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#Connectedmemories: Non-persecuted German witnesses of National Socialism on YouTube

YouTube is considered one of the most visited websites worldwide.¹ While it seems to be primarily a place for quick entertainment, historical content on the video portal was shown to be quite popular and worth examining.² Beyond some of the most watched videos focusing on easy divertissement or preparing students for their exams, other YouTube videos have mostly been neglected in Memory Studies. In addition to its educational and entertaining dimension, YouTube has memory cultural significance. To elaborate this is the aim of this chapter. I will therefore introduce online videos as an essential object of investigation in memory studies. In addition, I offer some points of departure to answer how online memory is currently practiced in and through YouTube videos and show that these videos are crucial parts of global memory networks. As examples, I will use two online videos with non-persecuted German witnesses who talk about the time of National Socialism in Germany.³

This chapter examines how YouTube videos with witnesses are part of connected memory networks. Therefore, I highlight different elements of these videos. I start by establishing YouTube videos with witnesses as memory media. Second, I introduce witnesses as audiovisual figures that follow specific modes of representation. Further, I demonstrate that representational aesthetics and mobilised narratives of the past can be classified as primarily centred on victims. Last, I focus on the possible impact of the videos as municipal memories thereby connecting different levels of memories. Therefore, the question of connectedness lies at the centre of each part, highlighting how media, witnesses, narratives and therefore memories are all connected.

1 "Most Visited Websites by Traffic in the world for all categories," last modified March 2023, accessed 24 April 2023, <https://www.semrush.com/website/top/>.

2 Christian Bunnenberg and Nils Steffen, ed., *Geschichte auf YouTube: Neue Herausforderungen für Geschichtsvermittlung und historische Bildung* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2019).

3 These videos are part of a larger corpus of videos forming the basis of my dissertation project. The findings I present in this chapter are based on this video sample. Overall, it encompasses 101 videos that are derived from a query on YouTube using the search term "Zeitzeuge" (witness) on 15 July 2020 that was extracted using the Mozdeh tool.

1 #Connectedmedia: YouTube videos as memory media

Following the attention generated by the US series “Holocaust” as well as Steven Spielberg’s “Schindler’s List” television and movies have been shown to trigger so-called “memory booms”.⁴ Nowadays, the social web is also used to convey representations of the past. As many of the chapters in this volume prove, memories of German National Socialism continue to be spread in digital and social media. In this context, YouTube, especially for young people, has long been identified as one of the most influential websites.

According to a study on the media use of 12- to 19-year-olds in Germany, YouTube represents the second most popular app. Three quarters of teenagers surveyed stated that they use YouTube regularly, spending on average 82 minutes a day watching videos on YouTube.⁵ YouTube is considered a “leading medium” and a “digital cultural site”.⁶ In this chapter, I extend this view showing that it is also a digital memory site.

However, the scientific discussion regarding the memory-cultural impact of the video platform is still pending. While approaches in historical education have already been made, memory studies have often neglected YouTube videos.⁷ Significantly, there is a pressing need to move beyond solely researching institutionalised forms of memory. Daring to approach subversive, “emergent, confrontational, yet

4 For in depth analyses of memory booms, see, for example, Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

5 Sabine Feierabend et al., *JIM 2022 – Jugend, Information, Medien. Basisuntersuchung zum Medienumgang 12- bis 19-Jähriger*, ed. Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest (mpfs), (Stuttgart 2022), accessed 24 April 2023, https://www.mpfs.de/fileadmin/files/Studien/JIM/2022/JIM_2022_Web_final.pdf, 37.

6 Rat für Kulturelle Bildung e.V., ed., *Jugend/YouTube/Kulturelle Bildung. Horizont 2019. Studie: Repräsentative Umfrage unter 12- bis 19-Jährigen zur Nutzung kultureller Bildungsangebote an digitalen Kulturorten*, last updated June 2019, accessed 24 April 2023, www.rat-kulturelle-bildung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Studie_YouTube_Webversion_final_2.pdf, 7.

7 A few exceptions are, for example, Alina Bothe, “Negotiating Digital Shoah Memory on YouTube,” in *Digital Diversities. Social Media and Intercultural Experience*, ed. Garry Robson et al. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 256–272; Marie-Christine Wehming, “Engrenzte Erinnerung – unbegrenzte Möglichkeiten? Der Holocaust auf YouTube,” in *artefakte. Holocaust und Zweiter Weltkrieg in experimentellen Darstellungsformen in Literatur und Kunst*, ed. Esther Kilchmann (Göttingen: Böhlau Verlag Köln, 2016), 145–153.

fragmented”⁸ parts of digital memory networks and to consider amateur productions as forming an integral part of them, lies at the centre of the following approach. Therefore, I theoretically describe YouTube videos with witnesses as memory media and approach them from a memory cultural perspective. I use the term memory media in reference to the term coined by Astrid Erll.⁹ She summarises these media as follows:

Media of collective memory create versions of reality and the past. The materiality of the medium (communication instrument, technology, and objectification) is as much involved in these creations as its socio-systemic dimension: the producers and recipients of a memory medium also actively participate [. . .] – in deciding which phenomena are ascribed memory-medial qualities in the first place, as well as in selecting and encoding and / or decoding and interpreting what is to be remembered.¹⁰

This last part of the quote is especially insightful when considering the different agents involved in memory cultures. Accordingly, not only the media, in this case the YouTube videos, but also the channel operators and the users are actively involved in the construction of memory media. As memory media, YouTube videos can be studied as a “meaningful indication of the needs and concerns of the ones remembering in the present”.¹¹ Therefore, memory media do not simply provide information about historical events but allow for conclusions about memory cultures at the time of production of the videos. In addition, the comment section underneath the videos, for example, offers clues about the time of the videos’ reception. Thereby, beyond Erll’s enumeration of ascribing, selecting, encoding, decoding and interpreting, the participants of digital memory media shape them even further.

8 Andrew Hoskins, “The Right to be Forgotten in Post-Scarcity Culture,” in *The Ethics of Memory in the Digital Age: Interrogating the Right to be Forgotten*, ed. Alessia Ghezzi et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 50–64, 60.

9 Astrid Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen: Eine Einführung*, 3rd ed., (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler Verlag, 2017), 137–172.

10 Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis*, 147.

11 Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis*, 7.

The memory agents' merging roles in "participatory digital culture"¹² become clear in neologisms such as "prosumer", "produser", or "viewer".¹³ As I have shown elsewhere, I consider the activities of the users of YouTube as forms of "doing memory".¹⁴ I thereby follow the example of the concept of "Doing History on YouTube" coined by Nils Steffen.¹⁵ The historian argues that explanatory videos on YouTube should be understood as a form of "doing history": as practices of performing history. I transfer his considerations to my approach of "doing memory" in YouTube videos with witnesses. Accordingly, I consider them as concepts of performing memories on the video platform. The concepts of memory mediation, representation and images are thus brought into line with the concepts of memory cultures and distinguished from the representation of historical events. Consequently, besides the witnesses portrayed in the videos on YouTube, the activities of various other participating agents in the digital social medium need to be emphasised as practices of constructing and performing memories.¹⁶ Further, these various activities are deeply connected to each other.

12 Wulf Kansteiner, "The Holocaust in the 21st Century: Digital Anxiety, Transnational Cosmopolitanism, and Never Again Genocide Without Memory," in *Digital memory studies: Media pasts in transition*, ed. Andrew Hoskins, 110–40 (New York, London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 114. Kansteiner refers to the "Participatory Culture," coined by Henry Jenkins: Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

13 Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York, NY: Morrow, 1980); Axel Bruns, "Produsage: Towards a Broader Framework for User-Led Content Creation," presented at *Creativity and Cognition 6*, 13–15 June 2007, cited in José van Dijck, "Users Like You? Theorizing Agency in User-Generated Content," *Media, Culture & Society* 31(1) (2009); Dan Harries, *The New Media Book* (London: British Film Inst., 2002), 103, 180.

14 Honke, Josefina, "Doing Memory auf Youtube: Zeitzeug*innen-Videos als Erinnerungsmedien," in *Klio hat jetzt Internet*, ed. Kilian Baur and Robert Trautmannsberger, 141–58. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

15 Nils Steffen, "Doing History auf YouTube – Erklärvideos als Form performativer Historiografie," in *Geschichte auf YouTube: Neue Herausforderungen für Geschichtsvermittlung und historische Bildung*, ed. Christian Bunnenberg and Nils Steffen (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 61–70.

16 In this context, the media-technical level is also relevant, which becomes especially obvious through the algorithmic video suggestions of the global platform. Unfortunately, this technological level of agency given to a global company cannot be further discussed in this chapter. Similarly, the role of (amateur) filmmakers and YouTube channels can also not be further explored in this essay. They are not just a difficult and anonymous group of important agents in the memory network but also often private persons. For a lot of YouTube videos with witnesses, there is no official institution or television station connected to them. Yet, as a researcher it is difficult, because the source of the uploaded videos is not always clear. Nonetheless, for a significant amount it can be assumed that the YouTubers are neither professional film producers nor historians.

The different actors involved in producing meaning become apparent through the conceptual pair of memory representation and memory appropriation. Memories come into being at the intersection of the two, where memory media are represented and appropriated. According to media scholar Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, memory media form a “network of images, visual icons, stereotypical figures, and conventionalized narrative forms”.¹⁷ This media network influences conceptions of the past, meaning that viewers “gain a sense of the past” as Robert Rosenstone posulated considering history movies.¹⁸ The various elements of memory media are negotiated, reworked, and passed on in different media, and therefore, even amateur filmmakers use them in their YouTube videos. In this process, historical images or memory images mobilise and produce ideas of pasts that follow established conventions of representation, as Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann among others describes. Similarly, Andrew Hoskins has coined the term “Digital Network Memory”,¹⁹ describing the interconnected, multimedia access points to the past and history. As part of this network, YouTube videos are closely connected to other memory media.

In summary, memory media form the prerequisite for sharing and negotiating narratives, ideas and images about the past. However, they are not neutral vehicles but shape the transmitted content. Therefore, the potential to significantly influence the users is inherent to them. These users often unquestioningly adopt the views and emotional attitudes conveyed on film. As witnesses play a crucial role in this emotional involvement, the second part of this chapter highlights the figure of the witnesses.

2 #Connectedwitnesses: Witnesses as audiovisual figures

Witnesses are “people who have observed or experienced a historical event to which significance has been attributed in retrospect and who report on it in a public space for the purpose of scientific knowledge or historical education”.²⁰ In the

17 Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, *Geschichtsbilder Im Medialen Gedächtnis: Filmische Narrationen des Holocaust* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014), 39.

18 Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

19 Andrew Hoskins, “Digital Network Memory,” in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2009), 91–108.

20 Steffi de Jong, “Zeitzeugin / Zeitzeuge,” in *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte* (2022), accessed 30 April 2023, <https://zeitgeschichte-digital.de/doks/frontdoor/index/index/year/2022/docId/2396>.

context of this chapter, witnesses are considered media constructs, audiovisual figures. In audiovisual media they are represented following certain conventions, as, for example, Judith Keilbach or Frank Bösch have compiled in detail for television productions.²¹ The viewers are primarily influenced by the emotionalisation and authentication strategies generated by audiovisual media. Frank Bösch summarises as follows: “[S]ubjective interpretations are spread with the authority of ‘having been there’”.²² This “aura of authenticity”²³ persists in YouTube videos with witnesses. Yet, the individual perspective and context of remembering are not considered. Rather, the continuing demand for decontextualized eyewitness accounts are now further satisfied online and on demand.

As soon as a witness figure appears in audiovisual media, the “documentarizing reading”²⁴ identified by Roger Odin sets in. Odin identifies this as learned reading and deciphering of the conventions of representation. The viewers identify the witnesses as authentic “embodiment of memory [*un homme-mémoire*]”.²⁵ Yet, this deciphering does not offer room to distinguish between different kinds of witnesses. Ebbrecht-Hartmann warns in this regard:

The witnesses of the crimes and the bystanders, supporters and perpetrators and their divergent points of view are made formally equal in this way [of representing them all as witnesses] and their different perspectives are harmonized in a concept of testimony that has been purged of its legal meaning.²⁶

21 Judith Keilbach, *Geschichtsbilder und Zeitzeugen: Zur Darstellung des Nationalsozialismus im bundesdeutschen Fernsehen*, 2nd ed. (Münster: Lit-Verl., 2010); Frank Bösch, “Historikerersatz oder Quelle? Der Zeitzeuge im Fernsehen,” *Geschichte lernen* 13(76) (2000), 62–65; Frank Bösch, “Geschichte mit Gesicht: Zur Genese des Zeitzeuge in Holocaust-Dokumentationen seit den 1950er Jahren,” in *Alles authentisch? Popularisierung der Geschichte im Fernsehen*, ed. Thomas Fischer and Rainer Wirtz (Konstanz: UVK-Verl.-Ges, 2008), 51–72; Thomas Fischer, “Erinnern und Erzählen: Zeitzeugen im Geschichts-TV,” in *Alles authentisch? Popularisierung der Geschichte im Fernsehen*, ed. Thomas Fischer and Rainer Wirtz (Konstanz: UVK-Verl.-Ges, 2008), 33–49.

22 Bösch, “Historikerersatz Oder Quelle?,” 65.

23 Heidemarie Uhl, “Vom Pathos des Widerstands zur Aura des Authentischen: Die Entdeckung des Zeitzeugen als Epochenschwelle der Erinnerung,” in *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012), 224–246; Martin Sabrow, “Der Zeitzeuge als Wanderer zwischen zwei Welten,” in *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei, (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012), 13–32, 27.

24 Roger Odin, “Film Documentaire, Lecture Documentarisante,” in *Cinéma et réalités*, ed. Roger Odin and Jean-Charls Lyant (Saint-Étienne: CIEREC, 1984), 263–277.

25 Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca, N.Y., London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 88.

26 Ebbrecht-Hartmann, *Geschichtsbilder*, 31.

In addition to Ebbrecht-Hartmann, Aleida Assmann noted that Holocaust survivors are the “paradigm of testimony”.²⁷ Other witness figures copy the initial, medial representation of witnesses of the persecution and extermination of the National Socialists. Witness figures can therefore be understood as a “travelling”²⁸ concept or as “multidirectional”²⁹ memory figures. This emphasises once more the connectedness of memories.

Even a brief analysis of some German YouTube videos with witnesses allows us to conclude that the film aesthetics are based on familiar presentation patterns for staging eyewitnesses.³⁰ The most frequently used camera angle corresponds to the origin of the term “talking head”: The subjects are filmed using head and shoulder close-ups. When powerful emotions arise, the camera sometimes zooms in on the witnesses’ faces or eyes. Otherwise, the camera remains relatively static. Some videos also use close-ups of gesturing hands. The witnesses sit in a private atmosphere on a sofa or stand outside. They speak in front of groups of students or talk at the kitchen table. They blink tears from their eyes, gesticulate, show objects, or point at places on maps. As diverse as these settings and camera angles may seem, they still allow for a “documentarising reading”. Importantly, this reading leads to the impression that the witnesses are talking about the past and not just their past.

Contrary to the infamous German television production of the late ‘nineties and early 2000s, there is no bare black wall with a single spotlight, decontextualising the interview.³¹ However, this can be attributed less to a conscious decision than to the most feasible solution. In the YouTube videos, the witnesses sitting at home support an immediate, familiar, and seemingly non-staged impression. This “authentic” impromptu staging requires no special equipment, such as the spotlight or the black background. Thereby, the *mise-en-scene* often supports a perception of a confidential family conversation. In addition, the interviews on YouTube are not intended to serve as images that can be inserted into different TV formats, reducing the witnesses to giving cues needed for the production’s narrative.

The interviewers and their questions are rarely heard or seen on YouTube. In most cases, the videos focus on one person; exceptionally, two people are interviewed at the same time. Outdoor shots show the witnesses at the locations of the

27 Aleida Assmann, “Vier Grundtypen von Zeugenschaft,” in *Zeugenschaft des Holocaust: Zwischen Trauma Tradierung und Ermittlung*, ed. Michael Elm and Gottfried Kößler (Frankfurt/Main, New York: Campus Verlag, 2007), 33–51, 33.

28 Astrid Erll, “Travelling Memory,” *Parallax* 17(4) (2011).

29 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

30 These findings are based on the video corpus described in footnote 3.

31 Keilbach, *Geschichtsbilder*, 229.

historical events they discuss. Overall, men are represented significantly more often than women. In summary, the innovative potential of online videos is not exhausted with the representation of the established figure of the witness. There are no new forms or approaches to representation on the video platform; instead, existing means of staging witnesses are reproduced.

Further, not only are the means of representation copied from the initial witnesses, the Holocaust survivors, but beyond the filmic means, their narratives, metaphors and finally the interpretation of their messages have been adopted in connection with the filmic means. In this context, the form of “moral testimony” coined by the Israeli philosopher Avashai Margalit and taken up by Aleida Assmann is particularly insightful.³² During the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in the 1960s, the figure of the witness emerged. Through this process and staging the witnesses in the media, a demand arose in the post-war societies for their testimonies. Annette Wieviorka, therefore, calls the trial in Jerusalem the “advent of the witness”, tellingly referred to as the “birth of the witness” in German literature.³³

The concept of “moral testimony” supplemented the function of bearers of history with the moral impetus of having to remember the past. With the representation of the survivors of persecution and extermination by the National Socialists being adapted, all media figures of witnesses are endowed with moral authority. At the same time an ethical mission of truth is attributed to them.

This becomes especially apparent when analysing the comments on YouTube videos. As Alina Bothe has noted for video testimonies uploaded by the USC Shoah Foundation, users tend to thank witnesses for sharing their testimony when commenting on such videos.³⁴ Similarly, this seems to be a learned behavior when in contact with any witness. Users also comment positively on the YouTube videos with non-perpetrated German witnesses of National Socialism in my sample, thanking the witnesses for sharing their testimonies and emphasising the importance of safeguarding their words for the future. Often, the underlying message of “never forget” in these comments is deprived of its initial connection to the Holocaust and employed to any witness account connected to National Socialism.

32 Avashai Margalit, “A Moral Witness,” in *The Ethics of Memory*, ed. Avashai Margalit (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 147–182; Aleida Assmann, “Vier Grundtypen.”

33 Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca, N.Y., London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 56–95; in the French original it is also “avènement”; see Annette Wieviorka, *L'ère du témoin* (Paris: Hachette Littérature, 2002); Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei, ed., *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*.

34 Alina Bothe, “Negotiating Digital Shoah Memory on YouTube,” in *Digital Diversities: Social Media and Intercultural Experience*, ed. Garry Robson and Malgorzata Zachara (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 256–272.

The people portrayed in the YouTube videos considered here are non-persecuted Germans who were children or young people during the Second World War. They tell, for example, of bombing raids on German cities. Others tell of forced labor camps under the National Socialists or describe their time as a soldier in the *Wehrmacht*. Their stories are mainly framed as victim narratives leading to the next aspect of this chapter.

3 #Connectednarratives: Traditionalisation of victimhood

As Sara Jones points out, “it is the witness to suffering who is seen to occupy a position of particular importance in public and popular history and who has a unique relationship to the concept of authenticity”.³⁵

Following a continuing German “national myth of victims”,³⁶ framing Germany as “a nation of victims”,³⁷ witness figures in the YouTube videos considered here are mostly portrayed as victims. The media figure of the witness is central to the victim-centered mode of representation and the victim narratives mobilised in the YouTube videos. Their impact has been repeatedly emphasised in media cultural studies – however, these analyses have been limited almost exclusively to television documentaries or video testimonies. Nevertheless, the emotional appeal to viewers and the embodied “aura of authenticity”, as highlighted above, apply at least to the same extent to eyewitnesses in YouTube videos. Here, the media figures are also perceived as being able to report “how it really was”. I would even go so far as to suggest that YouTube videos stress the authenticity, the unfiltered, and the seemingly direct contact with the past even more and may have an even more intimate effect on the viewers. This is because, in addition to the authenticity figures familiar from television, the online platform also mobilises the social media’ non-institutionalised, personal framing making the narratives seem unfiltered. This makes it even more important to question the continuing sacralisation tendencies of these media figures.

35 Sara Jones, “Mediated Immediacy: Constructing Authentic Testimony in Audio-Visual Media,” *Rethinking History* 21(2) (2017): 136.

36 Christoph Classen, “Back to the fifties? Die NS-Vergangenheit als nationaler Opfermythos im frühen Fernsehen der Bundesrepublik,” *Historical Social Research* 30(4) (2005): 112–127.

37 Lothar Kettenacker, Ralph Giordano and Cora Stephan, ed., *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940 – 45* (Berlin: Rowohlt-Berlin-Verl., 2003).

For this purpose, I mobilise the intergenerational traditionalization type of “victimhood” examined in German witnesses. This type of traditionalisation was investigated by Harald Welzer et al. at the end of the 1990s.³⁸ This group of researchers has worked out types of traditions that are applicable to current YouTube videos with witnesses. In addition to intergenerational narrative strategies such as distancing, overwhelming, and justification, those of fascination and victimhood play a particular role. The traditionalisation type of victimhood can be characterised as follows:

[T]he speakers of the witness generation stylize themselves as victims of a “hard time.” This happens on several levels: They [. . .] address their suffering and losses in the bombing war and the expulsion [from Eastern Europe], they lament that they were cheated out of their youth, they adopt characteristics from other victimization stories to frame their own narratives accordingly, and they reverse the roles of perpetrators and victims.³⁹

In short, this corresponds to historian Ulrike Jureit’s concept of the Germans as “perceived victims”.⁴⁰ The following YouTube video will show exemplarily how twisted this self-perception as a victim can be for non-persecuted Germans. The video entitled “A witness reports at the camp Kinzigdamm” showcases a significant connection between the family of the witness and the horrors of the municipal past.⁴¹ The video was uploaded in 2015 by the YouTube channel “Gedenkstätte Vulkan”. The German term for memorial (*Gedenkstätte*) suggests an institutional framing of the video. Additionally, the YouTube video is an eight-minute film excerpt of a documentary project funded by the Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg [Centre for political education]. However, these authentication markers are even more problematic when it comes to context-deprived excerpts. Such excerpts allow to shift off the initial focus of the documentary and to freely associate personal meaning in the changed framework on YouTube.

In the section of the documentary that is made available on YouTube, an elderly gentleman, who is not named, stands outdoors among schoolchildren. He emotionally recounts the events surrounding the labour camp “Kinzigdamm” that he observed as a child. His descriptions mainly focus on his emotions about the horrors in the camp as well as the numerous attempts of the village community

³⁸ Harald Welzer et al., *“Was wir für böse Menschen wir sind“: Der Nationalsozialismus im Gespräch zwischen den Generationen* (Tübingen: Ed. diskord, 1997).

³⁹ Welzer, *“Was wir für böse Menschen sind!”*, 146.

⁴⁰ Ulrike Jureit, “Erinnerung wird zum Gesellschaftszustand: Eine Beobachtung,” in *Gefühlte Opfer: Illusionen der Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, ed. Ulrike Jureit and Christian Schneider (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2011), 19–37, see in particular 23–29.

⁴¹ Gedenkstätte Vulkan (19.06.2015), *Ein Zeitzeuge berichtet am Lager Kinzigdamm*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMZyrvxbZnI>, accessed 29 April 2023.

and especially his family to provide help. Without judging the historical accuracy of the specific narrative, such accounts make it seem like Germans offering support during National Socialism happened frequently, whereas the opposite is true. This leads to the misconception of many Germans today. In a representative study only 17.6 percent of respondents affirm that there were perpetrators of World War Two among their ancestors. About the same number of people (18 percent) claim that their relatives helped potential victims during this period. Finally, slightly more than half of the interviewees (54.4 percent) report having victims of World War Two among their relatives.⁴²

To what extent victimisation is perceived can be shown using the example of the YouTube-video “A witness reports at the Kinzigdamm camp”. From the beginning of the film clip, the man is intensely emotional and repeatedly blinks away his tears. After referring to the location of the camp and the barracks, he summarises, “we just knew they [the inmates] were starving and mistreated”.⁴³ In his narrative, the suffering of the two groups – the prisoners and the German population – is connected.

Exemplarily, the German witness’s introductory narrative focuses on his mother’s arrest. He recounts that his grandmother had baked additional pancakes so that his mother could distribute some to the prisoners in the Kinzigdamm labour camp. Wrapped in her headscarf, she transported the food in the basket of her bicycle to the camp, where the inmates already knew they were allowed to help themselves and thus took the headscarf along with the pancakes. A guard became aware of this and asked the mother where the headscarf was. After searching the camp, her lie of not having had a scarf was exposed and she was “taken away”. It remains unclear whether the witness experienced this situation or only shares the memories of his family members. Finally, the witness tearfully tells the youth group: “And suddenly they [the National Socialists] said that my mother had to go to the concentration camp or she would [. . .] just be taken away, be shot or something”.⁴⁴ This mobilises memory images that are closely related to the accounts of those persecuted and exterminated by the National Socialists. These images are conveyed by focusing on the life threat and by naming concentration camps and shootings. The fact that this threat may have been less drastic for most Germans than conveyed in this statement by the witness is made clear by the following report of the witness, resolving his mother’s fate: In the

42 Andreas Zick et al., *MEMO: Multidimensionaler Erinnerungsmonitor* (2018), accessed 29 April 2023, https://www.stiftung-evz.de/assets/1_Was_wir_f%C3%B6rdern/Bilden/Bilden_fuer_lebendiges_Erinnern/MEMO_Studie/MEMO_1_2018/EVZ_Studie_MEMO_2018_dt.pdf, 11.

43 Gedenkstätte Vulkan, *Ein Zeitzeuge berichtet*, TC: 0:00:06 – 0:00:18.

44 Gedenkstätte Vulkan, *Ein Zeitzeuge berichtet*, TC: 0:01:19 – 0:01:30.

town hall, the grandfather negotiated that his daughter would be released in exchange for a few liquor bottles.

The incomparable juxtaposition of concentration camps, shootings and the seemingly simple solution of bribery, is not questioned in the video or the comment section. Therefore, the teenagers listening to the witness and the viewers of the footage alike might gain the wrong impression of this being a stressful, yet successful way to deal with these dangers. Thereby the millions who lost their lives are ridiculed. At the same time, I believe that images of concentration camps and shootings work much stronger than the actual resolution to the story and might remain much longer after the witness account was heard, thereby leading to the impression of Germans being the actual witnesses. This again is underlined by the strong emotional outburst of the witness, introduced with the words: “We have experienced a lot here”.⁴⁵ While his eyes become watery and his breathing heavy, the man taps his heart and wipes his nose. These emotions finally underline the authenticity of his report and deprive any room to question his account. Yet, it remains unclear who is encompassed in this “we” – whether it only contains his family or extends to the people living in the region sharing municipal memories. It might even encompass a highly problematic we-group mixing the former inmates and the non-persecuted Germans. Therefore, this video example allows us to highlight aspects of the new role that YouTube videos play in global memory networks. Notably, the witness’s narrative is firmly anchored in a very concrete place, in this case the former labour camp “Kinzigdamm” near Haslach. These local anchors and municipal memories are explored in the following part of this chapter.

4 #Connectedmemoires: Municipal memories

In the final part, I argue that contrary to YouTube’s global reach, YouTube videos with witnesses might significantly impact local memory communities. Even small channels and videos with only relatively few views may affect their respective niches, likely formed by specific regions. Here, viewers are particularly interested and personally connected to the places discussed. I consider this localisation of YouTube videos an essential feature of these memory media. Whether on a global, national, municipal, or individual level, the platform increasingly shapes users’ ideas about the past and their images of memory and historical narratives. In particular, different levels of memory are connected online and even merged,

45 Gedenkstätte Vulkan, *Ein Zeitzeuge berichtet*, TC: 0:01:51 – 0:01:55.

as personal memories are shared with a global audience. The municipal level grows increasingly important in history and memory studies and lies at the centre of the following argument.

I am employing the term “municipal memories” (“kommunales Gedächtnis”)⁴⁶ coined by historian Malte Thießen to highlight the level of memories between the nation-state’s official memory discourse and the personal family stories. While it is often stated that the macro-level of the nation-state and the micro-level of family memories form two divergent spheres of memory, the meso-level of municipal memories allows us to connect these two memory practices of public and private memory. In her study of Australian history videos on YouTube, historian Megan Sheehy establishes a typology of different video formats. She calls one important form “amateur local history videos with strong connections to place” and highlights how geographic location is vital in many videos dealing with the past.⁴⁷

It may seem paradoxical that content from small geographic areas can mainly gain importance on the global video platform. However, we need to take into account the platform’s search algorithms. As the algorithm remains secret and is mainly considered a black box, we can only make assumptions about its design. Among other things, YouTube has access to user data such as the location of the device from which videos are viewed. It can therefore be assumed that locally based content will be displayed higher up in the individual’s search results list. For example, if you enter the term “witness report” in Bamberg, a report from Bamberg is more likely to be recommended. If you enter the exact search term from Dresden, it is more likely that a video with a witness from Dresden is suggested, as this could be considered more relevant to the user.⁴⁸ Yet, none of these findings can easily be proven scientifically, and even if they could be, the algorithm would likely be changed again before this volume is published.

Concerning municipal memories in YouTube videos, another video example helps to underline the local context of the videos and the memories shared within: “A witness remembers the Nazi era in Plettenberg” was uploaded by an

46 Malte Thießen, “Zeitzeuge und Erinnerungskultur: Zum Verhältnis von privaten und öffentlichen Erzählungen des Luftkriegs,” in *Die “Generation der Kriegskinder”: Historische Hintergründe und Deutungen*, ed. Lu Seegers (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verl., 2009), 157–182.

47 Megan Sheehy, “New Perspectives on the Past: YouTube, Web 2.0 and public history,” *Melbourne Historical Journal* 36(1) (2008): 65.

48 Compare the official blog of Google: Danny Sullivan, How location helps provide more relevant search results, December 16 2020, accessed 29 April 2023, <https://blog.google/products/search/location-relevant-search-results/>. Since Google owns YouTube, it is likely that the search algorithms are built on similar structures.

amateur filmmaker in 2012 and is unconventionally 40 minutes long.⁴⁹ For amateur filmmakers, the focus often lies in promoting their hobby and showing off their technical skills. The link to the amateur filmmaker's website is superimposed throughout the YouTube video, making the video an advertisement. Also in contrast to most other witness productions, the interviewer is visible and sits next to the witness. Following the example of TV compilation documentaries of the 2000s, the YouTube video combines old film footage or photos, music, and transitions between scenes. The footage, however, lacks information about the origin of the source material shown.

The content of the video focuses on the boyhood of the witness Erich Schmalenbach in National Socialist Germany. The interviewer repeatedly directs the conversation specifically to the small town of Plettenberg. In the process, the two men discuss the Nazi youth organisations. The interview begins with the enumeration of the biographical data of the witness. This is a practice that originated in interviewing survivors of persecution and extermination by the National Socialists, the video testimonies. After the enumeration of biographical facts, the interviewer directly and seemingly promptly introduces the central topic, the beginning of the war, by asking: "Erich, when you were ten years old, the news came out that the Second World War had begun. How did you perceive this [. . .]?"⁵⁰

However, the witness does not answer this question; instead, he is still checking off facts. Thus, the staging and self-presentation of the witness follow the representational convention of an expert questioned about the past, rather than that of a narrator who reports how he perceived things (at the time).⁵¹ Accordingly, the witness's explanations are filled with dates and places. Therefore, when the witness Schmalenbach appears as an expert and describes the various Hitler Youth groups with a particular fascination and enthusiastically mentions their badges, uniforms or the driving knife, the initial question about the perception of World War Two is simultaneously evaded.

At the same time, this introductory scene makes it clear that distinct we-they groups are established in the video. Thus, the witness Erich Schmalenbach reports: "Then [we heard] on the radio that we were now marching into Poland; that the Poles had shot, that now they were shooting back".⁵² Here, "we" stands for the affiliation to a nation-state, forming the German we-group. Interpreted in

⁴⁹ HechmeckeStudio (10 January 2012), *Ein Zeitzeuge erinnert sich an die NS Zeit in Plettenberg*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qibgOAjURJY>, accessed 29 April 2023.

⁵⁰ HechmeckeStudio, *Ein Zeitzeuge erinnert sich*, TC: 0:01:14 – 0:01:25.

⁵¹ For the distinction between expert and narrator, see Thomas Fischer, "Erinnern und Erzählen."

⁵² HechmeckeStudio, *Ein Zeitzeuge erinnert sich*, TC: 0:01:30 – 0:01:39.

the extreme, this group could even be dubbed the German “Volksgemeinschaft”⁵³ and thus continue influences of National Socialist propaganda. This affiliation runs through the entire video and is even adopted by the interviewer. For example, at another point of the interview, the latter asks: “Were there still many soldiers of ours in Plettenberg?”⁵⁴ This shows how the position of the witness is unreflectively adopted by the interviewer. Often, such a unified narratives replace critical questioning of the witnesses. Problematic aspects concerning National Socialism can thus be left out.

Yet, the local anchoring creates opportunities for a democratisation of memories. Instead of putting national memory narratives in the foreground, municipal memory cultures become visible and enable numerous actors to shape ideas about the past beyond formalised national memory practices. It is precisely these “formalized practices of remembrance in German society that are [. . .] a tight-rope walk between serious commemoration, empty ritual, domestication of the oppressive from the past, and the hope of relief”.⁵⁵ The potential dangers and opportunities of municipal online memories will be highlighted in the conclusion of this chapter.

5 Conclusion: Dangers and opportunities

After introducing YouTube videos with witnesses as memory media, I finish this chapter by pointing out the possible impact these could have on global memory networks and how they are influenced by them. Global memory networks need to be considered a “fluid mnemonic space”,⁵⁶ that constantly changes. They offer opportunities but also dangers to current memory discourses.

On the one hand, different narratives of the past are increasingly mobilized separately online and solidified in so-called echo chambers without integrating opposing opinions. On the other hand, such fragmentation processes are becoming more visible online than offline. In particular, on YouTube memory-cultural tendencies can be examined that question the separation between a “cultural”

53 Norbert Frei, “Volksgemeinschaft,” in *1945 und Wir. Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen*, ed. Norbert Frei (München: 2005), 107–128.

54 HechmeckeStudio, *Ein Zeitzeuge erinnert sich*, TC: 0:15:56 – 0:16:00.

55 Christian Wiese et al., “Einleitung: Die Zukunft der Erinnerung,” in *Die Zukunft der Erinnerung: Perspektiven des Gedenkens an die Verbrechen des Nationalsozialismus und die Shoah*, ed. Christian Wiese et al. (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 1–18, 2.

56 Matthew Boswell and Antony Rowland, *Virtual Holocaust Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 17.

and a “communicative” memory⁵⁷ and focus more intensely on the influence of local memory cultures on a national memory.⁵⁸

One of the most significant opportunities of digital memory media is based on the continuous engagement (of younger generations) with narratives of the past. In the case of the portrayal of National Socialism in Germany, with its criminal structures of persecution and extermination of millions of people, memory can offer guidance and has often been used to learn from the past particularly to strengthen universal human rights. In doing so, local memory communities can likewise convey relevant content. In the sense of the slogan of the history workshops, “Dig where you stand”,⁵⁹ communal reappraisal of the past can thus also take place today. Especially on YouTube, the former workshops are mirrored in what could be entitled: “film where you stand”. This offers new access points to the past, especially for younger generations. Similarly, the producers of the videos in question can participate in producing ideas about the past through media, becoming agents in their local memory communities. The videos have the potential “to challenge dominant historical narratives and encourage web users to think critically about how they understand the past”.⁶⁰

Through the democratisation potential of the internet, non-institutionalised narratives of the past can also be made publicly accessible and disseminated. Besides opportunities for a pluralisation of memories, this also creates risks. Due to the selection mechanisms, so-called filter bubbles,⁶¹ only information that correspond to the digital profile of the users, their interests and their digitally recorded attitudes, become easily accessible. When dealing with this adjusted content, especially one-sided narratives about the past, there is an increased danger of political instrumentalisation of memories.

57 Fundamental to these categories of memory research is Jan Assmann, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: Beck, 1992). Further influential publications include, Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München: Beck, 1999); Aleida Assmann, *Der Lange Schatten Der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur Und Geschichtspolitik* (München: Beck, 2006).

58 Dietmar Süß, ed., *Deutschland im Luftkrieg. Geschichte und Erinnerung* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2007); Habbo Knoch, ed., *Das Erbe der Provinz: Heimatkultur und Geschichtspolitik nach 1945* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001); Malte Thießen, *Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis: Hamburgs Gedenken an Luftkrieg und Kriegsende 1943 bis 2005* (München, Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz, 2007).

59 Sven Lindqvist, *Grabe, wo du stehst. Handbuch zur Erforschung der eigenen Geschichte*, ed. and trans. Manfred Dammeyer, (Bonn: Dietz, 1989).

60 Sheehy, “New Perspectives on the Past,” 71.

61 Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

Therefore, it is important to warn about the dangers of the videos on YouTube. The videos can also impair historical understanding by presenting inaccurate or insufficient information. Anti-Semitic or other contemptuous, revisionist, conspiracy, right-wing populist or radical uses of the past are enabled on YouTube. This encompasses both the videos themselves, but especially the comment section and further sharing outside of YouTube, for example, in closed chat groups. Despite the controversial nature of spirals of increasing radicalisation, attention must at least be paid to filter bubbles that algorithmically suggest only content that lies within one's own beliefs and areas of interest. Other interpretations and ideas are thus not displayed. As a result, certain narratives are additionally solidified, as shown by the depiction of Germans as victims. In the digital space of memories, such narratives can reach an even larger circle of addressees and have an overall effect of seeming to be socially acceptable, since they can be voiced in public spaces and do not require contextualisation. We need to exercise caution when considering these tendencies. Therefore, investigating YouTube videos with narratives of the past is an essential and current necessity, which should be approached in particular from the perspective of cultural studies of memories. On this basis, it is possible to promote media competencies. Instead of being perceived as the transmission of historical "truths", YouTube videos with witnesses could then be identified as practices of telling and performing stories about a past, as doing memory. Moreover, through the present progressive, marked by the ending "-ing" in "doing", it is possible that viewers understand the acts of remembering as happening at that very moment, as anchored in the present. Thereby, the constant processes of change in memories become apparent as well as the connectedness of the different agents involved.

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