
Proximity to Connectivity: Shifting Theories of Collective Memory in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Social media has radicalized users' engagement with time, community, and memory. Currently, social platforms allow users to curate online identities that exceed and transform traditional boundaries of space and time. Such a transformation problematizes conventional theories of memory, such as Halbwachs' concept of collective memory which emphasizes the importance of physical proximity and social groups in shaping individual recollections. Social media's pervasive reach encourages individuation, since users prioritize online personas over authentic engagement with the present moment. This paper explores how social media challenges and reshapes traditional memory models, emphasizing the shift from localized, episodic memory to a more global, participatory, and fragmented form of collective memory. Drawing on Hoskins, this paper highlights the implications of digital connectivity for memory studies: the rise of semantic memory in the digital age reflects the growing influence of global digital ecologies over traditional social milieus. Thus, collective memory theory must be revised to account for complexities of the digital era and global connectivity enabled by social media.

Social media has radically altered how people experience relationships, temporality, and space. In postmodern society, technology provides individuals with unprecedented access to various social domains. Information, entertainment, and social connections are rarely further than a pocket away. This ongoing alteration is embodied in the zeitgeist of social media, which enables users to curate digital identities. According to Berger (2011), identity is shaped by how one interprets and reinterprets personal experiences. However, in the present interconnected world, this process no longer happens in isolation; instead, individuals must navigate their identities within a larger media-driven context—one where social platforms allow them to create a social presence. The ability to *log in* to specific online personas eases losing oneself in the digital world. Smartphones exemplify this as a simple way for individuals to escape the present moment. At any time, individuals can immerse themselves in millions of online realms, even when physically surrounded by each other. This individuation is mirrored: just as people carry alternative social worlds, they carry memory making tools, like portable cameras and phones. The power of these devices is evident when a user captures a photo or video during everyday life: the capturing of every moment often diverts attention from the moment itself. Instead of experiencing the present, users focus on documenting it for future consumption and reflection. As a result, a user's curated online presence often replaces authentic, real-time social interactions. The technology that facilitates a broad audience simultaneously destroys users' connection to their immediate surroundings.

Hoskins (2017a) suggests that social media disrupts the dynamics of both collective and autobiographical memory. While social media has the potential to build a global community, this comes at the cost of authentic engagement with local environments. The internet presents both

a door to new connections and an escape route from the present, complicating how individuals understand and experience time, community, and memory. This problematizes conventional theories of collective memory which have historically prioritized space and temporality. Such a transformation is not only a critical area for academic inquiry but also carries profound personalized implications. The need for traditional memory theories to evolve is emergent, as technological progress revolutionize memory (on micro to macro scales). Examining the impact of social media reveals that collective memory must adapt to the realities of digital connectivity. Thus, I aim to highlight the significant gaps in traditional memory theories and how conventional theories fail to capture a holistic framework for the ways memory is mediated, accessed, and shared in an interconnected world. I will argue that social media alters conventional notions of collective memory by disrupting the role of physical proximity, individual experiences, and social group (collective) boundaries.

Before examining how social media has changed memory by altering pillars of memory (such as time and connection) it is essential to understand the sociological theories that emphasize these elements as critical to remembering. Sociological theories on memory, particularly *presentists*, see social collectives and time as foundational to working memory. Presentists believe one's current emotional and cognitive interests shape how they remember and interpret their past. Russell (2006) recalls how Halbwachs (2011, as cited in Russell, 2006) posits that memory is not an individual experience but an entirely collective one. As a presentist, Halbwachs (2011) argues that an individual's access to their memories is governed by the circumstances and concerns of their social group, also contending that memory exists strictly on the social dimension, saying we are not the "originators of thoughts and ideas, feelings and passions" (p. 8). This expresses the collective inner monologues of community members, making these collective monologues a skilled "storyteller" (Halbwachs, 2011, pp. 14). He coined the term *collective memory* to describe a group's shared narrative in which each member filters and contributes their own memories.

Halbwachs (2011) further argues that the relationship between the individual and collective is symbiotic, as they both give and draw strength from each other. He develops the social dimension of collective memory by arguing that memory depends entirely on one's social milieu (a particular social group with specific interests to which an individual belongs at a specific time and place). These collectives exist at various levels and often break down into subgroups or cliques, each driven by its interests and beliefs. Halbwachs (2011) provides examples of milieu such as inner circles within churches, and even a "transient gathering in a salon, auditorium, or street" (p. 149). Such images allude to his argument that organic micro-interactions among parties physically close to one another govern memory.

Additionally, Halbwachs (2011) theorizes that because a person belongs to multiple social spheres, the influence of any one group becomes diluted, creating the impression that individuals exist independently, unshaped by the power of any particular collective. However, according to this theory, competing interests within the collective shape its unique belief system and memory (rather than a singular, independent self): Halbwachs (2011) illustrates this, mentioning "certain of these combinations are extremely complex[,] Hence their appearance is not under our control" (p. 142), further highlighting the complex interplay of collective memberships and Halbwachs' (2011) theory that autobiographical memory, or individual

personal memory, is essentially a mirage. Furthermore, he argues that a person's identity and experiences are shaped not only by their history but also by their group's memory—or, collective memory. He expands that it is impossible to separate the individual from the group's past and identity. However, social media undermines the traditional concept of mnemonic groups by fostering infinite, global networks that go beyond physical location. Since technology has disrupted the traditional paradigm, there is a need for a new approach to memory in the digital age.

To better recognize the evolution of memory studies, it is essential to understand foundational thinkers such as Halbwachs (2011) who assume memory grows organically from social context. However, the rise of digital media has radically shifted how individuals access and share memories—a shift for which traditional memory theories cannot account. Hoskins, a contemporary theorist, offers a contrasting perspective. He highlights how digital connectivity has fundamentally reshaped theories of collective memory. He critiques the traditional framework by examining how memory functions in the post-modern world, where media facilitates a more globalized, fragmented, and instantaneous form of memory. In this model, memory no longer depends on the localized group dynamics Halbwachs (2011) described. The contrast between pre-media and post-media memory studies becomes evident through their use or rejection of memory metaphors. Halbwachs (2011) utilized a landscape analogy to describe his theory on collective memory as a pervasive group narrative. Conversely, Hoskins (2011) criticizes the concepts of memory and metaphor. The contrast between describing their memory models highlights the gap between traditional, localized memory theory and the globalized, mediated nature of memory in the digital age.

Halbwachs (2011) illustrates his collective memory theory using a landscape analogy or a group settling in a particular area. He explains that when a group settles, it permanently alters its environment for its benefit by using the same paths to places it frequently visits. Repeatedly treading these paths packs the grass and prevents underbrush. Thus, these routes are the easiest to walk. These are the routes members follow, often unthinkingly. Therefore, individuals often participate in the group's history even when walking alone. This simple life analogy highlights Halbwachs' (2011) view of memory as a collective process, where the group provides cues or memory aids that align with its interests (Vygotsky, 2011). Providing *paths* only to the memories deemed relevant to the group creates a sense of cohesion and continuity, giving the illusion that the group is unchanging and enduring. This phenomenon increases confidence in the collective memory, encouraging individuals to recite the group story and perpetuate its sense of endurance. However, there are also unworn paths, which in the analogy are the individual memories that may not serve the current group's interests—these memories are less accessible to the individual (Halbwachs, 2011). This analogy emphasizes how collectives survive through homogeneity. However, social media challenges this process by blurring the boundaries between individual and collective memory, undermining Halbwachs' (2011) notion of memory as wholly contextual.

In contrast to Halbwachs (2011), Hoskins (2011) critiques this metaphorical framework, opening with a data-processing metaphor resembling a computer. Hoskins' (2011) immediate rejection of the metaphor illustrates how media has complicated modern memory, as he argues that metaphor cannot accurately represent the complex nature of memory. He alludes to the

simplistic nature of local and organic memory as a thing of the past; he emphasizes how technology and media have created a complicated landscape in which individuals balance their individual and collective memories. This is why Hoskins (2011) criticizes memory studies for giving more weight to one over the other, whereas Halbwachs (2011) does so through his entirely social account. Hoskins (2017b) further highlights the transformative impact of digital connectivity on memory through his exploration of memory in the context of *the connective turn*. The connective turn is an era denoted by a “sudden abundance, pervasiveness, and immediacy of digital media, communication networks, and archives” (n.p.), emphasizing the immediacy of contemporary communication practices. Strategies such as messaging, networking, and other internet-based services have radically changed how memory is understood and treated in the digital age (Hoskins, 2017a). Hoskins (2016) argues that this technology enables memory to bypass the “brain, body, and skin,” (n.p.) allowing individuals to transcend the physical dimension of memory, a critical aspect of Halbwachs’ (2011) theory. This theory heavily alludes to how the internet has become a paradoxical place of connection and isolation.

Due to the rise of social media, there is no longer a personal attachment to collectives; social users lack the physical and social boundaries that once defined the collectives. Thus, connectivity increasingly replaces space and place as key aspects of memory (Hoskins, 2021). Connectivity also encourages self-interest as social media increasingly becomes more important in users’ lives. With the pervasiveness of smart devices, one can share anything on the internet from anywhere. Moreover, the normality and prioritization of social media platforms in everyday life pressure users to regularly engage in online behaviours such as sharing, posting, and engaging. This constant interaction with social media creates significant ambiguity between the private and public spheres, as individuals often blur the boundaries between personal and shared experiences and time (Hoskins, 2021).

Additionally, connectivity contributes to a lack of distinct social and physical boundaries among social media users. Social media sacralizes what would previously be considered mundane experiences. When users post a photo Halbwachs’, they do so in their own interest. Users hope to elicit responses from other social media users who will participate in the user’s memory, whether a milestone, a causal event, or an outfit. These platforms immortalize these photos on profiles or storage drives, and one can access them by chance or intention at any time (Hoskins, 2017a). However, many platforms, such as Facebook and Snapchat, offer memory features. These platforms memorialize posts by resurfacing them for the original poster, prompting them to repost on the anniversary of sharing, which invites followers and friends to participate in the memory again (Hoskins, 2016). In other words, the interactions and moments that once fell to the periphery of one’s memory have been elevated to ritual status by technology.

Technology has also interrupted how we forget (another critical aspect of traditional memory). The memorialization of everyday events contrasts sharply with Halbwachs’ (2011) argument that a given collective’s interests and context dictate memory. This reality substantiates Hoskins’ (2017a) argument that media brought man and machine into new relations, as remembering is no longer confined to humans. Individuals can now rely on technology to store their memories, whether they are remarkable or mundane (Hoskins, 2021). This reality heavily shapes Halbwachs’ (2011) idea of social milieus, which posits that the group

dictates what rises and falls into accessible memory. Thus, while Halbwachs' (2011) theory remains foundational in understanding memory as socially constructed through physical proximity, contemporary shifts in media dynamics call for an update in memory studies. Hoskins (2017b) calls for this update, emphasizing the participatory nature of modern memory. Hoskins (2016) explains how, today, social media has created a community that emotes, mainly through emoticons. This passive participation reinforces that collective memory is no longer an active, reciprocal relationship between individuals and collectives (Halbwachs, 2011).

Furthermore, instead of fostering cohesion through a shared story, participation in this form stems from a social obligation to the posting user (Hoskins, 2016). Thus, Hoskins (2021) argues that social media's open access has led to new digitally fostered values and unyielding commentary from anyone on anything. Hence, the modern age brings a new density and diffusion to social networks, inviting a wider range of bodies to interact and verify memories from anywhere (Hoskins, 2017a). However, it also imposes a newly felt superficiality, because interactions become less meaningful as memories become more convenient to create and share. Thus, it has created a sense of omnipresence among viewers today, where individuals constantly observe or engage with the media landscape rather than participate as active agents in the narrative (Hoskins, 2017a). Therefore, collective memory today largely stems from individuals' relationships with the digital devices and networks they use to communicate. This transition proximity-based to global connectivity-based memory models highlights how social media challenges Halbwachs' (2011) theory. The evolution of collective memory shows that the Halbwachsian model is not relevant cross-culturally, as it is a form of episodic memory (Russell, 2006).

Russell (2006) distinguishes episodic memory by how it allows individuals to mentally recall past personal experiences and reconstruct the past, contending that episodic memory is highly personal and subjective. Russell (2006) suggests it "creates a sense of self that exists or persists through time, an identity" (p. 800). Halbwachs' (2011) concept of collective memory resembles this: it is rooted in lived experiences integral to individual and collective identity, and it cannot be transferred between collectives. Halbwachs (2011) also describes the continuous and identity building features of collective memory as "rigidly linked to the body" (p. 149), further situating it as an episodic memory. However, the intimacy of this type of memory further suggests that collective memory is traditionally bound by closeness. Hence, Halbwachs (2011) and Russell (2006) refer to a geographical scope for this type of memory, which becomes a limitation of past collective memory theory—one that Hoskins (2016) would consider a "key faultline" (p. 348) in Halbwachs' (2011) framework.

The limitations of episodic memory are particularly apparent in the modern world. Memory has become largely external as individuals and societies increasingly depend on social media and technologies for remembrance (Hoskins, 2021). The rise of a global or *transcultural* perspective, brought on by global digitization, is changing traditional forms of group memories. Hoskins (2016) argues that semantic memory is emerging as the prominent form of memory. Russell (2006) defines semantic memory as the storage of abstract information (broader, generalized knowledge) independent of personal experience—describing, "the Pythagorean theorem would be a good example of semantic memory" (p. 798) versus one's social milieu's history. Thus, it is becoming more central to collective memory in the digital age, where

knowledge is increasingly shared across transcultural networks rather than rooted in personal or collective experiences.

The internet-driven monopolization of remembering reshapes how connections to and definitions of social milieus, thereby complicating traditional concepts of collective memory. The rise in global connectivity undermines the social boundaries Halbwachs (2011) envisioned, because individuals and collectives from diverse cultures now interact, share, and participate in memories regardless of their geographic or group affiliations. Resultantly, a new global culture of accessibility is emerging in the digital age that challenges traditional frameworks, particularly those rooted in localized, episodic memory. The idea that collective memory is part of an embodied experience shared by those occupying the same spaces limits its applicability in postmodern society. Hoskins' (2017a/b) theory of the connective turn highlights this by exploring how digital platforms transcend boundaries, creating a more fluid, fragmented, and participatory memory model. While past and present research agree that memory is mediated, Hoskins (2017a/b) argues that media is now emerging as the dominant mediator, quickly replacing geographically bonded collectives. Thus, the shift from modern to postmodern memory studies can be seen as a move from social milieu dominance to the increasing influence of digital ecologies for memory forces.

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