Understanding holocaust memory and education in the digital age: before and after Covid-19


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EDITORIAL

Understanding Holocaust Memory and Education in the Digital Age: Before and After Covid-19

In this special edition of Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History, contributors explore how practices in Holocaust memory and education are becoming ever more entangled with digital media. Although there is a growing body of writing about digital Holocaust memory, there is certainly less about digital Holocaust education. Much of that which exists in book form related to the former, rarely critically engages with digitalness as its primary concern.\(^1\) Notable short chapters or articles, which explicitly foreground the implications of the digital for Holocaust memory include literature by colleagues at the Hebrew University, and Todd Presner’s insightful chapter on the Visual History Archive. However, all of these are short pieces, which focus on single cases, they do not interrogate the landscape of digital Holocaust memory more broadly.\(^2\) They are significant and important contributions to this field, nonetheless. To my knowledge, there exists no monograph or edited collection dedicated to digital pedagogy and the Holocaust (at least not in English). Literature about digital Holocaust education tends to be either written by those who created particular initiatives\(^3\) or observers, either cautious or celebratory of digital interventions, who do not engage closely with the disciplines related to the study of these formats (Media Studies, Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, Film Studies, and now also Digital Humanities).\(^4\) As Lawrence Baron noted back in 2005, any study of Holocaust film needs to account for the specificities of the medium and not naively compare it to literature or historical sources, for it will always fail to be a good enough or appropriate source of representation of this past in any such comparison.\(^5\) The same is true of digital media. We must also resist any temptation to think about ‘the digital’ as one cohesive, collective type of media. Whilst Wulf Kansteiner
has argued for more integration of digital logics and cultures within Holocaust memory, I advocate for an increased engagement with critical digital theory about them too.

The title of this special edition, and editorial, includes the phrase ‘the digital age’, which refers to the contemporary condition in which digital technologies are ubiquitous in many people’s everyday lives. We watch digital television, listen to digital radio, sometimes even see theatre performances broadcast digitally to cinemas, we work on digital devices, we carry digital mobiles with us wherever we go, we might even engage with tracking devices, such as sports watches, or the Internet of Things through smart heating or other domestic setups. Our everyday landscape and our mediascape are one and the same thing. In the following few pages, I want to offer a few provocations which come to the fore when one brings the concerns of some of the fields that directly engage with critical digital theory to bear on Holocaust memory and education, in order to understand better some of the questions these practices face in the digital age. I start with a case study: the timely concern of online Holocaust denial and distortion. This is followed by a more general discussion that foregrounds the significance of media, communication, and cultural studies to Holocaust Studies. Then, I explore how the Covid-19 pandemic offered an opportunity for experimentation regarding what digital media can do for Holocaust memory and education, which has I believe provided, amongst the chaos, stress, and anxiety of this time, an opportunity to really reflect about digital futures for Holocaust memory and education. Finally, I offer brief introductions and commentaries on the contributions to this volume.

**Understanding Holocaust Denial and Distortion Online**

Whilst there is an increasing enthusiasm about using digital technologies at Holocaust museums and sites of memory, for educational and outreach projects, and in Holocaust
research, there is still little evidence to suggest a widespread understanding within the fields of Holocaust Studies and Holocaust Education of computational logics and digital cultures. This has been particularly evidenced in critiques of the visibility of Holocaust denial and distortion online. 2020 saw two campaigns designed to put pressure on social media platforms to stop promoting such content. Firstly, the Anti-Defamation League’s Stop Hate for Profit encouraged companies to stop advertising in spaces that allow hate speech.9 Secondly, the Claims Conference ran the campaign #NoDenyingIt, in which survivors spoke in short videos addressed to Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg in an attempt to compel him to remove denial and distortion from the platform.10 This was hailed as a success when Facebook offered a public statement declaring they would address this issue; yet denial and distortion groups still persist on the platform.11 Although Stephen D. Smith (Director of the USC Shoah Foundation) advocates for banning users from platforms because ‘they don’t just sprout up elsewhere’, I am more sceptical that banning in itself is enough.12 Such an approach is only temporary and does not get to the core of the cultural reasons why such discourse is becoming increasingly visible in online spaces.

To understand Holocaust denial and distortion online, we need to consider several factors. The algorithmic culture that enables such content to be recommended to users who come across pages promoting these discourses, whether accidently or purposefully, is absolutely core to platform capitalism. The design of these algorithms is based on the attention economy – the need to keep users on the platform as long as possible.13 They function by recognising patterns in user input and responding to that with similar content, as well as promoting material that has been voted up by other, often similar, users. Likes and comments by other users help draw particular posts to the attention of wider audiences. It is not entirely the corporation or the algorithm’s fault; rather this culture develops through a symbiotic relationship with users (that is not to exonerate the companies from any guilt!).
Social media offer opportunities for users to become ‘produsers’ (both producers and users simultaneously), contributing not only explicit content but also implicitly to the popularity rankings of existing material. These platforms are also heavily reliant on forms of passive interactivity, by which corporations are secretive about how and what data they harvest, and the extent to which they use it for profit and, more concerningly, to manipulate user behavior. The idea that media corporations might manipulate consumer behavior is of course not new; this has been the staple of the advertising industry since its birth. Nevertheless, the ubiquity, extent, and secrecy about data use in the digital age poses serious ethical questions that are not only related to the increasing visibility of Holocaust denial and distortion, antisemitism, and the alt-right, but to digital culture more broadly. This case is exemplary of how Holocaust studies in the digital age is a media studies issue.

Algorithms of course do not only rely on user input at the interface but are designed by human programmers; they are simply instructions written in code. There are still a limited number of algorithmic types used today, the most common are: simple recursive, backtracking, divide and conquer, dynamic programming, greedy, branch and bound, brute force, and randomized. There are multiple sources online that offer a basic introduction to these for the interested reader. Developments in machine and deep learning offer the potential for more advanced algorithms in the future, as computers learn to programme themselves. Nevertheless, these are still based on machine learning sets, with rules established by humans, and structured in relation to particular beliefs and ideologies within certain human cultures. ImageNet was a troubling early example of a machine learning set based on online photographs. The fact that sets like this have been used to teach more contemporary ones is deeply concerning when their tagging includes misogyny, xenophobia, racism, and other forms of prejudice. We need to delve deep into the history of digital development to address the fundamental issues of machine learning and prejudice. We should
also be sceptical of the possibility that we can ever teach machines not to categorise the world in this way, given the wealth of linguistic and image-based media humans have created, rooted in prejudices and stereotypes.

Furthermore, the existence and persistence of Holocaust denial and distortion need to be understood in relation to digital culture more broadly. To what extent are expressions of such hate speech designed as dangerous incitements or trolling? (The latter referring to instances when users purposefully try to instigate conflict on social media for the sake of it.) The Holocaust, after all, has been situated as one of the greatest ‘taboo’ subjects in Western culture making in prime bait for offending a wide number of people by mentioning it in trolling posts. Whether intended or not, any such expression can lead to incitements of violence. We see this with the Pewdiepie controversy, in which the YouTube gaming influencer’s offensive prank to get people to hold up a sign that said ‘Death to All Jews’ via the freelance platform Fiverr was part of his wider meddling in concerning alt-right-like behaviours which led to the Christchurch mass murderer hailing people to subscribe to the influencer’s YouTube channel in a livestreamed video of his attack just before he opened fire.17 Pewdiepie claimed that his prank was designed to illustrate how people will do anything for a fiver (suggesting he identified that a reference to the Holocaust in this way is a great taboo),18 but the idea that he might be relinquished of any responsibility for the Christchurch massacre is problematic. As the most viewed influencer on YouTube, he has responsibility for how and what he influences. More could be done to examine and work with influencer culture, given its dominance in young people’s digital activity. How might Holocaust education and memory benefit from having its own influencers? How could they attract the notoriety of individuals like Pewdiepie but for social good? We tend to think such fame comes hand in hand with being provocative and controversial, but it was Malala Yousafzai’s position as a young blogger for the BBC that brought international attention to
her when she was shot by the Taliban, and Greta Thunberg has proven otherwise in relation to climate change activism. Whilst social media platforms may be designed for corporate gain, they can be used for social good too; we need to focus more intently on how to take advantage of and disrupt digital practices for such benefits. The problem is not the digital technology in itself; but how creators decide to use it.

Holocaust organisations have tended to focus on Holocaust denial and distortion in mainstream spaces. However, once such expressions have reared their ugly heads on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, it is almost too late to have an impact on their effect. We need to be turning our attention to the online spaces where Holocaust memory and education is pretty much absent. These include the Dark net, where Nazi memorabilia changes hands; 8kun, 4Chan and Reddit, where antisemitic, alt-right, and distortion and denial ideologies have proliferated; and online gaming environments, which have also become prime for cultivating communities of hate. #Gamergate brought this to public attention in terms of misogyny, but hatred towards women, people of colour, Muslims and Jews are all tenets of the ideologies of the far- and alt-right. By the time regular users of these platforms share ideas in online spaces more familiar to Holocaust organisations, they have already been indoctrinated and these messages have already been seen by thousands if not millions. To what extent do Holocaust education and memory need visibility on these alternative platforms and in spaces like the Dark net? It may not be productive: we might be fending off Holocaust denial more than promoting Holocaust education, and we may put individuals in danger of doxing (when a user shares someone’s personal details to encourage others to target them in the offline world), or maybe not. However, it is not only the spaces that matter, but the forms of communication. Posts expressing alt-right sentiments tend to be post-representational: they are about circulation more than message (as Rob Topinka has recently noted in relation to the Boogaloo Boys), and foreground affect and emotion over meaning;
the Web has long been understood as a space that creates networks of connectivity and feeling. How do the discourses of Holocaust memory and education, which have for so long been dedicated to questions of representability, intercept this field? This is not about engaging neo-Nazis or Holocaust deniers in a dialogue, but about being at least equally if not, I would hope, more visible online than the alternative. This not only means having a visible presence on multiple platforms as an institution but encouraging circulation of content and giving users that comment and share, visibility too. It is about being ten steps ahead of the alt-right in terms of how digitally savvy we are. If ‘White nationalists are being “innovative opportunists”, finding openings in the latest technologies to spread their messages’, Holocaust educators, commemorators and researchers have to be too. Creating digital projects at educational sites (online or offline) is not enough.

Conspiracy theorists, trolls, and those that espouse hate speech online must also be understood in terms of gaming culture and this is why I am more sceptical than Smith about the possibility for deniers and antisemites to reappear elsewhere after they are banned from platforms; navigating censorship is part of the game. Tech utopians after all conceptualised the Web as a libertarian space rooted in freedom of speech (this is echoed in Zuckerberg’s previous refusals to deal with content on Facebook). Many users believe censorship is the very opposite of the epitome of the Web; it does not belong online. When people or platforms are banned, the challenge is to find a new way to get back online. This is what happened when 8Chan was pulled by its server support CloudFlare, but reappeared days later as 8kun. ‘Pepe the Frog’ has sometimes been adorned with SS paraphernalia, but in images in which he is not, he may be construed as an innocent cartoon frog. For those ‘in the know’, however, he represents their community and identity. The banned subreddit /r/n***** was replaced with /r/GreatApes and other equally offensive titles that used terms designed to avoid the censor. However, semantic adjustments have also been used for good. (((name))) – a
marker once used by neo-Nazis to identify other users as Jews prime for doxing attacks, has now been commandeered by Jewish users as a form of resistance: proudly announcing their identity to the world. @Whatswrongwithmollymargaret replaces letters with numbers or symbols to promote women’s sexual health on Instagram, to work around the platform’s problematic censorship of signifiers of female genitalia.26 Navigating online spaces is about knowing how to play the game; it is essentially a gaming culture. Therefore, ludic logics need to be taken more seriously within Holocaust education and memory. Whether we decide to play the game or not, we need to understand it.

**Foregrounding the Significance of Media, Communication and Cultural Studies within Holocaust Studies**

There is an astonishingly wide range of literature available from within Media Studies, Communication Studies and Cultural Studies that interrogates computational logics and digital cultures, and their implications for wider society. There needs to be more interdisciplinary thinking between Holocaust Studies and these disciplines, and more training in these fields for those working on Holocaust memory and education digital initiatives.

The first concern is computational specificity. We need to understand what defines the computational. Is there anything new about digital media? The field of media archaeology would suggest we should be sceptical of the idea that it is radically new, instead such work recognises patterns from media pasts in our contemporary digital mediascape.27 In contrast, Lev Manovich’s seminal work *The Language of New Media* identifies five specificities of computational media: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding.28 The first presents ethical questions for Holocaust memory explored later in this special edition regarding the tension between the Holocaust as big statistics (such as the ‘6
million’) and the indexing of prisoners by SS officials, and the qualitative details of individual testimonies, and visits to specific historical places. Modularity refers to the fractal nature of computational media; discrete elements can be brought together in one display, for example video testimony, maps, text, the physical landscape of a memorial site and photographs can be accumulated into a singular Augmented Reality experience. This offers great scope for thinking about the multiple layers, perspectives and dynamics of Holocaust memory and opening up space for critical engagement with this past. It is perhaps no surprise then that such initiatives are becoming increasingly widespread, one of which is explored in this volume. Automaton and variability raise questions about authorship and gatekeeping of historical and commemorative discourses about the Holocaust. If any machine or human could possibly alter the content of something shared online, what effect does this have on the veracity of it? Archival material and testimony are core tools in Holocaust memory and education, does this call for the introduction of further materials that can productively be manipulated? Or, for introducing training in how to manipulate content for good? If online cultures are increasingly post-representational, does authenticity still need to be the dominant concern for Holocaust memory and education? Do historical information and authentic evidence have value in the affective networks online? As I argued in my most recent monograph, we do not necessarily need to be fearful of archival manipulation per se, filmmakers like Yael Hersonki and Peter Forgacs have performed this in deeply powerful and meaningful ways that have supported rather than hindered Holocaust memory. By the term transcoding, Manovich means that code can be turned into cultural meaning and vice versa. This is imperative to understanding computational media as more than closed texts; they are essentially dynamic and always have the potential to change through system and humans working in symbiosis. Whilst Manovich has been criticised for comparing digital media too heavily to cinema, and thus others have questioned his argument about computational
specificities, it is clear to see that whether these assets are only relevant to the digital or more widely embedded in other media, they are certainly essential to the functionality of computational media.³²

Beatrice Fazi has furthered discussion about the computational as based on the intelligible, quantifiable, discrete, and discontinuous in contrast to classic understandings of affect in the lived-world as continuous, qualitative, and related to the flow and movement between agents.³³ She argues that the former list characterises digital aesthetics. This is an important and marked shift from claims of digital media remediating existing forms.³⁴ Fazi looks deep into the machine, whilst remediation focuses on the representational surface. We need to consider both in thinking about designing Holocaust memory and education with digital media. I would add to this debate the fact that we need urgently to attend to the symbiosis between human and computer – that the lived-world Fazi describes is continually entangled with the computational. We see the negotiation between the two explicitly in examples of virtual tours online. When one tours the Auschwitz State Museum via the institution’s panoramic platform, you must click on directional arrows which trigger a static ‘judder’ moving the user between discrete photographed scenes. Yet, the user is still embodied in their lived-world, still experiencing their natural bodily affects, movement, and flow as they interact with the interface. The tour relies on the relationship between the user clicking with their mouse and the more discontinuous motion of the computer system.³⁵ It also hopes to provoke an affective experience for the user, which is felt in their body (including their mind). It is also distinct from a physical tour of the actual site because you cannot enter the buildings, so we remain detached from the interior spaces.

As introduced in the example of Holocaust denial and distortion mentioned above, we need to engage more extensively with archaeologies of machine learning practices, particularly in terms of implications of racism and xenophobia written into learning sets.³⁶
We need to move away from the myth of the big scary ‘algorithm’ and recognise that any algorithm is simply an instruction written in code that relies on human interventions both from within corporations and by users. By focusing on the consequences of algorithmic design for Holocaust education and memory, we can establish training opportunities so that more people have the skills and confidence to write them, therefore encouraging programming for good. What ethical responsibility do Holocaust institutions have for transparency to their users? Would the most ‘authentic’ or ‘ethical’ forms of digital Holocaust initiatives foreground the effect of user input on computational response, and make code open source? A further question at the computational level is how the computer understands content input by programmers. Tod Presner has argued that computer-driven searches can draw attention to lesser-known narratives within archives, but how does the computer understand the sources it highlights? To give one example, I recently explored the Hiroshima Peace Museum’s Google Arts and Culture exhibition which contains several photographs. Each of these could be opened in a bigger window, where I could zoom-in. To the computer, each image was an instruction in the code to source an image file, such as a .png or .jpeg. To me as the user, I was able to zoom into the details of a cabinet which had been hit with shrapnel from the blast. I could also perform the same gesture to look more closely at the cancerous lesions on the body of a now-deceased, anonymous naked woman. This activity questions the parity of the transcoding process mentioned by Manovich. In code, there was little distinction between these images except letters defining them as different files to be sourced. Culturally, one of these images felt rather banal – an everyday domestic object, the other was grotesque and left me feeling uncomfortable as I was able to study a deceased individual murdered by the US forces who dropped the atomic bomb, as if she was an object like the cabinet.
Whilst Manovich, Fazi, and others have focused on the computational specificity of digital media, some scholars study them as cultural phenomena. At one end, these digital cultures are celebrated for encouraging participation through user-generated content, and more dialogical engagement between corporations and users. The sharing and gift economies are celebrated as ways in which users negotiate their relationships with companies and manage to have agency in these spaces. At the other end, scholars fear the corporate control of the Internet. Whilst it was designed by those who loved the idea of a non-hierarchical, open access and open-source space, the Internet has become increasing commercialised since the 1990s and the libertarian ideals of its biggest advocates have enabled the amplification of hate speech. Media scholars who are more inclined to write from a Marxist perspective are particularly critical of the free labor users perform for the sake of corporate profit. The Internet was tentatively celebrated as offering more democratic engagements, but as Jodi Dean has argued, conversations online tend to be destructive rather than productive, and Mykola Mektoykh’s study of comment threads associated with YouTube videos of the Lodz Ghetto supports this. What is the place of Holocaust education and memory within this landscape? How can institutions negotiate their power relations, and relationships with users?

As I have discussed elsewhere, we also need to more carefully consider the discourse through which we describe digital initiatives. This is not simply a matter of semantics, but rather I argue that by choosing our words carefully and precisely, we become more nuanced in how we conceive of and then use digital media. Words like ‘virtual’, ‘interactivity’ and ‘immersion’ are corporate buzzwords promoted by tech utopians, and in industry magazines like Mondo 2000 and Wired. In media, communication, and culture studies, however, these terms have long, convoluted, contradictory histories and are often associated with negative connotations, particularly in relation to disciplining and controlling citizens’ thoughts and
behavior. They have been understood as techniques for conditioning society. Furthermore, notions of full immersion or complete interactivity are also idealistic and unachievable. Elsewhere, I have suggested intra-action and mixed reality might be better paradigms that acknowledge the ever-growing entanglement between actants (material and non-material, human and non-human) both in the lived-world and in the digital sphere which define digital Holocaust education and memory.

Whilst media scholars have long been critical of the, questionable, ethics of surveillance capitalism, it took the Cambridge Analytica scandal to bring this to the public attention. We need to take this seriously in Holocaust memory and education. Silicon Valley is still in denial that the utopian ideals of what the Internet could be, as proclaimed in John Perry Barrow’s *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,* have not come into fruition and thus its tech companies are resistant to change, reluctantly making minimal adjustments only when international furore threatens their corporate freedom. Who does one choose to work with in the production, distribution, and exhibition stages of a digital initiative? Does it do more harm than good to have a presence on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube? What about creating an exhibition on Google Arts and Culture, run by a data-hungry corporation? How complicit are we in the manipulation of user behavior if we are contributing content that attracts said users to spaces owned by these corporations? What are the long-term consequences of this for the user (especially if an institution’s post offers them an opportunity to share personal information, such as their Jewish, Roma or Sinti identity)? How do we negotiate the ability to make education and memory initiatives visible to broad publics and our responsibility to our memory communities? Do we need to develop activist tactics to resist platform’s mechanisms of control, or would it be better to create our own network of memory and education online spaces? The European Holocaust Research Infrastructure is already doing impressive work in
In this regard, but how can we encourage new audiences to invest in, produce, and take responsibility for Holocaust memory? How can we target those on the periphery, more vulnerable to being groomed by the alt-right? Surely, the best Holocaust education programmes would particularly want to engage with this audience.

Digital media can offer opportunities for advanced networking, mapping, and layering of modular content. Whilst Manuel Castells is critical of the power relations created within ‘the network society’, there is potential for such logics to help us disrupt traditional notions of the canon and simple teleological narratives. The Holocaust is not a simple history, it is a complex web of multiple narratives, people, and sites, which affected huge swathes of society and culture across the globe before, during and after the genocide. In one of the first pieces of academic writing about digital Holocaust memory, Anna Reading noted that computer terminals at the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance, in Los Angeles, rarely triggered users to perform searches that led to new content and that they regularly looked up ‘Hitler’, ‘Anne Frank’ or ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau’, some of the most iconic words associated with this past. This contrasts Presner’s more recent work on the Visual History Archive, which whilst still sceptical of the canon, is slightly more hopefully about the ways in which digital interventions can draw attention to lesser known people and narrative. Disrupting canons and encouraging learners to consider multiplicity, dynamism, and complexity in history speak to concerns of the wider decolonizing agendas within museology and pedagogy. The arguments, here, are that it is the very structures and traditions of our organisations that need to be reconsidered because they were instrumentalised in the colonial era and reflect power relations of that time; working in this way equates to complicity in the continuation of logics of violence. This is not what Holocaust education and memory wants or should do. Decolonising our practice does not simply mean including more stories from the Global South and ones particularly embedded in histories of colonialism, such as the Beau Bassin
detention centres in Mauritius or the Shanghai ghetto, although we should absolutely foreground these narratives more. It also means reconfiguring how we catalogue and present historical data, acknowledging and re-evaluating power dynamics, and questioning what we take for granted as pedagogically sound. The dynamism of digital media is one way in which we can begin this work, resisting the static, fixed ideas of completed texts and disrupting didactic power relations. Nevertheless, the digital is not naturally more decolonial; this depends on how we use technologies.

Not everyone has the privilege of extensive access to or the skills to navigate this digital/physical sphere which extenuates the digital divide. We not only face a dilemma regarding illiteracy in terms of reading and writing but regards digital literacy as well. Yet as media educationalist David Buckingham has rightly argued we should be cautious of offering digital literacy programs that teach students how to identity ‘correct sources’ because this dampens their critical faculties. The example he gives is teaching about fake news. If we just provide a list of key identifiers of dodgy websites, and a list of known ones and contrast these with mainstream media sources, we do our learners a disservice. The phone hacking scandal in the UK, which led to the Leveson Enquiry is just one example of established journalism corporations not following their own ethical codes of practice. Furthermore, this does not equip students to analyse historical media sources. Der Strümer was a mainstream publication in Nazi Germany and the Wochenschau was a newsreel that was regularly broadcast across Nazi-occupied territories. Today, many nations have state-controlled and state-censored media; others face corporate monopolies over information. We need to encourage students to understand codes and conventions, and practices within media sectors so they can learn to make judgements for themselves. This is an education that combines media studies, linguistic and historical skills. Some Holocaust organisations, notably USC Shoah Foundation, offer programmes that already begin to combine these different
disciplines. However, the Shoah Foundation has released its VR project *The Last Goodbye* on Oculus, which demands users signup to a Facebook account to use, and have partnered with ProQuest to distribute their Visual History Archive to universities across the world (and ProQuest has just been acquisition by Clarivate, a data analytics corporation). Thus, the very users it is educating about digital literacy, might be unwittingly or reluctantly sharing their data with corporations, who collect them for non-educational purposes.

The final point I want to highlight is the ecological impact of introducing digital technologies, which often have increasingly short lifespans to encourage consumption of the latest models. Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller foreground this concern in their book *Greening the Media*, which is essential reading for any organisations considering investing in digital media. Whilst we often think about such media as immaterial; it is deeply material. We may try to retain our hardware beyond any initial contract, but inevitably corporations will stop supporting updates for our device and then one by one our apps will cease to function. When we recycle the hardware, young children, mostly in the Global South, will risk their lives picking out precious but toxic materials to be reused; the consequence of their work is that many do not see adulthood because they die of poisoning. We feel good about ourselves of course though because we did our bit and recycled. The same elements that cause their deaths, are mined in dangerous conditions by child soldiers, enslaved peoples, and otherwise exploited and vulnerable individuals and form key components of our upgraded devices. The demand for new tech increases the amount they must supply. The more we invest in big tech, the more we contribute to these cycles of exploitation, and to the environmental damage caused by increasingly large servers and electrical waste. This speaks neither to the green policies nor the human rights advocacy of Holocaust museums, memory sites, and educational organisations. Sustainability needs to be at the forefront of any plans.
to implement digital technologies to ensure such interventions are performed as ethically as possible.

**Digital Holocaust Memory and Education in the Covid-19 Age**

This special edition was proposed to the *Holocaust Studies* editorial team before the Covid-19 Pandemic had begun. The impact of the digital was already a significant concern for thinking about Holocaust memory and education. Nevertheless, the pandemic coincided with a major year in Holocaust memory: the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the last Nazi concentration camps and the end of World War II. Sites of memory and commemorative organisations had to rush to produce online versions of what would have been incredibly large and momentous in-person events held at specific physical sites. Like all memorial museums, Holocaust exhibitions foreground objects, which aim to stand-in for every-one and -thing that was lost in this genocide; the very fact of standing before these things provides material evidence to visitors that it happened. The restrictions introduced to tackle the pandemic forced museums to close their doors and perform outreach and education online-only. This involved mediating simulations of objects, presented as photographs or in videos, which at the backend the computer only understands as paths to source files. How does this affect issues of authenticity, evidence, materiality, and the affective encounter of seeing historical objects with your own eyes ‘for real’ before you in a museum?

Many museums and guides offered virtual tours. Some of these aimed to simulate the physical experience of visiting their spaces which suggested curators, guides and visitors were longing for tangible cultural visits. For example, the education team at the Bergen-Belsen Memorial provided live Instagram tours where the guides would walk around the
physical site in bitesize tours, each one on a specific theme. The team at the Dachau Memorial presented object stories via social media and presented tours via Zoom, with speakers onsite. These virtual tours enabled many to feel as if they were there, whilst trapped inside their domestic sphere. On one occasion, teams from Bergen-Belsen, Dachau and Neuengamme partnered to provide a Zoom tour, where educators from each sites explored the liberation histories, passing between speakers across all three memorials. This example foregrounded the network logics of contemporary computational culture, although the networking was between institutions more than with participants, who remained as distanced viewers. There were only a handful of us in the Zoom call (less than 5 non-hosts), the rest of the audience watched on social media, where they could comment but the speakers did not respond to them. The Jewish Holocaust Centre, Melbourne offers an interactive, 360-degree self-guided tour of their, now former, exhibition space on their website. Whilst this was not designed specifically for the pandemic, but rather as an archive of the centre’s displays whilst they move to a new space, it offer the opportunity for visitors to connect with the space during lockdown. However, this virtual exhibition was not simply a remediation of the previous physical space, rather it was augmented by behind-the-scenes content where visitors/users could watch curators talk more about items in the collection.

One particularly interesting example however is the offering from Jerzy’s Wójcik, who is presenting tours of the Auschwitz State Museum but in a style that can only be described as more digitally specific than the type of virtual tours described above which remediated physical visits. Wójcik invites his participants to ‘visit’ an entirely and explicitly mediated version of Auschwitz. His tour begins with a Google map, which he zooms in and out of, locating Auschwitz in today’s geographical landscape whilst he explains its difference to the time when the camp was operational. He takes participants through the Auschwitz State Museum’s panoramic tour, which does not allow access into the buildings,
but he mixes this with, what I assume are, his own brief video recordings and photographs of objects inside the exhibition. He also embeds online learning resources from the museum and Yad Vashem, simultaneously introducing participants to content, and sources they can explore in more detail later. He combines pre-existing digital content with his own material presented through the dynamic presentation platform Prezi, which creates movement between content. This combination of materials and mode of presentation creates a distinctly networked and mediated experience, rather than suggesting the virtual event is *as if* we are touring the physical sites. ‘Auschwitz’ materialises here as a place related to a wider network of Holocaust memory and education, not an isolated historical site. Furthermore, Wójcik presents this through a Zoom meeting, in which he actively encourages participants to ask questions throughout, continuing the responsive role of the ‘guide’ opposed to the more didactic online ‘presenter’, which many organisations adopted for virtual tours.

Whilst many perceive the digital divide along generational lines, several elderly survivors keenly delivered testimony on Zoom, Facebook live and other platforms, whilst those of us in the classroom have seen younger generations struggle to negotiate the merging of private and public spaces, preferring to keep their cameras and microphones off. There has been an outburst of ‘virtual’ events related to Holocaust memory and education, including those ran by myself on [https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/digitalholocaustmemory/](https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/digitalholocaustmemory/). Concerns were raised about using Zoom for such projects quite early on as a Yom HaShoah event hosted by the Israeli Embassy in Germany was ‘Zoom-bombed’ with antisemitic and neo-Nazi content, and several other events faced similar attacks. (Zoom-bombing refers to disruptive intrusions of video-conferencing events, which normal materialise as taking over the screen, drawing on the shared screen, or spamming the chat bar.) After this, many organisations opted to turn-off the very features that distinguish video-chat software from pre-digital broadcast media. The UK’s National Holocaust Centre presented their events as embedded
video on their website; the Association of Jewish Refugees used Zoom but turned off the chat function. When I presented for the Cape Town Holocaust and Genocide Centre, I spoke to only 6 individuals in Zoom, totally ignorant to the 100 people viewing and asking questions on Facebook Live. There seemed to be an instant mistrust of the software and the idea of interactivity: an essence so many people particularly craved during lockdown. Many organisations failed to recognise their own agency within the symbiotic relation between human and computer and resorted to traditional didactic forms of doing Holocaust memory and education. Registration processes that ask people to identify themselves by full name, username, affiliation, and interest, can help identify questionable users. These users can be cross-checked against attendees as they arrive in the waiting room (easily setup on Zoom), screen sharing functionality can be limited to hosts and co-hosts only, preventing anyone from sharing visual content except your designated speakers, chats can be moderated, and users quickly banned if inappropriate. Cutting off the interactive features of video calls is completely counter to the culture they are trying to create, where everyone in the call can, if they choose, be visible and their agency acknowledged and respected by the organisers. Locking down these spaces excludes contributions from users and reinforces problematic power dynamics. We need to find constructive ways to negotiate between necessary security measures and still encouraging critical thinking and networking within and beyond these events. I have tried to do this with the events on https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/digitalholocaustmemory/ to great success. The animated chats have led to continuing collaborations with individuals and organisations across the globe and have expanded into a Discord Server moderated by contributors from the Global North and South, and entertainment industry computer game designers working with Holocaust survivors, academics, and museum professionals. The aim was to disrupt silos through encouraging digital participation, and it worked. None of this is to say that Zoom is the
answer to the future of Holocaust memory and education, indeed there have already been political issues with the platform banning events held by Hong Kong activists due to the local server being hosted in mainland China. Nevertheless, our experiences of online platforms like this, during the Covid-19 pandemic, should encourage a wider reflection about how we might use digital media and technologies to shift away from traditional, didactic forms of education and top-down memory practices.

The Content of this Special Edition

The articles of this special edition collectively represent a sample of the wide-ranging issues and media that relate to digital Holocaust memory and education. Pertinently, they each think about these two disciplines as interlinked. As a whole, the collection provokes us to rethink the disciplinary boundaries of ‘Holocaust Studies’. Whilst, it has always been an interdisciplinary field (as the subtitle of this journal ‘Culture and History’ recognises), it has tended to situate itself in humanities most dominantly. Yet, alongside digital media and cultural studies, this collection includes articles by artists, those engaging with quantitative methods, and the social sciences. Approaching the integration of digital media into Holocaust media and education requires a broader range of disciplines. This has already been acknowledged to some extent within Holocaust Studies, particularly by geographers, nevertheless this existing research is still recognisable as digital humanities rather than expanding across the multiple disciplines that speak to the analysis and application of today’s media technologies. Each article offers a different case study, spanning interactive testimony, a walking arts project, the integration of VR and AR technologies at Holocaust memory sites, the data ethics of archives, and influencer Vlogs posted on YouTube. These contributions speak to some of the issues raised in this editorial and will hopefully contribute
to continuing productive discussion about the relationship between digital media and technologies, and Holocaust memory and education.

Alan S. Marcus et al. foreground some of the human agents involved in the creation of digital testimony projects. So often, such work is analysed from the user’s perspective. Reporting on interviews with museum staff and survivors involved in the UK’s National Holocaust Centre’s *Forever Project*, the authors explore how these groups, involved in the production process, perceive the pedagogical and ethical potentials and limitations of this approach. As Marcus et al. acknowledge, testimony has become a central tenet to Holocaust education and many organisations are now grappling with how to continue their work in a post-witness era. Some, such as the National Holocaust Centre and the USC Shoah Foundation have prioritised maintaining the survivor encounter through new technologies. Some of the concerns raised by staff members of the National Holocaust Centre in the article’s findings about editing or matching up responses are dealt with in the similar project by the USC Shoah Foundation through the foregrounding of the digital in their research and pedagogical processes. For example, with their interactive biographies, *Dimensions in Testimony*, several team members have written about how they have worked through the socio-cultural and ethical issues related to training natural learning processing to provide smooth and meaningful responses to learners’ questions, without these necessarily being the specific questions that provoked the offered answers in the original recording session.

*IWitness* also allows students to edit testimonies themselves, thinking critically through creative media practice (a mode of learning celebrated by media theorists David Gauntlett, and Henry Jenkins, with Sam Ford and Joshua Green), so that they can create memory texts that are specifically meaningful to them. Whilst the National Holocaust Centre’s approach, at least as illustrated in this contribution to the collection, suggests a tightening of traditional
gatekeeping of memory by the institution, many of the Shoah Foundation’s projects explicitly foreground creativity as essential to the perpetuation of collective memory.61

In the second article, Richard S. White highlights two significant issues in thinking with digital media for Holocaust memory and education. The first, is the relationship between the digital and embodied experience in physical spaces. The Holocaust visibly and physically scarred the landscape of Europe; it also changed population and cultural distinctions across the globe as large numbers of refugees fled before, during and after the war, or were forcefully displaced. His project can be understood as part of the wider ‘spatial turn’ in Holocaust Studies.62 Yet, whilst the majority of work in this area seeks to map multiple experiences in the past, Honouring Esther uses embodied, location-based journeys to make connections between past and present, thus the project aims to stimulate memory rather than to do historical work. White’s project centralises the body of the contemporary witness, encouraging remembrance of the past through creative and critical reflection on the differences between being here, now, and present, and there, then, and the now absent.

The second, is pedagogical: how can we create learning experiences that activate thought? Often, Holocaust education is conceptualised as delivering facts and testing students’ empirical knowledge about the past. This is undoubtedly important, although as studies by the UCL Holocaust Education team highlight, many young people do not know the nuanced details about this complex past.63 The same is probably true about other pasts, and indeed other subjects – can we all recall the process of photosynthesis or how to use logarithms? Holocaust education is dependent on historical details – I am in no way disputing that here. However, if Holocaust education is also about ethical issues, and encouraging empathy and affective engagements with the past so that it encourages Holocaust memory (and there is a worthy debate to be had about whether this defines Holocaust education or not), we also need to structure it as something more than didactically consuming and
retaining information. White’s project *Honouring Esther* does this by combining embodied movement through lived-world space that tracks actual historical maps but through geographical displacement thus encourages walkers to reflect upon difference (not similarity which is so often foregrounded in empathic education strategy – ‘how am I like X?’ is now replaced with ‘how is my experience different from X?’). This is extended with digital interventions which enable the embedding of historical content into the experience and encourage contributions from the walkers, so they can share their reflections more broadly. Composing such reflections becomes part of the learning experience.

In the next article, Paul Verschure and Sytse Wierenga introduce an ambitious interdisciplinary project, which brings together thinking in neuroscience, psychology and pedagogy with computer science and heritage practice at concentration camp sites. Many of us familiar with teacher training remain frustrated with the didactic, more passive forms of knowledge acquisition which exam-based curricula demand whilst we have learnt that more experiential forms of learning are far more productive. The ‘Future Memory’ project illustrates how digital media, here particularly augmented and virtual reality, or Mixed Reality (XR), can enable spatialized and personalized learning experiences that allow visitors to explore historical sites in depth in ways that gives them the agency to design their own route through sources and information, rather than relying on a singular set narrative design. ‘Future Memory’ challenges some of the traditions of Holocaust memory and education, yet it offers ways to think about engaging with the more individualized and participatory practices many have come to expect of Web 2.0 cultures without necessarily relinquishing authority or control from Holocaust institutions, researchers, and curators. Instead, the apps and installations developed as part of this project transform the visitor from the ‘guided’ to the ‘navigator’, without their trip going off-piste in ways that would qualify as distraction from the learning objectives of the site or experience. ‘Future Memory’ illustrates how many
of the logics of digital culture can work with the aims of Holocaust institutions to address some of the pressing issues related to what we might do in the post-survivor era, how we can encourage critical and moral responsibility amongst visitors, and how Holocaust education might face the increasing presence of so-called ‘post-truth’, distortion and denial rhetoric. It also draws attention to how a cultural, collective memory, which is not related to our direct personal history can nonetheless be embedded in our personal memory as a learning experience, which is in itself a process that involves our neurological memory processes.

The next chapter remains focused on the work of institutions, moving away from historical sites to the digital databases of archives. Here, Alexis M. Lerner interrogates how the quantitative and numerate logics of the computational not only inform the backend of such sources but might offer productive ways to learn more about the Holocaust and genocide more broadly. Lerner asks whether given that the impetus of Holocaust education and memory has been to rehumanise the statistics (the ‘6 million’ as individuals), is it ethical and indeed useful for us to think about this past in terms of big data? She works through a number of issues that quantitative data analysts in computer sciences and the digital humanities encounter, but contextualizes these in relation to Holocaust archives, including the Arolsen Archives, USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive, and Yad Vashem’s Central Database of Shoah Victims’ Names. Whilst, as Learner notes, these collections have mostly been used by scholars in the arts and humanities, particularly historians (as one would expect), we are increasingly seeing calls for serious digital humanities engagement with these data from DH Fellowships offered by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure’s growing resources for working with data in quantitative ways. As the digital becomes ubiquitous in our working, academic lives as much as in our everyday experiences, we cannot simply work in silos anymore. Arts, humanities, and computer sciences are becoming increasingly blurred and those of us working in the
former two need, and will need, to increase our skills in the latter to be competent in our fields in the coming decades, as will visitors to historical sites. Lerner’s article offers a humbling moment of reflection for arts and humanities specialists – encouraging us to think about what big data and its subsequent analysis might offer to our scholarship, but with caution about the ethical issues we might seek to contemplate as we try this approach.

In the final article, Tomasz Łysak takes us away from institutionalised and officially organised collective memory practices to social media. The participatory practices of Web 2.0 have become the norm of online engagement in the past decade or so. Whilst there remain thousands, perhaps millions, of websites that are relatively static sources of information, for example those that introduce a museum, its mission, location and opening hours, most Web activity now happens in dynamic spaces. Łysak draws on the methodology of netnography to study Vlogs created by individuals who are not representatives of Holocaust memory or education organisations or professional experts in these fields. His reading of these non-expert creations on YouTube – a platform initially designed to allow anyone – the ‘You’ – to distribute their videos, on a digital ‘Tube’ (an Anglicised slang for television) – delves beyond the representational surface of what we can see, thus moves beyond the longstanding debates about the un/representability of the Holocaust to the specifically digital elements of these Vlogs. Their metadata, viewing metrics, the community engagement with them via the comments thread, the YouTube platform, and the culture of self-promotion that has grown through this and other social media platforms with the advent of Lifestyle Influencers.

Łysak reminds us that when we attempt to read audio-visual material online, we must not only look at discrete uploaded content, from video to text, or the interface, but we must read the source code as well. He draws attention to the logics of platform capitalism at play on sites like YouTube, where affect rules. Media have been toying with and constructing emotional and affective responses since at least the dawn of neoliberalism. This particular era
of (late-)capitalism foregrounds the individual: how we think, how we feel, and our responsibility. The focus on the self in vlogs and selfies is a continuation of well-established neoliberal trends; they are not unique to the digital. The extent to which Holocaust memory and education need to play to this ideology to retain their significance and visibility in culture remains to be seen. The memory activist in me would hope for a way to redeem digital media from capitalist structures for social good. The discussion of YouTube vloggers in this article raises questions about the ways Holocaust institutions engage with social media. Do they need to ‘play the game’ as those who understand the popularity ratings of different hashtags do? Is that appropriate for Holocaust and genocide memory? Do we need to rethink appropriateness for the digital age, if Holocaust organisations are to be as visible as popular non-(Holocaust) experts online? Could there be benefits of pairing Holocaust institutions with successful lifestyle influencers and other digital-savvy individuals, from Twitch-maestros to Reddit moderators to help the former reach new audiences and have a wider image, and the latter, perhaps to learn more about the historical details of this past so their own contributions to Holocaust memory might be better informed?

I hope that this special edition of Holocaust Studies provokes further reflection on all the questions that I and my companion contributors raise. We may not have all the answers yet, but an important first step is identifying the questions. I am incredibly thankful to the contributors of this volume for working with me in these unprecedented circumstances to produce thoughtful, original, and insightful pieces of research, which encourage us all to think more critically, but also productively about the potentials for using digital media for Holocaust memory and education. Furthermore, I hope that this volume encourages us expand the disciplinary boundaries of ‘Holocaust Studies’ so that it continues, productively, through the digital age.
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1 See Cole and Gigliott (eds.), Holocaust in the Twenty-First Century, and Shandler, Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age.
2 Pinchevski, Transmitted Wounds; Frosh, Poetics of Digital Media and “the mouse, the screen and the Holocaust witness”; Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann, “Witnessing Eva Stories”; and Presner, “The Ethics of the Algorithm”.
3 Schellenbacher, “Memento Vienna”; Shaprio, McDonald and Johnston, “Gathering the Voices”
4 Gray, “The Digital Era of Holocaust Education”; Fanning, “Going Online”; Pearce “What are the challenges in and challenges of education?”; Manfra, “Media and Strategies for Teaching about Genocide and the Holocaust”
5 Baron, Projecting the Holocaust, 4
6 Kansteiner, “Transnational Holocaust Memory”
7 Deuze, “Media Life”, Frosh, Poetics of Digital Media; Silverstone, Mediapolis; Couldry and Hepp, Mediated Construction of Reality
8 Silverstone, Mediapolis
9 The Anti-Defamation League’s Stop Hate for Profit campaign can be accessed here: https://www.adl.org/stop-hate-for-profit-0
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I thank a previous MA student, the wonderful Bethany Dawson for drawing my attention to this case study

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There is a wealth of writing about decolonizing agenda, to give just two important examples: Bhambra et al., Decolonizing the University, and Tolia-Kelly and Raymond, “Decolonising museum cultures”

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There are a wealth of writing about decolonizing agenda, to give just two important examples: Bhambra et al., Decolonizing the University, and Tolia-Kelly and Raymond, “Decolonising museum cultures”

Examples of virtual tours with detailed critique can be seen on my blog ‘finding virtuality in virtual Holocaust museums’, accessible here: https://digitalholocaustmemory.wordpress.com/2020/11/03/finding-virtuality-in-virtual-holocaust-museums/; for more on examples of Holocaust memory site projects during the pandemic, I recommend Ebbrecht-Hartmann’s “Commemorating from a distance”


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