

University of Groningen

## Activating the past in the Ferguson protests

Smit, Pieter Hendrik; Heinrich, Ansgard; Broersma, Marcel

*Published in:*  
New media & society

*DOI:*  
[10.1177/1461444817741849](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817741849)

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Smit, P. H., Heinrich, A., & Broersma, M. (2018). Activating the past in the Ferguson protests: Memory work, digital activism and the politics of platforms. *New media & society*, 20(9), 3119-3139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817741849>

### Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

### Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*



Article

# Activating the past in the Ferguson protests: Memory work, digital activism and the politics of platforms

new media & society  
2018, Vol. 20(9) 3119–3139  
© The Author(s) 2017



Article reuse guidelines:  
[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)  
DOI: 10.1177/1461444817741849  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/nms](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/nms)



**Rik Smit, Ansgard Heinrich  
and Marcel Broersma**

Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, The Netherlands

## Abstract

This article analyzes the Facebook page *Justice for Mike Brown*—set up during the 2014 Ferguson protests—in order to rethink the role of memory work within contemporary digital activism. We argue that, as a particular type of discursive practice, memory work on the page bridged personal and collective action frames. This occurred in four overlapping ways. First, the page allowed for affective commemorative engagement that helped shape Brown’s public image. Second, Brown’s death was contextualized as part of systematic injustice against African Americans. Third, the past was used to legitimize present action, wherein the present was continually connected to the past and future. And fourth, particular discursive units became recognizable symbolic markers during the protests and for future recall. Based on this typology, we show that memory work, although multidirectional and in flux, is stabilized by the interactions between the page administrator, users, and Facebook’s operational logic.

## Keywords

Connective memory, critical discourse analysis, digital activism, Facebook, Ferguson protests, interpretative repertoires, media memory, memory work, Michael Brown, police violence

---

## Corresponding author:

Rik Smit, Faculteit der Letteren, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Oude kijk in’t Jatstraat 26, 9700 AS Groningen, The Netherlands.

Email: [p.h.smit@rug.nl](mailto:p.h.smit@rug.nl)

On 9 August 2014, the shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown sparked civic unrest in Ferguson, a suburb of St. Louis with a large African-American population and a long history of racial tension (Teague, 2014). Brown was killed on the spot when he fled after a struggle with Darren Wilson, a police officer who wanted to arrest him for stealing a box of Swisher Sweets cigars worth US\$48. The African-American teenager turned out to be unarmed.<sup>1</sup> Police response to people taking to the streets was aggressive. Militarized forces patrolled the roads, tear gas was used, and at least 155 people were arrested (Keating et al., 2014). The protests and violence re-escalated when, on 24 November, a grand jury decided not to indict Wilson and a few days later another grand jury judged similar in the case of African-American Eric Garner who was killed by a New York cop after holding him in a prohibited chokehold.

These events instigated massive press attention (Hayes, 2014: 4). Not only in Ferguson but also in other major cities in the United States, people demonstrated against racialized police violence. Decentralized protests, mainly organized via social media, emerged. Using mobile technologies such as smartphones, citizen witnesses recorded and shared their experiences of the protests, next to the extensive coverage by the mainstream press. Social networking and microblogging sites—mainly Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, Vine, and Twitter—served as public spaces in which people could commemorate Brown, vent their opinions, inform others about new developments, organize rallies, connect with similar-minded people, and aggregate and comment upon mediated material. Social media thus allowed individual protesters and activists to connect to each other and ideas *in time*, across different locations, something that recent scholarship devoted to digital activism has noted (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2015; Lim, 2012).

In this article, we argue that, simultaneously, a temporally oriented discourse emerges within and surrounding protests, which connects the present to the past through protesters' memory work. Memory work is a discursive process—comprising practices, cultural forms, and technologies—wherein the past is shaped and constructed in the present and carried into the future. It can be highly intentional and purposive, as in the case of documenting and recording for future recall (Lohmeier and Pentzold, 2014) or the conscious appropriation of historical figures and symbols for present goals (Jansen, 2007). Other cultural objects and practices, however, can produce unanticipated mnemonic effects. A photo, phrase, or meme then come to “stand in” or represent a moment in time and particular narratives or personal stories might take hold publicly (Gerbaudo, 2015). Potentially, all practices, cultural forms, and technologies can thus perform memory work. But in practice not all do, because certain interpretations of and engagements with the past have more currency in the present than others. Within protests, memory work may help mobilize individuals into action, legitimize their cause, historically situate their struggle, and create a collective identity.

To tease out the connections between digital activism, memory work, and social media platforms, this article analyzes the memory work performed on the Facebook page *Justice for Mike Brown (JfMB)*. This page was set up a day after the shooting and administered by Derk Brown, a Ferguson resident not related to Michael. The page, liked by 50,683 people as of November 2015, was initially set up as an activist platform aimed at direct action, as the first posts by the administrator demonstrate. Yet, it also offered a

space for users to engage in memory work. This ranged from affective and personal practices, such as mourning and condoling, to rational and political practices such as the sharing of purposively documented instances of police violence during the protests which aimed to construct an agenda for the future, or “mediated prospective memory” (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014). Moreover, the page helped spread and amplify particular repertoires, images, and icons that made the protests recognizable in and through time.

Consequently, the page invited memory work on different temporal and relational levels, either as a goal in itself or as a rhetorical resource. It functioned as a space in which private and public, individual and collective memories connected and converged. The resultant “connective memory” is “generated through the flux of contacts between people and digital technologies and media” (Hoskins, 2011: 272). Although memory work is highly dynamic on the page, we argue that the page administrator, users, and Facebook’s operational logic concurrently helped popularize particular narratives and representations and stabilize them in repertoires.

These theoretical observations lead to two questions that guide our research. First, how is memory work constructed and shaped on *JfMB*? This question is geared toward revealing the interplay between humans and technology in representing the past and preserving the present on Facebook. By means of critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 180 posts, and more than 5000 comments, reply threads, images, and videos, we provide a typology of memory work. Second, we analyze which “interpretative repertoires” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) are employed in this memory work. This shows how memory work was used to reach rhetorical goals and shaped understanding of events that occurred after the shooting.

These questions move beyond an instrumental approach that views social media as mere tools for mobilizing, organizing, and coordinating (Castells, 2015: 257). Rather, *JfMB* is a formalized space that shapes interaction and is therefore *part of* the memory work done within digital activism. Consequently, we provide an analysis of cultural forms, practices, and technologies, since these are inexorably linked on Facebook—or on any social platform for that matter. Therefore, this article rethinks the role of memory work within contemporary digital activism, wherein the controversial death of an individual ultimately inspired action against systematic injustice.

## Facebook’s operational logic

Facebook thrives on the affective interactions its users have with the platform, other users, products, and the content shared on it (Van Dijck, 2013). *Sharing* is the imperative on Facebook: not only does the platform constantly ask its users to share, it also selectively shares what it deems important for its users. Users mediate activities, texts, ideas, feelings, relationships, memories, and places to “friends” but also with a company that makes its business out of this information. Moreover, users are engaged in the “affective processing” of data: Facebook expects people to connect, select, rank, and produce digital content (Gehl, 2011).

Facebook users who are interested in specific topics, people, places, or causes can connect with pages about these by “liking” them in order to receive updates on the personalized News Feed and to interact (“like,” share, comment, reply) with it (Bucher, 2012).

Hence, by liking and engaging specific content becomes part of unique informational diets. The more a user likes, shares, and comments, the more visible the page becomes on the newsfeed. This also implies that Facebook's algorithmic favoring can "hide" important news stories. Moreover, certain types of posts and comments are preferred by Facebook; for example, visuals (photos and videos) do well in terms of visibility, whereas plain text does not (Corliss, 2012). Accordingly, users are encouraged by Facebook's architecture to post content that attracts interaction. Popular material thus becomes "most relevant" and therefore most visible on the platform, which in turn attracts more interaction.

Facebook's black-boxed communication interface is governed by hidden protocols and algorithms that, to a certain extent, have become part of our "technological unconsciousness" (Thrift, 2004). The underlying structure, architecture, and affordances of networked technologies "steer" (Van Dijck, 2013) social interaction in a seemingly natural way. Taking this "engineered" or "platformed" sociality (Van Dijck, 2013: 3–18) into account, direct connections to memory work can be made. Facebook's affordances and technological architecture prefer certain creative practices over others, semi-automatically value certain objects higher than others, and steer particular interpretations of mediated material. Its multiplier effect has come to determine popularity and visibility within the new media ecology and it partly explains why certain objects "go viral" (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013).

The commercially driven operational logic of Facebook does not only shape everyday interaction with the platform, but it also affects engagement with the past by, on, and through it. That is, the agency within memory work is distributed on Facebook. It ranges from the highly conscious and intentional memory work of users to the "algorithmic" memory work of the platform, which selects and re-presents digital objects that are highly interacted with. Moreover, because each post, comment, and reply are saved on Facebook, these might emerge again unexpectedly and might shape public discourse in unintended ways. In other words, Facebook pages—especially public Facebook group pages like *JfMB*—can be seen as spaces wherein memory of events and people is continuously assembled by both human and nonhuman actors.

Consequently, when Facebook users engage in memory work, besides other engagements, they do so within a techno-discursive space that is ultimately driven by a commercial strategy revolving around visibility and "the new." How do these "politics of the platform" (Gillespie, 2010) entangle with the politics of memory? This question becomes even more pertinent when memory work plays a pivotal role in the internal dynamics of protests concerning highly contentious issues such as racialized police brutality. The procedural logic of Facebook may help, together with its users, lead to the legitimization, popularization, and normalization of a certain mnemonic discourse. In other words, Facebook's operational logic may help stabilize connective memory's unpredictable and dynamic trajectories. Research into discourse within digital activism—of which memory work is an important part—thus needs to take into account how both platforms and their users shape this.

## Research design

When we examine a Facebook group and memory work within it, we are essentially examining discourse as it is presented within a formal technological environment.

Consequently, “just” critically analyzing this discourse is not enough; it is produced, interpreted, and practiced in interaction with Facebook’s interface and underlying mechanics. Which norms, attitudes, and standards vis-à-vis memory flow out of this interaction between users and between users and the platform? To answer this question, we perform a CDA while also scrutinizing the operational logic of Facebook. CDA is both a theory and method (Wodak, 2001) and is used to study the dynamics of power—particularly pertaining to questions of voice and inequality—within particular discourses.

To tease out the discursive functions of memory work, we employed the concept of interpretative repertoires, “recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 203). Hence, interpretative repertoires can be viewed as the building blocks of discourse, being the frameworks of language that people employ both strategically and unconsciously to construct meaning. Each interpretative repertoire is the result of different memory practices and discursive units (tropes, metaphors, etc.). The uses of discursive units are manifold; that is, there is *variation* within interpretative repertoires that enables contestation (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 172). Identifying these discursive units within the memory work done on *JfMB* revealed how the past is used rhetorically to assert particular ideological stances—how *types* of memory work emerged.

While we conducted a CDA, we also paid attention to the technological features and operational logic of Facebook as to explain why certain posts and comments became dominant and visible. In critical approaches to platforms (Kennedy, 2013; Patelis, 2013), the interface is viewed as an important part of the content: “It is a non-neutral entity, as a cultural text that aspires to power and that frames specific forms of interaction” (Patelis, 2013: 120). Although a thorough analysis of Facebook’s mechanics is beyond the reach of this article, we did investigate the ways in which users employed and appropriated Facebook for memory work and the dominant cultural forms and content that flowed out of this interaction. Thus, we demonstrate how the platform’s logics of visibility and sharing affected the popularization of particular interpretative repertoires and discursive units.

### *Sample and data analysis*

Data collection and the discourse analysis followed nine iterative-inductive steps (Figure 1). In the first step, all posts, comments, and replies between 10 August 2014, when the page was created, and 15 March 2015, when posting activity stopped (8 months), were read, which helped to familiarize the researchers with the data.<sup>2</sup> This resulted in an initial data set of 180 posts by the page administrator and more than 5000 comments and replies. The latter were all anonymized for ethical reasons. Also, observational notes were made during this phase to indicate important moments and events and the emergence of dominant themes and narratives. Second, screenshots were made of posts, comments, and reply threads (1) that *purposively* engaged with the past for present or future-oriented goals, (2) were highly interacted with (through likes and replies) and thus more visible on the page, and (3) contained repetitive and recognizable content (recurrent images, narratives, etc.). For example, a post that called for a rally was not included in this step, yet a *documentation* of this rally to show its non-violent nature was.

Procedures	Steps
Gathering and selecting the data	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gathering all posts, comments, and replies</li> <li>2. Selecting posts, comments, and replies that <i>explicitly</i> engage with the past for present or future-oriented goals: memory work</li> </ol>
Describing and categorizing the data	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Inductive categorization of type of memory work (mourning, documenting, historicizing, etc.)</li> <li>4. Identification of tropes, narratives, symbols within memory work</li> <li>5. Development of tentative interpretative schemes</li> </ol>
Formulating discursive questions and identifying interpretative repertoires	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Identification of questions that the memory work aims to answer discursively</li> <li>7. Clustering of these questions, memory work, tropes etc.</li> <li>8. Identification of regularities and patterns in use of repertoires</li> <li>9. Identification of dominant repertoires</li> </ol>

**Figure 1.** Overview of procedural steps.

Steps 3, 4, and 5 revolved around describing and categorizing those posts and comments selected in step 2. First, the *types* of memory work were identified by asking what memory practices were supported and realized by these posts and comments. For example, a comment might *commemorate* Brown, while another *historicizes* his death. Some posts and comments are examples of *intentional* memory work, for example, those that aimed to “set the facts straight” about Brown’s death, while others *unintentionally* became important symbolic markers or part of the narrative surrounding his death. Step 4 consisted of identifying discursive units and connecting them to the specific types of memory work (step 3). For example, posts that drew parallels between past and present (memory work) often used the trope of the “raised fist” and commemorating Brown (memory work) often involved portraying him as a martyr (trope). After these steps, we formulated tentative interpretative schemes based on our inductive categorizations.

The last four steps concerned the formulation and clustering of discursive questions that the memory work and content of the posts and comments aimed to answer. For example, in a mourning comment, Brown could be portrayed as an average teenager. The discursive questions connected to this would be, “Who was Mike Brown and what did he stand for?” The consecutive interpretative repertoire (steps 8 and 9) connected to this would be “Michael Brown’s identity.” Alternatively, a shared recording (memory work) of peaceful protests (trope) answered the question how the protests should be represented and would be ascribed to the “protest identity” repertoire.

It is important to note that the process of inductive theory building, which CDA ascribes to, is iterative and interpretative. It is “not a matter of following rules and recipes; it often involves following up hunches and the development of tentative interpretative schemes

which may need to be abandoned and revised over and over again” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 177). Consequently, throughout the analysis, we have aimed to provide a typology that demonstrates the complexity and untidiness of mnemonic discourse.

## Justice for Mike Brown

Before we present our typology, *JfMB* requires some more introduction. The page was originally set up as an activist platform to rally support for punishment of police officer Darren Wilson, who shot Brown. As the first post demonstrates, the “cause page” was created “to gain awareness and bring Justice to Mike and his family, what the cops did was just senseless!!!!!! So angry at police right now .... #JusticeForMike #RipMike” (10 August 2014). The phrase “Justice for” was popularized in the (social media) protests in the wake of the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin and alludes to the principles of equality embedded in the foundational history of the United States.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the online and offline protests against racialized police brutality were immediately linked to the past: the shooting was interpreted as the result of systemic injustice and inequality toward African Americans. The profile image used for the page is a photo of Michael Brown’s stepfather, Louis Head, holding up a cardboard sign that reads “Ferguson police just executed my unarmed son!!!” (Figure 2). The cover photo shows the street in which Brown was shot—his body lies just outside the frame—and the hashtag #justiceformike is placed over it. The hashtag plays a pivotal role: not only does it link this page to the hashtag stream within Facebook, it also connects the page to the larger online presence of the diffuse protest movement, most notably microblogging sites Twitter and Tumblr. The page’s description reads, “18 year old ‘Mike’ was gunned down by police shot 10 times and he was unarmed. He was heading home with his friend. Justice for Mike.”



**Figure 2.** The *JfMB* “About” page.



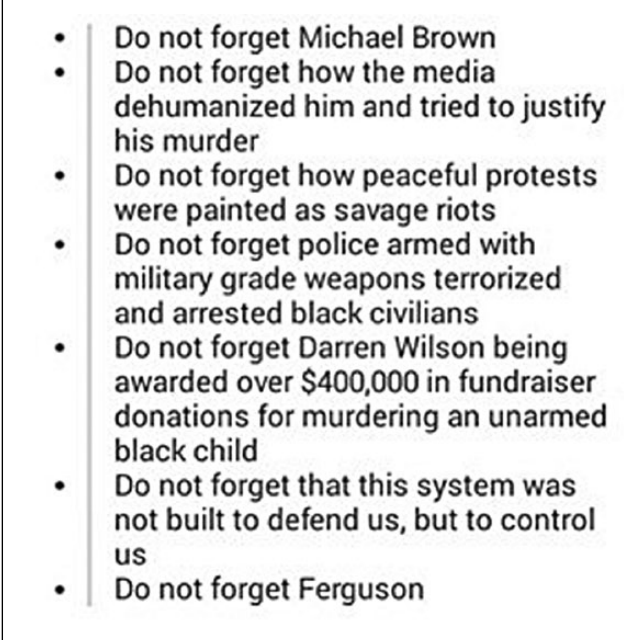
As this text, the profile and cover photos indicate, the page was clearly created to invoke affective responses. Increasingly, whenever a disruptive event occurs, people actively seek out spaces that provide them with more information. They share their thoughts and feelings online and engage with other people's thoughts and feelings. Such alternative socially networked public spheres provide fertile ground for discussing race-related issues and performing racialized identities (Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013). In the week after the shooting, while a protest group grew in both size and (online) visibility, the page became a central space for information, to organize activities, vent frustration and anger, share grief, and engage in discussion.

Because *JfMB* is a Facebook *page* and not a *group*, it is visible and accessible to anyone with a Facebook account. Page administrator Derk Brown, however, was the only one with full control over posting activity.<sup>4</sup> He also had the power to ban users, thereby effectively silencing those who comment or reply in offensive (e.g. racist) ways. Indeed, traces of bans were found in the comment threads. In the posts in which he spoke directly to page users, he thanked them for the support (while users repeatedly thanked him for his work), provided additional (practical) information or corrected users. He also often asked about the visibility of his posts on individual timelines: "If you can see this post please comment (YES)" (16 January 2015). Moreover, Derk Brown energetically covered the protests in Ferguson by writing weblog-like reports and by "live streaming" marches and road shut-downs.<sup>5</sup> He also actively included user's documenting protest actions or events such as rallies, sit-ins, and so-called "shut-it-down" actions (the closing-off of roads and shops). Brown was, therefore, an important agent for memory work on the site. He consciously set the agenda by providing the topics for discussion, moderating and deleting material, and drawing from experience or selecting from the vast amount of available (social) media content.

## A typology of memory work

We now present a typology of memory work on the page and a discussion of the interpretative repertoires applied in this. Although memory work on the page differs on relational, geographical, and temporal levels, it can be viewed as *functioning* toward political goals. It is a means to comment on institutional politics, to increase awareness of the structural problem of racialized police brutality, or to provide a "just" depiction of Michael Brown and the protests for future recall. Particular contentious discursive questions are answered by means of the employed discursive units, for example, how should the protests be represented and how does the shooting fit in US history? The comment in Figure 3 adequately summarizes the memory work on the page.

The phrase "Do not forget" signals that Michael Brown's death and its aftermath should be remembered alternatively and in contrast to "mainstream" portrayals of Brown and the protests, which focused on riots and material damage. A comment like this shows how protesters and their supporters positioned themselves against a monolithic Other that did injustice to Mike Brown, and by extension, to a social group. This is in line with Van Dijck's (2007) conception of memory work as something that allows us "to make sense of the world around us, and constructing an idea of continuity between self and others." (p. 5) Consequently, the memory work on the page was aimed at "getting the

- 
- Do not forget Michael Brown
  - Do not forget how the media dehumanized him and tried to justify his murder
  - Do not forget how peaceful protests were painted as savage riots
  - Do not forget police armed with military grade weapons terrorized and arrested black civilians
  - Do not forget Darren Wilson being awarded over \$400,000 in fundraiser donations for murdering an unarmed black child
  - Do not forget that this system was not built to defend us, but to control us
  - Do not forget Ferguson

**Figure 3.** Screenshot of comments by a user on 10 February 2015.

facts straight” about who Brown was, the injustice within “the system,” and providing an alternative to mainstream media’s coverage of the protests and other police violence. Discursively, the past is thus used rhetorically, and as something to be actively shaped in the present.

As Figure 4 demonstrates, four distinct interpretative repertoires can be discerned in the memory work on *JfMB*. These will be discussed in the following sections.

### **Michael Brown’s identity**

Many discussions, especially in *JfMB*’s early stages when personal information and updates on the shooting were scarce, revolved around the question who Mike Brown was and how he should be remembered in the “right” way. Through mourning, commemorating, memorializing, condoling, and paying tribute, page users constructed Brown’s identity. In borderline or explicitly racist comments, some users would call him a thug or worse, whereas especially family and community members would sanctify the young man, making him a martyr who died for a grander cause. Illustrations of these ambivalent depictions are an image portraying Brown with angel wings on his shoulders and another showing him intimidating the convenience store owner (Figure 5).

This type of affective “impression management” is common on Facebook memorial pages (Marwick and Ellison, 2012). On *JfMB*, page visitors mainly depict the teenager positively. Most personal details and renditions of Brown’s image stress his kindness and

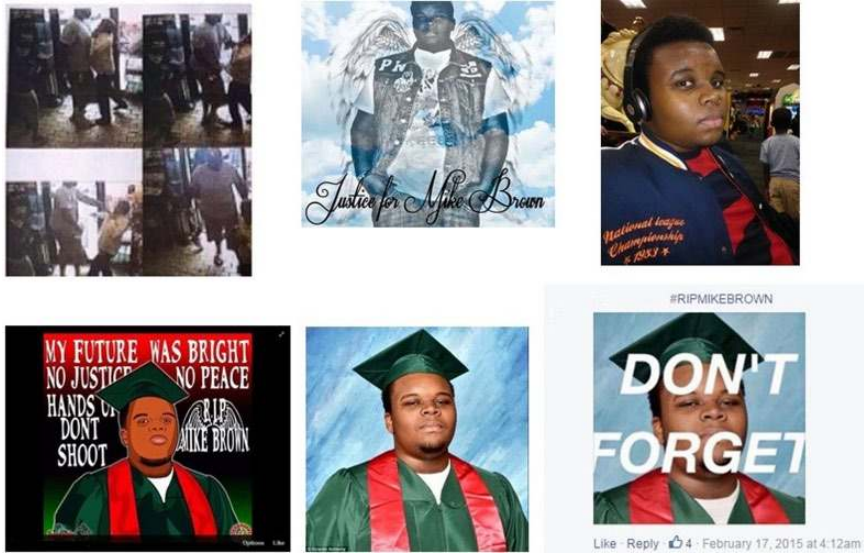
Interpretative repertoires	Memory work	Discursive units (tropes, narratives, symbols)	Discursive questions
Michael Brown's identity	Mourning Commemorating Memorializing Condoling Paying tribute	The saint The son The graduate The teenager The martyr The victim The thug	Who was MB? How should MB be remembered? Where did MB stand for?
Facticity of the case	Selecting official documents Re-mediating media content Updating information	The innocence of MB Wilson as guilty Racist Ferguson police Prejudiced jury Reports as proof	What did really happen on August 9? Why was MB killed? Why was DW not punished for his crime?
Protest identity	Documenting the protests Creating and appropriating memes and icons	"Hands up, don't shoot" "I am Michael Brown" #Blacklivesmatter Protest as non-violent Aggressive response by militarized police	What forms should the protests take? How should the protests be represented? Which symbols carry weight and should be used?
Systematic injustice	Historicizing Drawing parallels Contextualizing Remediating icons	Other police violence Racial injustice "Look how far we've come" Raised fist Black leaders	How does the shooting of MB fit in US history? Is MB shooting the result of a racist system?

**Figure 4.** Typology of memory work and interpretative repertoires.

good nature. Two visual tropes became especially dominant: Brown as an ordinary teenager and as a high school graduate (Figure 5). These photos were posted on the page and other social media platforms shortly after Brown's death and were also often used in news reports. The photos highlight that what happened to Brown could have happened to any Black teenager. Moreover, they have high templatability (Rintel, 2013); that is, they are easily used as the basis for creative remixes and they are easy to identify with. As Figure 5 shows, the high school portrait was appropriated for rhetorical effect. "Playful" interaction in memory work is also stressed by Kuhn (2010: 3): the past, and memories thereof, is "material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and its possibilities" (Kuhn, 2010: 3).

Posts by people who knew Brown during his lifetime stabilized this public identity further. For example, a post by Brown's old kindergarten teacher was shared by the administrator (Figure 6). She called Brown "one of the kindest kids that I have taught." This post is representative of the personal memorial work done on the page that affectively shaped Brown's public identity as an innocent teenager with a bright future ahead. This, in turn, had implications for the tone and subjects of more political discussions: how could it be that such a kind-hearted teenager was killed? Writing from the position of someone who knew Brown well, the kindergarten teacher's claim that attacking a police officer was "NOT his nature" gains in authority. Through commemorative posts like these, Brown's public persona is being managed: who Michael Brown was perceived to be in life served as a means to criticize both police brutality and the violence and looting that took place during the protests.

One depiction that incited much debate, on the page and elsewhere, shows Brown's body lying in the street, the blood from his wounds visible. It was the first photograph that was shared on *JfMB* (Figure 7). To many, this picture was appalling and disrespectful



**Figure 5.** A compilation of popular depictions of Michael Brown.

to Brown's family and his memory. This is understandable especially given the knowledge that his body had been on the street for over 4 hours—another point of discussion on the page. Others, however, argued that it was key to showing the human tragedy of the shooting. Kern et al. (2013) found that on most Facebook memorial pages pictures of the deceased dead body are taboo. The fact that this photo is represented on the page demonstrates that its memorial quality served political goals. It was a means to show what “really” happened and to spark public debate, well beyond the page itself. The finality of the picture stands in stark contrast to the pictures of him taken when he was alive. Coming together, they evoked strong affective and emotional responses.

Sharing photos of the (improvised) Michael Brown memorial at the location of the shooting became a popular way to memorialize and pay tribute (Figure 8). After some time, it even became a fad to take selfies at the scene and share these on *JfMB* and other platforms. Here, we see how Facebook users actively engage with the platform's features in their memory work. Pictures were placed on personal timelines, but made public by the place-tag “Michael Brown Memorial,” a Facebook feature to indicate a “historical place.” The physical place was interwoven with a digitally networked space, which increased its symbolic meaning for the protesters. Therefore, reactions were furious when a police report referred to the improvised memorial as a pile of trash (posted 25 December 2014) and when a person drove through it on purpose with his car (26 December 2014).

As these examples demonstrate, a highly mediated and networked display of affect and support emerged in the aftermath of the shooting. Following the vernacular Web logic of “sharing is caring,” these affective practices that are simultaneously offline and online were highly visible on the page. The offline and online distinction is even further

I'd like to take this opportunity to tell MY story about Michael Brown. I taught Michael when he was in Kindergarten. Michael was one of the kindest kids that I have taught. Michael was quiet, yet funny. He had an infectious smile. Some things I remember most was how Michael's grandfather or dad picked him up from school every day. His mom, dad, and extended family were fiercely protective of Michael and at that time, his only sister, Déjà. They were active in every aspect of his education, conferences, school performances, et al. I hadn't seen Michael in some time and in June, I saw him walking in our school parking lot with a friend. He asked me, "Mrs. Sealey, do you remember me?" I answered, "Yes, Michael Brown, but I am amazed at how tall you've gotten." He gave that shy grin and informed me that he had just graduated and had intentions of attending Vatterott. I asked about his mom and sister and he told me that they were well, and he went on his way. Each of my colleagues, who had the opportunity to teach Michael, have echoed my sentiments. I guess this is why it is so very hard to fathom that Michael's demeanor would change so suddenly as to wrestle with an armed police officer. While I am unsure of all of the details of Michael's untimely death, I can answer with certainty, that this was NOT his nature. Those of you who watched the interview with Michael's mom and dad, you saw a glimpse of Michael's demeanor in his dad, very quiet but proud. I saw the man that Michael will never get to be. I saw his mom two weeks ago and she was excited about his future. She has ALWAYS been her children's biggest cheerleader. I ask that we continue to keep Michael's family in prayer. I understand the anger. But, please don't allow anger to turn into bitterness. Out of anger comes CHANGE, bitterness destroys. Please stay in Peace.

Share

**Figure 6.** Re-posted post from Michael Brown's kindergarten teacher.

blurred in a post with a picture of Michael Brown's mother, Lesley McSpadden, crying, while two young people, presumably relatives, hug her (Figure 8). Her white hat shows the picture of her son with angel wings (Figure 5). The comment, selected as "most relevant" by Facebook and therefore pushed to the top, emphatically expresses the tragedy of losing a child. Integrated within this post are practices of affective processing (Gehl, 2011). Users are encouraged to affectively interact with the post by liking, sharing, and commenting. "One Like=One Hug" reads the post. Moreover, they are afforded to connect to the broader protest network by three hashtags that are immediately visible: #JFMS (Justice for My Son) in the picture, #Ferguson, and #RIPMikeBrown. Memory work in the form of mourning, condoling, commemorating, memorializing, and paying tribute thus actively shaped Michael Brown's public identity, both online and offline, and afforded people to connect affectively to the protest cause.

### **Facticity of the case**

A less prominent, yet important repertoire concerns facts about the shooting. What did really happen on 9 August 2014? *JfMB* can be regarded as a collaborative space in which



**Figure 7.** The scene of the shooting.

numerous “gatewatchers” provided updates on the basis of personal or community interest. Aimed at constructing “prospective memory” (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014), this aggregated material is used to set the agenda for the future and to achieve “justice for Mike Brown.” The memory work connected to this involves selecting and posting official documents, remediating media content, and updating or correcting previous information. Administrator Derk Brown plays an important part in concomitantly shaping the current narrative and public memory: next to filming the protests, sharing this type of information is one of his main page activities. He regularly reminds page users of a recording in which a witness said, “he had his hands up and he wasn’t no threat” (5 March 2015). Users also posted material from professional journalists and government reports claiming that Brown was murdered in cold blood. This became an important narrative that took hold within the protest movement. Three other important, regularly raised points of contestation were the role of prosecuting attorney Robert McCulloch in the non-indictment of Wilson, the veracity of the witness accounts used in the Grand Jury hearing, and Darren Wilson’s own testimony.

Although Facebook does not provide means for users to clearly order and index material, *JfMB* functions as a distributed, yet specialized archive. As a living archive, Facebook favors the communicative aspect of memory work and the present over the past; it makes sharing and connecting easy, while the only way to curate is by integrating hashtags in posts. The platform therefore favors “newness” and present over the past (Kaun and Stiernstedt, 2014). Facebook’s technology supports this in an idiosyncratic way: through #Ferguson, #ShawShooting, and #JustForMike, posts appear in hashtag streams, and on personalized newsfeeds of “likers” and users of the page. In other words,



**Figure 8.** Compilation of two posts showing convergence of online and offline memory work.

*archival* material—physically stored on Facebook’s servers—becomes part of the *repertoire* of page users (Taylor, 2003). The memory work regarding the facticity of the case—selection, re-mediation, and updating of information—allows users to further justify the protests and support truth claims about “what really happened.”

## Protest identity

*JfMB* also became a space to document and share videos and photos of protests and to create icons that made the protests recognizable in the present and future. What forms should the protests take? How should the protests be represented? And, which symbols should be used? The page, for example, facilitated the emergence and spread of Internet memes: “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience” (Shifman, 2013: 367). These “multimodal symbolic artifacts” (Milner, 2013: 2359) are connected to memory work in three overlapping ways. First, they are the products of the “remix culture” of digital media (Bayerl and Stoynov, 2014: 3). They intertextually feed off of cultural resources from the past. Second, memes can become mnemonic building blocks for the identity of protest movements. They are easily recognizable and can be put to powerful political use (Bayerl and Stoynov, 2014; Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2013). Finally, memes create simple

narratives about the past that avoid nuance. They can inspire action, mobilization, and creative activity, but may concurrently lead to polarized and antagonistic representations of the past.

On *JfMB*, memes not only enhanced the protest movement's visibility within social media networks but also became important symbolic markers that signified the broader protest movement against racialized police violence. They were used to document and shape peaceful protests and thus became *part of* the movement. They became indicators of a collective identity by inviting people to contribute and take part. The protests' non-violent character and the aggressive police response were continuously highlighted on the page, making it an important part of how protesters were represented and saw themselves. As symbolic artifacts, memes carry the short-term memory of movements and make it recognizable as such: the meme is an important cultural form and social practice through which protesters can engage in memory work.

One of the first protest phrases to emerge on *JfMB* was "Hands up, don't shoot." It alludes to the witness reports claiming that Michael Brown held up his hands before he was shot. It became a hashtag on social media, a gesture that signaled allegiance to the protest movement, and a cue for creative practice because it was easy to adopt and to adapt. The stark contrast between unarmed people holding up their arms and heavily armed police forces aiming their guns at them provided photogenic moments. The phrase and gesture persisted and spread in TV news, newspapers, and, most prominently, on social media. It further gained prominence when four US representatives made the gesture during a House floor meeting and when the St. Louis rams held up their arms before an NFL match (Figure 9).

On *JfMB*, t-shirts with the phrase were sold (Figure 9) for charity purposes, users started to use "raising both" emoticons, and people posted pictures of themselves, friends, and family holding up their arms. Others restaged the photograph taken of Brown's dead body lying in the middle of Canfield Drive. Even a mobile application, *Handsup4Justice*, was created—and promoted on the page—to record encounters with law enforcement (cf. [handsuptheapp.com](http://handsuptheapp.com)). These bodily performances became recognizable, non-violent means to support the movement. Both practices also directly allude to narratives and tropes concerning Brown's identity (non-violent, innocent, victim) and the disrespectful treatment of his deceased body. These examples further show that the distinction between online and offline action, or at least the display of sympathy, were blurred during the protests.



**Figure 9.** Compilation of "Hands up, don't shoot" images.



The view that Brown's fate could have been any Black teenager's was an important source of inspiration for activity on the page. The phrase "I am Michael Brown" was used in many comment threads and posts. This phrase also connects to other, earlier protests, for example, "We are all Khaled Said" (2011 Egyptian Revolution) or "I am Charlie Hebdo" (2015 terror attack). "I am Michael Brown" and "Hands up, don't shoot" became recognizable symbols that referred to an activist attitude, a socio-political movement, and a historical moment. They became the memorable means by which individuals could easily connect, from a distance, to the protest movement. This conscious engagement with the past through documenting the protests and creating memes out of previously mediated material can be viewed as a type of memory work that allowed the page administrator and users to negotiate the identity of the movement.

### Systematic injustice

A fourth repertoire apparent in the memory work was used to interpret Michael Brown's death and the aggressive responses to the protesters as forms of systematic and historic injustice against African Americans. This type of posts and comments links the present with the past by juxtaposing, comparing and contrasting current and past events, and remediating iconographic imagery. Especially the time of the Civil Rights Movement became a historical era to draw from. For example, a Charles Moore picture from a *Life* magazine photo essay about the 1963 Birmingham Civil Rights protests (Spratt, 2008: 86–87) was juxtaposed with a current picture (Figure 10). By using Moore's photo, users link up to a common journalistic and historical discourse because it has come "to represent and explain an important chapter in American mythology and collective memory: the valiant struggle for civil rights by a people who were suppressed, segregated, and abused by the dominant White power structure" (Spratt, 2008: 102). This is communicated in the photographs through a now familiar trope: White men in powerful positions (holding dogs) and a powerless African-American crowd.

On *JfMB* recognizable icons are both popular to use and heavily interacted with in comments. Stripped of their original meaning and specific context, historical photos are visual symbols that span time and history. They become freely floating, mostly "empty signifiers," that is, "signifiers without signified" that are easily identified with and therefore provide ample materials for political statements and identification with a group or cause (Gerbaudo, 2015: 921). This makes the historical picture ambiguous. It does provide the means for the quick transmission of allegiance within the political realm. However, the use of an icon also reduces the complexities and idiosyncrasies of the current political issue, which may stand in the way of nuanced understanding and solution of the problem. This ambiguity of historical imagery in protest movements is maybe clearest on *JfMB* when it comes to the usage of symbols from the Black Power and Black Panther movements (Figure 10). The "Liking" of these images of previous protests reaffirmed their status as symbolic markers within cultural memory.

Another common practice on *JfMB* was to use iconic images in personal statements about race and the events in Ferguson for rhetorical effect (Figure 10). Martin Luther King's *I have a Dream* speech, for example, is used to support a personal view on the destructive behavior of some protesters. The speech and the image are thus taken from

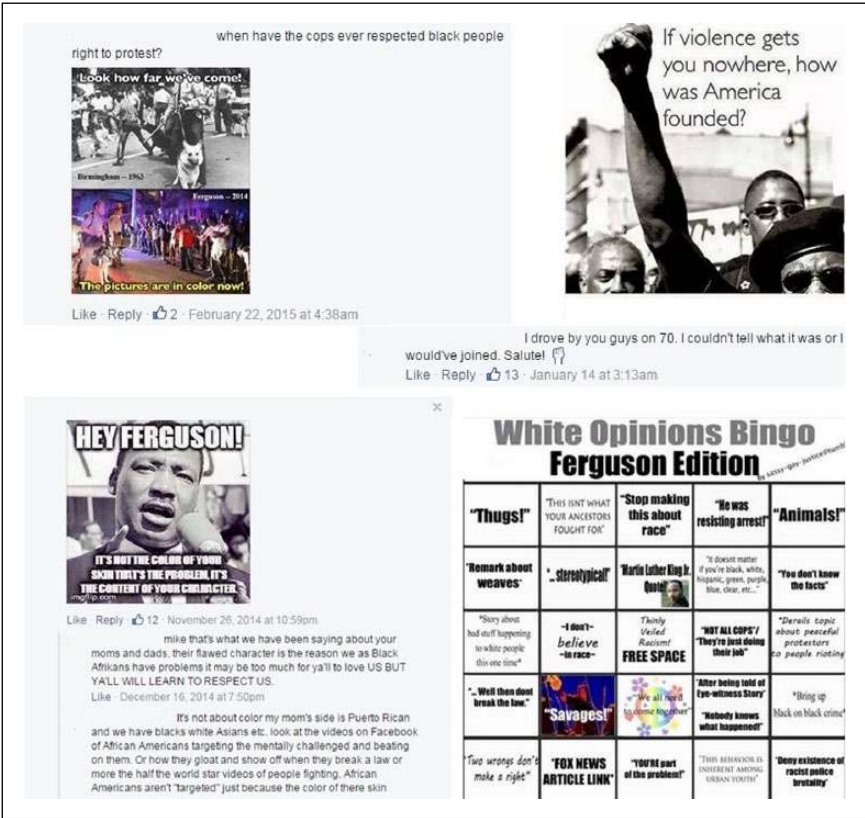


Figure 10. Compilation of historical imagery re-used and appropriated on JfMB.

their original context and placed in a new one. This type of cultural “hijacking” of meaning—or “textual poaching” (De Certeau, 1984; Jenkins, 1992)—common and is often taken as an insult, when not done “correctly.” That is, iconic words of important African-American leaders like King are treated as having a mythical status. When used and appropriated in the “right” sense—as support for the movement against racialized police brutality—they were highly “liked,” were deemed “most relevant” by Facebook in comment fields, and spread quickly. In these instances, we see how Facebook’s technology is co-supportive of the popularization and visibility of particular historical appropriations.

The ownership of history and the right to use it in order to comment on the present is highly central to political interaction on JfMB. A “White opinions bingo” makes this explicitly clear (Figure 10). Comments like “this isn’t what your ancestors fought for” and those using Martin Luther King Jr. quotes are considered “wrong”—that is, typically mainstream and White—appropriations of history. In comments like these, the iconic is seen as a racial cliché that glosses over the experience of being black. Seemingly friendly comments such as “it doesn’t matter if you’re black, white, etc.” and “we all need to come together” are insulting to the more protest-minded users on JfMB, who strive for

recognition of the systemic problem of racialized police brutality and what they see as inherent racism in American society. Thus, by historicizing, drawing parallels, contextualizing, and remediating and appropriating icons, users of *JfMB* engage in a type of memory work that shows the continuity of racial injustice in the present while simultaneously linking present protest with past protest.

## **Conclusion: toward a model of memory work in digital activism**

This article has demonstrated that memory work in digital activism is simultaneously personally affective and consciously political. It allows protesters to connect personal experiences and interpretations of the past as a means to express discontent and advocate for change, now and in the future. Notwithstanding the particularities of national and geographical contexts, protests are fed by lingering tensions and often spark into being by an atrocious event. This is especially apparent when this involves the tragic death of an individual, as in the case of Brown. A wide variety of memory work—from mourning and condoling to documenting and historicizing—then becomes politicized. Today, these practices increasingly take place and are mediated through social media platforms to show allegiance to causes that involve the violent deaths of individuals and the system that produces these.

Although rooted in a specific case, the here provided typology theorizes general dynamics of memory work in the context of digital activism and protests and provides a tentative model for future research. Four stages that are characterized by different interpretative repertoires, memory practices, and discursive units (see Figure 4) can be distinguished. First, a shocking event such as the violent death of an individual inspires individual and shared affective commemorative engagement, fueled by grief and anger. This results in the creation of a publicly remembered image of this individual and what he or she stood for, in the case of Michael Brown an average African-American teenager. Second, protesters and activists contextualize this event within broader societal and historical trends through memory work. That is, the atrocity is framed as part of systematic injustice, in this case racialized police violence. Third, these two first steps inspire and legitimize present action, wherein the present is continually being connected to the past, or, in the case of recording and documentation, the future. Fourth, present action helps stabilize certain discursive units by repeated use of them. This, in turn, may be picked up again within future protests. In our case, the past on *JfMB* is constantly “worked” through the dynamic interactions between the page administrator, users, and Facebook’s operational logic. The resultant memory of Michael Brown, his death, the protests, and systematic injustice are indeed “connective” (Hoskins, 2011) in the sense that it is in a constant state of flux due to people’s constant visible interactions with it. Yet, as our analysis has shown, even connective memory “settles” to a certain extent.

Memory work thus functions as a particular kind of discursive practice that connects personal action frames and provides the building blocks for collective identity formation. For example, the memory work on *JfMB* invites identification, which involves “a process of projection of the individual into various symbols of collectivity that could act as sort of rallying points for otherwise divided individuals” (Gerbaudo, 2015: 921). This,

however, is a double-edged sword: while memory work on social media enables people to connect to each other, causes and ideas, it simultaneously leads to a dynamic in which the complexities of the issues at hand are transformed into what Lim (2012: 244) describes as “a simpler, more tangible narrative that [resonates] with everyday experience.” This is partly the result of the guiding technology and commercial logic of platforms like Facebook. The iconicity, representability, and visibility of images intermingle with the sociotechnical practices of social media users (clicking, liking, sharing, commenting, posting) and the procedural logics of social media platforms (algorithms, code, interface, design).

This, in turn, may lead to a further polarization of stances in contentious political issues such as racialized police violence. In the highly mediated public discourse on the shooting of Michael Brown, facts and fictions blended and provided the rhetorical resources for heated politicized debates. In addition, Brown’s public image became the subject of controversy: some called him a thug, while others sanctified him, effectively making him a martyr. Michael Brown thus “stood in” for other African-American teenagers and became a symbol in the broader social movement against racialized police violence in the United States, most notably *Black Lives Matter*, which emerged a year before Brown was shot. Linking today’s problems to those of the past, old debates of racism and police violence were reinvigorated. Consequently, memory work helped activate the past in the present, but also to spread present concerns to other protests and into the future.

### Acknowledgements

The authors thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. This is based on the witness reports, evidence, and grand jury testimonies that were released in November 2014. See: <http://apps.stlpublicradio.org/ferguson-project/evidence.html>
2. The entire page was saved as an html file for offline reading
3. The phrase “justice for all” is widely used in American cultural memory: ... And Justice for All (1979) is a courtroom film starring Al Pacino. A 1988 album by Metallica has the same title.
4. Unfortunately, page administrator Derk Brown did not respond to requests for an interview.
5. Facebook introduced the live stream option in 2016, after the protests in Ferguson. Derk Brown used [www.livestream.com](http://www.livestream.com) and linked to his page on *JfMB*.

### References

- Bayerl PS and Stoykov L (2014) Revenge by photoshop: memefying police acts in the public dialogue about injustice. *New Media & Society* 18: 1006–1026.
- Bennett WL and Segerberg A (2012) The logic of connective action: digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society* 15(5): 739–768.

- Bucher T (2012) Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *New Media & Society* 14: 1164–1180.
- Castells M (2015) *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Corliss R (2012) Photos on Facebook generate 53% more likes than the average post [NEW DATA]. *Hubspot*. Available at: <http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/33800/Photos-on-Facebook-Generate-53-More-Likes-Than-the-Average-Post-NEW-DATA.aspx> (accessed 31 July 2015).
- De Certeau M (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Florini S (2014) Tweets, tweeps, and signifyin' communication and cultural performance on "Black Twitter." *Television & New Media* 15(3): 223–237.
- Gehl RW (2011) The archive and the processor: the internal logic of Web 2.0. *New Media & Society* 13: 1228–1244.
- Gerbaudo P (2015) Protest avatars as memetic signifiers: political profile pictures and the construction of collective identity on social media in the 2011 protest wave. *Information, Communication & Society* 18(8): 916–929.
- Gerlitz C and Helmond A (2013) The like economy: social buttons and the data-intensive web. *New Media & Society* 15(8): 1348–1365.
- Gillespie T (2010) The politics of "platforms." *New Media & Society* 12(3): 347–364.
- Hayes D (2014) St. Louis suburb is National Media Flashpoint. *Broadcasting & Cable* 144(31): 4.
- Hoskins A (2011) 7/7 and connective memory: interactional trajectories of remembering in post-scarcity culture. *Memory Studies* 4: 269–280.
- Jansen RS (2007) Resurrection and appropriation: reputational trajectories, memory work, and the political use of historical figures. *American Journal of Sociology* 112(4): 953–1007.
- Jenkins H (1992) *Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Kaun A and Stiernstedt F (2014) Facebook time: technological and institutional affordances for media memories. *New Media & Society* 16: 1154–1168.
- Keating D, Rivero C and Tan S (2014) A breakdown of the arrests in Ferguson. *The Washington Post*, 21 August. Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/national/ferguson-arrests/> (accessed 31 October 2017).
- Kennedy J (2013) Rhetorics of sharing: data, imagination, and desire. In: Lovink G and Rasch M (eds) *Unlike us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives* #8. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, pp. 127–136.
- Kern R, Forman AE and Gil-Egui G (2013) R.I.P.: remain in perpetuity (Facebook Memorial Pages). *Telematics and Informatics* 30: 2–10.
- Kuhn A (2010) Memory texts and memory work: performances of memory in and with visualmedia. *Memory Studies* 3(4): 298–313.
- Lim M (2012) Clicks, cabs, and coffee houses: social media and oppositional movements in Egypt, 2004–2011. *Journal of Communication* 62(2): 231–248.
- Lohmeier C and Pentzold C (2014) Making mediated memory work: Cuban-Americans, Miami media and the doings of diaspora memories. *Media, Culture and Society* 36(6): 776–789.
- Marwick A and Ellison NB (2012) "There isn't WiFi in Heaven!" Negotiating visibility on Facebook memorial pages. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56(3): 378–400.
- Milner R (2013) Pop polyvocality: Internet memes, public participation, and the occupy wall street movement. *International Journal of Communication* 7: 2357–2390.
- Patelis K (2013) Political economy and monopoly abstractions: what social media demand. In: Lovink G and Rasch M (eds) *Unlike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives* #8. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, pp. 118–126.

- Potter J and Wetherell M (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. London: SAGE.
- Rintel R (2013) Crisis memes: the importance of templatability to Internet culture and freedom of expression. *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 2(2): 253–271.
- Sharma S (2013) Black Twitter? Racial hashtags, networks and contagion. *Newformations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 78: 46–64.
- Shifman L (2013) Memes in a digital world: reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18(3): 362–377.
- Spratt M (2008) When police dogs attacked: iconic news photographs and the construction of history, mythology, and political discourse. *American Journalism* 25(2): 85–105.
- Taylor D (2003) *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press.
- Teague M (2014) Long history of racial tension set the stage for Ferguson protests. *Los Angeles Times*, 30 November. Available at: <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-ferguson-tensions-20141130-story.html> (accessed 31 October 2017).
- Tenenboim-Weinblatt K (2014) Bridging collective memories and public agendas: toward a theory of mediated prospective memory. *Communication Theory* 23(2): 91–111.
- Thrift N (2004) Remembering the technological unconscious by foregrounding knowledges of position. *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 22(1): 175–190.
- Van Dijck J (2007) *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Van Dijck J (2013) *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wodak R (2001) What CDA is about: a summary of its history, important concepts and its developments. In: Wodak R and Meyer (eds) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: SAGE, pp. 1–13.

### Author biographies

Rik Smit is an assistant professor at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. Smit recently finished his PhD dissertation called *Platforms of Memory: Social media and digital memory work*.

Ansgard Heinrich is an associate professor at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. She has published the book *Network Journalism and her current research focuses on global media, conflict and journalism*.

Marcel Broersma is a full professor and director of the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. He has published widely within the fields of media and journalism studies and co-edited the books *Retelling Journalism and Rethinking Journalism*.