

# The online discourse on the Demjanjuk trial. New memory practices on the World Wide Web?

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**Abstract:** In this article I want to discuss the question if and how the World Wide Web changes social memory practices. Therefore I examine the relationship between the World Wide Web, social memory practices and public discourses. Towards discussing mediated memory processes I focus on the online discourse about the trial against the former concentration camp guard John Demjanjuk.

**Keywords:** online discourse, social memory practices, world wide web, mediated memories

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*Le discours en ligne sur le procès contre Demjanjuk. Nouvelles  
pratiques de la mémoire sur la Toile ?*

**Résumé:** Dans cet article, je pose la question si et comment la Toile change-t-elle les pratiques sociales de la mémoire ? J'examine la relation entre la Toile, les pratiques de la mémoire et les discours publics. En discutant les processus de

mémoire médiée, je me concentre sur le discours en ligne sur le procès contre l'ancien garde du camp de concentration John Demjanjuk.

**Mots-clés:** discours en ligne, pratiques de la mémoire, toile

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## Introduction

This article examines the relationship between the World Wide Web, social memory practices and public discourses. A big part of our memory is not based on our personal experiences but on socially shared knowledge mediated by communication and determined by media technologies. For example the remembering of events such as celebrity death or the anniversaries of tragedies are constituted by and are spread through media.

But which knowledge about the past is remembered in a society, in a generation or a community is manifested in discourses. So the construction of a collective memory can be described as a negotiation process where different actors inserting their interpretation of the past into a discursive arena. These discourses are also highly mediated for example academic discourses are based on journal articles, books or presentations. Public discourses are typically connected with classical mass media communication like Newspapers, TV and Radio. But the spreading of the Internet in the last twenty years has changed the constitution of public debates. Since the emergence of the so-called Web 2.0 at the very latest discourses in general and memory discourses in particular are not constituted only by mass media and/or institutions. In different online communication forms like blogs, social networks, video platforms other actors aside from institutional actors participate in discourses. So the question is if and how these new communication forms have changed the discursive construction of memory.

My focus is not memory about the personal past rather than how the actors on the World Wide Web constitute memories of events which are part of collective memories. And as Carolyn Kitch (2005, 2008) has shown for journalism also online communication is full of "overt and acknowledgement memory content" (Kitch, 2008, 313). A very good example for memory content in online communication is the discourse about the former concentration camp guard John Demjanjuk. The news about his deportation from the USA to Germany in 2009 caused an intensive discussion on the Internet. This discourse included not only debates about Demjanjuk's state of health and his age but also reactivated the memory of the Nazi crimes in the concentration and death camps in which Demjanjuk took part in as a so-called Trawniki, a helper of the SS (SS-Hilfswilliger). Despite actors from the mass media, institutions like the Central Council of Jews in Germany or experts in

History and Law, other participants join the debate with their interpretation of the Holocaust and post-war processes of coming to term with Second World War crimes. On different communication levels they participate in the discussion and employ cultural resources that form part of collective memories. Thus very heterogeneous positions appear in the discussion.

During my analysis of these social memory practices, I asked myself, are these positions and communicative practices new, emerge from digital media, or are these current practices of memory work, which one can find in every conjunction with different media techniques?

Media have always played an important role for the constitution of individual and collective memory (Assmann, 2004; Erll 2011; Garde-Hansen, 2011; van Dijk, 2007; Zierold, 2008). Or as Jeffrey K. Olick underlines: "To be more concrete, the past has always comes to us through some representational medium" (Olick, 2007, 98).

Nevertheless, in the rise of digital, networked media scholars in the social and cultural studies see a strong impact of media change on social memory processes (Garde Hansen, Hoskin and Reading, 2009; Hoskin, 2009; Esposito, 2002; Levy and Sznajder, 2006; van Dijk, 2007; Van House and Churchill 2008; Zierold, 2006). Digital technologies make it easier to record, restore and share personal and collective memory. And as Garde-Hansen, Hoskin and Reading (2009, 7) underline digital memory is not about a passive approach: "Rather, it is the active, subjective, organic, emotional, virtual and uncertain production of the past and present at the same time".

In a first step I will discuss the theoretical concepts of *memory practices* and *online discourses*. In order to determine the relation between personal and collective memory processes in the World Wide Web I refer to a discursive perspective. This approach is based on the assumption that social memory is constituted by different communities in social discourses. Online discourses then can be described as a characteristic mediated form of the Web 2.0 (Fraas and Pentzold, 2008; Fraas, Meier and Pentzold, 2010).

According to Garde-Hansen (2009, 3), it reveals new concepts to describe the relationship between new media and memory because associated theoretical models are "inadequate for understanding the profound impact of the supreme accessibility, transferability and circulation of digital content: on how individuals, groups and societies come to remember and forget". From my point of view it is also necessary to develop new methodological and methodical approaches to analyze memory practices on the World Wide Web. Hence in a second step I present the methodology of how to analyze these different levels of discursive memory making. Based on a case study about the Demjanjuk discourse I develop a mixed method

approach: To analyze the discursive memory practices I combine the research program of discourse analysis (Keller, 2011) with the rules for collecting and analyzing data of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2008; Strauss and Corbin, 2008) and the social semiotic visual grammar of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2010).

In the last part of this article I discuss the question if the World Wide Web changes memory practices on the base of the results of my case study about the online discourse on the Demjanjuk trial.

## 1. Memory and Media

In the past 30 years we can observe an increasing interest in memory processes in various disciplines. In the following I will not consider the various concepts from the interdisciplinary field of memory studies (for a general overview see Olick and Levy, 2011). Instead I reconsider one line of argumentation which includes two steps: first the theoretical shift from *collective memory* as a thing to *collective memories* as *social memory practices* and their connections to media. Second I highlight the relation between the concept of *social memory practices* and the concept of *online discourses*.

### 1.1. From Collective Memory to Mediated Memory Practices

With his term *collective memory* (*mémoire collective*) Maurice Halbwachs (1980, 1992), the founder of modern-day memory studies, pointed out the social dependency of memory. From his point of view *collective memories* are constituted socially on two different levels: On the one hand – on the level of groups – the members of a group have a common image of their past whereby they constitute a collective group memory. On the other hand – on the level of individuals – the single person is the bearer of his/her memory, but both form and content are mediated socially by the groups she/he belongs to. Or as Halbwachs underlines: “One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories” (Halbwachs, 1992, 40). The important key point is that every community reconstructs its own past, whereas this construction is fundamentally shaped by the concerns of the present. This means that the references to the past are regulated by special interests and thereby changeable. This is why there exist as many collective memories as there are groups; and people normally share a plurality of collective memories (Halbwachs, 1992, 52).

The connection between the level of groups and the level of individuals are provided by the social frameworks of memory - *les cadres sociaux* and “no memory is possible outside framework used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections” (Halbwachs, 1992, 42). These social frameworks are the categorical prerequisites for every form of remembering no matter if it is collective

or individual. Halbwachs defines these frameworks in a very vague way as “words and ideas” which are constitutes in the milieus and communities the individual is part of. An individual places his/her thoughts in given frameworks and therefore participates in a collective memory so that he/she is capable of the act of recollection. Halbwachs does not discuss the role of the media in the process of remembering. But from my point of view these social memory frameworks have a medial function. Based on communication these frames are constituted and reconstituted by media especially if one reconsider that even small groups like family or friends use media like photos, yearbooks or private videos for their social memory frameworks not to mention larger social communities in terms of imagined communities (Anderson, 2003) like generations or nations who could not constitute a social memory without media.

Referring to Halbwachs many scholars reformulated the concept of *collective memory*. How the relation between the different levels of individual and collective memory can be characterized is a key question in most of these concepts. Jan Assmann (1992, 2008) for example differs between two modes of collective memory: On the one hand, there is the *communicative memory* and on the other hand there is the *cultural memory*. The first – *communicative memory* – includes all forms of collective memory based on everyday and face-to-face communication. It can be regarded as the social short-term memory shared with contemporaries. The *cultural memory*, however, creates the condition to remember past events, in which one did not participate, and/or about which the own relatives cannot report in face-to-face discussions. Jeffrey K. Olick (2007) distinguishes between two approaches: the *collected memory approach* which focuses on individual memories and the *collective memory approach* which focuses on narratives and images of the past structured by groups, societies and nations. “It means remembering both that memory occurs in public and in private, at the tops of societies and at the bottoms as reminiscence and as commemoration, as personal testimonial and as national narrative, and that each of these forms is important; (...)” (Olick, 2007, 34). He argues to connect these both approaches it is necessary to analyze memory processes as a “wide variety of mnemonic products and practices” (Olick ,2008, 158).

Similar to Olick also Astrid Erll (2009, 2011) shifts the perspective from memory as a thing to memory as a process. She assumes the term ‘memory’ itself is an artificial scientific construct which can neither be easily observed nor reconstructed. Instead, it is only observable during the reconstructive analysis of memory processes (Erll, 2009, 2). In her concept of *memory cultures* she therefore stresses the plurality of *communities of memory*. This term refers to the insight that in contemporary societies there are different national, regional, or ethnic groups living in more or less peaceful coexistence and each of them constitutes (and is constituted by) different memories (Erll/Nünning, 2006, 12).

Marita Sturken (1997, 2008) also assume, that memory can be described as a result of practices: “A practice of memory is an activity that engages with, produces, reproduces and invests meaning in memories, whether personal, cultural or collective. Thus, an emphasis on practices, rather than objects or sites of memory, highlights the very active aspect (and hence the constructed nature) of memories” (Sturken, 2008, 74). And these memory processes and practices are nowadays highly mediated like social communication in general (Livingstone, 2008). Hence Erll (2009, 4) underlines the importance of media: “all representations of the past draw on available media technologies, on existent media productions on pattern of representation and medial aesthetics”. Furthermore, collective relevant knowledge about the past has to be part of media formats like text or images, in order to store and to save it.

I conclude that these mediated memory practices not only connect the levels of personal and collective memory, they also change the relationship between these two levels of remembering. There are different concepts to describe mediated memories on a personal level: for example Marianne Hirsch's (1997) concept of *postmemory* with which she examines the remembering of children of victims of the Holocaust and how they constitute a *postmemory* of the traumatized experience their parents went through by refereeing to family narrations as well as to public narrations about the Second World War. Contrary to that my research focus is not on individual memory about personal experiences but on events in the past which are remembered in public discourses on the Internet. For example in the online discourse about Demjanjuk most of the actors who discuss this case didn't experience the Second World War or the Holocaust. Alison Landsberg (2004) characterizes these forms of memory practices as *prosthetic memory* – memory which is not based on first-hand experience but on media events which can have a similar emotional effect.

To ground the understanding of media and memory as a mediated communicative construction of memory the concept of mediated memory practices is very helpful. But to strengthen my research focus on memory processes on the Internet which are not based exclusively on personal experiences I include the notion of discourse (Pentzold, 2009; Pentzold and Sommer, 2011).

### 1.2. Online Discourse and Memory Practices

Mediated memory practices can be characterized as discursive: different communities insert their interpretation of the past into a discursive arena and (re-) produce memories. Which memory about the past is reconstructed and in which way, is manifested in these discourses.

According to Foucault discourses consist of discursive practices. In his study *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1982) he develops the concept of *discourse* as a unit of

statements (*énoncé*), which are materialized through language. In his later work (Foucault 1995) he extends his concept and analyzes practices as acts of discourse production. At the beginning of the 70s he connects (Foucault, 1998) the term of discourse with the phenomenon of power: each discourse can then be described as a conflict of knowledge and power. Foucault's understanding of the production of knowledge as a result of politics can also be adopted for memory discourses. Based on the socio-constructive conception that memory is constituted in the current presence and that different communities strengthen their position as legitimated spokesmen in "memory contestations" (Olick and Robinson, 1998, 126) or "memory wars" (Jakubowicz, 2009, 98).

The discourse research which refers to Foucault's approach is often based only on mass media. But communication on the World Wide Web changes the constitution of the discursive arenas and therefore of the mediated memory practices. To analyze these processes of how new digital media technologies and communication networks can change memory practices, I use the concept of *online discourse* (Fraas and Pentzold, 2008). *Online discourse* is a special mediated form of discourses which focuses on digital practices on the Internet especially on the World Wide Web (Fraas, Meier and Pentzold, 2012, in press). Online discourses become memory discourses in a thematic sense when the topics which they are constituted of are about the past. In the debate about Demjanjuk on the web there can be defined two thematic frames: one involves debates about the trial itself and juristic question like why the trial takes place in Germany and not in the USA. The second frame is about the Nazi crimes Demjanjuk was involved in during World War II and his role as a Trawniki. The communication which is framed by the second one is my main focus to reconstruct memory practices.

But the digital memory practices in this discourse pose methodological challenges because of the interactivity, the hypertextuality, the multimodality and the peripheral production practices of the Web 2.0 (Fraas, Meier, Pentzold and Sommer, 2012, in press).

In online discourses the personal and public perspective is merged: While actors in the classical mass media are less recognizable as individuals, they act on the web on the micro level in interpersonal processes of interaction, thus having effects on the macro level through specific conditions of interaction, production, and reception. Hence actors don't just consume or retell they also produce and reproduce media content. That's why some researchers refer to it as a concept of *history from below* (Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading, 2009, 8-19; Jones, 2012), because more and more social actors gain access to the tools required to give media to form their memories and offer them for public consumption.

The peripheral practices of publications are a challenge especially for the sampling of the data (Meier and Pentzold, 2010). Because there is no

institutionalized archive of online-communication – contrary to the mass media – one is confronted with the problem of decentralized development of topics, which are less systematical and develop in segmented public spheres. As for example in my case study: in March 2009 there were the first news about Demjanjuk's planned deportation from the USA to Germany. Shortly after his family published private recordings from his father during a medical examination through the YouTube channel of the news agency Associated Press. Demjanjuk's lawyers avoided his deportation because of his poor health at the beginning of April 2009. By the end of the month the Simon Wiesenthal Centre published a video on YouTube with the title "Is John Demjanjuk too sick to be deported?", where one can see an active Demjanjuk who is getting in his car without any help. On the first of May 2009 a member of the German Internet forum Allmystery started a new thread about the case Demjanjuk with a link to an online article from the German Newspaper "Welt Online". In the middle of the month the Supreme Court denied a stay of the deportation and Demjanjuk flew to Munich. One day later an user expressed his strong disapproval of Demjanjuk's deportation on the wall of the Facebook group „Free John Demjanjuk Now !!!“. This short insight in the beginning of the online discourse about Demjanjuk illustrates the nonlinear distribution of debates on the Internet.

Furthermore online communication on the web is characterized by its fleetingness: comments are marked as spam, users and their posts are banned in social networks or forums, videos are deleted because of copyright infringement etc. And there is no institution, no archive yet which save online content in an organized way. A start for a systematic online archive could be initiated by the platform <http://www.archive.org/> which saves web pages since 1996. Through the so called Wayback Machine (<http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>; 23.09.12) one can surf on older archived versions of a web page. This Internet archive is not complete yet and some resources of the web pages like images or videos are not always available.

Additionally online discourses are subjected on the micro level to a personalized filtering. Thus, depending upon individual retrieval, only certain contents are offered by search engines. Hence search engines "determines what we can find on the basis of technical, personal and collective biases about what is remembered." (Van House and Churchill 2008: 304). Moreover, different feeds and certain browser settings as well as their uncoordinated dissemination by linking and through "copy and paste" practices lead to personalized content (Meier, Wunsch, Pentzold and Welker, 2010).

Another characteristic of online communication, which must be referred to in the analysis, is the increasing multimodality. In accordance with Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2010) multimodality is understood to be the interplay of different signs or signs systems which through their interplay generate meaning. Every form of communication can be described as multimodal sign acting starting with face to face interaction to negotiation between the TV and the viewer. But through the



digitalization of media, especially visual signs can be designed, arranged, and represented on a technical level easier and more freely. For example a user can shoot a video, cut it, add music to it and upload it on a social platform. Because of the easier technical production practices for visual content the dominance of visual signs became higher and by now there are used to the same extend as language (Kress/Van Leeuwen 2001, 2, 112).

The changed space and time concepts, which developed on and through the medium Internet, have also changed. With regard to time concept some researchers assume that through the possibilities of synchronous communication on the Web the relationship between historicity and topicality will change, because the distance between past and present seems to disband. Related to space concepts, events can spread beyond spatial distances, and/or develop new space references through networking. If one understands spaces as constituted by social producing practices, the Web can be described as a communication space, in which events of the past can be interpreted beyond national borders (Levy and Sznajder, 2006).

## 2. Methodical Approach

The described characteristics of online discourses require a development of an flexible method for collecting and analyzing data (Fraas, Meier, Pentzold and Sommer, 2012, in press; Sommer, Fraas, Meier and Pentzold, 2012, in press). I triangulate the research program of the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse with Grounded Theory and social semiotic visual analysis.

### 2.1. The research program of the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse

According to Reiner Keller (2011, 51) online discourses as well as discourses in general can be described as regulated structured practices of sign usage. These communicative practices of a discourse can be reconstructed through the analysis of frames – in a sense of interpretative schemes/patterns (Deutungsmuster). Keller (2011: 57) defines frames as basic, fundamental schemes for generating meaning, which are propagated through discourses and which suggest what a phenomenon is about. In my study of the discourse about John Demjanjuk I reconstruct the memory frames which were used by different social actors in this discourse.

With my proposition I refer to Keller's *research program of the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse* (SKAD) (Keller, 2011, 2008, 2005). In this research program Keller combines the sociology of knowledge tradition founded by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann with Foucault's concept of discourse and discursive practices. Keller (2008, 95,185) argues that both concepts can be linked by their focus on construction processes of collective knowledge. In their book *The Social Constructing of Reality* (1966) Berger and Luckmann demonstrate how knowledge is constructed through interactions and objectified through processes of

institutionalization. Keller suggests specifying the *social construction of knowledge* by defining it as discursive. But unlike Foucault he underlines the role of the social actors (Keller 2005, paragraph 16): “It is important to keep in mind that it is not discourse itself which performs actions or social practices, but rather social actors involved in different social fields and symbolic struggles.” This focus is very helpful for the analysis of memory practices in the web, because it is a specific quality of online discourses that the specific acting of individuals and/or groups is observable.

SKAD uses the canon of methods of the qualitative social research, because is not a self-contained, concrete method, but rather a research program which links Foucault’s discourse theory with the qualitative research paradigm of the social science. Nevertheless it offers important components for the analysis of memory practices: on the one hand the inclusions of the actors of a discourse in the analysis because of the interpersonal communication on the other hand the reconstruction of discursive practices through the analysis of frames. But to reconstruct the memory practices on the online discourse about Demjanjuk a research program is required which is more concrete than the SKAD.

## 2.2. *The research programme of Grounded Theory*

The SKAD is linked with qualitative methods of social research, as for instance with Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 2008; Strauss 2010; Strauss and Corbin 2008; for further information on the general inclusion of qualitative approaches into discourse analysis see Keller 2004; for online discourses Meier 2008; Fraas and Pentzold 2008). I also use the concept of Grounded Theory to reconstruct social memory practices. An important connection to the SKAD is the research objective of the Grounded Theory to generate theoretical concepts. These concepts are reconstructed by analyzing patterns of interpretation and action in the data. These research processes can be used to reconstruct the frames of a discourse.

Furthermore this method is particularly suitable to make semantically unstructured research fields accessible. Therefore the analysis of the Demjanjuk discourse is guided by the rules for collecting and analyzing data of Grounded Theory. Via the rule-governed data collecting, the so-called *theoretical sampling*, the selection of the data sources occurs via minimum and maximal contrasting, i.e. that one compares cases that are on the same time both similar and very different from each other, until, during the data acquisition, no more new aspects emerge. This circular process of collecting data is necessary for the peripheral practices of publications on the web. Because of the fleetingness of online communication a one-time data collection would be too vague (Fraas, Meier and Pentzold, 2012, in press)/

The selected data are analyzed by the *coding method* of Grounded Theory. Similar to the *theoretical sampling*, the *coding method* is characterized by constant comparing and asking. The processes of data selection and analysis parallel and

mutually influence each other. On the base of the selected and analyzed data one pursues proceeding abstraction of determined concepts (Strauss and Corbin, 2008), by selecting and coding them as *open*, *axial* and *selective*. Out of these codes there can be developed elements, which describe memory frames of different remembering groups and refer to their memory practices.

### 2.3. Visual Analysis

As I already mentioned, online discourses can be characterized as highly multimodal. So memory frames of an online discourse are not only verbalized through mostly written text but are also materialized in weblogs, videos, audio files and the like. Hence utilizations of visual signs also constitute memory frames and it is necessary to analyze these visual forms of expression. To reconstruct them the research program of Grounded Theory is triangulated with the social semiotic analysis.

From a theoretical point of view, the social semiotic concept of multimodality is based on Michael Halliday's (1993) assumption that the construction of meaning is not only realised through language, but also involves many semiotic systems. Cultural meanings are realized, he argues, through a great variety of symbolic modes such as language, pictures, fashion, music, and art. He points out three social *metafunctions*: that is the *ideational function*, the *interpersonal function*, and the *textual function*; all three of them are simultaneously present in every act of social communication. Following his argumentation, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (2001, 2010) point out the three social semiotic *metafunctions* for visual design. Based on the assumption that images can establish discursive assertions, it is important to analyse visual forms of expressions and their design. The *ideational function* encompasses the represented objects, actors and their relationship to each other (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2010, 42, 47). The *interpersonal function* refers to the interaction between the producer and the receiver of an image (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2010, 114). And the *textual function* is realized different compositional arrangements in images (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2010, 43). In my mixed method approach I use these *metafunctions* to extend the coding process and generate visual design codes and categories.

### 3. Discursive Memory Practises on the World Wide Web

In the following I present some results of the discourse analysis about the Demjanjuk case to discuss the question if the digital media change and especially the World Wide Web have caused new discursive memory practices.

### 3.1. The *Online Discourse on the Demjanjuk Trial*

An important reference to the past in the online discourse about the former concentration camp guard is the crime, for which Demjanjuk was accused – the murder of thousands in the extermination camps. The representation and the interpretation that accompanies it on the web are however very heterogeneous. One of these interpretative schemes is *no gas chambers, no war crime*. From this point of view there were no gas chambers, therefore Demjanjuk can't be accused for any war crimes. One group that uses this memory frame is the right-wing nationalist news platform Altermedia. In articles that can be found on Altermedia, the trial against Demjanjuk is characterized as a show trial and the writers assume a conspiracy of the media ([http://de.altermedia.info/general/was-macht-eigentlich-der-schauprozess-gegen-john-demjanjuk-10-07-10\\_48561.html](http://de.altermedia.info/general/was-macht-eigentlich-der-schauprozess-gegen-john-demjanjuk-10-07-10_48561.html); 15-11-2010). Furthermore the camp Sobibor, in which the accused has been assigned, is described as a transit camp, which had – from their point of view – no gas chambers at all. So this group is characterized by historical revisionism like denying the holocaust and spreading right-wing propaganda.

The right wing propaganda of course mostly existed before the spreading of the Internet, as for instance revisionist interpretation, that began already shortly after the War in 1945. However, the web facilitates to meet with communication partners who have the same attitude beyond national borders. An example for that is the Facebook Group: Free John Demjanjuk Now!!! (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=78214541332&v=wall>; 22-11-2010). This group was founded by a Norwegian user and has members from different countries, like e.g. Russia, Great Britain, the US or Canada. The standard accusation, expressed by its members on their Facebook wall, is that the Jews were not punished for killing Palestinians. This frame *other crimes in relation to Nazi war crimes* is an often used pattern by users who judge the trial against Demjanjuk as morally wrong. They often mention other war crimes, such as the Vietnam War or the Stalinist Crimes. But they mostly compare the NS crimes to “crimes” of the State of Israel.

The very different positions the anti-Semitic, revisionist interpretation, the conspiracy theory, which appear in the Demjanjuk discourse can't be characterized as new practices to interpret the past. But on the web these practices are more visible than in other mediated environments.

But it is not like these groups do not act in the respective “corner” of the Web. On the large platforms, as for instance YouTube or Facebook, one can observe direct debates, as well as in the comment section of online articles in the mass media. Of course, these platforms cannot be described as revisionist like the platform of Altermedia. However, there are articles on certain platforms, as for instance the video platform YouTube, on which a mixture of journalistic and

interpersonal communication takes place, due to the possibilities of commentating which is also a way of interpretation of the past.

The production company *Journeymann Pictures* for example posted a report on its own YouTube Channel about the case of Demjanjuk (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjpTXgW-uQg>; 07-09-2011). In this video the Dutch Sobibor survivor Jules Shelves, who also appears as a joint plaintiff at the trial against Demjanjuk, is interviewed. The video received more than 500 comments. There are again and again hostile exchanges between YouTube users, who demand proof for the Holocaust and who deny the existence of gas chambers in the extermination camps, and other users, who judge them as reactionary, like in these comments: user A: "I like to see scientifically provable facts on Gas Chamber Mass Executions regarding this Holocaust case. I do not accept gossips, propaganda or partial statements based on angry believes. Please, I invite everyone to send me references supporting both sides of the argument. Be open and help me to clarify this unproven subject. Thanks in advance." In direct response user B comments: "@User A why don't you look at all the black-and-white photos of skinny dead bodies being burned by men in Nazi uniforms. And then you can look at more photos of starving people in striped pajamas with yellow star of david symbols on them behind barbed wire." This short excerpt demonstrates, how some of the YouTube users apply the same memory frame as the Altermedia network– so they can be identified as members of the same remembering community – which doesn't mean, that the YouTube network is also a group of revisionists.

The memory frame *victim of circumstances* demonstrates that the level of how social memory framework is communicated is as important as the level of content for the discourse analysis. In this interpretation Demjanjuk is a victim of circumstances, because he gets into the role of a Trawniki unintentionally. He was a prisoner of war, captured by the Germans, before the SS recruited him. So from this perspective he can't be responsible for the crimes in Sobibor. In texts from institutional actors or actors of the mass media this interpretation is worded very cautiously. It is very often verbalized as a question, for example in one of the online articles of the Deutsche Welle (<http://www.dw.de/dw/article/0,,15064271,00.html>, 27-07-12), a German-based international broadcaster, or in online newspapers, as the International Business Times (<http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/144958/20110512/john-demjanjuk-sobibor-nazi-holocaust-concentration-camp.htm>, 25-07-12) or The Week (<http://www.theweek.co.uk/people-news/5571/demjanjuk-nazi-war-criminal-or-victim>, 27.07.12) which headlines are formulated as a question about Demjanjuk's role as a victim. But even though it is formulated as a question, the interpretation of Demjanjuk's role in the war is not totally rejected by quoting historian experts, his family and his lawyers who are also convinced that he was a victim of the Nazis. In a more direct way the frame is verbalized by non-mass media actors, as for example in their YouTube Video and also in short commentaries on Facebook, forums and

blogs. Hence as this frame has shown it is necessary to extend the analysis in terms of how the memory frames are constituted.

An important pattern of interpretation is also the discussion of the *SS Identity Card* in the online-Discourse about Demjanjuk. This identity card is particularly interesting on the visual level, because the image of it emerges in many different online articles. For example to discuss its authenticity like the actors on the news platform of National Alliance - a racist organization from the USA. In the article "Jewish Hatred Exposed: The Case of John Demjanjuk" (<http://www.natallnews.com/page.php?id=2>; 15-11-2010) the trial is characterized as one big conspiracy by both Jews and the former Soviet Union. From their point of view the identity card was faked by the KGB. A contrastive example is a video on tagesschau.de (<http://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/video/video538038.html>; 16-11-2010), where the identity card is characterized as authentic. There are also a lot of online texts that do not discuss the ID card on the linguistic level, but present the image of the card. As for example in an article by the radio Netherlands: (<http://www.rnw.nl/english/article/war-crimes-trial-demjanjuk-germany>; 15-11-2010) about the trial beginning in November, the image has the function to introduce the subject on a visual level. A crucial reason why the ID card is shown so often is, that it is the only historical document of Demjanjuk from the NS time.

The *extermination camps*, in which Demjanjuk was deployed, are also represented on the visual level. There are some black and white scenes of prisoners in concentration camps, whose arrangement suggests that these were recorded by the Allies. There is, for example, a black-and-white video of a group of prisoners in a concentration camp, standing close to the camp fence or even leaving a camp. As for instance shown in a video of the news page tagesschau.de (<http://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/video/video538038.html>; 7-09-2011). All these images have one thing in common: there are no guards to be seen, so one can assume that these images were recorded while or shortly after the freeing of the respective concentration camps, but these cannot be images of prisoners of extermination camps like Sobibor. These camps were not liberated, since the Nazis closed them and pulled broke them down before 1945. Therefore there are no comparable historical pictures of the camp Sobibor. Especially this camp is often visually presented in the analyzed online discourse through contemporary images, which are colored and on which one can see no humans. Furthermore, there are pictures of SS guards, but the visual reference to Demjanjuk is missing. As I mentioned before, there is no historical picture of Demjanjuk except the photo on his identity card. In order, however, to document Demjanjuk's actual employment in the extermination camps, there are shown in some texts, photomontages, as for instance in an article of the online edition of the SZ Magazin, a German newspaper supplement, in which Demjanjuk appears in a drawing, dressed in a Trawniki uniform and standing in front of a camp fence (<http://sz-magazin.sueddeutsche.de/texte/anzeigen/33508/1/1>; 30-11-2010).

These examples underlie the importance of visual information in online communication. One can say there is a compulsion to use images, even if there is no authentic visual material. This is also a consequence of the increasing multimodality - the interplay of different signs or signs systems, which through their interplay generate meaning.

### **Conclusion: New memory practices on the web?**

The past is a horizon of fragments, which are recombined in a discourse, according to the respective topic. This is valid for discourses of memory cultures in general. However, in online discourses this process is particularly dynamic, because the references are strengthened by different forms of communication and different actors. Thus in web based communication various contents are generated, which make plural references on the past possible.

On a content level most of the interpretations of the past cannot be characterized as new social memory practices on the web. But the visibility of the different interpretations is higher on the web compare to other social remembering situations. The World Wide Web cannot be understood as one consistent medium like television or radio but rather as an underlying basis that fosters different applications, tools and forms of communicative interactions. Hence on a technical level it is easier for different remembering communities to participate in memory discourses. In view of the lower barriers to access the web – even for actors who are not members of the traditional institutions, which interpret the past officially – a resonance space develops for plural references on the memory. On the one hand the actors who share similar interpretations about one event in the past can form a group memory more easily through the Internet. On the other hand these plural references can cause direct memory conflicts on larger platforms as one can observe on YouTube or Facebook.

On the visual level one can state a global usage of similar visual motifs, but these images have to be seen in the context of the corresponding (audio-)text. On the multimodal level – thus the interaction of the different signs – these uses are then again certain by the respective position of the actors. Discursive practices in general can be described as multimodal sign acting. But through the digitalization of media, visual signs can be designed, arranged, and represented easier and more freely.

As the Demjanjuk case has shown, the references to the past are not necessarily dominated of a national memory. How memory frames are constituted in online communication depends on the communication form in which the respective actor communicates and it depends on their (political) position within the discourse.

Hence the relationship between public and private interpretations of the past has changed in online discourses in terms of the negotiation processes between different levels of remembering.

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