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Memory and Platformization

In the introduction to their edited volume *Mediation, Remediation and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (2009, 2), Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney argue that "the dynamics of cultural memory can only be fully understood if we take into account, not just the social factors at work [in remembering], but also the 'medial frameworks' of remembering." This is because media allow us to make sense and give meaning to the world around us, and they mediate between individuals and groups and across time and space. That is, media are active agents in the dynamic construction of memory, whether this concerns autobiographical memory or shared memories of and within groups (e.g., collective, social, or cultural memory). They can enable, shape, and constrain particular memory practices and, related to the construction of cultural memory, engage in the (re)mediation of the past through particular performances present in the public arena (Erll and Rigney 2009b, 5). These dynamics are as old as humankind. In fact, cultural memory and our ability to inscribe meaning into cultural artefacts that can overcome time and, to various extents, space make us successful as a species. Without this transmission – in some socio-technical manner or medium – of experience and knowledge we simply would not be. We are, in other words, technogenetic creatures (Hayles 2012).

So, what *are* the new medial frameworks of remembering and how do they affect how we remember, and by extension, how we should be doing memory studies related to media? The answer, I contend in this short chapter, lies not so much in media's various capacities and instances of overcoming time and space. This is not to deny that there is more media content than ever, coming from and circulating all over the world and entering our private and public spheres (Rigney 2005). Indeed, we live *in* media (Deuze 2011), in the sense that large parts of our very lives are mediated or stand in relation to media, even if we are not using them (cf. the 'digital detox'). Therefore, critical scholars of memory should be engaging more with that which *supports* media content, with those structures that encompass and envelop the 'medial frameworks,' with the very real and material socio-technical assemblages that, to put it as a McLuhanesque pun, *stand under* media today. We should, in short, be talking about platforms, a problematic term I will unpack below. In this chapter, I argue that platforms act as new 'medial frameworks' of memory that support – infrastructurally speaking – and shape new forms, dependencies, and power dynamics when it comes to the keeping and representation of the past (see also: Smit 2023; Smit et al. 2024).

In their introduction Erll and Rigney employ the word 'framework' in a mostly metaphorical sense to extend Halbwachs's notion of the social frameworks

of remembering. The word 'framework' denotes a basic conceptual structure related to meaning-making, a mental construct rooted in culture that is the link between individuals and society, a frame of reference. As such, media actively shape our understanding of the past (Erll and Rigney 2009b, 3). But the word framework also has a material meaning that is very closely related to that of the word platform. Merriam Webster's dictionary definition, for example, holds that a framework is "a structure made for admitting, enclosing, or supporting something." A 'medial framework of memory' could therefore not 'just' mean the enabling and shaping of mnemonic meaning-making and mediation, but also the material and infrastructural support of (other) media. This infrastructural meaning is especially important when we scrutinize the relationship between memory and platforms.

The term 'platform,' Tarleton Gillespie (2010, 348) writes in his seminal essay "The Politics of 'Platforms,'" "has emerged recently as an increasingly familiar term in the description of the online services of content intermediaries, both in their self-characterizations and in the broader public discourse of users, the press and commentators." It is a rather vague container term that has, according to Gillespie, (at least) four semantic uses: computational, architectural, figurative, and political. In software developer language, a platform is "an infrastructure that supports the design and use of particular applications, be they computer hardware, operating systems, gaming devices, mobile devices or digital disc formats" (Gillespie 2010, 349). Specifically related to Web development, the term is used to describe "online environments that allow users to design and deploy applications they design or that are offered by third parties" (Gillespie 2010, 349). This meaning relates to an earlier, architectural use of the term as to refer to "human-built or naturally formed physical structures, whether generic or dedicated to a specific use" (Gillespie 2010, 349). In (computer) architecture, then, platform refers to something that allows other structures to be built upon. Importantly, platforms can be stacked, so one platform can be built on top of another.

Figuratively, 'platform' connotes an "opportunity, action and insight" and "we might describe our entry-level job as a 'platform' for climbing the corporate ladder" (Gillespie 2010, 350). Like 'framework,' platform can be used metaphorically. This also holds true for its political meaning as the word might "refer to the issues a political candidate or party endorses" and a phrase often asked to politicians is how they 'stand' on a political issue (Gillespie 2010, 350). The point of Gillespie's semantic and etymological exercise is to show that invoking the word 'platform' is a strategic discursive move. To claim that one's latest ICT product is a platform, for example, "suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it" (Gillespie 2010, 351). Importantly, this labeling does political work, in the sense that it "obfuscates as much as it re-

veals. It obscures how social media and other digital services, labeled as platforms, not just facilitate socioeconomic, cultural, and political interaction, but very much organize and steer this interaction" (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4276). "Platforms' are 'platforms,'" writes Gillespie (2010, 351), "not necessarily because they allow code to be written or run, but because they afford an opportunity to communicate, interact or sell." By 'offering support' and by 'building infrastructure' in the form of platforms, technology companies are simultaneously making themselves essential while presenting themselves as non-threatening.

A growing body of research in media studies and other fields critically investigates the ongoing 'platformization' of existing markets and fields of cultural production. Helmond (2015, 5) originally defined platformization as "[t]he rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and the consequences of the expansion of social media platforms into other spaces online." Nieborg and Poell (2018, 4276) take a broader perspective and define the process as "the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries." Importantly, these definitions emphasize how platforms create dependence. For example, the music industry is heavily dependent on Spotify and streaming platforms have fundamentally reshaped the film and TV industries, from preproduction to marketing. These and many other examples show that "cultural production is progressively 'contingent on,' that is, *dependent on* a select group of powerful digital platforms" (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4276).

Dependence, however, is just one meaning of the word contingency. A second important aspect is that "[p]roducts and services offered and circulated via digital platforms are contingent in the sense that they are malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation" (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4276). In other words, through and by platforms, cultural content and consumption are rendered into data that can be analyzed and inform the creation and marketing of new products. Movies, series, and music are now partly produced taking datafied user behavior into account and recommender systems produce lists of cultural content on the basis of 'users like you.' Platforms are meta-media, the media of or for media, because they offer the infrastructure to keep a vast range of mediated cultural content in database form, which can be accessed through smooth interfaces that allow for the seamless consumption and simultaneous tracking of user behavior. They are infrastructural data companies through and through, but also, and perhaps because of that, today, active agents in the workings of memory, whether individual or cultural. Taking the above into account, platforms play at least three roles in the contemporary construction of memory. They are keepers, producers, and selectors of cultural content and user data about consumption of this content. In each of

these roles, we see the dual contingency (dependence and constant revision and recirculation) noted by Nieborg and Poell play out. In what follows, I will scrutinize these interrelated roles in the light of platformization and end each discussion with key questions that can be picked up in future research on this topic.

We are increasingly dependent on platforms to keep our cultural content, to produce it, and select and re-present it to us. In a sense this is not so different from our historical dependence on the cultural industries to keep, produce, select, and re-present cultural products. This has been thoroughly critiqued from the Frankfurter Schule onward and may very well be the *raison d'être* of the field of media studies. A difference today, though, might be the sheer scale of what is produced, selected, and re-presented by a relatively small amount of platforms that are built on an even smaller group of server and cloud technology providers, such as Amazon Web Services (AWS). Netflix, for example, uses AWS for almost all its storage and computing needs. This role of keeper of media content does of course not stop at audiovisual and textual material produced by professionals, but also pertains to the huge archive of cultural content produced on social media, ranging from YouTube to Instagram and everything in between (which also holds vast amounts of work created by professionals and influencers). Key critical questions concerning this role might be: what happens when platforms are discontinued? How do copyright laws and regulation affect platforms' archival role? And: how does the (automated) 'cleaning' and moderating of platforms' content impact what *is* or *can* be remembered (Smit et al. 2017)?

Importantly, related to the second meaning of contingent, platforms do not 'see' films, series, music, and books (in the case of Amazon's Kindle) as the rich, meaning-full cultural artefacts that they are, but as data. Cultural-artefact-as-data can be broken apart and analyzed. This can occur on the level of one cultural artefact, but also on a very large scale, using thousands of films or millions of hours of music. In combination with user data (when and where do people consume what; when do people pause or stop; how do they rate and feel about content), predictions can be made about what sort of content (down to the actors, directors, and genre) will be liked by particular consumers at particular times and places. This algorithmic logic drives much cultural production and recommendation today and it is partly made possible by platforms as infrastructural data companies. Concerning memory construction, this logic allows for the selection (from abovementioned archive/database) in the form of recommendations and production of original media content about the past informed by present and datafied audiences interests. As of yet, though, scholars of memory and media have only just started answering the question of how the datafication of cultural artefacts affects the 'working' and circulation of cultural memory.

The purpose of this chapter has been to introduce memory studies scholars to critical scholarship on platforms. Moreover, it argued that the dynamics of cultural memory today cannot be fully understood if we do not take into account platforms, because they are dominant infrastructures for and actors in the keeping, selection, production, and circulation of human experience and knowledge carried in media forms (Smit et al. 2024). These new, material 'frameworks of memory' deserve critical, interdisciplinary scrutiny because present and future memory construction depends on them.