

A Quest for *Communitas*

Rethinking Mediated Memory Existentially

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Abstract

Despite the fragmentation of audience behaviour and the pluralization of platforms within the media cultures of the digital age, cultural memory practices retain an important feature: They echo a basic existential quest for *communitas*. The present article compares two seemingly incomparable regimes of memory of our time: the anniversaries of 9.11 on Swedish television and web communities of commemoration of lost loved ones. It suggests through these contrasting examples that existential themes are pursued in the face of three challenges: the temporality of instantaneity, the all-pervasive networked individualism that makes memory into a matter of elective affinities, and the technological capacities that subject memory to endless revision. The article explores the existential dimension of these memory practices in line with research within the culturalist emphasis on the study of media and religion. This debate recognizes the need for a broader understanding of the mediated qualities of religion and the religious qualities of the media. The article argues that both televisual anniversaries of trauma that invite audiences to an annual return, and our new multiple and fragmented media memories compel us to conceive of our hyper-contingent, late-modern digital age as a quest for meaning, transcendence and cohesion – for what Victor Turner (1969) called *existential communitas*.

Keywords: memory, digital age, existence, anniversary journalism, web memorials, *communitas*, death

If as Merleau-Ponty observed, I can grasp myself only as ‘already reborn’ or ‘still living’, it is mostly because I know of life only as being with others, communicating with others, connecting with others. When I strive to imagine the end of my being, the first thing that comes to my mind (as a notion, not a picture) is the severance of “the sense of connection”. *Connection is more than mere co-presence*. Connection is what fills the connected with content – perhaps all the content there is. Connection makes the connected meaningful. One may say it makes the connected human, humans are distinguished by the *meaningfulness of their being*.

Zygmunt Bauman *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies*,
Cambridge: Polity Press (1992: 40, emphases added)

The Tyranny of Connectivity and the Promises of Connection¹

Digital memory practices increasingly saturate our contemporary existence. They include, for instance, the mundane activities of storing images, video clips and texts on social networking sites (SNS); our personal portable archives of images, photographs,

music and profiles; services to manage the digital afterlife; databases; digital shrines, web memorials and communities of the bereaved, and blogging about terminal illness (cf. Garde-Hansen et al. eds. 2009). Despite their all-pervasive presence in our life world, we have a scant understanding of what these digital memory cultures mean for people *existentially*.

The present article argues that existential issues are at the core of our lived experience of the media environment. Such issues deal with our basic experiences of being in the world. They concern our sense of time, space, identity, and meaning.² In the age of social media, this is quite palpable and straightforward and for some quite worrying. For example, according to psychoanalyst Sherry Turkle, we now inhabit a world where the *self itself* is tied to, and emerges through, constant connectivity and instant validation, while leaving individuals emotionally deprived and ultimately alone (2008, 2011). The digital age has simultaneously been described as an era of fragmentation where the public sphere has disintegrated into public sphericules, and ‘the audience’ into differentiated individual strata of preferences. In an era of social networking sites (SNSs), sociality sometimes seems reduced to the perpetual reinforcement of existing social ties in our own personal digital ‘echo chambers’. At the same time, what has rapidly emerged is, instead of what John Durham Peters (1999) called the tyranny of communication, a kind of tyranny of connectivity, with compulsive individual acts of broadcasting and validating the self, before a mass of onlookers. And the web simultaneously caters to us through offerings in the microcosm of our own consumer behaviour.

In this context, the very notion of collective memory has quickly become equally precarious, and memory has been transformed into what Amit Pinchevski calls “a matter of elective affinities” (2011: 263). Hence, in this era of networked hyper-individualism (Wellman 2004), one important aspect, much debated in memory studies, is the changing nature of memory itself. The present article takes cultural or mediated memory as its starting point for providing an existentialist approach to the digital ecology. It is guided by three premises:

- 1) Memory is a fundamental social, cultural and communal human practice (Halbwachs 1925/1992), and performances of memory involve and engender our sense of cohesion, identity and continuity – both individually and collectively (cf. Nora 1989; Sturken 1997; Erlil 2009; Lagerkvist 2013);
- 2) In today’s world, the media and mediations constitute what Maurice Halbwachs found in the family, nation or congregation – “a social framework for memory”, as memory is in effect “media memory” (Neiger et al. eds. 2011);
- 3) Questions about memory and non-present interaction are central to media theory and especially important in the digital ecology.

To illustrate these points, and to thereby launch a novel approach to digital media inspired by existence philosophy and anthropology, I will discuss two contrasting types of contemporary memory cultures: televisual and digital commemoration. In fact, I will compare two seemingly incomparable regimes of memory. First, I will share an argument that I have put forward about televisual anniversaries of 9.11 in Sweden in the context of digitization (Lagerkvist 2012). This type of officially sanctioned mourning and commemoration, by media witnesses, is then contrasted by the second type of public

mourning and memorialization: the construction of a memory of a loved one in digital cemeteries. This second example deals with a completely different and privately sanctioned form of commemoration. These two types relate to Dorthe Refslund Christensen and Kjetil Sandvik's recent theorization, building on Klaus Bruhn Jensen's typology (2010), of the materiality of the media of the first, second and third degrees (forthcoming): "Whereas media of the first degree facilitate encounters with death and loss on a personal level, media of the second degree relate to more public oriented encounters: death and suffering as the result of wars, natural disasters, famines and so on are mediated by the TV, radio and newspapers and thus circulated in the public sphere on a local, national or global level for people to engage in" (forthcoming, 2014). The materiality of the media of the third degree, in turn, refers to digital information and communication technologies that they label *metamedia*, following Bruhn Jensen.

The two regimes of memory to be discussed in the following correspond to the second and third degrees, but they also relate closely to novel types of mourning and commemoration, discussed by Tony Walter (2008). He delineates two forms of new public mourning (2008: 245ff) that are part of our mass media society, but refutes the idea that they are entirely manufactured by the media. Walter contextualizes this development by saying initially that two types of mourning lost legitimacy in the twentieth century. The first was socially mourning someone you love, and the second public mourning for people you do not know, with the important exception: "unless sanctioned by the state: e.g. the war dead, astronauts, victims of 9.11 terrorist attacks" (2008: 242).

The new public mourning hence comes in two forms. In addition to war remembrance and mourning for public figures such as heads of state, people are in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first increasingly, firstly, prone to mourn for people one did not know personally, such as celebrities (see Sumiala 2013) or victims of terrorist attacks. Secondly, people are publicizing their private losses on Internet sites. According to Walter, these two types also belong to two different temporalities: the first one is permanent, annual and cyclical and is visible in commemorations and anniversary journalism; the second one is more spontaneous (Walter 2008: 245).

Walter asks provocatively in relation to the commemoration of the loss of lives in mediated trauma: "do such messages, such sentiments, even such middle-of-the-night-tears, represent 'recreational grief', 'grief lite' – a lightweight, undemanding image of connection, a pseudo-community that is increasingly replacing face-to-face connections of family, church, and neighbourhood, as ephemeral as the television images that spawn it?" (ibid.: 241-242). This type of question echoes at least a century of mass communication critique, where the media ingredient has been accused of causing the levelling down of authenticity, community and here – *emotion* – due to the mediatization of society and culture. It is beyond doubt that mourning codes and memory practices have changed and continue to change in late modernity, through mediatization and digitalization (Hutchings 2012). But perhaps it is time to look beyond what is new, and ask questions about the digital as a cultural form, and how it relates to being. In order to arrive at this, I propose that, in the present essay, it is fruitful to examine what these new and 'residual' forms of mediated commemoration and public mourning have in common today, as both belong to and are impinged on by the 'digital age'. And furthermore, how are memories in the digital age meaningful? What kinds of communal experiences do they afford? To what extent are they allowing for a sense of connection that is more than mere co-presence, as

Zygmunt Bauman posits above (Bauman 1992)? And to what extent can digital memories bring about a sense of cohesion, hope, or profundity – what I call, highly aware of the ambiguity of the term, existential security (Lagerkvist 2013)? By comparing two very different memory practices, I propose that we may begin to discern the bigger picture. Through their commonalities, I argue, we may move beyond those most common tropes of the digital era of ‘fragmentation’.

The Existential Deficit

While the questions of community and meaning were key in early ethnographies in networked cultures (Baym 1995; Markham 1998), their full existential implications were not elaborated. In the footsteps of Raymond Williams, Cultural Studies approaches conceive of culture as ‘ordinary’, and people as involved in meaning-making practices within the this-worldly everyday. In Cultural Studies, questions of meaning and community are typically drained of any connection to the human experience of, or *quest for*, spirituality or transcendence in any form (cf. Cvetkovitch 2012). With important exceptions (e.g., Durham Peters 1997, 1999; Rothenbuler 1998; Axelson 2006; Pinchevski 2011, forthcoming; Sumiala 2013), in mainstream media studies in general, existential perspectives have played a minor role in analysing the media, or our media cultures.

An existential approach to media also relates to important debates within the science of religion and the subfield that studies *religion and the media*, where such issues have been approached through the culturalist emphasis on the need for a broader understanding of the meaning-making and mediated qualities of religion, and the religious qualities of the media (Schofield Clark and Hoover 1997; Sumiala-Seppänen et al 2006; Morgan ed. 2008; Lynch, Mitchell and Strahn eds. 2012). These approaches emphasize the need, in an ostensibly ‘secularized’ Western society, for a new understanding of people’s changing relationship to transcendent and existential dimensions in life (cf. Woodhead and Heelas 2000). Sharing this point of departure, my take on digital memory cultures and existentialism acknowledges that the exploration of existential themes takes place within the structures and through the rituals of institutionalized religions, but more importantly, it also occurs in other more uncharted contexts (cf. Hoover and Lundby eds. 1997). Here it is conceived of as occurring vividly and ubiquitously within the realm of digital media (cf. Lövheim 2004, 2006) and digital memory cultures in particular.

Approaching these matters from an existential perspective will both complement the psychological approach in this burgeoning debate, and bring other crucial facets of the analytical object into sight. The theoretical framework of my project is inspired by some of the basic themes in classic existentialist thought (see Dreyfus and Wrathall eds. 2009, or the works of Søren Kierkegaard in Hong and Hong eds. 2009), which highlight the fundamental anxiety and dread of nothingness that we are faced with in existence; the absurdity of life as a contingency and the pervasive alienation of our modern world, societies and lives. As a point of departure, humans are conceived of as existential beings, torn between freedom and necessity, who constructively and actively seek meaning in the face of these conditions. The objective is to unpack both the exigencies and potentials for pursuing existential issues through memory practices among media users of the digital age.

Instead of seeing the Internet as inherently positive or negative, liberating or controlling, democratic or undemocratic, meaningful or trivial, I conceive of it as an existential and ambiguous terrain. This terrain provides avenues to explore issues of meaning and meaninglessness, remembering and forgetting, individuality and collectivity, loneliness and sociality, the finite and the infinite. Digital memory cultures span these contradictions, and display a number of tensions and key issues in human existence. While digital memories serve to existentially secure continuity, to pursue meaning and value and to enable profundity (in terms of human growth or transcendence), they may also, existentially speaking, potentially bolster a sense of a void – a loss of meaning.³ In the following, I will focus on the problem and possibility of existential security.

Challenges of the Digital Age: In Search for Existential Security

I submit that the basic themes and predicaments in existentialism are actualized in three tensions that constitute contemporary digital memory cultures. First, as already mentioned, users' identities are shaped through increasingly fragmented and versatile forms of individual and collective remembering, and this constitutes a major challenge for the study of collective memories. This is due to the fact that digital media are pervaded by the combination of connectivity with instant, easy and affordable publishing possibilities that create endless avenues for sharing, exposing, participating in shaping, selecting, editing, revising and revaluing, individual and collective memories (Maj and Riha 2010).

Second, and related, networked publics that group around memories of individual and collective trauma and grief contribute to an accelerated evaporation of the public and the private. This amounts to a widespread, unprecedented new sense of mediated publicness, offering possibilities for the public mediation of private experiences and memories, and for the emergence of new constellations of communities of memory – often on a global scale (Reading 2010, Assmann and Conrad 2010).

Third, when our lives become increasingly digitized, this terrain may be haunted by the fear of information loss, because the speed at which we live and work compels us to practices of constantly updating ourselves while “keeping track, recording, retrieving, stock-piling, archiving, backing up and saving” (Garde-Hansen et al. 2009: 5). This constitutes a fundamental tension in our contemporary existence between remembering and forgetting, keeping and losing, saving and deleting (van Dijck 2007, Hoskins 2009; Garde-Hansen et al. 2009).

These tendencies, I propose, may also constitute for media users an impetus for entering into existential terrains of connectivity. Central to my approach, hence, is in addition the question of how I/we may secure a sense of cohesion, meaning, continuity and community, that is, what I term ‘existential security’ in the digital age? I define *existential security* as slightly differing from Giddens’s *ontological security*, which he delineates as referring to

the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action. As sense of the reliability of persons and things, so central to the notion of trust, is basic to feelings of ontological security (1990: 92).

He stresses that ontological security has to do with the phenomenological and emotional sense of 'being-in-the-world'. Existential security adds to this emphasis on the social, emotional and material, the sense in which individuals may integrate their being-in-the-world into a meaningful whole, or into beneficial meaning-making practices in the face of the challenges of life. Such meaning-making 'systems' can involve both this-worldly and other-worldly aspects of profundity *or* spirituality, transcendence and the sacred. This meaning-making system may not, however, be entirely congruent or completely lacking in discordances: In fact people's spiritual identities are often constituted by contradiction. I conceive of existential security, in addition, not only as an individual quest, but also importantly as a matter of seeking meaning and continuity through/as inspired fellowship – that is through *communitas* (see E. Turner 2012). Put differently, "communitas has an existential quality; it involves the whole man in his relations to other whole men" (Turner 1969: 127). In addition, the concept acknowledges that human existence is highly ambiguous and that existential security is a wished-for goal, never unambiguously realized. The concept thus focuses as much on the quest for it as on its actuality.

In the next section, I will discuss two examples of contemporary memory cultures where the quest for meaning and existential security is arguably played out. Is it possible to discern, through the commonalities between televisual and digital commemoration, the contours of a wider pattern? Before discussing this possibility, it is important to acknowledge their differences.

Televisual and Digital Memory

In "The Mediatisation of Memory," Andrew Hoskins outlines the main distinctions between how cultural memory operated during the so-called broadcasting age and how it works today, during the post-broadcasting age (2009). Discussing how memory has become mediatized across these two phases, Hoskins defines mediatization as an extension of the impact of the media into all social and cultural realms resulting in an increased embeddedness of the everyday into the mediascape (*ibid*: 29). In the mass communication era, memory was officially produced from and contained within large media institutions, broadcasting from a centre to a mass audience, administering flashbulb memories – those important TV or radio moments that seemed to constitute many of the common experiences for people of the electronic age. The first phase of mediatization "is associated with the dominant media and institutions of the broadcast era, notably television and the news networks, respectively, which produced many more flashbulb memories for a newly connected global village [...]" (*ibid.*). In our contemporary media environment, however, new media technologies have proliferated and they have accompanied "mediatised regimes of memory". These new memory regimes drive, maintain and refill the 'past' through connectivity and mass accretion of mnemonic fragments (2009: 31). The post-broadcasting age is thus dominated by a new memory ecology in which the media or media technologies are ubiquitous and at once both accessible and fluid, easily revised yet almost endlessly dispersed.

Televsual Commemoration and Anniversaries of Trauma

If we look at the distinguishing features of televisual memory at large, it must be noted that for some this notion is a contradiction in terms, since the medium of television has been associated with the loss of memory. Dominated by “insistent presentness” (Doane 1990: 222, see also Sturken 1997: 24), television has been conceived of as producing cultural amnesia, creating merely newness and forgetfulness rather than stable collective memories. As much as television is in the now, we must acknowledge that, in the past decade, television in the Western world has become more and more preoccupied with representing history, and hence with the production of collective memories (cf. Edgerton 2001). Scholars have shed light on the way in which *history* (historical documentaries and historical series) have become a major part of programming. Others have tended to focus on television as the primary producer of cultural memories and as the centre of the symbolic environment. According to Paul Frosh, we actually have a living relationship to television conceived of as a remembering mechanism. Broadcasting from centres, and locating the attention of the audience, televisual collective memory is also, according to Frosh, “a simulated, synchronous, connective nucleus” (Frosh 2011: 129) that informs our way of imagining the socio-historical totality and ourselves as a form of collective consciousness. As already mentioned, television is also associated with so-called flashbulb memories: exceptionally vivid memories of where we were, what we were doing when we heard of traumatic emotional or “ecstatic news” – that is impact events – that seemed to change everything, for instance, the murders of JFK, Olof Palme, Anna Lindh, the Challenger explosion, the Tsunami of 2004, the massacre on Utöya, Norway. People often envision themselves in front of a TV when they recall how they learned of the trauma. Another important trait of televisual memory is the sense in which it calls into question established notions of temporality, especially in its close connection with catastrophe (Doane 1990). Television usually drops its schedule, and disrupts the everyday routine, thereby ushering in the existential sense of when a traumatic event occurs, of being outside of time. Catastrophe is in this sense televisual *par preference*: It is both timeless and instantaneous, momentary, chaotic and fragmenting. Television often makes catastrophe instantly historical⁴, but such events also simultaneously become durable collective memory. This occurs when the images are subsequently and endlessly *repeated* internationally on television (and beyond) in chronicles, documentaries, memorials and news reports.

In sum, televisual memory has to do with the perpetual building up of an institutionally organized archive, through expectations of the present drawn from the past. These expectations are affected by schemata framing the present, as well as by how both past and future atrocities are conceived of (Hoskins 2009). Anniversaries of major breaking news events are also part of how television repeats and recycles its archival materials, and today as television, through its play functions, provides for an open archive of all the events on TV – that count as ‘historical’ events due to having been on TV – the relationship between television and collective memory seems quite outright and highly self-reflexive. I have analysed all the anniversaries of the terrorist attacks in the US on 9/11 2001 on Swedish television (Public Service and TV4), with a particular emphasis on the first and tenth anniversary. Remembering 9.11 has been a major *lieu de mémoire* on Swedish television ever since the terrorist attacks on 9.11 2001.⁵ But why is television involved in the annual commemoration of these major traumatic news events? While

I firmly acknowledge the ideological and political role of the attention paid to 9.11 in Sweden, which speaks volumes about what we are compelled to remember and whose deaths are important to commemorate, initially, my principal curiosity had to do with one of the founding texts in memory studies, which posits memory as always connected to *place* (Nora 1989). How does this square with televisual memory? My analysis of the anniversaries framed them as *electronic sites of memory*, exploring the various and inter-related spatial scales involved as television commemorates traumatic news events. My conclusion was that these memory practices, firstly, offer for audiences the performance of an annual return to the traumatic memorial site: *to the television set*. For (trans)national witnesses, the events are/were televisual; they belong to the medium and its practices of returning to its archive of images and sounds that we will never forget. Secondly, and related, I found that on anniversaries such as 9/11, TV *situates itself* as a central global nucleus, connecting people across the world around the catastrophe (cf. Frosh 2011). Television is thus involved in producing a particular imagined global “we” of witnesses to 9/11, connected through our return to the machine. This interpellated “we” seems to be transnational and even global, but in actuality it is constituted of a selective *Western* socio-historical idea of community. But more importantly, as a comparison between the anniversaries in 2002 and 2011 shows, over time this “we” increasingly emerges as *a we of media witnesses*. What does this mean in the broader context? I will return to my interpretation and conclusion, but in order to do so I will now first turn to digital memory.

Digital Memory Cultures and Web Memorials

Due to digitization and mediatization, and the all-pervasive changes in our media environments and media use, the relationships between media and memory have currently become the object of renewed interest within memory studies. Scholars have argued that digital media have effects on how we remember, what we remember and perhaps the nature of memory itself (Garde Hansen, Reading and Hoskins (eds.) 2009). The very distinctions between personal/private and public/collective memories – as well as the previous primary focus on national identity – are now also questioned and problematized. For instance, José van Dijck, in her seminal book *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*, offers a holistic and integrative framework for analysing media memories. Moving away from a focus on cultural and shared memory, she looks into our digital ‘shoeboxes’ and finds our private and personal memories in digital archives equally valid for cultural analysis. Mediated memories in our digital age are always *embodied* and sensuously felt, *embedded* in social contexts, and *enabled* by technologies (van Dijck 2007). Hence, it seems we are enplaced within digital memories, they are embedded in us – in our existence. This means that in studying digital memory cultures, we need to dispense with the thinking that long conceived of “*the media*” as a discrete unit separated from the social or from memory.

In line with this reasoning, scholars in the field of digital memory cultures stress that we are neither retrieving memory any more nor constructing pasts through representational practices in the present. Instead memory is seen as “embedded in and distributed through our socio-technical practices ...” (Hoskins 2009a: 99). The dynamics of mediated memory hence renders it “created when needed, driven by the connectivities of digital technologies and media and inextricably forged through and constitutive of

digital social networks: in other words, a new ‘network memory’” (ibid.). As Anna Reading argues (2010), these features of the new memory ecology constitute a new dynamics of what she calls *the global memory field* in which memory is both digitized and globalized at the same time. The stress here is on keywords such as multiplicity, fragmentation, liquidity and speed.

Among a range of other functions and affordances, as listed earlier, digital memory cultures display new commemorative communities of grief on social networking sites (see for instance www.vsfb.se/Pratbubblan or Facebook). What do we make of the above-mentioned characteristics of network memory, if we turn to these outlets of grief, where the connections occur precisely because of the fact that individuals have been transposed from the mundane realm into a sequestered space of death and mourning?

Communities of grief online (sometimes run by funeral services, sometimes by individuals, larger corporations or associations) showcase and invite interaction at digital shrines and memorials, where you often find guest books you can leave notes on and candles you can light (<http://varaminnessidor.se/> and Tillminneav.se). On VIMIL (Swedish: “Vi som mist någon mitt i livet”; “We who lost someone in the middle of life”), a Swedish bereavement community of grief and support, members, as well as strangers may post their concerns and consolations in the commentary fields. Conversations on VIMIL confirm scholarship in this field, showing that the sense of togetherness, of overcoming loneliness, is a primary theme in the interactions. On the Swedish web memorial site [Till Minne av.se](http://TillMinneav.se) (“In memory of”), the memorials are often constituted as obituaries. There is also a blog function, and users may upload film/video and light a candle. Most of the memorials are not particularly detailed in terms of describing the departed person, instead they convey strong feelings of grief, emptiness, and loss. They directly communicate with the dead. The role of web memorials in creating existing ties both to the dead and the living is evident. Pamela Roberts argues that there are a number of positive rewards from these communities: The bereaved may stay in touch with the dead person, strengthen bonds with the living, and create a new sense of community with others. Indeed she holds that Rheingold’s utopian vision for the Internet, as a realization of the ingrained human need and wished-for goal of creating a working and gratifying community, is fulfilled (Roberts 2004). The members are highly aware of being part of something bigger, through their communicated grief. There is a strong emphasis on relationships and feelings of community, despite the fact that there is sometimes a limited interactive affordance designed into these sites. In addition, Walter et al. hold that Facebook defragments a dead person’s social networks and allows for mourning to re-emerge as a group experience: a communal activity (2011/12: 290). In social networking they see a break with earlier technologies in terms of how death and grief are brought back, and are in the process of becoming de-sequestered and reintroduced into the everyday:

... 21st century media have the capacity to desequester the dying, death, and mourning of personally known individuals. *SNSs bring death back into everyday life*—from both the private and the public sphere—in a way that older media such as television and even virtual cemeteries were largely unable to. If late 20th century mass media enabled grief to become more public (to the dismay of some members of the public), 21st century Facebook enables grief to become more communal, that is, shared within the deceased’s social networks. (ibid.)

Sharedness, here in the sense of sharing loss through mediated publicness, is thus the keyword in virtual mourning. Scholarship on digital memory cultures similarly stress the idea of *connectedness* as a “fundamental value that matters in the process of global and virtual self-description” (Maj and Riha, 2009: 29). Active participation and sharing are key to thinking about digital memory practices (Garde Hansen et al. 2009). In rounding up this paper, I will offer my understanding of these tendencies.

United in the Quest for *Communitas*

I have thus far discussed the differences between two media memory practices of our time: the official archives of the anniversaries of 9.11 on Swedish television and alternative personal archives – web communities of grief and commemoration of lost loved ones. There are important differences between these two examples. Televisual commemoration sanctions particular official memories of certain events and certain deaths. Digital memories are non-official and spring from individual and collective needs to grieve, memorialize, connect (with the living and the dead), to support and be supported. But there are also interesting commonalities between televisual memory *today* and new media/new memory practices.

In my study on televisual anniversaries, I was struck by television’s self-centredness. In effect, the medium seems here, more than anything, to be involved in centring the attention on itself, and on its own nucleus of connectivity. I suggest that this has everything to do with the digitization of memories, and of media culture at large. Commemoration in the form of anniversaries is triggered by the digitalization of the media landscape. Notwithstanding the diversification of audience behaviour (Bjur 2009), and the plurality of memories on a variety of platforms as well as the selectivity and ephemerality of contemporary digital memory cultures, the anniversaries can be read as “campfires” intended to unify viewers around what to remember as well as around the very ritual of memory. Simultaneously, in fact, they reflect non-consensus around how to interpret the events remembered. On the anniversaries, television offers an existential space for working through the undecidable.⁶

In doing so, the medium, I suggest, is struggling to retain its status as the preeminent contributor to the symbolic environment and the primary memory bank of our societies. In a situation pervaded by digitalization, it acted as the unifier that many people would deny the existence of. In our contemporary digital ecology, there are countless threads, commentary fields, and statuses on which we continually edit the present into a perpetual archive of recent pasts (see Lagerkvist 2012). Attending to the tenth anniversary has led to the conclusion that television, despite these changes, attempts to hold sway by constituting itself as stable, as the *site* that will continue to offer, if not social cohesion, then at least some kind of existential security.

Here people are grouping together – or are invited to group together – in a ‘Durkheimian’ manner to experience something significant (see Sumiala 2013). I suggest that when we pay attention to memory practices of our time existentially, one thing that becomes visible is the sense in which the digital age can be described as, in effect, *a quest for communitas* – for what unites and connects us in our “common humanity and mortality” (Turner 1969: 110). *Communitas* is a sense of profound and inspired comradeship. This is of course not a new argument, and has been put forward in relation to electronic

media before. Televisual weddings, Christmases, and natural or man-made disasters, for instance, have also been depicted, as Roger Silverstone does in *Television and Everyday Life*, as "expressions of the medium's capacity to mobilize the sacred and to create ... *communitas; the shared experience, however fragile, momentary and synthetic, of community*" (Silverstone 1994: 21, emphasis added).

Famously, Victor Turner described *communitas* in the context of transformative rituals (*rites of passage*), following the three steps of van Gennep's model: the sequestering of the person, the liminal stage, and the reintegration. *Communitas*, as has been much emphasized, often belongs to the second phase – liminality. Some of the digital memory cultures that I focus on are, similarly "betwixt and between" – virtual mourning occurs as bereaved individuals are in a sequestered state and in their connectivity it seems, that "all are siblings or comrades of one another regardless of previous secular ties" (1969: 111). As in liminality, they seem to connect stripped of rank, they appear anonymous, outcast, sexless, and on the interstices of culture (*ibid.*: 128).

It is worth stressing that the mobilization of *communitas*, and of the sacred, may occur in contemporary memory practices in differentiated ways. On the 9.11 anniversaries, Swedish television consciously offered audiences a ritualistic return by staging itself as an existential space for remembering what they had experienced (in all its complexity) at this very site. I have suggested that despite all the changes within television today, the medium is making efforts to remain important and central in the face of rapid shifts in the new media landscape. Television thereby desires to be the place where audiences can go, to remember, in some cases to mourn, interpret, and assess the significance of their mediated memories of the traumatic news events, as well as to debate the global political consequences in their wake. Similarly, the web memorials and communities of grief also have, as scholars have pointed out, a strong *communal* streak. But online grief and commemoration offer spontaneous, concrete, immediate and unexpected forms of *communitas*. This is what Turner called *existential communitas*: "approximately what the hippies today would call a 'happening'" (1969: 132).

In Conclusion

As I have discussed in the present essay, memory work in the digital age is pursued in the face of three challenges: the temporality of instantaneity, technological capacities that subject memory to endless revision by networked individuals who increasingly choose what to remember, and an accelerated blurring of the private and the public. The digital age is fraught with a number of vulnerabilities because digital memory cultures are fragile and transient – both for individuals and society at large. One-sidedly emphasizing these challenges may, however, make invisible the important paradox that securing memory practices online may be elicited in order to counter the very mass proliferation of selves and memories, and the acceleration of both saving and deleting, that seem integral to our time. I propose that it is fruitful to revisit *communitas* to grasp this situation. This will bring other nuances to the discussion on network memory, and to the 'diagnosis' of the digital age. Firstly, as scholars have recently argued, social networking actually allows for transcending the sense in which there can be only a liminoid or temporary sense of community online:

Pre-modern societies tended to produce a bereaved community, modern societies tend to produce bereaved individuals, and post-modern mutual help groups (online or offline) produce a community of the bereaved, that is, connections with previously unknown others who have suffered the same category of loss—the death of a spouse, of a child, of a relative by suicide, etc. *SNSs such as Facebook, however, can produce what pre-modernity did: a bereaved community.* [...] The person's social networks are thus de-fragmented, and mourning re-emerges as a group experience ... (Walter et al 2011/12, italics added)

Hence, beyond the momentary and 'liminoid' character of *communitas*, here it seems that there is, in fact, a feature of surprising equilibrium, stability, permanence and an unexpected rootedness to these aspects of communal web commemoration and mourning, experiences that contradict or at least problematize the discussed features of the digital age and new memory ecology as endlessly versatile, flexible, fragmented. While they are indeed created when needed, they seem fast at hand but not the least short-sighted, and they seem profoundly meaningful for users. Perhaps this poses a challenge or a complement to the burgeoning discourse on network memory?

Secondly, the existential approach offers a different picture of the digital age beyond the either-or; that is as *either* a utopian realization of community *or* a threat to the collectivity of memory, politics, discourse, etc. I will suggest that both televisual anniversaries of trauma that invite audiences to an annual and collective return and our new multiple media memories compel us to conceive of our hyper-contingent, late-modern digital age as a search for meaning, transcendence and cohesiveness – for existential security. Through a new existential optics for media studies, we may be able to see that, despite the fragmentation of audience behaviour and the pluralization of platforms within the media cultures of the digital age, these cultural memory practices retain an important feature: They echo a basic existential quest for *communitas*. Victor Turner emphasized that *communitas* of religious movements as well as tribal rituals emerge “in times of radical social transition, when society itself seems to be moving from one fixed state to another whether the *terminus ad quem* is believed to be on earth or in heaven” (1969: 133). In our transitional times, new cultures of memory seem to be cultures reflecting a need for securing ourselves existentially in the wake of technological change. They echo most importantly, I will suggest in closing, a pursuit for coming together and for sharing significant moments of ultimate meaning. These phenomena merit further attention in media studies, and future work is needed on how digital memory cultures may enable and encompass a quest for *communitas*.

Notes

1. The present article outlines some of the theoretical vantage points of my project *Existential Terrains: Memory and Meaning in Cultures of Connectivity*, financed by the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation (2014-2018). A previous version of parts of the article has been published in “New Memory Cultures and Death: Existential Security in the Digital Memory Ecology” in *Thanatos*, 2(2) December 2013.
2. I propose that we approach the Internet and in particular our practices of memory online as activating those fundamental and straightforward existential issues outlined by Tomas Axelson: *why are we here; what is the nature of human nature, God, existence; what should I/we do; who am I/who are we?* (2006: 218).
3. The present article primarily stresses the possibilities afforded, that is, how existential meaning may be secured through these memory practices. In other recent writings, I more specifically highlight the

- ambivalences within the digital memory ecology, and the potential loss of meaning due to its inherent vulnerabilities (see Lagerkvist 2013).
4. If we consider the attacks on 9.11, they were in fact considered “historical” across the globe as they happened; they were described (in and on television) early on as containing “a turning-point quality”, something “we will never forget,” and the world was believed to have “changed forever”.
 5. The Swedish channels SVT1, SVT2 and TV4 all commemorated the first anniversary in 2002. The channels offered different types of programming to remember the attacks: live broadcasts from ceremonies at Ground Zero, attention on the anniversary in morning hours news shows coexisted with memory segments in news programs, documentaries and fiction about 9.11, and documentaries. In 2011, the memory of 9.11 seems overdetermined, and the tenth anniversary produced a memory craze on the Internet, in newspapers, on Public Service radio channels and not least on television. It was widely encouraged across the mediascape that people *should remember September 11th* – where we were, what we were doing and how we reacted. The culminating moment was the nine-hour-long memorial broadcast “11 September: the Day that Changed the World” from SVT.
 6. One might think of the anniversaries as *response events* in line with Dayan and Katz: “They mobilize popular reactions to trauma and rededicate a society to the values which were violated” (1992: 150-151). They are thus ceremonies in response to an external event. The anniversaries both pay tribute and wish well (ibid: 149), and in a sense they offer some kind of healing. And yet, in the Swedish context those societal values and in effect the interpretation of 9.11 itself offered during the anniversaries, were *not* monolithic.

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