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## Connective Memory Work on *Justice for Mike Brown*

*Rik Smit*

### INTRODUCTION

On 9 August 2014, 18-year-old African American Michael Brown was shot dead by white police officer Darren Wilson. The shooting followed a series of controversial police killings—of mainly young African American men—which instigated racial tensions throughout the US and incited civic unrest in Ferguson, where the shooting occurred. A day after Brown's death, the Facebook 'cause' page *Justice for Mike Brown (JfMB)* was set up by Derk Brown, a Ferguson resident (no relation to Mike). The page developed into a platform where people could share condolences and feelings, commemorate Brown, provide information, give opinions, and organise protests. Hence, it became a hybrid space in which a diffuse, seemingly non-hierarchical, decentralised, yet interconnected group of protesters, activists, and interested others engaged in communicative interactions and mobilised each other into online and offline action.

Moreover, as argued elsewhere (Smit, Heinrich, & Broersma, 2017), *JfMB* came to serve as a techno-discursive space in which digitally

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networked individuals actively engaged with the past for present political purposes. Users of the page collaboratively (re)created Michael Brown's identity, (re)constructed the day of the shooting, provided new information about it, helped to set goals in light of past protests, and linked the shooting to systematic historical injustice against African Americans. Thus, these activists and protesters engaged in digital memory work. Memory work, an age-old phenomenon, encompasses the transfer and reconstruction of knowledge and experience of the past into the present and future. This occurs through and by specific practices, technologies, and cultural forms and, often, for specific goals (Bowker, 2008; Van House & Churchill, 2008). This makes memory work inherently political (Sturken, 1997). Which and whose versions of the past are carried into the future is the result of a continuous power struggle. Hence, the past is continually being constructed in the present by various actors with their own goals and agendas. Nowadays, this process increasingly involves social media platforms. These platforms affect memory work—like other media technologies before them—in idiosyncratic ways (Smit, 2018).

Advancing these arguments, this chapter views memory work on *JfMB* as a form of what Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2014) have called 'connective action.' Connective action is a type of political engagement based on the sharing of and connecting with personalised content and personal action frames via digital and social media. In earlier scholarship, memory of, by, and within social movements, protests, and activism has been explained by the logic of *collective* action, which uses and results in collective memory (Jansen, 2007; Kubal & Becerra, 2014; Lee & Chan, 2016; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Zamponi, 2013). Alternatively, the logic of *connective* action presupposes different types of engagement with the past in activism, which revolve around notions such as connectivity and personalisation, enabled and shaped by social media. As a result, this chapter engages with broader questions regarding what Hoskins (2011) has labelled connective, rather than collective memory: a constantly shifting, emergent form of memory, as people continuously interact with materials, interfaces, and each other in online digital spaces.

Before developing the argument to view memory work in digital activism as a form of connective action, the chapter briefly revisits memory work, a widely used, yet sporadically developed term. This first section aims to challenge two commonly held assumptions in existing scholarship: that memory work is performed by humans alone and that it is always purposive. This is important to discuss because, as we will see, human and

non-human agency, intention and chance in (activist) memory work are even harder to disentangle today than in a predigital era; they are, I argue, part and parcel of connective memory work. The second section engages with Bennett and Segerberg's model and connects it to memory work in digital activism. The authors' conceptual model has been widely adopted and challenged in the field of political science and social movement studies (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Tarrow, 2014), yet still is somewhat marginal in research concerned with the intersections of memory, social media, and activism. I propose the term 'connective memory work' to describe the idiosyncratic dynamics between these three key components in today's 'ecosystem of connective media' (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 4). Third, I provide a multimodal textual analysis of *JfMB* that integrates a critical reading of Facebook's features to demonstrate how connective memory work can be studied. In this way, the chapter aims to show how the logic of connective action drives the memory work on *JfMB*, and by extension, similar activist platforms.

### MEMORY WORK: RETHINKING A TRAVELLING CONCEPT<sup>1</sup>

The types of memory under scrutiny in the present volume—cultural, collective, social, historical, and activist memory—share underlying epistemological and practical principles. These types of memory comprise the capacity and process of reconstructing and representing the past in the present, or preserving the present for future recall. Memory, here, is a *process*, because it is never fixed, static, or finished. It is a *reconstruction*, because it utilises and requires various resources, practices, techniques, technologies, and experiences. It is a *representation*, which implies that it is encoded with meaning, decoded, and recoded within existing cultural contexts. It is a *capacity* of the individual human body and mind, yet it is social through and through, because it is never *just* a capacity. It is always in a process of becoming, connected to and associating with the world outside the individual body and mind. Memory is therefore always partly personal, partly collective. The ontology of memory—its *being*—is fluid. We will never quite grasp what it actually *is*. Like the past, as soon as we 'fix,' 'label,' or 'capture' memory, or use metaphors to describe it, we disregard or do not do justice to another aspect of it.

While taking these into account, in this chapter, I propose a different lens through which we can make sense of engagements with the past. To this end, this chapter revisits the concept of memory work. At the heart of

this section lie two points of contention: first, that memory work is solely a human practice, and second, that memory work is always an intentional process. As I will argue later, this reconceptualisation of memory work can fruitfully be operationalised for empirical research into contemporary activist engagements with the past and the role social media platforms can play in this.

The term ‘memory work’ has been employed across disciplines, but despite its casual use, it has only sparingly been theorised and no single, unequivocal definition or application of the term dominates academic discourse. It is very much a ‘travelling concept’ (Bal, 2002). In media studies, memory work is generally regarded as something strictly human and as something intended, purposive, and conscious. Annette Kuhn (2010), for example, suggests that memory work is a ‘conscious and purposeful staging of memory’ and that it is an ‘active practice of remembering that takes an inquiring attitude towards the past’ (p. 303). Correspondingly, the past, and memories thereof, is ‘material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and its possibilities’ (Kuhn, 2010, p. 3). This selective poaching of the past is also noted by Van Dijck (2007), who views memory work as involving ‘a complex set of recursive activities that shape our inner worlds, reconciling past and present, allowing us to make sense of the world around us, and constructing an idea of continuity between self and others’ (p. 5). Van Dijck thus points at the dynamic and relational aspects of memory work—involving a set of practices, cultural forms, and technologies—and at its function of bridging past and present. Likewise, Lohmeier and Pentzold (2014) conceive of *mediated* memory work as ‘bundles of bodily and materially grounded practices to accomplish memories in and through media environments’ (p. 778). As such, mediated memory work ‘involves purposive practices in and through which the past is expressively and consciously represented, interpreted, reflected and discursively negotiated’ (Lohmeier & Pentzold, 2014, p. 779).

Even though memory work *can* be purposive human engagement with the past, I argue that memory work is not only restricted to humans and is not always purposive. Rather, objects, things, technologies, places, forms, and content can be part of and engage in memory work too. That is, agency in memory work is not only reserved for humans, but is *distributed* among people and things that continually interact and associate with each other. Objects, cultural and symbolic forms, and technologies may ‘steer’

and shape memory in peculiar ways, may contain it, and may remember for us.

This latter thought is inspired by actor-network theory (ANT) and the work of Latour. In ANT, what is meant by ‘social’ differs from common usage of the term, both in academic and popular discourse. As Latour (2007) writes: ‘In most situations, we use “social” to mean that which has already been assembled and acts as a whole, without being too picky on the precise nature of what has been gathered, bundled, and packaged together’ (p. 43). That is, ANT is ‘based on the assumption that “reality” as we encounter it, is the product of complex interactions between human and non-human actors (e.g., technologies and artefacts)’ (Van Loon, 2008, p. 114). Controversial in this theory is that agency is not reserved for human beings, as Van Loon (2008) writes:

Actors can be humans, animals, technologies, angels and gods. That is, the nature of an actor is not predefined, it is simply linked to act, which in turn solely depends on whether the impact of its actions has consequences for other actors. Action is thus not tied to intentionality. (p. 115)

In ANT, ‘the social’ itself is deconstructed and not taken for granted as an essential structure or force. Latour (2007) argues that ‘there is no society, no social realm, and no social ties, *but there exist translations between mediators that may generate traceable associations?*’ (p. 108, emphasis in original). These mediators translate, that is, they transform, distort, or alter the meaning or elements they transport within the network (i.e. they are not neutral) (Latour, 2007, p. 39). By treating actors and ‘non-human’ actants as mediators, social ties are problematised, yet simultaneously made less abstract and not taken for granted. Mystifying notions such as ‘social force’ and ‘social dimension’—and maybe, by extension, social, cultural, and collective memory—are thus broken down. Likewise, memory work is a ‘social’ process wherein connections are made, and continually remade, between mediating and associating people, technologies, objects, and ideas.

The insight that agency in memory work is distributed among human and ‘non-humans’ changes the way we can think about intentionality in memory work. A cultural object might be designed with a specific purpose in mind, but it might have unintended mnemonic effects. For example, a statue of a historical figure whose name we do not know might trigger a host of unexpected memories and associations. What is more, an object or

symbolic form that was not intentionally designed or produced to carry particular knowledge or experience from one point in time and place to another might just do that. Van Dijck (2007) describes these varying degrees of intentionality well:

We can take a picture just for the sake of photographing or to later share the photographed moment with friends. While taking a picture, we may yet be unaware of its future material form or use. However, any picture—or, for that matter, any diary entry or video take—even if ordained to end up in a specific format, may materialize in an unintended or unforeseen arrangement. (p. 7)

Following this line of thinking, memory work always involves processes of mediation and association on a number of levels. First and foremost, memory work mediates, on a temporal level, between past and present and between present and future. On the one hand, the past manifests itself in the present through memory work, which may include selection, interpretation, and meaning-making vis-à-vis the past. On the other, memory work designates the transference of the present and past into the future. Whereas documenting and registering the present are aimed at future recall, commemorating and reminiscing go back in time, linking the past to the present and vice versa. On a relational level, memory work involves processes of mediation between people, between individual and group, and between people and ‘non-human’ things. On both the temporal and relational levels, this mediation can be done by the communication technologies we call media, but it is important to remember that memory work may involve (and always has involved) a vast range of mediators.

Memory work, instead of ‘memory’ or ‘remembering,’ immediately indicates the past as something ‘under construction’ by not only individuals and groups, but also technologies and objects, who are all and equally socially and culturally embedded. This flattening of actors does not neutralise memory work, stripping away its political dimension. Rather, it allows a broader range of actors to be seen as potentially political, among them, increasingly, digital objects and social media, which are never neutral intermediaries in activist communication. This insight is especially pertinent to the study of memory work in social media activism, to which this chapter turns to now.

## FROM COLLECTIVE TO CONNECTIVE MEMORY WORK IN ACTIVISM

Throughout history and around the world, memory work has been both the *objective* of activism as well as an *integral part of it*. Pertaining to the latter, '[t]he past,' writes Jansen (2007), 'is a crucial symbolic resource for groups in political contestation' (p. 958). For example, the memory of Chernobyl is a key aspect for anti-nuclear energy movements in Europe, and Chinese anti-Japanese protests draw heavily from the memory of the Japanese domination in the 1930s and 1940s. Similarly, '[s]ocial movements often have to activate people's memories of past events to generate support for their causes,' write Lee and Chan (2016, p. 999). Alternatively, when memory work is the objective of activism, it is often about the representation of certain events and peoples in the present. For example, in the Netherlands, protesters have aggravated against the prominent placement of Dutch Golden Age 'heroes' in Dutch cities, and in the US, indigent peoples continue their struggle for proper representation of their pasts in the present. Both types of activist memory work have been performed by traditional social movements and familiar repertoires. What happens, however, to activist memory work when much action, organisation, and communication takes place, or has links to digital and social media?

In their highly influential 2012 article (expanded into a book in 2013), Bennett and Segerberg theorise the transition of a logic of *collective* to a logic of *connective* action. Collective action theory (starting with Olson's classic 1965 study), they argue, offers a distinctly modernistic view on social movements and activism. It centres around resource allocation, strategic coalitions, community, and the 'importance of formulating collective action frames, and bridging differences among those frames' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 750). The logic of collective action is characterised by a recognisable organisational structure, leadership, and clear messages of change. It persisted throughout the twentieth century up until this day: the differences between collective and connective action networks are not always clear-cut. Traditional activist organisations may adopt characteristic elements of emergent digitally enabled networks and vice versa. In this regard, the model proposed by Bennett and Segerberg presents ideal types because connective action does not *replace* collective action, but co-exists and intertwines with it. However, the logic of collective action does not adequately describe relatively novel dynamics of activist organisation and mobilisation in the digital age.



Connective action can be located within a broader move within media-tised and highly modernised societies towards what Hjarvard (2013) calls ‘soft individualism.’ This ‘social character,’ asserts Hjarvard (2013), ‘is neither characterized by a strong, self-dependent individualism nor by a strong collectivism,’ but instead, is a ‘paradoxical combination of individualism and sensibility toward the outside world’ (p. 137). Similarly, already in 2002—before the rise of social media platforms—Kevin McDonald identified ‘an emerging paradigm of contemporary social movements, one constructed in terms of fluidarity rather than solidarity, and in terms of “public experience of self” rather than collective identity’ (2002, p. 111). This paradigm of ‘personalised politics’ revolves around personal lifestyles, is characterised by fluid connections and commitments, and leads to reactive political participation through public self-expression. That such a sociopolitical paradigm existed before social media is important to realise, as this shows that social media (and their uses) are as much informed by existing values as they are contributing to shaping them.

Signalling this general societal move away from the collective to the individual, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) recognise a shift in the logic of action networks from collectivity to connectivity. The authors argue that ‘the starting point of connective action is the self-motivated (though not necessarily self-centred) sharing of already internalised or personalised ideas, plans, images, and resources with networks of others’ (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 753). Within modern action networks, two elements are central: ‘easy-to-personalize action themes’ and digital media as principal organising agents (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 742). Consequently, ‘the linchpin of connective action is the formative element of “sharing”’ (p. 760). Furthermore, the authors demonstrate that connective action networks include ‘organisational connectors,’ ‘event coordination,’ ‘information sharing,’ and ‘multifunction networking platforms in which other networks become embedded’ (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 753).

Following this model, memory work—both as a goal and part of activism—that results from the logic of *collective* action is, to varying degrees, shaped by top-down organisational coordination and strategic planning. It contributes to the generation of collective action frames and ‘the building of a group’s identity’ (Zamponi, 2013, p. 2). Activist leaders can become ‘reputational entrepreneurs’ who are provided with ‘a limited set of symbolic conditions that both constrain and enable particular options for memory work’ (Jansen, 2007, p. 993). In these views, memory work helps mobilise individuals for the common good, aids in bridging differences,

sets overarching goals, and creates a shared frame of mind that informs and justifies action—collective identity, in other words.

While collective identity used to be a prime focus in social movement studies, it has been marginalised by Bennett and Segerberg and the broader literature on social media activism, argue Gerbaudo and Treré (2015). Nevertheless, collective identity formation has not disappeared (Daphi, 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2010), despite Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) claim that the logic of connective action 'does not require [...] the symbolic construction of a united "we"' (p. 748). Rather, collective senses of self are arrived at through different dynamics and interplays among actors. The 'we' of social media activism is, to a large extent, constructed through the sharing of and engagement with symbolic content on social media by connected individuals. In other words, the construction of such an identity today increasingly hinges upon the degree of individual connectedness and the visibility mechanisms of platforms (Bucher, 2012). Indeed, as Milan (2015) argues, 'social media provide the material support for embodying semantic units in an assortment of images, messages, and datafied emotions. These semantic units are the building blocks of collective identity' (p. 6). Collective identity is therefore still important in social media movements, yet it is arrived at differently. It is more fluid, and involves a different set of actors than in previous collective action networks, including platforms as important mediators that may change meaning and increase or decrease visibility of symbolic content and narrative frames.

Although they do not fully determine, digital media and social media platforms are central to the logic of connective action. Bennett and Segerberg (2014) argue that: '[s]uch connective networks grow to the extent that people can engage in content themes that are amenable to *personalisation*, *appropriation*, and *collaboration* through the sharing of ideas and multimedia content, as well as through access to technologies that enable such sharing' (p. 197, emphasis mine). Because digital objects are effortlessly personalised and appropriated, they offer networked individuals the easy opportunity to show allegiance to a cause and connect with similar-minded people from a distance. Moreover, social media platforms allow 'people to commit to an action and recommend it to others by sharing their personal participation stories, photos, or videos, and [they] connect large populations across time and space as individuals make fine-grained networked decisions about filtering ideas, taking up roles, linking others in, and coordinating actions' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2014,

p. 16). Similarly, Papacharissi (2014) writes that ‘the connective affordances of social media help activate the in-between bond of publics, and they also enable expression and information sharing that liberate the individual and collective imaginations’ (p. 9). Such overt optimism in terms of the liberating potential of social media has been challenged, yet the possibilities for bottom-up organisation and information sharing do lead to new power relations within and beyond social movements (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011; Youmans & York, 2012).

Personalised engagements with and representations of the past with, in, and by social media are an essential part of the building blocks of collective identity. However, connective memory work is not or barely coordinated nor the result of organisational strategy and leadership—if at all, it is novel, connective leadership (Poell, Abdulla, Rieder, Woltering, & Zack, 2016). It results from the personal investments of individuals who express themselves and share their contributions—a form of ‘public experience of self.’ Often, these contributions are internet memes that offer inclusive mnemonic templates (e.g. ‘Remember [name]’; ‘Do not forget [name]’) that other individuals can easily adopt and affectively connect to, that is: like, share, comment on, and reply to. Social media play an active role in increasing the (in)visibility of these contributions through their operational mechanics: with each interaction with a digital object, its visibility increases. Moreover, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) write, ‘digital traces may remain on the web to provide memory records or action repertoires that might be passed on’ (p. 753) Indeed, researching the persistence of and engagement with these traces is the aim of the rest of this chapter. This is important because the logic of connective action affects the usage of the past as a resource and as an activist goal in itself.

### RESEARCHING MEMORY WORK ON *JUSTICE* FOR *MIKE BROWN*

In order to empirically examine connective memory work, this chapter applies a multimodal textual analysis—scrutinising both written text and visuals—of the Facebook page *Justice for Mike Brown*.<sup>2</sup> This is amended by an extra analytical sensitivity towards the technological environment in which these texts circulate. Like any technology, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are not neutral entities disembodied from culture and society, but are, rather, informed by and informing them. That

is, they are ideologically infused and infusing. Therefore, the analysis here follows an interpretive approach that blends textual hermeneutics and interface analysis, which allows for the study of ideological bias in ICTs, how this affects interactions with them, and ultimately, how textual representations are informed by and informing them.

The analytical components of this approach make it a suitable method to analyse digital memory work which I have conceptualised as a continuous interplay between practices (what and how people *do*), technology (the material artefacts that enable, shape, and constrain this doing), and cultural forms (the type of content or object that is produced through interactions between humans and technologies). For example, the Facebook interface—essentially an empty template—invites users to fill it with a variety of cultural forms, ranging from videos and memes to photos and written posts. Added to that, the practices of ‘liking,’ sharing, commenting, and replying that ‘feed’ Facebook’s algorithm make content that has high levels of interaction more visible on other users’ newsfeeds. This view allows researchers to heuristically pry apart these three components, to assess how they affect each other, without privileging a priori human or non-human agency.

The case study this chapter is based on is the Facebook group *Justice for Mike Brown*. On the level of analysis, I collected multimodal content (videos, images, written texts) consisting of posts by the page administrator, comments, and replies. After familiarising myself with the page (‘following’ it for over a year), rereading the content several times, and extensive note-taking, I filtered out and saved those posts, comments, and replies that followed my definition of memory work—the transfer and reconstruction of knowledge and experience of the past into the present and future. That is, I selected (1) those posts, comments, and replies that explicitly engaged with the past, signalled by specific wording (cf. ‘50 years ago,’ ‘during the Civil Rights era’) or historical visuals; (2) those posts, comments, and replies that became recurrent, recognisable tropes and themes during the time of observation. On the level of Facebook’s interface and technology, I scrutinised how the platform’s features, ‘possibility space’ (a term widely used in game design; cf. Bogost, 2008), and algorithmic procedure invited and shaped memory work. Important to note is that the separation of content and technology is a heuristic construct. On Facebook—or any other communication technology, for that matter—‘the technological,’ ‘the social,’ and ‘the symbolic’ are practically inseparable; they continually and mutually shape each other.

## CONNECTIVE MEMORY WORK ON *JUSTICE FOR MIKE BROWN*

Memory work on *JfMB* provided a means for individuals to connect to each other and to broader protests, ranging from those in Ferguson to *Black Lives Matter*. As will be discussed and illustrated in what follows, I discerned four types of connective memory work on *JfMB*.

1. Networked commemoration
2. Memetic resurrection
3. Digital archiving and curation
4. Crowd reconstruction

Even though connective memory work is a continuation and remediation of earlier forms and practices (e.g. culture jamming; activist archiving and documentation; strategic use of iconicity), it does describe a relatively new set of technologically enabled practices and symbolic forms. These types of engagements with the past in protest are enabled and shaped by platform-specific affordances and mechanisms, but are linked to core Web 2.0 principles, which underlie all social media: crowd classification of content, the ‘long tail’ of information (a niche for everything), and user participation (Smit, 2018, p. 63). Connective memory work is never strictly personal or collective, being simultaneously the result of the personalised experience of social media *and* shared discontent in everyday life. It blurs the lines between the offline and online, because offline activities will often find their way to online realms and Web native material will regularly lead analogue lives. Moreover, the space of connective memory work is as much virtual as it is physical, and often a combination of both. It offers individuals ways to invest in broader movements and add to its collective identity, without being at physical protests, a form of ‘cloud protesting’ (Milan, 2015). The integration of social media into age-old activist practices and spaces thus seems seamless, a normalised procedure, which is precisely when they become a major locus of power—an actor worth investigating.

The mnemonic practices and cultural forms appearing on *JfMB* are the result of individual interactions with its interface and are popularised through an algorithm that grants certain posts more visibility than others. Facebook is, in each of these types of memory work, always an active facilitator and mediator of content sharing and communication between users—it is specifically designed to do so, based on its business model and ideology of sharing and openness (Van Dijck, 2013, pp. 45–67). Second,

each of these forms of memory work are ‘easy to imitate, adapt personally, and share broadly with others’ (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 745). In the next paragraphs, these dynamics will be explored further. A discussion of agency and intentionality in connective memory work follows these sections, as to further theorise these findings.

### *Networked Commemoration*

Especially during the first weeks of the protests following Brown’s shooting, *JfMB* became a space in which people could share their grief and offer their condolences to Brown’s family—an online memorial. Commemorating him allowed individuals not only the opportunity to connect affectively, but also to connect their personally felt grief and anger with larger political issues at stake. One of the first posts shared by the administrator on *JfMB* makes this clear; moreover, it shows how Facebook was immediately integrated in activist commemoration: ‘17 year old Mike was shot 10 times and killed in cold blood by police...he was unarmed. How many “Likes” and “Shares” in his memory and to raise awareness [sic] ??? #RipMike #JusticeForMike’ (August 10, 2014). Similarly, a comment three weeks later reads:

God bless Mike’s mom and dad. As a parent I couldn’t even begin to imagine losing a child. But to lose to the people who are supposed to “protect and serve”...what a slap in the face. Shame on you Officer Darren Wilson. (August 30, 2014)

The structure of the last comment is recurrent: first, condolences are offered to (specifically) Brown’s mother, Leslie McSpadden. Next, a connection is made to the user’s own life or experience, and then a larger political statement is made. Another illustrative comment that is ‘liked’ 64 times and is therefore placed at the top of a comment thread: ‘We send much love and respect ur way Mrs. Leslie from Orange, Tx,’ followed by an image of two bumping fists, and in meme-like superimposed text: ‘I stand in solidarity with Mike Brown’ (November 26, 2014). Another post, by the page administrator, is also indicative of the meme-like quality of networked commemoration. The post, ‘liked’ over 4920 times and shared 251 times, shows a photograph of McSpadden, obviously crying behind sunglasses, being hugged by two teenage girls. The photo is accompanied by the text: ‘Let’s all wrap our hands around Mike Brown’s

mother and send her love. They still don't care, but we do. 1 Like = 1 hug.' In this instance, the 'technological,' the 'personally affective,' and the 'social' are inseparably connected to each other. Clicking the Like button might not take as much effort as going to the event where McSpadden appeared, but this image, and the affective-political engagement it invited, increased the overall visibility of the page and, by extension, the protests.

Another form of networked commemoration was the visiting of physical memorial sites and the sharing of this visit on *JfMB* (see Fig. 4.1). The left image in the compilation shows a woman holding up her hands (a 'viral' gesture) at the improvised memorial site on the spot where Brown was shot. The image on the right is a photo of people visiting the official memorial. This type of activity shows that the online and offline modes of connective memory work are blurred. The images on the left and right demonstrate that the physical activity of visiting the memorial site is almost entirely mediated, from photographing the visit and holding up hands, to geotagging (a feature offered by Facebook) the visit as to, presumably, add more weight and credibility to the post ('we have really been there'). Also in the left image, a printed-out note says: 'We remember: Vigil for Justice Against police brutality.' This indicates how a personal act of commemoration shared on social media can be simultaneously a form of protest. Moreover, it is neither trivial, nor is it a centrally organised form of activism. The image in the middle also offers a good example of the multimodality of networked commemoration: it is a photo of a mural, based on a photo of Brown that widely circulated on Facebook and beyond, and



**Fig. 4.1** A compilation of networked commemoration taken from *JfMB*. (Compilation by author. Photos, left and right: Derk Brown; middle: mural by Joseph Albanese; photos by Anthony Ward)

shows two hashtags ('stop the violence' and 'hands up') adopted by protesters. This multimodal integration of commemorative symbolic content and calls to (activist) practice adds to the visibility of the protests, both offline and online.

A final example of networked commemorative practices were memorial marches for victims of other police shootings. Gatherings such as these were organised spontaneously through social media during the months after Brown's death.

These examples of connective memory work are supportive and affective, show an ambiguous mix of personalisation, yet connection to others, and illustrate how Facebook is *part of*—instead of instrumental to—networked commemoration. By commemorating on the page, users simultaneously connected to other users, past symbolic content, other sites of memory (both online and offline), and, importantly, the platform itself. As such, techno-social practices were contributing to the gradual formation of collectively shared practices, symbols, and beliefs, the building blocks of collective identity. Especially emotionally infused commemorative protest activity was salient on and beyond the page. This can be partly explained by the design of Facebook (and social media, in general), which invites users to share 'what's on their mind' (on top of the newsfeed) and 'Like' other shares.

### *Memetic Resurrection*

A second type of connective memory work involves the reuse and claiming and appropriation of iconic imagery, symbols, and people, something I propose to call 'memetic resurrection' in the context of social media activism. Of course, these practices have been part of collective action networks in the past as well. The difference lies—next to sheer quantity—in the uses of these images and icons as means to express personal opinions and thoughts and the ease with which they are produced and distributed. This 'memefying' of the past is often not a reflection of nuanced understanding of the past or contextualisation of the present in terms of the past, but is rather clichéd and reactionary, offering easy entrance and show of allegiance. The most famous iconic images are successful, in terms of general visibility and recurrence on the page. Again, this can be partly explained by how Facebook works: the more interaction there is with a digital object, the more visible it becomes on newsfeeds and within comment sections. This algorithmic principle operates in the background of interaction on



the page, but does have far-reaching effects on both its tone and content. Moreover, it partly determines which symbolic content and practices from the past become prominent in the present. In other words, the platform plays an active role within these politics of visibility.

To illustrate, a recurrent practice on *JfMB* was to share a photo of Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X with superimposed text on it, in the way internet memes are built up. Hence, the past—in this case a well-known black leader of the Civil Rights era—is symbolically resurrected, claimed, adopted, and adapted in order to increase the rhetorical effect of a personalised message. For example, a widely circulated and ‘liked’ image shows a gathering of Black Panther members. One of the members holds up his hand in a fist, and next to the fist a newly inserted text reads: ‘If violence gets you nowhere, how was America founded.’ The context in which this image circulated was that of riots and looting occurring next to peaceful protests. The dual resurrection of history in this image (Civil Rights era *and* the Revolutionary War fought against England) helps the rhetorical justification of violence. The same principle can be said to drive the placing of photo mashups juxtaposing Civil Rights and Ferguson protests with text superimposed on them that says that no progress has been made since the 1960s. Emojis in the form of two raised hands or raised fists also represent a common cultural form on *JfMB*. Essentially a remediated form of activist expression, the digital equivalent of hand signals is afforded by Facebook and appropriated by users by means of the platform’s ‘insert an emoji’ dashboard. These examples demonstrate how connective memory work is the outcome of human practice, symbolic content, and platform technology.

Notwithstanding its often reactionary and clichéd nature, memetic resurrection as a form of connective memory work did offer a low-threshold means to contribute to the formulation of shared narratives, an important aspect of movements that informs their collective identities (Daphi, 2017). Memetic resurrections of iconic images helped geographically dispersed protesters to construct collective identity by sharing and negotiating a specific outlook on the world, creating clear boundaries between ‘us and them,’ and establishing emotional proximity between individuals (Daphi, 2017, pp. 19–20). By resurrecting the well-known past, connecting it to the present in a meme-like fashion, and sharing it on *JfMB*, protesters engaged in connective memory work.

### *Digital Archiving and Curation*

The documentation and archiving of injustices and protests have historically been part of activist repertoires. Today, digital archival practice on social media has become an essential skill in the activist toolkit. The curation of this material occurs within the possibility space of the platform—in this case, Facebook. For example, *JfMB* administrator Derk Brown strategically posted videos of other police killings and links these to other cases by hashtagging. Consequently, the administrator engages, essentially, in archival practice: it makes these video traceable and searchable and links the uploaded material to similar protests. Also, metrics are omnipresent in these posts, ranging from date, to number of views, likes, and shares. These numbers have important consequences for the visibility of these posts. Moreover, numbers have rhetorical effects: the more likes and shares a post has, the more rhetorical weight it gains as an important document.

Thus, *JfMB* served as a space to share and store videos (specifically) of the protests and instances of police violence. This can be seen as a form of connective memory work that added to the collective identity of the protests. By including visual evidence of other forms of injustice and the activist responses to them, protesters generated an inclusive sense of ‘we.’ Serving a dual purpose—sharing now and keeping for later—this practice is simultaneously communicative and archival. This is reminiscent of Tenenboim-Weinblatt’s (2013) idea of mediated prospective memory: the setting of the future’s political agenda. Following Bennett and Segerberg, these videos can easily reappear in future protests; they are the visual traces of injustice that kept fuelling the Ferguson protests but may also incentivise future action. Even though Facebook is designed to favour the present and the new, the platform is also designed in such a way that older posts emerge at the top of newsfeeds when there is much interaction with them. This relevance metric thus plays a key role in the representation of certain archived material over others, which shows how Facebook is partly engaged in this important aspect of memory work.

### *Crowd Reconstruction*

A fourth and last type of connective memory work that can be discerned on *JfMB* is the active tracing and reconstruction by ‘the crowd’ of what exactly occurred on the day of the shooting. Having an informative goal,

this process of distributed labour is concerned with the piecing together of this specific past. Both the page administrator and page users were actively searching out and sharing pieces of information, which mainly consisted of official police reports, court documents, and journalistic pieces available on the Web. This practice allowed individuals to provide proof of Michael Brown's innocence, something that was challenged by Darren Wilson's testimony and publicly in US media. Characterising posts and comments like these is a mix in tone that sits somewhere in the middle of indignation, factuality, and personal opinion. An example of this is a comment ('liked' 70 times and with 18 replies) from November 25, 2014:

Onn [sic] CNN they just showed the pcs of Wilson's so-called injuries with a measurement stick and for the life of me I can't see anything but a one pink mark and idgaf wat [sic] anyone says I'm white and u can pinch me playfully and ima turn red there so u can't tell me those 'injuries' justify shooting that young man down like a dog in the street!!! Nothing but love and support from Naptown for the cause!!!!

This type of post, which is a blend of plain outrage and a shared goal of finding out (and sharing) what 'really happened' on 9 August 2014, offered individual protesters, and those sympathetic to the protests, a means to easily show allegiance to the cause, a personalised political act that, cumulatively, adds to a group identity. This is also characteristic of the other types of connective memory work: a low-threshold, customisable, and inherently digitally networked form of protest participation. The 'ease' with which individuals could show support and connect, however, should not be underestimated: it is a principal component of connective action that increases visibility within and outside digital networks.

Crowd reconstruction describes the purposive, collective practices of seeking out information, piecing it together, framing it, and sharing it with others. When performed in the context of social media, however, technologies in this process are not neutral tools. They offer search suggestions and represent material. In the case of *JfMB*, this became especially clear during the first days after the shooting, when information about it was scarce, but wanted. Many set out to find, gather, and share information on the shooting, and especially on Brown and his shooter. Portrait photographs of police officers who might have shot Brown were circulated on the page, instigating an online witch hunt, which shows a potentially harmful aspect of crowd reconstruction. Nevertheless, protesters' active

tracing and reconstruction of the shooting and its direct aftermath on *JfMB*, using digital tools and resources, contributed to the creation of a shared sense of ‘we,’ especially set against those media, who according to many protesters, framed Brown as a thug, Wilson as a victim, and the protests as unjustified.

### RETHINKING ACTIVIST MEMORY WORK IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

This chapter set out to reconceptualise and investigate the notion of memory work in the context of digitally networked activism. Linking the concept of connective action to the study of memory in social and protest movements, the chapter proposed to view contemporary activist engagement with the past as connective memory work. Four types of memory work became apparent on the page: networked commemoration; memetic resurrection; digital archiving and curation; and crowd reconstruction. As we have seen, memory work on *Justice for Mike Brown* offered individuals low-threshold, easy-to-personalise symbolic vehicles to connect with others and show allegiance with the protests. Hence, it became a means to express and contribute to a protest identity. These connective dynamics overlap and intertwine, but also differ from those within collective action networks. The past is still used as a strategic resource or is an activist goal, but which representations become dominantly visible is increasingly dependent on the logics of social media and the digital literacy of its users. This makes social media an important new group of actors in activist memory work. In this final section and conclusion, the chapter picks up on the thoughts expressed earlier that connective memory work is the result of both human and ‘non-human’ agency and as much a product of intention as of chance.

Memory work on *JfMB* is not solely the result of human effort, but is, rather, the outcome of interactions between users and Facebook’s procedural logic and interface—which offers a limited possibility space. For example, ‘[o]rdering and indexing, which are the central elements for preserving data and for organising temporality, are not well developed on the platform’ (Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014, p. 1160). Instead, the Facebook page ‘invites users to constantly upload new materials rather than to engage with older posts. This is enhanced by the fact that steady activity promotes the page’s visibility among users and potential users’ (Kaun &

Stiernstedt, 2014, p. 1160). What follows is that the trajectories of products of memory work are unpredictable. Mnemonic objects may appear semi-randomly on timelines, or follow a re-presentational process that is black-boxed. Indeed, as Schwarz (2014) argues, the digital artefacts that inhabit our everyday lives ‘are not merely *tools* for anamnesis (initiated by human subjects), but *memory-actants*: they partake in shaping our relations with our past, which is memory’ (p. 18, emphasis in original).

This has had implications for memory work within contemporary activism. Whereas the dominant symbolic repertoires and practices (of which memory work is part) of activism 30 or even 20 years ago were mostly the result of the efforts of key figures within protests and movements, they are now the result of interactions of, in theory, ‘everybody’ with the media at their fingertips (Shirky, 2008). Moreover, the algorithms and interfaces of social media platforms enable, shape, and restrain memory work on it. They simultaneously filter, select, contain, and re-present the past *for us*, often through personalisation mechanisms (Prey & Smit, 2018). As Schwarz (2014) asserts, ‘[a]s we leave more digital traces, stored in databases that refuse to order them, their docile thingness diminishes’ (p. 18). In other words, memory objects and traces live a life of their own, travelling between platforms and other media, emerging at unexpected times and in unexpected places or waiting to be resurrected (or forgotten).

However, again we should be mindful of technological determinism and utopianism. For example, an amendment to Bennett and Segerberg’s model is that, although connective action is non-hierarchical and self-motivated, it is not completely leaderless or *non-directional*, or completely technologically driven. Rather, Poell et al. (2016) have shown that ‘connective leaders’ emerge in modern movements, who invite and steer user participation. By providing information and topics for discussion, taking initiative, removing comments, and correcting, group page administrators, for example on Facebook, are concerned with creating ‘symbolic unity’ (Poell et al., 2016, p. 1006) on their pages. Hence, administrators can be seen as connective leaders within digital activism. Indeed, write Poell et al. (2016), ‘Facebook Pages constitute a specific type of sociotechnical configuration, which provides the administrators with extensive controls to set the agenda for the interaction between users’ (p. 1010). By moderating and posting on *JfMB*, Derk Brown can be typified as a connective leader as well. In terms of memory work, he can be seen as an active and important memory agent within the protest, by having access

to the page's editorial tools (e.g. deletion) and having the power to select topics for discussion.

As the analysis has demonstrated, memory work on *JfMB* is both retrospective ('look where we came from') and prospective ('never forget this injustice'). Hence, it constitutes a connective repertoire for activists now and in the future. In similar vein, Kubal and Becerra (2014) assert that 'the repertoire acts as a cultural resource out of which activists draw symbols and ideas; the repertoire also provides boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate speech' (p. 872). The administrator and contributors to *Justice for Mike Brown* engage in discussion, reflection, encouragement, and rejection of each other's posts. In other words, they discursively negotiate the present in terms of the past and vice versa. That is, the page adds to what Gerbaudo (2015) has called a 'new protest identity,' especially through the memory work performed on it, which is demonstrative of the fact that 'collective identity continues to exist in the contemporary web, despite the high levels of individualisation and fragmentation of online interactions' (p. 920). Even without strong strategic leadership, a shared narrative and a sense of 'we' are created, and connective memory work, enabled and shaped by social media platforms, plays a key role in this. As a result, writes Castells (2015), 'the source of the call is less relevant than the impact of the message on the multiple, unspecified receivers, whose emotions connect with the content and form of the message' (p. 252). Michael Brown personified an individually experienced injustice and the memory work surrounding his death became one of the means to express sympathy and allegiance with a cause—it provided people with a low-threshold, affective means of political engagement.

To conclude, future research into memory work in contemporary activism could focus its attention on the four dimensions of memory work outlined earlier: *connective leadership in memory work* (who are those human actors engaged in curatorship, archival work, preservation, generating repertoires, setting the agenda for the future, etc.?); *connective memory technology* (what role do technologies play in keeping the present and making connections between past, present, and future?); *connective memory objects* (how is the past represented in cultural forms online, and how do offline forms link to the online, and vice versa?); *connective memory practices* (how do people 'work' the past or present for present or future-oriented goals, or to connect with each other?). As indeed many other contributions to this book highlight, these dimensions are pivotal to the visibility, traction, and effective operation of activism today. The past is

very much alive in contemporary activism and on social media, despite their focus on immediacy and the here and now.

## NOTES

1. This section has been taken from the author's unpublished dissertation and revised in order to fit this chapter.
2. <https://www.facebook.com/JusticeForMikeBrownFerguson/>

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