Pixelated Memory: Online Commemoration of Trauma and Crisis.

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Abstract

Online environments provide public spaces for expressing, sharing and working through experiences of trauma and crisis. New communities are created and new kinds of records and histories are produced. What happens when private trauma is made public? What does online commemoration achieve? What kinds of communities are created and how are these different from physical communities? This paper investigates these questions with reference to recent examples.

Keywords

online communities, commemoration, memorialisation, collective memory, Holocaust, genocide, Web 2.0, social networking.
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A certain ambiguity is attached to the expression ‘a duty to remember’...First of all, those who are subjected to this duty are obviously those who have not been direct witnesses or victims of the events of which one intends to preserve the memory. It is very clear that those who survived the Holocaust or the horror the camps do not need to be reminded of their duty to remember. On the contrary, perhaps their duty has been to survive the memory, to escape, as far as they are concerned, from the everlasting presence of an incommunicable experience....

– Marc Augé, Oblivion (1994)

War memorials are the most familiar and visible means of acknowledging and respecting the trauma of large scale, violent conflict. In practically every town in Australia, however small, monuments to war are found. These are haunting, poignant reminders of the brutality of war and the fragility of life. And yet, their reassuring solidity and prominence shields us from the reality of lost lives and suffering by casting war in terms of abstract and stylised notions of heroism, loyalty, sacrifice and glory. While it is usual for the names of the dead to be listed on these monuments, their individual suffering is blended, ritualised and distanced in a symbolic and generalised tribute. It is not surprising then that there has always been an awkward fit between the public statements made by these monuments and the personal stories told by individuals who returned. Personal accounts demonstrate such diversity in people’s responses to the atrocities of large scale conflict that it easy to see why they can destabilise collective national representations. They also serve to demonstrate that these two ways of remembering the trauma of war – the collective and the individual – have traditionally been poles apart and often contradictory. Gilmore reflects on this by asking, “How can the experience of a survivor of trauma stand for many? How can one tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, when facts, truth, and memory combine in the representation of trauma to undermine rather than strengthen representativeness?” (emphasis added).
At least part of the answer lies in the difference of purpose and genre of each mode of remembering: in this case, one is a national narrative with the primary aim of mythologising and nation building by generating and consolidating a unified public vision of events and people, while the other is the fragmentary, individualised and messy mode of autobiography. One is big, solid and clear; the other is small scale, unstable and unpredictable. One, like a national anthem, has the ability to trigger an instant common response; the other can delve into the unique specificity of a single life, a single moment; it can shock and startle; it can challenge and shatter the unity of our world view and it can unleash the full range of emotions, through memory.

In spite of this, there is no doubt that in the past it is the national narrative that has been the more influential. As the mythologised Anzac story clearly demonstrates, people value the sense of community that collectively ‘remembering’ such a story gives them. As Benedict Anderson points out, war memorials have great unifying power even when they are at their most general and representative:

No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than the cenotaphs and tombs of the Unknown Soldiers. The public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments precisely because they are either deliberately empty or no one knows who lies inside them, has not true precedent in earlier times…. Yet void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly national imaginings.3

The Australian War Memorial in Canberra is the most visited in the country and it is also a world leading museum.4 The exhibitions and displays are planned and curated with great care and sensitivity. As is fitting for a national memorial, there is a strong nationalistic theme. However, this memorial departs from the standard pattern in that personal stories are well represented and there is no effort to try to hide, smooth over, or explain away, the conflict between collective and personal views of war.
Including these personal perspectives alongside national themes responds to the interest worldwide, over the last two of decades and more, of stories of ‘ordinary’ people in history. This has loosened the hold that nationalistic collective memory once had on public consciousness. At the Australian War Memorial the two modes of remembering are interwoven, with individual stories demanding imaginative engagement, though still firmly under the broad banner of national pride. Typically, however, war memorials make no great demands on the imagination. The personal traumas that have unfolded in other arenas of imaginative expression are not confronted. This is because, in the context of nationalism, the aftermath of war demands a coherent, public story so as to preserve social cohesion, justify the loss of life, bring comfort to the living, and create an environment where those directly affected by war can rebuild their lives and keep on living. And this story, like the nation itself, is, to use Benedict Anderson’s term, an invention.

The online environment of the World Wide Web has recently created a vast new arena for remembering and reimagining, so much so that the old dichotomy between public and private remembering no longer holds, and has to be rethought. This virtual world is a place where quite suddenly there have appeared multiple sites of commemoration and community that recognise and record disaster, conflict and trauma. In contrast to the physical surety and agreed social rituals of national memorialisation of war, online commemoration happens in a distributed virtual space with few signposts, ceremonies or conventions. There is no doubt that therapeutic benefit comes from expressing and sharing personal accounts in the public domain. As Leigh Gilmore notes, “Survivors of trauma are urged to testify repeatedly to their trauma in an effort to create the language that will manifest and contain trauma as well as the witnesses who will recognize it.”
This is perhaps the greatest benefit that comes from giving any sort of testimony. It is part of working through a traumatic event – telling it as you saw it, or telling it in a way that you can bear to see it. But there may also be pitfalls that come with mass public exposure. The long term repercussions of this sort of exposure are as yet little understood. For example, there are challenges that result from the fragility of online information and the nebulous nature of online communities. In the virtual world communities can form and dis-form, leaving few traces. Because participants can be anonymous or assume false identities, there is the danger of skeptical, hostile or hurtful responses. Even more disturbingly, in making the intensely private experience of trauma public, there is a danger of over-exposure and exploitation, of turning trauma into entertainment.

What happens when private trauma is made public? What does online commemoration achieve? What kinds of communities are created and how are these different from physical communities? This paper investigates these questions with reference to recent examples.

**Giving testimony**

Yet we must not forget that everything starts, not from the archives, but from testimony, and that, whatever may be our lack of confidence in the principle in such testimony, we have nothing better than testimony, in the final analysis, to assure ourselves that something did happen in the past, which someone attests to have witnessed in person, and that the principal, and at times our only, recourse, when we lack other types of documentation, remains the confrontation among testimonies.


Trauma is often thought of as “unrepresentable” and “beyond language in some crucial way”; “trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency.” Although it may be only one step in trying to articulate the experience, giving testimony is central to the process of healing.
Those who have suffered intense trauma report that the unspeakable becomes speakable when it is communicated and shared, and that through this process it also becomes more bearable. Cathy Caruth’s definition of trauma highlights the long term effects of traumatic experiences: “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”

This can be a self enclosed, endless torment leading to a lifelong re-playing of the same drama, a rupturing experience that repeats and does not let one go. This was the experience of my Ukrainian grandfather, Petro Olijnyk, who recently died in Adelaide at the age of 94. My grandfather and his family survived Stalin’s enforced starvation, German invasion, and Nazi labour camps in occupied Poland as prisoners of war, before ultimately migrating, as refugees, to settle in Australia. He told his harrowing stories over and over again to anyone who would listen.

Testimony is particularly powerful when it is given in formal settings, such as the many Truth and Reconciliation Commissions that have been established around the world in recent years. Some take the position that trauma “does not even exist until it can be heard by a sympathetic listener”. Perhaps, then, trauma can only speak through testimony. “Flashbacks, nightmares, emotional flooding” are in this way “replaced by a conscious language that can be repeated through structured settings.”

In Australia the pivotal recent example is the process that led to the publication of the Bringing Them Home report (1997), which followed the investigation of the history of forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. Witnessing Stolen Generation testimony “has been seminal to subsequent research and writing” in Australia.
For the first time, this report made public the voices of the people who had either been taken away or directly affected by the controversial policy. At the end of the report the commissioner, Sir Ronald Wilson, wrote of the enormously cathartic effect of simply telling the stories and having them formally heard:

At times, it was as though they were reliving the experiences of which they spoke. In an effort to be faithful to the courage and dignity of those who came forward to tell the stories, we have, in writing the Report, retained as far as possible the actual words as we heard them. It seemed to us the least that we could do. There is a further comment I should like to make about the telling and listening to these stories. The Commission became convinced that the process of storytelling was itself the beginning of a healing process. We have therefore recommended that those remaining stories that we were unable to hear because of lack of time and resources should continue to be told to an appropriate authority. In this way, one aspect of the healing process could continue.14

**Online commemoration**

The interconnected online environment of the World Wide Web is very well equipped to facilitate the process of telling, listening and sharing that is a basic element of healing, commemoration and also of community building following crisis. Online communities take many different forms. Like their traditional counterparts, they can be of different sizes, exist for short or long periods, and shift or evolve as people come and go. Many of the contributors to commemorative websites are geographically distributed for the very same reasons that the sites are formed in the first place – as a result of the exile or physical displacement caused by war or natural disaster. However, these websites also invite contributions from the global public. Each of the examples discussed below assembles and displays testimony and memory in a different way. They do not create *collective memory*, although the resources may ultimately contribute to a long term collective understanding through offering evidence of different versions of events. They are best thought of in terms of *collected memory*.15
There have been many public commemorative responses to the events of 11th September 2001, which shattered the hope of world peace at the opening of the new millennium. Miller and Tougauw start their book *Extremities*, published just after these events, by saying, “This tragic overture to the twenty-first century has changed the context of this book, jarred our perspective. We are only beginning to take the measure of the new testimonies to loss, the new contexts of traumatic experience that this event has produced.”\textsuperscript{16}

The *September 11 Digital Archive* (http://911digitalarchive.org/) is a project of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, with a range of partners that include Red Cross and Seagate. This archive collects and preserves the memories and documents of people directly or indirectly affected by the tragic events that took place on that day and its aftermath. It is a publicly available, searchable archive that is now maintained by the US Library of Congress as a growing historical record. The website actually stopped accepting direct public contributions in 2004 but the library keeps receiving material and adds it to an even larger, offline version of the collection. As the managers of this project explain:

> Our goal is to create a permanent record of the events of September 11, 2001. In the process, we hope to foster some positive legacies of those terrible events by allowing people to tell their stories, making those stories available to a wide audience, providing historical context for understanding those events and their consequences, and helping historians and archivists improve their practices based on the lessons we learn from this project.\textsuperscript{17}

The *September 11 Digital Archive* also aggregates and preserves various community projects as special collections. These include the National Museum of American History’s exhibition ‘September 11: Bearing Witness to History’, as well as a Sonic Memorial project,\textsuperscript{18} and related photography and local history initiatives.
One can see everywhere, and at all times, the basic instinct to tell stories as an individual and collective human strategy for recovery and survival. For Augé, to abandon storytelling may be to abandon memory altogether: “...as soon as we distance ourselves from the tale, as soon as we give up turning what we call ‘remembrances’ into a story, we distance ourselves from memory too perhaps.” In this context, storytelling in the online environment opens up remarkable new opportunities for people who would otherwise have been isolated in their grief to share their memories and emotions with a community of willing listeners, whose lives were suddenly changed by the events of that same moment in history.
Storytelling, as a private and public act of remembering and *comprehending*, and as a means to create a community who shared the experience of trauma on the same day and in the same place, in most cases without knowing each other prior to that time, is central to this archive [figure 1]. This is not about piecing together what ‘actually happened’. The whole world saw on their television screens how the buildings exploded and were shattered into fragments. The stories indeed are themselves fragments that, when assembled, form a collected communal memory of the event, one that gathers and flows under and around and through the famous photographic and video images that have somehow become solid and clear in visual memory across the world. Precisely how the accounts of 11th September 2001 and similar archives actually represent communities when the only evidence of these communities is in the online records they create, is a current concern of archivists.20 Aside from storytelling in the narrative sense, online commemoration can enable a kind of rebuilding and reconstruction of community through user contributed photographs, objects and other digitised ephemera.

In the case of the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank* ([http://www.hurricanearchive.org/](http://www.hurricanearchive.org/)) which is also a project of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, users contribute all manner of digital assets as a record of the physical and human devastation caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Like the September 11th project, it is a large scale collaborative effort (supported by the University of New Orleans, with the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and funded primarily by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. It also has over twenty other cultural and community partners). In the *Hurricane* project, contributions are linked in physical relation with one another by being ‘pinned’ to a Google Map interface [figure 2].
These traces – memories, photographs, scraps of objects and documents – are left-over items, a jumbled index of miscellany imbued with significance it would no doubt never have had before the disaster. One anonymous contributor, for example, has posted a scanned copy of a salvaged menu from Dempsey’s restaurant [figure 3]. The fact that it survived seems reason enough to celebrate its significance in this archive.

In the same way that retrieved everyday items displayed in war museums seem to overflow with emotion, these virtual collections of significant objects seem to speak louder, and have more impact, than they possibly could have before. While the September 11 Digital Archive could be said to allow some escape from the overpowering visual representations of the physical place to the place of memory, the Hurricane project seeks to recover a sense of the destroyed place from the broken and disconnected fragments left behind. This is because this place was their home and their neighbourhood.
In many ways the archive itself resembles the mess of scraps and disconnected remnants that are left by a violent storm. The sharing of objects allows people to piece them together into a collection that becomes a focus for enshrining the physical location in the memory and enabling mourning to take place.

In my third example, a different kind of online community is being formed through the newly launched World is Witness ‘geoblog’ hosted by The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum program, ‘Genocide Prevention Mapping Initiatives’ (http://blogs.ushmm.org/worldiswitness). This commemorative project, which “documents and maps genocide and related crimes against humanities”, has an explicit additional purpose: it provides an interactive forum for awareness building and activism.
Using a Google Earth interface – and including RSS feeds, Facebook links and other Web 2.0 social bookmarking features – the site connects first hand reports of contemporary human injustices to particular locations, along with historical references to sites of earlier documented atrocities [figure 4].

Like the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank project, it is an example of a place-based approach to digital history and documentation that is paving the way for a new model of electronic publication in the humanities. Its primary purpose is to facilitate an online forum but it locates and positions the discussion, and hence focuses the attention of the blog community, on geographical points of relevance. It is significantly different from the other two projects in that it opens up multiple sites of trauma and does not privilege some over others. Most importantly, it has the specific aim of preventing future neglect or injustice in the aftermath of disasters and even perhaps preventing future acts of mass violence through the horrors it puts on public
display. Targeting global audiences, this project does not attempt to bring the multiple events together into a single whole but rather, to expose the specific nature of each in order to bring world attention to a common thread of human suffering and also of injustice. The community it seeks to form is one of listening, caring and potentially taking action.21

The three examples discussed here are efforts to rebuild, reconstruct or create new communities out of witness accounts and collected memory in its many forms. The basic need to re-visualise and re-construct is a familiar response following war and other atrocities, whether it be through the repeating of stories, giving testimony or other ways of re-imagining the circumstances in which traumatic events occurred. When there are no remains of the physical environment that is the focus of extraordinarily painful memories, the responses can be especially extreme, as in the case of Sztajer, a Melbourne resident and one of the approximately 100 Jews to have survived the Treblinka Nazi extermination camp. He died in early 2008 at age 98. By the time Nazi mass extermination ended in April 1943, around 870,000 people had lost their lives, including Sztajer’s family. Treblinka was destroyed and the remains later buried and planted over in an act of erasure. This erasure of history had a profound effect on Sztajer, who, much later in life, laboriously reconstructed the camp as a scale model built from memory out of wood and plaster. It measures three square metres. The model is now a permanent exhibit at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum and for many years Sztajer offered public tours and interpretations of the model and of the camp. It may take years to work through such trauma and for many people it is a lifelong process. According to Sztajer’s wife of 35 years, “there was not one day that he didn’t speak about Treblinka”.22
Localised communities of memory can help to strengthen and even reform communities that have been physically scattered. But these are also new communities in the sense that they have been created through a shared experience of crisis. While the common ground may be physical in the case of a community affected by events in one particular location, it is often the removal of/from the shared space that creates the conditions for the formation of this kind of new community. People are always brought together, in a sense, by shared identification with experiences of disaster and displacement – even if they never actually meet. We also have many more visible ways of responding, through museums, monuments, petitions, tribunals, crisis centres, support groups, trials, novels, biographies, documentary films, public acknowledgements and announcements, rituals, anniversaries and through art and activism.

Online communities, especially dedicated commemorative websites, perform many of these functions and some others that are unique to their distributed format. Firstly, while they may be thought of in terms of a snapshot of initial impressions, as time goes by and the collections of impressions grow, they become a deeper account that has increasing value as an archive. Secondly, considered as a form of commemoration, online memorials differ from other sorts of more traditional memorials in that they are closer to ‘listening tribunals’ than to carefully planned commemorative gestures. They can better reflect and facilitate a fundamental aspect of working through trauma because they invite and encourage people to share their memories and they provide a public forum for giving testimony and having it heard. Thirdly, these websites reach out further, encouraging the input of people who are affected less directly. As the opening quotation points out, the “duty to remember” is arguably a duty for those least affected by war.
Conclusion

Pixelation occurs by zooming closer and closer to a digital image, or when the signal is interrupted or breaks up. When an image is highly pixelated, it appears chaotic. The individual parts do not add up to form a coherent or easily recognisable picture. The title of this paper refers to the fact that traumatic memory and recollection can be just like this: a picture full of gaps or made up of fragments. The closer one looks and the more detail one seeks, the less the personal story of trauma can cohere as, or accord with, collective memory. There is nothing pixelated about physical war memorials. In Australia the memories are further solidified with every Anzac Day commemoration. There is a quiet respectfulness in those memorials, a reassurance in their solidity, qualities very different from the fragmented, distributed nature of online commemoration in the digital sphere.

The online environment is making possible the cathartic sharing of information and experience amongst vastly greater numbers of people and across all boundaries – of geographical location, nation, social status, ethnicity, age and even time itself. Through the process of making the experience visible and accessible in the public domain, some kind of respect and pride can be restored, and the shame and humiliation that accompanies suffering can start to be transformed and sometimes even transcended. We could call these communities that share their stories of trauma and disaster, communities of pain. But they are perhaps better thought of positively, in terms of commemoration, memorialisation and even celebration of community and collective identity in the face of extreme hardship and crisis. Further, as is the hope in the case of the World is Witness geoblog, they may even play a role in preventing similar events the future.
In a very visible, palpable, experiential way, online commemoration makes possible the transformation of history that has long been talked about but could not be fully activated without the Web’s new emphasis on user generated content and sharing. That democratisation, expansion and inclusiveness, has enabled history itself to be reconceived as an inevitably shifting and moving entity, a dynamic set of perspectives of life and experiences with personal stories at the heart of it. This has allowed a great enrichment of the pool we call history. People whom history has traditionally ignored are now being heard and have a voice and place to speak. Never before has this sort of history making been possible – for anyone who is within reach of a computer, anywhere. And yet, the very qualities and activities of online memory communities that make them helpful to people in the immediate aftermath of disaster – their capacity to form quickly, change their shape, expand or contract at will, accommodate incoherence and disorder – are also the features that threaten their long-term existence. As these examples of digital projects show, the new capacity to share stories and images online has enabled a transformation of the arena of trauma commemoration. Unlike the traditional stone war memorials, built with their feet planted firmly on the ground, and designed to be looked at, the new online ‘products’ that are emerging are dynamic and interactive, and exist in a volatile space that is everywhere and yet nowhere. Serving purposes that go far beyond those of public memorialisation, these highly interactive projects are forming new genres which are beginning to redefine not only the form and substance of sites of commemoration, but also their priorities and purposes in the lives of those who have experienced or been touched by traumatic events.
Notes

6 “In the preceding chapters I have tried to delineate the process by which the nation came to be imagined, and once imagined, modeled, adapted and transformed. Such an analysis has been concerned primarily with social change and different forms of consciousness. But it is doubtful whether either social change or transformed consciousness, in themselves, do much to explain the attachment that peoples feel for the inventions of their imaginations – or....why people are ready to die for these inventions.” Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, London and New York: Verso, 1991, p. 141.
15 The concept of ‘collective memory’ is associated with the work of philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs but has been developed by many others including James E. Young, who has used the term ‘collected memory’ to indicate the fragmentary nature of memory.
18 http://www.sonicmemorial.org/.
Jeanette Bastian, “Living in the Web of Memory: Constructing Virtual Communities of Records and Remembrance”, public lecture, Institute of Advanced Studies, The University of Western Australia, 18 August 2008.

A different kind of activist site is GetUp (http://www.getup.org.au). Highly proactive and political, this Australian grass roots organisation claims responsibility for changing the Australian Howard government’s direction on a number of key issues in recent years.