a connection to the social context in which they take place. With Erving Goffman (1967), we can analyze the interactions and communications in a certain situation in terms of a logic of their own, processing meaning in a specific way detached from the intentions and meaning constructions of the participants. In the interweaving performances, be they antagonistic or cooperative, the unique meaning of the situation is accomplished. This is accompanied by the situation's own temporal references and generalizations that have connections to the generalizations used in the situation, but which are not merely the sums of their parts or a kind of average. Rather, it can be described as a kind of translation (see Renn 2006), emerging out of the transactions taking place. Communication can be taken as an example. None of the participants has an intentional reach-through, or control over what happens in a communication, over the meaning that emerges out of it, nor over what is understood by other participants. The same holds true for transsituational social processes and phenomena, like discourses, organizations, the public, differentiated fields of social order (law, education, science, economy, and others), and forms of collectivities (families, milieus, nations, subcultures). In Durkheim's words, these are social facts sui generis. All of them process their own references to the past, their own forms of a generalized past, narratives, and rules. Most of these transsituational forms of the past are kept in media formats, such as protocols, pictures, statutes, texts or software. Depending on their validity [Geltung] and binding character these forms are integrated— or, rather, translated—into the situation at hand. These translations are done by individuals taking part in the situation by practically performing, communicating and acting without being able to control the processes on the situational and transsituational level. Of course, there are reflections, intentions, motives, thoughts, and conscious forms of meaning. These operate on another level of social memory: reflective individual memory. In using linguistical or pictorial (and therefore social) generalizing forms, a stock of references to the past is composed and used for

orientation in present situations. These references are genuinely social in generation as well as in application and use, or as Alfred Schütz put it, »it seems to be a truism to state that only an exceedingly small part of our actual and potential knowledge originates in our own experience. The bulk of our knowledge consists in experiences [...] which have [been] communicated or handed down to us.« (Schütz 1964, 131) But beneath these reflective forms of references to the past, I would propose to distinguish another form of memory: body memory, which has its own forms of generalizations and processes of meaning and selection. And, therefore, it has its own relevance for the flow of the social. This means that body memory is an analytically distinguishable way of referring to the past, which is operational in many social processes.

Social memories operate on these four levels of the social course of events. They provide processed forms of the past, schemes, types, scripts and so on, for present processes of meaning construction, which are translated and integrated throughout the levels in situations.

Conceptualizing the digital

Taking such social references to the past on the different levels of the social as starting point the universal technology of the present comes into sight: digital technology as specific combination of hardware and software, of material and symbolic devices.

Software is a specific sequence of commands for processing, arranged in complex and recursive patterns, producing clocked electric states in the material machine. These temporarily stabilized processes can be read as sequences of two different states of electric tension, as 0 and 1. That is the basis of all digital technology. The important point is that the processes in the machine are decoupled from all the contexts it is used in. When software is written, the problem at hand has to be strictly formalized. Meaning and context of the problem have to be forgotten. What is done then is building a (implicit or explicit) model, modeling reality into a formalized, computer readable description. What is necessary to couple such a model with the setting it is used in are quantified splinters of it, data. These data produced themselves in a formal and rational way and are, for the processing in the machine, stripped of any possible meaning. The "inner coherence [of a programme] and its performative power are based […] on the purity of its construction", as Hartmut Winkler puts it. The history of the software or the development are completely irrelevant, instead only the present functioning is relevant. Software is the perfect separation of genesis and validity. Formalization produces code purified of its own past and purified of the past of the problem context and meaning, and that is a way of forgetting. What is taken to the present is the model of the context and its actual processing with loops, recursions, and iterations using the memory units of the machine. Therefore, digital technology is itself a form of memory and, when used in social contexts, a form of social memory.

Given the rapid spread of digital technology through nearly all life-worlds, such symbolic models are used pragmatically, are actualized again and again, are becoming effective in use. That is, present situations are formed by the software and according to the software used in them, have to be adjusted to the model inherent in the code. Present social processes are formed and in-formed, brought in form, by the ever and again recalled model inscribed in software. Its formalized inputs and outputs become part of present processes of meaning construction and have, therefore, functions of a social memory. That does not mean a kind of determination of these processes. I would rather speak of facilitations: software opens up some possibilities and closes others.

If these two moments are taken together with the connectivity of the computers, the construction of a world wide net of symbol processing machines, and the plasticity and flexibility of software, digital technology becomes the material and symbolic infrastructure of present sociality. It is taken for granted, just like water and power supply, it becomes the forgotten frame, rack or scaffolding, the "Gestell" as Heidegger puts it, for present processes of meaning construction. And as such it is forming and facilitating social processes with its aforementioned memory aspects, not only with its famous memory capacities. Therefore, digital technology as an autological form of social memory is far from being neutral to its use. Some of the effects and interactions of digital technology with other forms of memory and meaning construction are shortly outlined in the next step. It has to be remarked, that the distinction of the levels is an analytical one. In actual situations all of them are combined in specific way.

Despite the post-humanist diagnosis of the bodiless communication via the Net, the dematerialization of the body in cyberspace, or the disembodiment in the internet, there is still (and for a long time to come) no communication, no use of digital machines possible without a material body. To be sure, the body is involved in a different way than in face-to-face-interaction. So, in the practical use we have to do adjustments: the way we use and handle the machines, handle the input devices, keyboards and touch screens, perceiving the output, reading texts, distinguishing the symbols: these are habitualized forms of using the devices, forms inscribed in body memory and invoked in every present use. Mobile digital machines not only inscribe themselves into bodies, they become part of the body, sometimes even an indispensable part of the body, bodily extensions in McLuhans sense for reaching out into time and (cyber)space. Also, these devices have an intrusive and appellative character (Ziemann 2011) with their ringing tone or the vibration alarms, bodily forms of alarm, which can be ignored only with difficulty.

The interaction of digital technologies with individual reflective memories have been described using the notion of "mediated memories" or of "personal cultural memory" as Jose van Dijck does. She asks for the couplings of consciousness, technology and culture, which change the nature of remembrance, because they are integrated into

everyday routines of identity formation. In social media profiles the relation to others, between private and public and individuals and collectives is at stake, is negotiated and mediated. Therefore important parts of personal and social life-worlds are constituted in digital media, enabling new forms of remembrance, orientation and self-positioning. Digital memory culture seems to be driven by "a longing for memories, for capturing, storing, retrieving and ordering them" (Garde-Hansen et al. 2009: 5). What happens is a permanent active, subjective production of past, stored away in devices for use in future presents. Portable digital devices are not only means for communication but a kind of personal memory assistants. Their use leads to a "greater personalization of events, narratives and testimonies." (Garde-Hansen et al. 2009: 17). The past itself, as it has been, is still unavailable, but we have more and more processed forms of it, remnants and generalizations, like messages, fotos, films, texts (a wealth of material for social sciences).

If we take a short look at the level of the situation and interaction the impact of digitalization seems to be obvious. With portable devices digital references become ubiqitiuos, at least when connections to the net are possible. Then, new digital horizons are available for social situations, checking mails or messages, communicating with absent and present persons at the same time, using knowledge form the net to solve problems or answer questions. Patterns of attention, rules and schemes of interaction, and temporal structures of communication change or at least have to negotiated anew. Situational social memories adjust to the digital elements.

On the transsituational level we have a wealth of changes in social memories beneath digital social memory of the machines themselves. I just want to mention a few of them:

1) Symbolic technologies (not only the digital ones, but also literature or film) have a world constructing potential. Different forms of aesthetical, playful or discursive experiences are possible. As the digital worlds of games, of socalled virtual reality, or of simulating devices provide possibilities of interactions that seem to be much more immersive, integrating body and consciousness (and the according forms of memories) in a more intensive way. So, fictional digital worlds offer new kinds of subuniverses for life-worlds, new ways to cope with the world, for gaming, escapism, or for training purposes.

2) Connected to the world creating possibilities of digital technologies are the ways digital devices are presenting or representing reality. Computer generated images mold our view of the world. Pictures like those from the Hubble telescope coin our imagination of the space, they give us evidence of the stars. But it is evidence not in the sense of proof but in the sense of the apparent. Elisabeth Kessler (2012) has shown that the color scheme of these pictures is derived from the romantic painture of the american frontier in the 19th century. Our memory of the astronomical space is a computer-generated one. To a certain degree this also holds true for medical pictures or the pictures used in neuroscience. Data are technically translated into

colourful images, are selectively visualized. This kind of improvement and construction of visual data enables and facilitates also new forms of knowledge and knowledge production.

Another important change made by digital memory takes place in the realm of social time and time consciousness. If memories according to Husserl, Schütz and Luhmann are constitutive for time, then changing social memories alter sociocultural time. Life-worlds and social references to the past transform with the use of digital communication and memory devices. If we take a look at contemporary cultural diagnostics we find headings like "acceleration" (Rosa), "time is out of joint" (Assmann), or even the "terrorism of a historized memory" (Nora). Even if we do not take this kind of semantics at face value, all of them hint to a double phenomenon: time seems to alter its speed and the past is getting more important. Compared to the time structure of modernity when an open future became available, the accent shifts more and more to the past. When more and more of the past is documented and permanently available it becomes difficult to escape from it and do something completely different. That holds true especially for personal identities codified in social network profiles.

To sum up these rather sketchy perspective: digital technology is the taken for granted infrastructure of our life-worlds. It processes autologically references to the past and develops in its processing social memories sui generis. But to be sure: The aforementioned changes require pragmatic and situated communications and interactions for activating those memory processes on different layers and in different fields of the social. But these pragmatic performances are facilitated and oriented by social memories. The concept of social memory aims at grasping and describing such developments in their course of events. And it shows, that the default is not shifting from forgetting to remembering as Mayer-Schönberger states, but it changes the way of forgetting.