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Social media at memorial sites: Are we sure this is a good idea?

Considerations and experiences on the use of social media by two German concentration camp memorial sites

1 Introduction

While “the era of the witness” is gradually giving way to mediated forms of remembrance and commemoration, the employment of digital technology has also become pervasive in the field of Holocaust studies and as part of the education of memorial sites configuring new scenarios in which the “Culture of Remembrance” and Holocaust Education is driven by multimedia and digital technology. Efforts to save and preserve historical archives and the testimonies of the last survivors have taken numerous shapes and forms, including recorded interviews with survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides, survivor testimonies that have been produced in interactive 3D format, or TikTok videos by Holocaust survivors like Lily Ebert. Additionally, the idea of a “virtual Holocaust memory” is progressively including a blend of digital and non-digital Holocaust-related forms of memory. More specifically, driven by the limitations and restrictions imposed on Holocaust memorial and museums by the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, an increasing number of institutions started offering live, online tours that used to take place on location or came up with new forms of digital remembrance and education. Hence, digital culture is opening up new possibilities for externalising collective memories of the Holocaust in the digital space. Similarly, concentration camp memorials and Holocaust museums also play a significant role in the negotiation process on how to learn from the past between the required temporal and emotional distance from past events, and events and developments today, while not only reaching younger generations, but also a wider population in general.

In this chapter, we will share considerations and experiences from our own use of social media, particularly online live tours and TikTok videos at the Dachau and Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial sites. This will not only provide practical insights on how to possibly blend digital and non-digital forms of memory. It will also highlight how memorials face the trade-off between providing factual information while dealing with the “unanchored” nature of social media posts and other online formats.

2 TikTok and commemoration? An example from the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial Site

The platform TikTok has developed in a short space of time into a relevant information and communication medium for a broader younger demographic, where a variety of topics are negotiated. The success of TikTok is based on participation. Consequently, everyone can actively shape the way history is talked about online through their own videos. Historical content on the topic of National Socialism is also available on this platform. There are even survivors of National Socialist persecution, for example, Lily Ebert, Tova Friedman or Gidon Lev, who reach a large audience through TikTok.¹ Until recently, however, there was a lack of content created by memorial sites themselves.

The Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial Site has been active on TikTok since November 2021 and was thus the first such site to use this platform to communicate its topics, with preparatory support from the “Shoah Education and Commemoration Initiative on TikTok”.² Their account intends to reach young people with different levels of knowledge. This is important because on the one hand, studies show that half of the so-called Millennials cannot name a single former concentration camp.³ On the other hand, as further studies show, “Generation Z” is more interested in the Nazi era than their parents were, and in addition, associate the discussions about Nazi era with current social problems, and wish to deal with

1 See, for example, Lauralie Mylène Schweiger, “Holocaust remembrance on social media,” *Deutschland.de*, March 1, 2032, accessed 11 March 2023, <https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/knowledge/holocaust-remembrance-education-on-social-media>; Jonathan Edwards, “A 98-year-old Holocaust survivor built a massive TikTok following to combat deniers: ‘It happened’”, *Washington Post*, 1 February 2022, accessed 11 March 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/02/01/holocaust-survivor-lily-ebert-tiktok/>.

2 American-Jewish-Committee, “Press Release: Presentation of ‘TikTok – Shoah Education and Commemoration Initiative,’” 27 January 2022, accessed 11 March 2022, <https://ajcgermany.org/en/comment/press-release-presentation-tiktok-shoah-education-and-commemoration-initiative>; Iris Groschek, “Can Social Media Make Commemoration More Inclusive and Diverse?” 27 January 2023, accessed 11 March 2023, <https://koerber-stiftung.de/projekte/ecommemoration/interview-iris-groschek/>.

3 Harriet Sherwood, “Nearly two-thirds of US young adults unaware 6m Jews killed in the Holocaust,” *The Guardian*, 16 September 2020, accessed 20 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/16/holocaust-us-adults-study>.

the Nazi era in a different way.⁴ What can this “different way” look like, and how can institutions enter into a forward-looking dialogue with them?

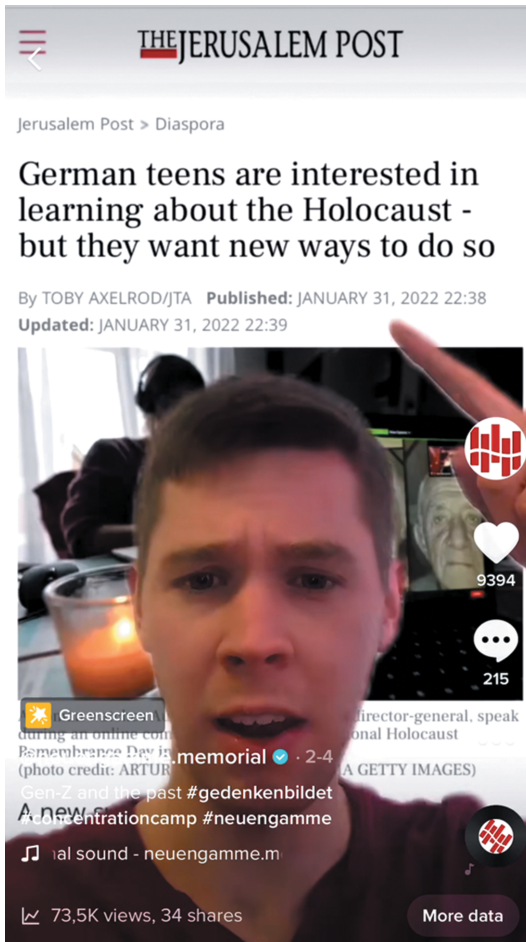


Figure 1: Screenshot TikTok Account @neuengamme.memorial (KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme, 2022).

⁴ According to the rheingold study on the attitude of “Generation Z” to National Socialism, commissioned by the Arolsen Archives in 2021. “Gen Z and Nazi History. Highly receptive and strangely fascinated. A Qualitative and Quantitative Study. The Arolsen Archives commissioned the rheingold institute to investigate young people’s attitudes to the history of the Nazi era,” January 2022, accessed 11 March 2023, https://arolsen-archives.org/content/uploads/study-gen-z-and-nazi-history_arolsen-archives.pdf.

The motivation behind the TikTok project of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial Site (figure 1) is to sensitise a younger, international audience to topics in a low-threshold, interest-generating and modern way. The account was set up to inform, raise awareness, increase the visibility and relevance of the topic of National Socialism in “Generation Z” and, last but not least, to strengthen the level of awareness of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial Site. The memorial site also intended to provide an impetus and a framework for thinking about the significance of history in today’s society in everyday digital life. For this purpose, a new digital offer was created on TikTok. It is based on the existing didactic foundations of memorial education but also follows the rules and aesthetics of a new platform which brings new people, partly new questions and specially created dynamic moving image content. Here the memorial was able to draw on its many years of experience in the field of social media.

The basic communication concept from the first year of the memorial site’s activity on TikTok is to let mainly young English-speaking volunteers at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial Site talk in front of the camera about their work, their thoughts and their growing knowledge about the place and its history, addressing an audience of the same age directly. This personalisation allows topics to be broken down into short units without trivialising them and without being emotionally overwhelming. The peer-to-peer communication created by the setting is designed to make it easier for the community to engage with the person in front of the camera and the issues they are addressing, and to be able to ask questions directly.

As people communicating in front of the camera, the volunteers draw attention to objects or manageable topics and contextualise them. They answer both content-related and personal questions with videos or ask honest questions to the community themselves. In terms of historical content, the memorial site has two directions in mind, in line with the studies mentioned above: on the one hand, passing on basic information and, on the other, asking where the community might be surprised by rather unknown information and stories (“untold stories”). The memorial site has also participated with its account in platform-typical “challenges”, for example as part of Yom HaShoah, or even “trends” (“we work”). In addition, it has entered into cooperation, amongst others with the TikTok accounts of Deutsche Welle and Gidon Lev, and has also collaborated with the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme, by putting videos created by family members of former persecutees online via the memorial site’s TikTok account. In this way, it has also given rela-

tives a voice, in-line with the mission statement of the *Foundation of Hamburg Memorial and Learning Centres Commemorating the Victims of Nazi Crimes*.⁵

Since the memorial site has always responded to questions and comments from the community, it has been possible to offer a wide variety of content that seems to have appealed to many young people: In a very short time, the TikTok account has grown considerably – especially in comparison to any other social media platform used by the memorial site. The very rapid increase in followers, particularly from outside Germany – now over 35,000 (March 2024) – and the community’s instant desire to communicate with the account of the memorial site has surprised the people who initiated the account. The new TikTok presence has gained a lot of attention in traditional media and, more importantly, on the platform itself. Within five weeks, the memorial site’s account received its first million views for their short videos. Almost immediately, the site recorded a high level of comments, likes and questions, so that community management very soon occupied a large place within the project; by now (March 2024), a single video on the TikTok account @neuengamme.memorial has almost three million views (“Do you see what I see?”), and a cooperation video with Deutsche Welle has been viewed more than nine million times (“3 things you should never do at a former concentration camp”).

Of course, the primary goal is not attention at any price. But it aims to achieve a relevant amount of reach and to be taken seriously by the community. Even accounts that want to convey complex topics must adopt the language and communication forms of the specific communities in order to be perceived as relevant and appealing. This also means dealing with the fact that in social media the telling of stories is further condensed and thus there is a danger of oversimplifying topics.

Another issue is the possibility of being overwhelmed when people unexpectedly encounter a memorial site account in their everyday life scrolling through social media, as videos are displayed directly via the “ForYou” page without any active selection having to be made. The emotional burden can also be seen as a barrier to acceptance of the remembrance culture offer of a memorial site’s TikTok account.⁶ However, against the backdrop of a change from a purely entertainment-centred

5 The foundation “promotes empathy with the persecuted, their relatives and descendants and makes their concerns heard.” <https://www.gedenkstaetten-hamburg.de/de/stiftung>.

6 Fanny Seewald, “#gedenkenbildet. Digitale Erinnerungskulturen an die Shoah. Eine empirische Analyse zur Konstruktion zielgruppengerechter digitaler Erinnerungskultur am Beispiel des TikTok-Accounts der KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme,” Master’s thesis, Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg, 2023, 48–49.

content platform to “serious TikTok”⁷ that is already taking place, not only have the motives for using this platform expanded, but the use of TikTok as a commemorative medium, which was originally classified as inappropriate, is now also viewed less restrictively by memorial sites.⁸

Furthermore, when memorial sites use social media, they must be aware of what it means to feed algorithms with attention-grabbing topics. Thus, in the specific case of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial Site, not only were those people reached who the staff had imagined when planning the content – 17-year-old youths interested in history – but they were confronted with insulting or mocking comments and also had to deal with Holocaust denial and Holocaust distortion as well as conspiracy narratives in comments.⁹ Staff had to familiarise themselves not only with current youth language, but also with racist or right-wing “code words”, and an ongoing moderation process had to be set up, which among other things began with implementing a “stop list” for words used in comments. During that process, the institution communicated its “netiquette” externally and established a strategy internally that also regulates whether, when and how to respond to comments. The memorial want to stay active on TikTok in order to contribute information and interpretations of historical events and narratives to online debates having an important voice as a credible institution and thus contribute to counteracting anti-democratic tendencies.

7 Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Tom Divon, “Serious TikTok: Can You Learn About the Holocaust in 60 seconds?” March 24, 2022, accessed 11 March 2023, <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/digital-holocaustmemory/2022/03/24/can-you-learn-about-the-holocaust-in-60-seconds-on-tiktok/>.

8 Rebecca Starke, “Gedenkstättenpädagogik und Soziale Medien. Eine qualitative Studie über die Verhandlung von Sozialen Medien und Bildungsarbeit durch Mitarbeitende in KZ-Gedenkstätten.” Master’s thesis, Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg, 2022. Jan Lormis, “#DoingMemoryOnTikTok : Gedenkstätten auf TikTok: Ist-Analyse und Perspektiven der Videoplattform TikTok für die Bildung und Vermittlung in Gedenkstätten”, Master’s thesis, Hochschule für Technik, Wirtschaft und Kultur Leipzig, 2023.

9 “References to the Holocaust that mischaracterise and distort its history and relevance are an insult to the memories and experiences of victims and survivors. Holocaust distortion erodes our understanding of this history and nourish conspiracy theories, dangerous forms of nationalism, Holocaust denial, and anti-Semitism.” IHRA: Recognizing and Countering Holocaust Distortion: Recommendations for Policy and Decision Makers, 2021.

3 Live tours on Facebook? An example from the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site

In retrospect, the Covid-19 lockdown in the spring of 2020 was a turning point in educational programmes at memorial sites, including the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site. There had been individual offers before that used social media (Tweetwalk) or which were oriented towards current media (the audio offering “Tonspuren”). But in March 2020, the question suddenly arose as to how the memorial site’s education department could fulfil its tasks if neither visitors nor staff could enter the site.

The tours, digitised exhibitions and streaming offers which all of a sudden became visible everywhere from this point on and clearly demonstrated that this existential question also occupied other institutions.¹⁰ It also became apparent that the digital audience was large, and many people interested in culture were initially very happy to tune in to broadcasts from concert halls or in order to participate in virtual museum tours. Until that moment, the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site had offered workshops lasting either full or half days, and most commonly, two-and-a-half-hour tours of the site. It was agreed that the area of the former concentration camp, where the memorial site is located today, should also play a central role in digital forms of education. A certain time pressure and the personnel capacities justified the need for a quick implementation with little technical complexity. It became clear that films from the site would be a relatively easy method to implement without needing to conceive something completely new (Figure 2). In addition, all participants agreed that the live tours should be a supplement to the memorial site’s existing offer.

It therefore made sense for the guides to focus on a specific subject that could be covered in no more than one hour. Often these were topics that are peripherally addressed in the normal tours but can rarely be discussed in any great depth. By concentrating on unknown facts from the history of the place not just new knowledge can be conveyed: It also breaks with the belief of many visitors that they already know everything there is to know about the concentration camp.

The online tours are usually conducted by two to three people. One person streams with a smartphone on Facebook from the Dachau Memorial Site and pays attention to questions from the audience in the chat, while the second person speaks in front of the camera. At the same time, the tours are supervised online by a third individual who takes over the moderation of the comments from

¹⁰ Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, “Erweiterte Orte: Überlegungen zur virtuellen Transformation von Gedenkstätten,” *Medaon – Magazin für jüdisches Leben in Forschung und Bildung*, 15(28) (2021): 1–5. Accessed 11 March 2023, http://www.medaon.de/pdf/medaon_28_ebbrecht-hartmann.pdf.



Figure 2: Announcement of an online live tour at Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial (KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau, 2020).

the audience. This ensures a close connection to the interests of the participants, because our wish is not only for the films to be watched, but that viewers can also seize the opportunity to contribute their own interests, ideas and reflections.

The Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site's choice of Facebook as a streaming platform was due to practical considerations. In 2020, the memorial site was not yet active on all social media platforms, but as already mentioned in connection with TikTok offerings, it is important that institutions become familiar with the medium and language for the respective audience. It seemed to make sense to use the platform on which the memorial had the most followers at that time. On the other hand, the live tours didn't just reach young students, but many teachers and other multipliers were addressed.¹¹ On 22 April 2020, the first live

¹¹ On the use of social media platforms, see also Stefania Manca, "Holocaust Memorialisation and Social Media. Investigating how memorials of former concentration camps use Facebook and Twitter," in *Proceedings of the 6th European Conference on Social Media*, ed. Wybe Popma and Stuart Francis (Brighton: ACPIL, 2019), 189–198; Stefania Manca and Martin Rehm, "Three Institutions, Three Platforms, One Goal: Social Media for Holocaust Remembrance," in *Proceedings of the 8th European Conference on Social Media*, ed. Christos Karpasitis, (Larnaca: ACPIL, July 2, 2021), 195–204.

tour was streamed on Facebook. To date, it has had more than 6,300 views and there have been more than 100 comments during and after the tour was completed. More than 70 tours have now been conducted. Although the Covid restrictions are now no longer valid, the live tours are still seen as a way to bring the history of the site to people who cannot be there for whatever reason.

4 Digital education within the context of memorial sites

A comprehensive analysis of the effect of different digital offerings at memorial sites is still pending and is also not the aim of this essay. Nevertheless, it is viable to address specific possibilities offered by linking a real place with the digital world. In doing so, the focus is on two questions that Victoria Walden captured in a reflection on the event “The Digitisation of Memory: Technology – Possibilities – Boundaries”: What can digital applications do that was not possible before? And how can institutions use this to, on the one hand, make memories accessible in a way that is characteristic of digitality and, on the other hand, preserve them in a digital world?¹²

For a long time, institutions have said that the reason they use social media is to reach “young people”. But do they really? After ten years of activity, an analysis of the age structure of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial Site’s followers on Facebook, Twitter (now “X” or the follow-up Bluesky) and Instagram shows that they are between 25 and 65 years old. For a long time, this was also exactly the age group that the Foundation of Hamburg Memorial Sites and Learning Centres wanted to reach with its topics online – adults who are interested in topics, events, activities of the Foundation and its memorials. Young people seemed to belong more to the field of education departments at memorial sites, because they are more likely to come in a school group to a memorial site as an extracurricular place of learning and not as an individual visitor. The moment the guided tour ends, however, so does the dialogue: In Germany, there is no standard framework in which teachers and memorial educators could work together to determine content and procedures for the preparation and follow-up of a visit to a memorial site. Every teacher is free to choose the framework he or she wants to offer to the student before and after a visit to the memorial site. There is also a

¹² Victoria Grace Walden, “Holocaust Remembrance in a Digital Future: Towards Deep Truth or Deep Fake?,” accessed 11 March 2023, <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/digitalholocaustmemory/2021/02/12/holocaust-remembrance-in-a-digital-future-towards-deep-truth-or-deep-fake/>.

difference between having a group of people (for example a school class) talk about the history of the concentration camp as part of a booked tour and having a conversation with an individual person. There is often no lasting exchange with the young visitors beyond the guided tour or the project day.

How can this be changed? How can institutions also be present in the everyday life of “Generation Z”? How can they show young people the significance of National Socialism when dealing with current social problems? The younger generation’s interest in the topic has been proven many times in studies. On platforms that this generation finds interesting, they already participate in the culture of history and remembrance with their own ideas. One example of this is the series of so-called POV (“Point of View”) videos on TikTok, which were dubbed the “Holocaust Challenge” on other channels: These videos received a lot of attention, which was expressed in negative comments on other platforms like Twitter. The appropriateness of the expression was criticised, and the young people were denied sincerity in their expressions. As a result, they removed their TikTok videos and turned away from dealing with the topic of National Socialism.¹³ Social media platforms can provide the opportunity to actively shape the culture of remembrance. This is what young people have tried to do by choosing their form of storytelling on TikTok, a platform they find exciting and engaging. Instead of condemning this, shouldn’t institutions use social media platforms such as TikTok to enter into direct dialogue with young people who show their interest so clearly? They can use the opportunity, on the one hand, to listen to what the young generation is interested in and, on the other hand, to subsequently demonstrate the relevance of memorial sites and the topics associated with them for “Generation Z” by placing them where youths and young adults spend their everyday (digital) lives.

With the appearance of social media, from the very beginning the visual engagement with commemoration and remembrance has become the subject of debate. Selfies at memorial sites initially experienced fierce public criticism from 2012 onwards after they went viral on the internet. Since around 2015 the phenomenon has become the subject of research. The need to leave a visible sign of the visit and the discussion about appropriateness has not diminished since then.¹⁴ The discourse was recently examined by Pia Schlechter, taking into account the categories of gender, sexuality, age, religion and nationality, she was

13 Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Divon, *Serious TikTok*. Tom Divon, Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, Performing death and trauma? Participatory mem(e)ory and the Holocaust in TikTok #POVchallenges. Dublin 2022, accessed 11 March 2023, <https://spir.aoir.org/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/12995/10874>

14 Jackie Feldman, and Norma Musih. “Selfies in Auschwitz: Popular and contested representations in a digital generation.” *Memory Studies*. July 13, 2022, accessed 11 March 2023, doi: 10.1177/17506980221101111.

able to show that in the denial of a “correct” form of memory, exclusions of the selfie-makers from a hegemonic memory collective are produced.¹⁵ So who “may” shape the culture of memory in the future? Who determines what is appropriate and which forms of memory will remain?

Interestingly, social media platforms have become sites for the negotiation of remembrance. In a digital world, the very reach of a post leads to a supposedly higher value than it would have in an analogue world. Therefore, it must be the subject of a public negotiation which forms memory and remembrance take in the digital, considering what is appropriate and which opinions are taken into account. Institutions have the opportunity here to shape the future “culture of remembrance” in an increasingly collaborative form.¹⁶ At the end of the associated negotiation processes, there will be a more diverse, more varied kind of memory, which in this way will become connectable for more people and thus sustainable in the long term. In this framework, institutions also have the task of asking questions about ethical boundaries, because users will specifically respond to a memorial site’s contributions in social media with their own texts, images, or other content. They will also have the opportunity to influence the next productions through questions or by posting their own experiences, and in this way enhance the relevance of remembrance for many people.

It is not only the question of the stakeholders of a multifaceted remembrance work that is important, however. Indeed reflections on reasons why digital media should be used at all and what advantages they bring within the memorial context are also important. Since museums have been researching, not only with the joint project “museum4punkt0”, what effect different digital solutions mean for the institutions and their visitors, the enormous significance the digital transformation has in the cultural sector can no longer be denied.¹⁷ It is becoming apparent that precisely the opposite of many digitally conservative fears is occurring: Institutions with a greater amount of modern, digital content are considered attractive not only by a virtual audience, but also by potential visitors. To produce relevant digital content is an enormous challenge, especially for very small, volunteer-run memorial sites. However, joining online and Social Media platforms can also be an impetus to push networking and thus become more visible online

15 Pia Schlechter, “Selfies in KZ-Gedenkstätten: Zeigen, Anprangern, Verhandeln. Eine intersektionale Perspektive auf den Diskurs um die »richtige« Erinnerung an den Holocaust in den 2010er-Jahren,” in *Digital Memory. Neue Perspektiven für die Erinnerungsarbeit*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung 4, ed. Iris Groschek and Habbo Knoch (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2023).

16 Groschek, “Can Social Media Make Commemoration More Inclusive and Diverse?”

17 <https://www.museum4punkt0.de/>, accessed 20 March 2023.

and thereby score points against other institutions that, for various reasons, neglect an online presence compared to the real place.¹⁸

Digital offerings bring the distant closer. They create connections between people and places. What became apparent during the pandemic was that not only people from the immediate vicinity were interested in the digital offerings, but wider circles of people could quickly be addressed. Live streams, Instagram campaigns or TikTok videos can be used to inform people worldwide about the history of memorial sites. In many cases, people are engaged who will probably never physically visit one of these places. If these digital offerings did not exist, then these parts of history might not have become known to them either.

Especially memorial sites located at the scene of National Socialist crimes must deal with the fact that they are not self-explanatory. Between the moment of the liberation of the concentration camps and the establishment of the memorial sites, the sites were used in a variety of ways. Buildings were altered, rebuilt or demolished entirely and the construction of memorial sites themselves also brought about further changes to the sites. Therefore, they must be explained to visitors today or deciphered together in an educational format. This is the typical work of education departments at memorial sites, which today are supplemented and expanded using digital means. With the help of digital applications (Figure 3, Figure 4) or arrangements in social media “the past, sometimes irretrievably destroyed, is to be made accessible in such a way that additional layers of time and thus meaning emerge”.¹⁹ Altered places can make their diverse past more accessible in the digital sphere and make the layers of time that are often not initially recognisable – and furthermore successfully contextualise them. In addition, they enable people to discover the place and its history on their own not only online, but also during a visit with the help of the media and explanations provided. With digital offerings, visitors can learn much more at their own pace and guided by their individual interests in terms of topics and levels of depth, about the history of the National Socialist sites of violence, on structures of power and exclusion, but also the history of today’s memorials. The use of non-linear storytelling, which is an outstanding innovation of digital history narration, also serves this purpose. It enables a greater individualisation of commemoration and learning than would be possible with linear narratives. This can stimulate the development of one’s own points of view even regarding modern forms of exclusion or propaganda.

18 One opportunity for networking is the #rememBarcamp, where especially those people from the memorial environment who work with digital methods and tools in different fields meet and exchange ideas. Accessed 11 May 2024 https://www.gedenkstaettenforum.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Aktivitaeten/Rundbrief/Rundbriefe_PDF/einzelne_Artikel/213/GedRund_213-7.pdf, accessed 13 May 2024

19 Ebbrecht-Hartmann, “Erweiterte Orte,” 1.

On the other hand, these offers mean a lot of new work for the institutions. Existing materials must be prepared for pedagogical use in the digital world, or adapted for the use in social media, including assistance in decoding them. This requires not only knowledge of content and methods, but also financial and human resources. Furthermore, it takes a lot of knowledge and experience to decide which basic narratives should not be touched in a place, i.e., which representations are so fundamental that institutions do not want to leave the selection of objects or documents to chance.



Figure 3: Using the App “The Liberation” at Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial (Foto: KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau; App: Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2020).

As diverse as digital formats are, from TikTok videos to AR extensions, they all offer the non-negligible opportunity to present several different streams of information at the same time, without changing the place itself and the exhibition boards and signs. In this way, memorial sites can address their guests in different, more personalised ways and at different places in a way that is appropriate for a wider variety of target demographics, in order to arouse their interest and also retain it in the longer term. Sustainable digital offerings are more than just one-way communication of news, events and historical happenings on websites and social media. Beyond that they open up a possibility for dialogue with interested (digital or analogue) visitors. Digital offerings tie in with the memorial site’s peda-

gical, dialogue-based work and help institutions to deal with current and socially relevant topics in a totally different way as an exhibition board on the memorial site. An example of this is the possibility to virtually include spaces that are not physical parts of the memorial.

However, digital offerings are not a panacea and they are not replacing a visit to a memorial site. They are an independent form of representation and mediation, often more easily available than a personal visit to a memorial site or the tedious individual research of information that is universally present in the everyday life of many people in the world. They can thus change how memorial sites will be perceived in the future and what the culture of remembrance will look like.

Physical presence at a site is not automatically a more authentic experience. Nevertheless, a sensory perception gives a more diverse impression that goes beyond simply looking at and listening to a technical device. Even if memorial site education work rejects the expectation that visitors can – or have to – “feel something” at the site of a former concentration camp, the physical location of course remains significant and cannot be replaced by digital applications. This begins with the dimensions and distances, which have a different effect physically than in digital space. The fact that everyone can follow their own interests and impressions during a visit, turn their gaze, see other guests, have an overall impression and not be guided by the camera or a predefined narrative thread also changes the visit. Last but not least, sensory impressions have an effect on visitors’ capacities for cognitive empathy.²⁰

Digital extensions, video-based narratives or virtual reconstructions support and expand pedagogical approaches and create points of contact for personal engagement that did not previously exist in this form.²¹ For example, geographical or temporal boundaries can only be overcome virtually by digital means. This makes it possible to directly compare the structure of concentration camps at certain points in time and link them to historical events or biographies. Dimensions and temporal processes become more visible. Digital applications expand the educational offerings with the possibility of finding more individual access and a personal reference to the sources and materials that are available in abundance. Such educational uses are lower threshold than is often the case with analogue on-site offerings. This is because users can voluntarily watch a video or application in complete anonymity, they have control over what they see or click or swipe away, or they can stop using it without social pressure. Analogue offerings do not offer such possibilities with this simplicity.

²⁰ On the concept of cognitive empathy, see Lena Funk, “Empathie,” in *Psychologie der Werte: Von Achtsamkeit bis Zivilcourage–Basiswissen aus Psychologie und Philosophie*, ed. Dieter Frank (Berlin Heidelberg: Springer Nature, 2016), 53–65.

²¹ Ebbrecht-Hartmann, “Erweiterte Orte,” 5.

Interested people can also keep their distance, which makes it easier to adopt their own point of view. If online reviews of memorial sites are examined, it is evident that spatial and emotional proximity and distance are a problem for many. When visiting a concentration camp memorial, different strong feelings can arise unexpectedly. If these are to be included in educational processes, it is important to ask whether it may not also overwhelm visitors if they are brought into this situation without any concrete prior knowledge.²² This is something that memorial sites also need to consider when addressing digital audiences and planning content for social media. A certain immersion is wanted and desired, but it should never be overwhelming. In contrast, digital offerings can also be a way for visitors to maintain a distance that, again, makes it easier to find their own point of view. In this context, Steffi de Jong warns that institutions need to be aware of the dangers of simulating witnessing – simulation is related to the wish for immediacy in Holocaust remembrance and clashes with the idea of Virtual Reality (and maybe other digital approaches) as an “empathy machine” that mirrors sensations and emotions. De Jong argues that the digital should instead be used to emphasise social and historical differences and the diversity of stories.²³

In addition, the often-existing diffuse historical knowledge visitors bring with them, which comes from different sources, is usually not suitable for reducing fear of contact with the topic. Considering something such as “Dark Tourism”, there is a notion that the historical events at a site can be perceived with the senses whilst visiting. But it is not a concentration camp people are visiting today, it is a memorial site. They cannot smell or see what prisoners saw or smelled. As a memorial it is a place that now consists of several layers of time and often works with symbolic representation. In addition, there are often unrealistic expectations of a sudden onset of emotions that are placed on pupils in particular by teachers or politicians: This can be about a hoped-for immunisation against right-wing extremist ideas through visits to memorial sites, but also about determining what socially desirable behaviour or speaking about the topic should be.²⁴ All of these expectations can prevent people from voluntarily visiting a memorial site, even if they are actually

22 Anja Ballis, “‘I cannot say “enjoy” but I can say look and learn.’ Touristen schreiben auf TripAdvisor über Besuche in KZ-Gedenkstätten,” in *Dark Tourism. Reisen zu Stätten von Krieg, Massengewalt und NS-Verfolgung*, ed. Axel Dreßler, Frank Bajohr and John Lennon (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2020), 66–83.

23 Steffi de Jong, “The Simulated Witness: Empathy and Embodiment in VR Experiences of Former Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camps,” *History & Memory* 35(1) (2023): 69–107.

24 Verena Haug, “Gedenkstättenpädagogik als Interaktion. Aushandlungen von Erwartungen und Ansprüchen vor Ort,” in *Gedenkstättenpädagogik. Kontext, Theorie und Praxis der Bildungssarbeit zu NS-Verbrechen*, ed. Elke Gryglewski et al. (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2015), 113–126.

interested in it, or it can lead to their expectations of the visit not matching the actual circumstances. Here, too, the digital presence offers a possible way out: on the one hand, it gives interested people the opportunity to get to know the memorial site first at a physical distance; on the other hand, the online memorial site has the chance to offer a low-threshold dialogue at eye level and thus be perceived as an approachable and open partner rather than as a superordinate institution.

Digital offerings can therefore be useful on various levels. Potential visitors can familiarise themselves in advance with themes, representations and the place itself. They decide how intensively they engage with the history of the place at any time, they set the pace and also have the option to leave the virtual location. These are things which are difficult to do in the real space.



Figure 4: Screenshot from the 360-degree tour of buildings at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial that are otherwise not accessible to the public (KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme, 2020).

In addition to the expansion of physical space and the opportunity to dismantle limitations of various kinds, the digital space is also one of communication. The relevance of the National Socialist era becomes clear from the fact that it is still extremely present in the media. But the fact that anyone can speak out on social media also means that anything can be said – and is said. During the pandemic in particular, conspiracy narratives were very widely perceived and analysed.²⁵

²⁵ Jochen Roose, *Verschwörung in der Krise, Repräsentative Umfragen zum Glauben an Verschwörungstheorien vor und in der Corona-Krise* (Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2020).

There is loud opposition and protest especially when iconic images of memorial sites are put into aberrant contexts by means of photomontages, or when protesters align themselves with the victims of the Shoah with “unvaccinated” stars during the time of the pandemic. It is important for a memorial site to take a stand on such forms of appropriation by offering fact-based and educational dialogue, providing context, or simply pointing out inappropriateness. Their voice weighs-in due to pedagogical and scientific expertise, decades of experience and a close network with the still living former persecutees and descendants, but also with other memorial sites. Such sites as credible institutions can use their position, for example, to provide opportunities for argumentation against conspiracies and hate speech through well-prepared information.²⁶ In doing so, it is not absolutely necessary that the memorial sites themselves permanently enter the discourses, but they would first have to be the ones that are most prominent in the algorithms through permanently high click numbers, and thus can reach an even broader community that can pass on the knowledge.²⁷

This also highlights a challenge for memorial sites that is largely beyond their scope of action: Algorithms are not objective. Even in their non-transparent development, algorithms are influenced and they subsequently cause distorting effects, for example with regard to the weighting and selection of information in search engines and news feeds. A comparative analysis of search results displayed in English and Russian showed remarkable differences, for example with regard to content denying the Holocaust.²⁸ A new challenge will be artificial intelligence (AI)-based information generators, such as ChatGPT. Here, it will be necessary to consider how to react to information that users no longer check for origin and consistency, since the entire internet can be used as a basis for generating new texts without any prior verification and without any transparency as to which criteria the AI uses to assess its sources. It is not a new phenomenon whereby state-

26 Pia Lamberty, “Verschwörungserzählungen,” *Informationen zur politischen Bildung aktuell* 35 (2020); Countering Holocaust distortion on social media project. “Addressing Holocaust distortion on social media. Guidelines and Recommendations for Memorials and Museums,” 2022, accessed 11 March 2023, <https://holocaust-socialmedia.eu/wp-content/uploads/Addressing-Holocaust-distortion-website.pdf>.

27 Tomasz Łysak, “Vlogging Auschwitz: New players in Holocaust Commemoration,” *Holocaust Studies* 28(3) (2022): 377–402, accessed 10 February 2023, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/17504902.2021.1979180?needAccess=true&role=button>.

28 Mykola Makhortykh et al., “Can an algorithm remember the Holocaust? Comparative algorithmic audit of Holocaust-related information on search engines,” in *Digital Memory. Neue Perspektiven für die Erinnerungsarbeit*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung 4, ed. Iris Groschek and Habbo Knoch (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2023).

ments are adopted without being scrutinised. With the advent of AI, however, this phenomenon has taken on a new dimension and critical scrutiny is becoming rarer. ChatGPT can present false or misleading information very convincingly, and since the program ultimately makes calculations about the probability of one word or half-sentence being followed by the next, it can even invent quotes or sources in the process. But one must not forget: When the memorials are silent – who do you hear instead?

An institutionalised, almost globalised culture of remembrance, now thoroughly contested in different ways and from different origins, has experienced a new space for discussion with the dimension of the digital. Institutions use their voice in the digital and especially in social media to not only assume the role of digital gatekeeper in the public sphere, but they are responsible for preserving the dignity of the victims.²⁹ They are thus also a voice representing ethical positions. This voice, guided by negotiation processes, arises from internal as well as socio-political discussions about appropriateness and dignity. Memorial sites have long been actors in the digital transformation, and educational work on Nazi persecution uses both dialogue and digital means. In this context, memorial sites should always actively ask themselves where there are innovations in digital educational work, where there are new forms of remembrance. Among a range of questions are the following: Which formats are accepted, where do offerings have little added value and are interchangeable? What does digitalisation do to the staff? How will the staff structure have to change in the future with the digitalisation of our lives and the new skills that go with it? Who are followers of memorial sites, who uses the digital offerings? Where are the limits of digitalisation in the field of remembrance culture? How can we explore these limits in a participatory process together with diverse social actors? How is the culture of remembrance changing? What ethics are we committed to?

This means that institutions not only in the digital space have to deal with ethical questions and ask themselves again and again what is appropriate for them to implement and what value, for example, outreach has over ethical-moral concerns about the use of certain social media channels.³⁰ The digital, as much as it is a public space and as such a place of negotiation, is also subject to rules and limits. Although the content of digital ethics can be co-determined by institutions,

²⁹ See International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, *International Memorial Museums Charter*, 2016, accessed 11 March 2023, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/international-memorial-museums-charter>.

³⁰ History Communication Institute, “Communicating History on TikTok. Ethics, practices and considerations,” November 2022, accessed 11 March 2023, <https://historycommunication.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/HCI-TikTok-White-Paper-1.pdf>.

again, as stated above, memorials cannot disregard the power of algorithms programmed by humans. Algorithmic systems also have great significance in the context of memory, because, as already indicated above, they determine what is shown to whom and they decide which forms have a public reach. They help to structure information but are non-transparent. In addition, information clustered by artificial intelligence has a different focus. The ethical-moral, i.e., human dimension, is missing and, on the other hand, they can be used for propaganda purposes and can thus be misused for political purposes. Analyses by Makhortykh et al. show problems with content, so that results shaped by algorithms (for example, from search engines) tend to display materials that give a general overview of the Holocaust instead of showing the dimensions of National Socialist rule through the variety of individual topics.³¹ This could be the important task of Memorial sites.

A digital ethics should therefore also be the foundation of decisions in the development of offerings by memorial sites. This means that the basic principles of historical-political education that apply to analogue education must also be applied in suitably modified form to digital education. The primary task of memorial sites, to remember the murdered with dignity, thus always remains the guiding principle. But the form is negotiable – and institutions take on the role of mediators between the place and its history(ies) and those who visit it, both analogue and digital.

One way to fulfil this mediating or educative role is to help people visualise things that existed in the past but are no longer visible today. In addition to the ability to integrate one's knowledge of the past into a narrative, the capacity for "historische Imagination"³² is an important component in the didactic discourse on history that people should have in order to engage with the past, whether they are historians or interested non-professionals. This means that each person develops an idea about the past based on his or her own knowledge, which can always be updated as new sources are added. What remains unattainable is a complete and comprehensive idea of the past. Digital extensions of various kinds offer important support for this. For example, if people do not (yet) know how buildings or structures looked, imagining them will either not be possible, or they will only come close to it by chance. Most places in a memorial site will remain incomprehensible, because of the transformation process after the liberation of the former concentration camps. For this

31 Makhortykh, "Can an algorithm remember the Holocaust?"

32 Christian Bunnenberg, "Das Ende der historischen Imagination? Geschichte in immersiven digitalen Medien," in *Brennpunkte des heutigen Geschichtsunterrichts, Joachim Rohlfes zum 90. Geburtstag*, ed. Lars Deile, Jörg van Norden and Peter Riedel (Frankfurt am Main: Wochenschau Verlag, 2021), 174–179.



Figure 5: Social media presence at a commemorative event (KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme, 2020).

reason, it can be helpful to access brief videos that expand the historical place and help enhance the imagination, the idea of a place.³³

Another way to build a bridge between visitors and history is to use networking techniques at various points. Although visitors know that the crimes of National Socialism did not take place in isolation from society, this knowledge is relatively abstract. Through digital applications, the close connections of society and the “network of persecution” can be made visible. Within hybrid events that take place simultaneously at several memorial sites, thus overcoming geographical borders live, individual biographies, but also places and objects that connect these sites can be thematised. Hashtags can be used to weave a tight thematic network online that shows how great the overlaps between the individual memorial sites are today. By displaying information on a visitor’s smartphone not only at the memorials themselves, but also at so-called external sites, for example places where concentration camp prisoners had to perform forced labour, it can be per-

³³ See, for example, Elisabeth Fink, Steffen Jost and Nicole Steng, “Die Befreiung des Konzentrationslagers Dachau in Augmented Reality. Geschichte digital – vermittelt in virtuellem Web-Rundgang, App und Podcast,” *museum heute* 58 (2020): 44–47.

ceived how closely the concentration camps and the prisoners were connected to other parts of society, such as workplaces.

A final example of the possibilities offered by memorials is the promotion of individual participation in remembrance culture (Figure 5). Digital platforms in particular are, as already indicated above, a way for self-determined participation in the future culture of remembrance. The digitisation of files from concentration camps is another good example of this. The collection of data from different sources, a job carried out by only a few people before it was put online, was completed in a very short time with the help of over 80,000 people in the crowdsourcing project *#everynamecounts* of the Arolsen Archives. Volunteers transcribed the names, dates of birth and addresses of thousands of persecutees. In the process, the helpers could sit at their smartphones, tablets or PCs anywhere in the world. Not only did they experience the work that had previously been done by archivists or historians, but they were also able to discover – and this was the fascination of the project for many participants – on the basis of previously unseen documents how many people were at the mercy of the National Socialist persecution apparatus, and how important it can still be today that their names are preserved and made accessible. Not all fates have yet been clarified. Through active participation, steps could be taken to reconstruct family histories. Further-reaching projects generated from this data can additionally connect records. How the long-term digitisation of the source holdings of the Arolsen Archives was linked with the crowdsourcing approach to ultimately obtain more comprehensive data on individual persons via participatory data collection is a successful approach. This data can then be automatically and orderly visualised and thus made generally usable creating a fact-based, diverse digital memorial.³⁴

These examples show that digital innovations hold many possibilities for memorial sites. Digitality does not replace any memorial site as the digital and the analogue worlds go hand in hand. Digital visitors are just as interested as on-site visitors to the memorial site. They must be taken just as seriously, and special offerings should be made to them as well. The close interweaving also creates new approaches to learning about the history of National Socialist persecution, which can certainly help improve awareness of knowledge and scope for action within society as a whole.

In the digital space, there is the chance to constantly enter into conversation, to interactively include different opinions and thoughts as part of the education

³⁴ Like similar projects such as the “Joods Monument” or “InEvidence. The Map of Holocaust by Bullets,” <https://www.joodsmonument.nl>, accessed 24 February 2023; <https://www.yahadmap.org/>, accessed 24 February 2023. Here see: <https://everynamecounts.arolsen-archives.org/>, accessed 24 February 2023.

about history, and thus to shape a culture of remembrance for all. This requires not only an appreciative attitude on the part of the memorial sites for new – or differently to address – target groups, but also an open-mindedness for inspiring formats. Comprehensive digital strategies and digital departments that develop cross-departmental solutions are also necessary. What is needed is an understanding of the language of individual communities and a communication strategy that is appropriate to each community. Memorial sites need educational concepts in which digitality does not mean the replacement of paper but is understood as a completely new educational opportunity. They need their own technical know-how and a genuine interest in innovation. In the future, the boundary between digital and analogue will become increasingly permeable and memorial sites now have a great opportunity to actively promote digital literacy in the culture of remembrance.

Memorial sites – and learning with them as experts about a difficult past – are important for the identity of a democratic society. In order to remain relevant to the next generation, institutions will have to invest more time and energy in their own, but also user-generated content and co-creation formats in the future, in order to not only be gatekeepers in the fight against deliberately used misinformation and “alternative facts”, but perhaps also to follow Lily Ebert and become influencers in the digital world.

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