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THE GENERATIONAL ROLE OF MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEMORY: A RESEARCH AGENDA

Abstract

The theme of the relation between the media and the generations has been much explored in recent years, with significant results in both the field of media studies and the sociology of culture.

On the media studies side the generational approach has been particularly important in relativising the role of technical evolution. Both the emergence of new media, and the evolution within each medium are considered explicable in the generational approach only if we consider the role played by the ever-new waves of youth audiences (who have experienced innovation as natural and coherent with their needs) in making these socially and successfully acceptable innovations.

On the other hand, considering the media enables sociology to assess one of the essential factors in the permanence of rituals of usage, habits and memorial contents during the aging of generations and their self-identification in coexistence with the different generations (earlier or later).

Within this strand of studies, the present paper aims to consider the interaction between the media, generational belonging and social memory. First, the relationships between memory and generational identity are discussed. Secondly, the role played by the media in collective memory building is analyzed. Finally, a new model of the relationship between the media, social memory and generational belonging is discussed, in the light of the previous discussions. As an example, the model is applied to the case of the different memories of Tienanmen events (1989) in China and in Western Countries.

Keywords

Media; time; social memory; digital media; generations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The theme of the relation between the media and the generations has been much explored in recent years¹, with significant results in both the field of media studies and the sociology of culture.

On the media studies side the generational approach has been particularly important

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¹ See for instance P. Aroldi, F. Colombo, “Questioning ‘Digital Global Generations’. A Critical Approach”, *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook*, Bristol: Intellect, 2013: 175-190; F. Colombo, “The Long Wave of Generation”, in F. Colombo, L. Fortunati, eds., *Broadband Society and Generational Changes*, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2011, 19-35; M. Corsten, “The Time of Generation”, *Time and Society*, 8, 2 (1999): 249-272; J. Wachelder, “Regeneration: Generations Remediated”, *Time and Society*, 8, 2 (1999).

in relativising the role of technical evolution. Both the emergence of new media (for example, television after radio or colour films after black and white), and the evolution within each medium (for example, the transition in Europe from the monopolistic system of the radio-television medium to a mixed one in the late Seventies) are considered explicable in the generational approach only if we consider the role played by the ever-new waves of youth audiences (who have experienced innovation as natural and coherent with their needs) in making these socially and successfully acceptable innovations.

On the other hand, considering the media enables sociology to assess one of the essential factors in the permanence of rituals of usage, habits and memorial contents during the aging of generations and their self-identification in coexistence with the different generations (earlier or later²). For example, the older users of social media, who learned to use them only at an advanced stage of their lives, and who incorporate them into their habits of using traditional media, consider their routines typical of their own generation, contrasting them with those of the following generations (whom they see as excessively addicted to the use of the social networks)³.

Within this strand of studies, the present paper aims to consider the interaction between the media, generational belonging and social memory. It is divided into three parts. The first discusses the relationships between memory and generational identity. The second one explores the role played by the media in collective memory building. The third one focuses on a descriptive model of the relationship between the media, social memory and generational belonging.

2. GENERATIONS AND MEMORY

A good starting point to evaluate the role of memory in the construction of the generational ‘we sense’⁴ consists of considering that every generation lives in history, and meets, in a certain phase of its life (i.e. in the life of its ‘inhabitants’) with certain events, whether they are political, social or environmental.

Belonging to a generation endows each of us with a place in the historical process, and this in turn exposes us (and limits us) to a particular range of experience, thought, and action⁵.

Naturally, the whole community touched by an event, whether of a local or global dimension, shares the same experience. Like many of my compatriots, who were old enough at the time to understand political situations, experienced the drama of the months that followed the 1978 kidnapping of the politician Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades terrorist organisation (ending in his murder), which was obviously experienced with greater detachment in other parts of the world. On the other hand, I shared the television viewing of the 1969 moon landing with a much larger audience, spread all over our planet, and

² G. Bolin, *Media Generations. Experience. Identity and Mediatized Social Change*, New York: Routledge, 2017.

³ F. Colombo, P. Aroldi, S. Carlo, “I Use It Correctly!”: The Use of ICTs among Italian Grandmothers in a Generational Perspective, *Human Technology*, 14, 3 (2018): 343-365.

⁴ P. Aroldi, “Generational Belonging between Media Audiences and ICT Users”, in Colombo, Fortunati, eds., *Broadband Society and Generational Changes*, 37-50.

⁵ A. Coming, H. Schuman, *Generations and Collective Memory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

equally exciting thanks to the resources of the television medium and its live streaming from space.

Yet, the global or local dimension is not the essential element in these experiences from the generational point of view, which lies in the memory of them as they are placed in a certain phase of life. Thus, my memories of the Moro kidnapping or the moon landing are much more similar to those of my peers scattered across Italy or the world than they are (they were) compared to my father's. For my generation, the Moro case was the first major challenge to the democracy that grew up after fascism, and the moon landing was a demonstration of the power of innovation and science as a universal value. The generation of my father had known fascism and war, and the Moro case, though serious, represented a somewhat lesser stage of a historical process, just as the space race represented a possible dimension of the Cold War and the shift on the technological plane in the military challenge between the NATO bloc and the Soviet bloc. As Wohl observes:

What is essential to the formation of generational consciousness is some common frame of reference that provides a sense of rupture with the past and that will later distinguish the members of the generation from those who follow them in time. This frame of reference is always derived from great historical events like wars, revolutions, plagues, famines, and economic crises, because is great historical events like these that supply the markers and signposts with which people impose order on their past and link their individual fates with those of the communities in which they live⁶.

But, as I have tried to demonstrate with my small examples, the opposite is also true, namely that the events experienced in a certain phase of life tend to be interpreted more easily as a break with the past than happens if the same events are experienced after a longer and more highly articulated experience of shared vision. In essence, the great events are such not only in themselves, but also as a function of the phase of the generational experience in which they are located.

Such an approach may lead to some questionable emphases. For example, Corning and Schuman propose and discuss what they define as a *Critical years hypothesis*, inspired by the thought of Mannheim. They describe it as follows:

Individuals who were in their critical years when an event occurred are more likely to remember the event as important than are those from earlier or later birth cohorts⁷.
[...]
National and world events that occur between early adolescence... and the later twenties... are most likely to have a lasting impact on individual memories⁸.

After exposing the hypothesis, the authors put it to the test in terms of empirical research, through a reconnaissance on the memory of 8 events held at different times in American history by different generations.

The result partially confirms the *Critical years hypothesis*, mitigating it with two important factors: the importance of the event, and the recency effect.

The first term, as Sewell had already mentioned, should be restricted to:

⁶ R. Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1979.

⁷ Corning, Schuman, *Generations and Collective Memory*, 80.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

(1) a ramified sequence of occurrences that (2) is recognized as notable by contemporaries, and that (3) results in a durable transformation of structures⁹.

We could add that the importance of an event must be assessed not only in terms of the objective dimension of the event (such as the number of victims of a catastrophe), but also by considering the importance assigned by the media routines and cultural assumptions, as well as the consequences for society as a whole. To clarify this point, we can mention the recent case of migrations across the Mediterranean, where the magnitude of the phenomenon (though indisputable) is amplified by the media, so as to determine a falsified and magnified perception of its scope, interpreted in the light of the increasingly strong nationalist and sovereignist subcultures).

Regarding the so-called recency effects, i.e. the deformation, well known to social psychology, by which we tend to assign greater historical significance to the most recent events, which appear to us to be of greater magnitude and relevance than the more remote, Corning and Schuman note that when a survey is performed “the most recent notable event is likely to be specially influencing in terms of memory”¹⁰. Even if they must recognize that:

“recency” is difficult to define, when dealing with historical events, since it involves not only time per se but also the impact of other events that precede a new one¹¹.

Remembering the elements necessary for an event to become part of the definition of the ‘we sense’, we are therefore obliged to consider two fundamental factors. The first is that the event is always and only defined in a circular process between its strength and its acceptability for the cultural assumptions of the communities affected – by direct impact or mediated knowledge. The second is that in order for the event to continue to act as an element of collective identity it must be recorded in memory. Which, in the case of generational studies, refers to the concept of collective memory, since by definition individual memory cannot in itself constitute an element of collective identity, unless it is shared with the other members of the group (in this case the generation of belonging).

It is at this point that the question of shared memory comes into play (between groups, and therefore also between generations). If an experience can indeed constitute an element of the ‘we sense’ of a community it is because it enters or has become part of a shared memory, recognised as such by members of the group.

3. ‘COLLECTIVE’ MEMORY AND THE MEDIA

The term Collective Memory was firstly coined by Hugo Van Hofmannstahl in 1902¹². The Twentieth-century debate has gradually highlighted the potential and risks of this definition.

⁹ W.H. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

¹⁰ Corning, Schuman, *Generations and Collective Memory*, 90.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² J.K. Olick, J. Robbins, “Social Memory Studies: From Collective Memory to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22 (1998): 105-140.

Following the arguments of Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg¹³ we can identify at least 5 different meanings of ‘Collective Memory’ (the emphasis is mine), as:

- A sociopolitical construct (a version of the past, selected to be remembered by a given community [...] in order to advance its goal and serve its self-perception).
- A continuous, multidirectional process: *current events and beliefs guide our reading of the past, while schemes and frames or references learned from the past shape our understanding of the present*¹⁴.
- Functional: CM enables the members of the social groups to define group membership (in contrast to the ‘other’, *reaffirm core convictions and inner hierarchy*)¹⁵.
- To be concretized through the physical structure and cultural artifacts such as commemorative rituals, monuments¹⁶, historical museums¹⁷, educational system, *the Internet and much more*.
- *Narrational, and structured within familiar cultural patterns*.

The definitions I have put in italics seem to me particularly pertinent to the role that the media can play in the construction of collective memory (or a collective memory), also in relation to the classical tradition of media studies: the nature of agencies (fourth definition), the tendency to construct frames through processes of agenda setting (second and third definition), the narrative predisposition according to codified and recognisable patterns (fifth definition).

In short, it is evident that the collective memory is strongly entwined with the media, which it uses and which it provides with continuous instruments for processing contents and functions.

But what is the role that the collective memory plays in the construction of the social identities (and viceversa)? To find out, we should go back to the history of the concept, and in particular to the fundamental reflection of Maurice Halbwachs. In the development of his thought, which his tragic destiny has unfortunately interrupted, Halbwachs provided various interpretations of the notion of collective memory.

In *The Collective Memory* (1950), the common memory of such a group (families, sets of friends) is defined as “not exceeding, and most often much shorter than, the average duration of human life”. “Every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time”¹⁸. Here Halbwachs seems to refer to shared memory as a symbolic inheritance that is valid as long as the heirs can spend it among themselves. In this sense the memory disappears with the group’s dissolution. It is evident, in this type of definition, that the existence of the group precedes that of the memory, which depends totally on the existence of the former.

¹³ M. Neiger, O. Meyers, E. Zanberg, *On Media Memory. Collective Memory in a New Media Age*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

¹⁴ See M. Schudson, “Lives, Laws and Language: Commemorative vs Non-Commemorative Forms of Effective Public Memory”, *Communication Review*, 2 (1997): 3-17.

¹⁵ See for instance M. Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, University of California Press, 1997, and Y. Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

¹⁶ J.E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994; A. Tota, *La città ferita. Memoria e comunicazione pubblica della strage di Bologna, 2 agosto 1980*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2003.

¹⁷ T. Katriel, *Performing the Past: A Study of Israeli Settlement Museums*, Boca Raton: SCRC Press, 1997.

¹⁸ M. Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, New York: Harper and Row, 1992 (ed. or. 1950).

In *The Social Frameworks of Memory* (1925), Halbwachs, however, seems to provide us with a vision of the Social Group that, rather than enabling memory, is constituted by it. The example given is that of the aristocracy: “Two nobles who meet each other for the first time [...] recognize themselves as two members of the same extended family that established their kinship or alliance. This presupposes that, in the nobility, through the generations there continues a totality of well-linked traditions and remembrances [...] it must be said that the noble class has for a long time been the chief upholder of collective memory”¹⁹. In our author’s interpretation, the aristocracy is built around forms of collective memory that precede and embed (through the noble tradition) the individual’s belonging to the group, as if the symbolic took the upper hand over the concrete existence of individuals.

Finally, in *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land* (1941), Halbwachs devoted himself to studying the Gospel writers as recording “what remained in the collective memory of the Christian group”²⁰. Here the perspective still seems different, because the author insists on the ability of the group of belonging not only to preserve, but also to modify memory as a function of its transmission: according to Halbwachs, as “the group of followers became more distant from the events, it would have ‘burnished, remodeled and completed’ the collective memory, changing it over time”²¹.

The nuances of Halbwachs’ thought should not be taken as contradictions, but as a contribution to highlighting the complex nature of collective memory, which it is worth summing up and then extending. The term ‘collective’, in the first place, can be interpreted as “belonging to (and made by) a small group or a large group (up to the whole society)”. Secondly, it must be remembered that a collective memory must always be interpreted as a hegemonic memory, as shown by the reference to the aristocracy and the role of its shared memory as the cement of the group (or the class). Finally, the reference to the Gospels highlights the role of the media in a play of memory that is made up not only of fidelity, but above all of reinterpretation and adaptation to the needs of the context in which the narration takes place.

We can now go deeper into these three points, considering the debate following the works of Halbwachs.

The first point: the collective nature of memory. As Schwartz wrote:

Collective memory refers to the distribution throughout society of what individuals believe, feel, and know about the past. Only individuals possess the capacity to contemplate the past, but this does not mean that beliefs originate in the individual alone or can be explained on the basis of unique experience. Individuals do not know the past singly; they know it with and against other individuals situated in different groups and through the knowledge and symbols that predecessors and contemporaries transmit to them²².

So, we could add, the memory is of the individual, but each uses it to reread the past in the context of a group experience.

¹⁹ M. Halbwachs, *The Social Frameworks of Memory*), in Id., *The Collective Memory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 (ed. or. 1925).

²⁰ M. Halbwachs, *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land*, in Id., *The Collective Memory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 (ed. or. 1941).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

²² B. Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

The second point: the hegemonic nature of memory. The theoretical journey of Tzvetan Todorov, in his *Hope and Memory*²³, is helpful here. In the first place, Todorov reminds us of the three phases by which a collective memory is constructed by defining the events that constitute its founding elements: establishing the facts, construction of meaning, and application.

The third stage in the life of the past in the present is its instrumentalisation in terms of present aims, its *application* to the here and now. After *establishing* the facts and *interpreting* them, we can now use the past. This is what people do when they want to serve their present aims by reference to the past, and this is how politicians work too²⁴.

But, observes Todorov, such a process is part of a struggle for the power of memory, and therefore the selection of significant facts is already a reading of history that tends to enhance the memory of the winners as a collective memory, to the detriment of the memory of the defeated. The theme comes from afar, but also gives Todorov the opportunity to redefine Twentieth-century totalitarianism:

The totalitarian regimes of the Twentieth-century sought to achieve total control of memory. Such a dangerous ambition had never been thought of before. Admittedly, rough and ready stabs at steering collective memory were made in earlier ages through the destruction of documents and public monuments. To take a fairly distant case in point, the Aztec emperor Itzcoatl (early Fifteenth century) destroyed all the stelae and codices in his domain so as to remake Aztec traditions to his own liking. A hundred years later, the Spanish conquerors of South America made great efforts to uproot and put to the flame anything that bore witness to the former grandeur of the vanquished. Because they were not totalitarian, however, Aztecs and conquistadors attacked only the official repositories of memory, and they let many other forms of remembrance survive, in oral narratives and poetry, for instance. But the tyrants of the Twentieth-century realised that mastery of information was the key of the conquest of people and lands²⁵.

We can offer two observations on Todorov's contribution to the problem of collective memory as a hegemonic form. The first is that a precondition for the cancellation of the memory of the defeated is the cancellation of the defeated themselves. Their memory (individual and collective) risks nullifying the hegemonic work of the winners in the construction of their memory as univocal. Among the collective dimensions of the losers there is also, of course, the generational dimension, which is then legitimised both as an alternative memory and as collective testimony. The second observation concerns the modes of the cancellation of the memory of the defeated in a modern society, in which in some way the monuments and documents are replaced by information and archives²⁶. I will return to this point shortly. For now, I would like to point out that the work of erasing memory tends to leverage its eminently generational and limited nature. To cancel the witnesses and/or their memories means making the following generations start again from a *tabula rasa* on which power can rewrite its hegemonic memory.

Here is the third of the factors I have mentioned, namely the role of the media.

As Assman reminds us:

²³ C. Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth-Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003 (ed. or. 2000).

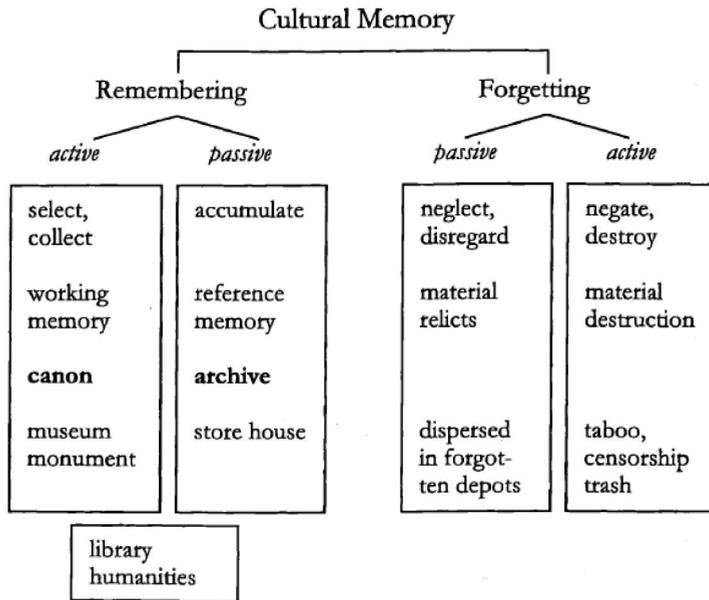
²⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁶ See also A. Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Personal interaction is not the only way in which a collective memory is created. If we replace face-to-face interaction with symbolic communication via media such as newspapers, television, history textbooks, museums, monuments, and commemoration rites, the range of participation in a collective memory, widens considerably. If there is a leap of analogy involved in the thinking about 'collective memory', it is not from individual memory to a mysterious collective mind, but from unmediated (face-to-face) interaction to mediated symbolic communication and from informal practices to more formal channels, occasions, and institutions and communication²⁷.

The work of Assman, who has explored the theme of memory in several studies, is very important because the German scholar looks for an approach that escapes the ambiguity of the notion of collective memory by speaking of 'cultural memory' and creating an interesting diagram of it that brings into play the dialectic between memory and oblivion²⁸:



In particular, in his work, Assman insists on the role of the 'instruments of memory', exposed to the risk of destruction and loss, but nevertheless capable of acting as if between past and present. The theme is presented in other authors, such as Paul Ricoeur in his famous *Memory, History, Forgetting*²⁹, and closely concerns the role of the media. Neiger, Meyers and Zandberg³⁰, for instance, use the term *Media Memory*, in order to define "The systematic explorations of the collective past that are narrated by the media"³¹.

²⁷ A. Assmann, "Response to Peter Novick", *Bulletin of German Historical Institute*, 2008: 833-838; A. Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory", in A. Erll, A. Nünning, eds., *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008, 109-118.

²⁸ A. Assmann, "Canon and Archive", in A. Erll, A. Nünning, eds., *Media and Cultural Memory*, Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008, 98-107.

²⁹ P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

³⁰ Neiger, Meyers, Zandberg, *On Media Memory. Collective Memory in a New Media Age*.

³¹ On the same topic see also Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

4. A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVE FOR MEMORY, GENERATIONS AND MEDIA

Let us now try to re-read the theoretical acquisitions we discussed in a unified framework, which integrates the collective memory and the role of the media with the processes of construction of the generational we sense. In the first section we have emphasized the importance of participation and memory of events in the construction of a generational identity. In the second section we have instead talk about the relationship between memory, collective identity and the role of the media.

The theme has relevant consequences on the definition of generational memories. First of all, we have been able to detect the particular status of trans-individual or group memories, which we can define collective memories. On one hand, we could say, the memory is of the individual, but on the other hand each uses it to reread the past in the context of a group experience. This is true of the generations, which represent groups based on the sharing of a historical period in a specific phase of their lives, and which base their own generational identification on the memory of their experiences at that time. While it is true that – within the limits indicated above – the memories that the members of a generation tend to focus on through processes that assign greater ‘identitarian’ importance to their shared experiences (including the media, understood both as technologies and as content transmitted and enjoyed through them) during their formative phase, yet the memory of each generation is opposed to that of the others with which it has to compare itself, in a process of continuous adjustments and negotiations. Among the collective dimensions of the losers there is also, of course, the generational dimension, which is then legitimised both as an alternative memory and as collective testimony.

The second observation concerns the hegemonic and therefore ideological nature of memory, and the specific modes of the cancellation of the memory of the defeated in a modern society, in which in some way the monuments and documents are replaced by information and archives³². I will return to this point shortly. For now, I would like to point out that the work of erasing memory tends to leverage its eminently generational and limited nature. To cancel the witnesses and/or their memories means making the following generations start again from a tabula rasa on which power can rewrite its hegemonic memory.

The third aspect concerns the role of the media in the cultural construction of memory. On this perspective, the role of the generations again appears extremely important. Different generations see the media and their nature as memory agencies in different ways, in keeping with their experiences. For a generation that has lived through the events as part of its experience (in a direct or mediated way, for example through information), the role played by the media as archives and narrators of the past will be different than for those generations who know the same past only through celebrations and media narratives of a ritual order.

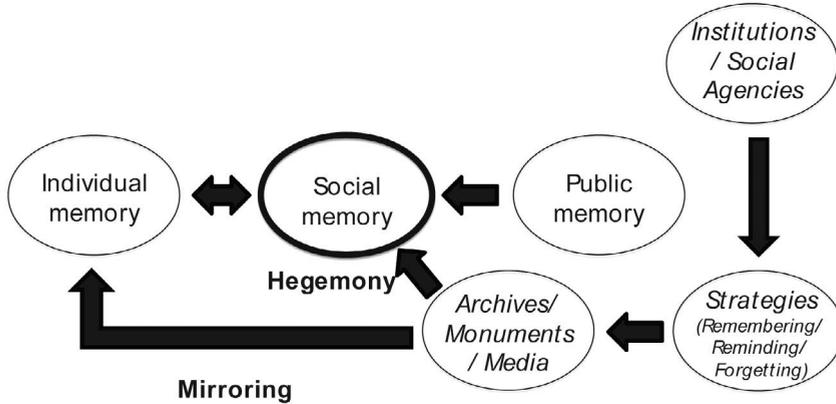
In conclusion, we can confirm that the three fundamental aspects of social memory (its collective and/or group dimension, its hegemonic nature and its ties with the media) are closely linked to the generational dimension of human time.

It is from these observations that I would like to propose here a model of reflection on the relationship between media and collective memory that is set in a generational

³² See also A. Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

approach. I will term this the ‘multidimensional’ model, because it takes different factors into account.

Media and collective memory: a model



4.1. *Social memory*

The first place is occupied by the dialectic between individual memory and public memory. This dialectic defines that rightly termed, in my opinion, the *social memory of a given historical period in a given society*. The individual memory is placed in the private sphere, which may also be invisible if not declared. It includes the lives and experiences of each person, and in a generational perspective it may include shared memories that are not necessarily expressed publicly in an institutionalised form or celebrated by public institutions through operations of ritual recovery.

Public memory, on the other hand, is such as it is legitimated, expressed and ratified by institutions and social agencies. Think, in this case, of national holidays, or Holocaust Remembrance Day, or the memory of particularly significant events (the end of a world war, the date of an attack like September 11). It may happen that witnesses to an event (for which the celebration constitutes an institutionalisation of individual memory) are incorporated into the institutional celebration (as with Holocaust survivors on Remembrance Day). In this case a virtuous circuit is created between the two memories (the public one and that of individuals who are witnesses of the events). But – as we know from the various forms of denial – there may also be counter-memories that deny both public and individual memory, seeking to delegitimise them and become symbolically hegemonic. In this case witnesses – as well as documentation and historical investigations – become particularly valuable. However we must suppose that with the progressive disappearance of the witnesses themselves because of the biological cycle the collective memory maybe weakened, because it is based only on the relative coldness of the documents and the institutional celebrations. This is one of the elements that brings the generations into play, because gradually the influence of the generation of the witnesses declines and the influence of the subsequent generations grows, so that the only component of collective memory becomes the institutional one.

4.2. *The role of the media*

The second active factor in the construction of social memory is the media. This, of course, is true in general, if we also consider monumental forms such as pyramids or commemorative documents from the early empires. And it is also true, naturally, of the media understood in the traditional sense. They perform multiple functions in this respect. In the first place, through information, they make contact with events and in some cases³³ they construct the importance and historicity of events in all respects as they are taking place. As Ytreberg recently observed³⁴, the role of the media is inherent in the event itself, as a symbolic construct that marks the otherwise indistinct flow of social time. From this point of view, an event transmitted by the media is already inherently predisposed for memorisation, social rather than technological memorisation, since it has exceeded the thresholds of gatekeeping during the process of communicative transformation³⁵. The process has been particularly evident ever since, in the second half of the Nineteenth century, photography began to fix historic events, recording them and serving as evidence of them³⁶. Hence the media act as archives, which may be available to both the media operators themselves and the public, by enabling the recovery of their texts or documents. Moreover, as we have seen, they perform the fundamental function of recall through the celebration of anniversaries, which brings the events celebrated into the pantheon of public memorabilia. Finally, they themselves are often part of the memory landscape, because communication technologies, when they become obsolete, remain in the memory of the generations who used them and think of them nostalgically³⁷.

However, we must note that the memorial style of the media has largely changed since the advent of the social media³⁸. Legacy media tended to behave like large collective institutions of memory, establishing the contents to be selected, the rhythms of recall, the viewpoint from which to remember. For instance, in Italy born from the Resistance in World War II, the episodes of the partisan war, the atrocities committed by the Nazi-Fascists and the stages of the liberation by the Allies became important contents of memory and celebration. These contents were celebrated by the media in institutionalised anniversaries and recalled, with an approach that naturally extolled the point of view of the liberators and condemned the actions of the Nazi-Fascists. Cinema, literature, journalistic information and radio and television formed a relatively compact part of this strand.

With the passing of time, what we can call alternative memories also emerged. They recalled possible atrocities carried out by some partisan formations or by the allies. This led to a struggle for the hegemony of interpreting the Resistance, which involved the media as supporters of the various points of view in a clash that duplicated the one underway in the country between conservative and progressive forces. Even in this case,

³³ D. Dayan, E. Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

³⁴ E. Ytreberg, "Toward a Historical Understanding of the Media Event", *Media, Culture and Society*, 39, 3 (2017): 309-324.

³⁵ See R. Bartoletti, *Memoria e comunicazione. Una teoria comunicativa complessa per le cose del moderno*, Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2007.

³⁶ S. Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977; *Regarding the Pain of the Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

³⁷ Bolin, *Media Generations*.

³⁸ J. Garde-Hansen, A. Hoskins, A. Reading, eds., *Save As... Digital Memories*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

however, the media moved as institutions, no longer compact and universalistic, but rather as representatives of the various parties involved and the different ideologies in the field.

What happens first with alternative media (free radios since the seventies) and then with the advent of Internet (for example, the development of BBS and later blogs and autonomous networks since the Eighties and Nineties) is different, because for a certain period disintermediation led to the emergence of an active citizenship, often anti-establishment in spirit, capable of guaranteeing correct information and updating the memory of events, protecting them from manipulation and oblivion. This happened, for example, with the events at the G8 in Genoa in 2001. Only the work of alternative sources (via radio, Internet and independent newspapers), together with the investigations of the magistracy, first revealed the illegitimate violence inflicted by some law enforcement agencies on the anti-global protestors, and they have continued to work to ensure that the facts are part of our country's social memory.

It is more complex to establish what has happened since the advent of large platforms³⁹, capable of elaborating on the one hand a sort of automatic historicisation of what is posted by a subject and on the other hand to manage memory and oblivion independently with idiosyncratic criteria.

A representative example is the story of the Norwegian writer Tom Egelund, who posted on his Facebook account the famous photo of Napalm Girl. This was the photo by Nick Ut depicting a little girl naked and screaming among a group of children and soldiers fleeing a blazing Vietnamese village. The writer's purpose was to publish a series of photographs that 'changed history' or at least represented it in a particularly meaningful way. Napalm Girl posted by Egelund was initially censored (and his account closed) by the social platform founded by Marc Zuckerberg because it contained nudity. After a controversy with the writer and other Norwegian media, Facebook then reactivated the account and reposted the photo with the following motivation:

An image of a naked child would normally be presumed to violate our Community Standards, and in some countries might even qualify as child pornography. In this case, we recognise the history and global importance of this image in documenting a particular moment in time. Because of its status as an iconic image of historical importance, the value of permitting sharing outweighs the value of protecting the community by removal, so we have decided to reinstate the image on Facebook where we are aware it has been removed. We will also adjust our review mechanisms to permit sharing of the image going forward⁴⁰.

The platforms are therefore not so much an evolution, but in some way a qualitative leap in the memorial role of the media: thanks to the ownership of the contents posted and user accounts, they can actually establish rules that interact in a new way with the traditional dynamics of collective memory. If in the case of the Chinese censorship of events at Tienanmen on the Web we can speak of a classic practice of power, of a strictly hegemonic nature, in the case of the Facebook censorship we are instead faced with a new normative dimension, among other things inspired by a logic that we can endorse (the protection of the child and her image, for example), but administered by algorithms whose functioning entails a logic of a different nature.

³⁹ J. Van Dijk, *The Culture of Connectivity. A Critical History of Social Media*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁴⁰ P. Bruno, *Facebook rimuove la censura alla foto della napalm girl*, <https://www.tomshw.it/facebook-rimuove-censura-foto-napalm-girl-79895>.

The advent of digital media, and their overlap and intersection with legacy media also has consequences in generational terms, given that different generations prefer different media or even different uses of the same media. Thus, the generational self-celebrations that form (as we have seen) a salient element of the collective identity of the various generations, take different forms on media and social media: the former tend to construct anniversaries and memories on the availability or curiosity of the object of the celebration (think of the articles that make the public aware of the present lives of actors celebrated for some past successes); the latter exploit the same content produced by users and democratic systems, creating and amplifying individual and inter-individual memories on collective pages. In the first case, the identification of the generational identity takes place by reflecting on the contents and in the second mainly by reflecting lived experiences.

4.3. *Strategies of preservation and oblivion*

The third fundamental element in the construction of social memory is the strategies of its production, safeguarding or cancellation and of the oblivion that constitutes its negation.

As we have seen, following Todorov's reflections in the first part of this work, every statement of memory by some subjects involves reducing the visibility of the memory of other subjects: those who are defeated, weaker, or only alternative.

The phenomenon concerns, as we have seen, both totalitarian and democratic systems and it involves a form of symbolic hegemony over public memory.

Traditional media are inclined to perform their memorial work essentially by privileging certain events, facts or memories over others, through a process of emphasising what 'has' to be remembered. Even the previous memorial institutions (libraries, museums or archives, have always operated on the same principle, determined by their limited storage capacity (in terms of space or in an intensive sense).

There is no doubt that the multiplication of storage capacity, which in recent years has increased with unprecedented momentum thanks to the Cloud, is slowly changing the prospect. The problem on the one hand seems to be excess of memory, within which it is increasingly difficult for people to coordinate their movements and get their bearings. But on the other hand, this expansion of memory involves a new reflection on oblivion and its usefulness, opportunity and legitimacy. The legislation on the right to be forgotten, for instance, enshrines individuals' right to want not to be remembered, at least for some parts of their lives and actions, to ensure that the memory of their existence is not potentially wholly public. Moreover, faced with the impossibility of avoiding memory, the strategies of oblivion seem to be inclined not towards cancelling data, but rather questioning it, contesting it as false (this happens continuously with the various conspiracy theories).

Clearly, what is happening is that today generations with different kinds of logic, accustomed to different uses of different media, with consequences still to be explored, coexist in a context of rapid change in the relationship between individual memory and public memory (hence changes in the concept of social memory).

4.4. *A case analysis*

An exemplary case of application of the model that I have just illustrated is offered by the memory of the events of Tiananmen Square in Beijing during the 1989 student protests, whose 30th anniversary is celebrated this year. Studies of the memory of those events in China reveal a progressive fading from the memory of young people, associated with a transformation in the interpretation of facts and their veracity⁴¹.

Conversely, those facts have remained alive in the memory of the West, and that images are still significant and able to generate quotations and elaborations. The model I have just explained helps to show these differences and the paradox that an event in China is considered historically more important abroad than in the country where it happened. A first explanation refers to the first element of the model: the construction of social memory as a reciprocal influence between individual memories and public memory. Generations in fact recognize as their own the memories of events that on the one hand have been shared, on the other they are attested by entry into a public and institutionalized memory. Here then is that the social memory of the events of 1989 in China may be different from the Western one, and tends to be more and more so with the progressive silence of the genuinely protagonist generation or witness of those facts. Without generational memory and without public memory those events fall into the silence of history and hegemonic narration. The situation in the West is different, where Tiananmen Square has been lived only through the narration of the media and the symbolic images that are derived from it. In this case the progressive elaborations of those images have become precise references of the struggle of individuals against an overwhelming power, and therefore can more easily pass from one generation to another. In this case, also the role of the media becomes clear. It is thanks to the role of the media that in the West it has become a symbol the photo of what has been called the “tank man”, the young man who on 5 June 1989 – holding two plastic bags in his hand – stood before a column of Chinese army tanks to stop them, or at least slow their progress.

The episode was recorded by four photographers: Charlie Cole, Stuart Franklin, Arthur Tsang Hin Wah and Jeff Widener, as well as in a CNN video from which many frames have been taken. The images have been an authentic meme in the West⁴² for several generations, even those born after the events. On the one hand, the image is revisited by cartoonists and designers, who recontextualise it to comment on other historical events; on the other hand, several photos that oppose individuals to overwhelming police forces clearly recall the tank man. The result is that the Tiananmen image immediately became a symbolic image of the 1989 protests by Chinese students, and *at the same time a motif*⁴³ ready to be used to comment on other contexts. Moreover, the image has gradually come to embody the significance of individual heroism in the face of overwhelming power, enabling it to act as a matrix for other photographs, which more or less explicitly evoke it⁴⁴.

Here are some examples:

⁴¹ L. Lim, *The Public Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁴² J. Hubbert, “Appropriating Iconicity: Why Tank Man Still Matters”, *Visual Anthropology Review*, 30, 2 (2014): 114-126.

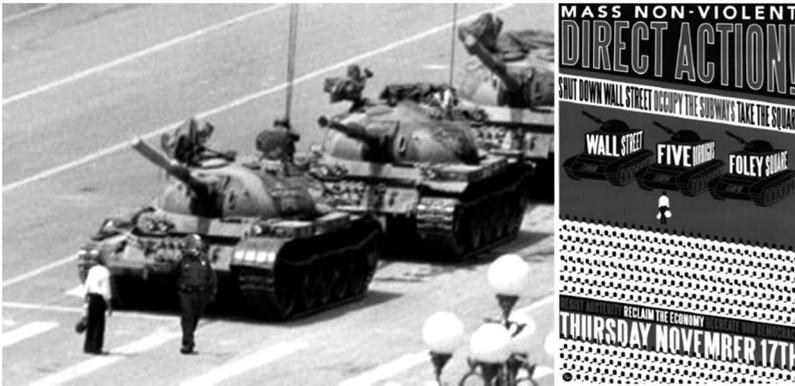
⁴³ F. Colombo, *Imago pietatis. Indagine su fotografia e compassione*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2018.

⁴⁴ I. Tomanić Trivunđža, *Press Photography and Visual Framing of News*, Ljubljana: Faculty of Social Sciences, 2015.

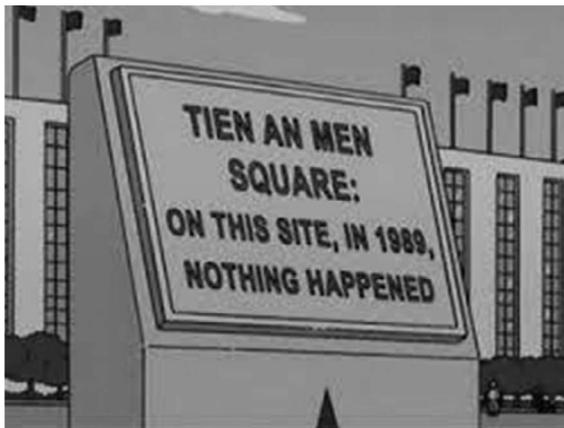
Time cover, 1989



Jamming memes for Occupy Wall Street, 2011



Unsurprisingly, with its scathing irony, the TV series *The Simpsons* epitomised this paradox in an episode, when the characters move to Beijing and find the sign below in Tienanmen Square:



Even in China, however, the media played a crucial role, removing the images and references to the events of 1989 through a censorship that acted both on legacy media and on social media and on the web. And here we move on to the two different institutional and public strategies that have acted on those events and those images: remembering and passing on to the West and forgetting and hiding in China. Thus we have two different hegemonic memories of the same event. In China, the event has been repressed or redefined and stripped of its revolutionary significance. In the West, by contrast, that memory has become a symbol of values legitimated as universal and representing just rebellion: two different collective memories determined by a different interaction between public memory and the memories of individuals, against the backdrop of the flow of generations, by the different role of the media and finally by two different strategies of political memory.

5. CONCLUSIONS

I will now attempt to sum up the results of this argument. Through a survey of the literature on social memory, the generations and the media, we have highlighted three salient themes that are recurrent in this debate.

The first theme is the essential role of memory in the construction of the generational 'we sense'. For the members of a generation it also means identifying with shared memories, having lived through certain events in a certain phase of one's life and therefore having interpreted them from a certain point of view, recognising a specific sense of them as individuals and as a generation.

The second theme is the collective memory, which constitutes, to all intents and purposes, one of the foundations of societies. As a great connector between past and present of a whole community, it also constitutes the substratum of coexistence between generations, in the sense that, by emphasising some events as foundations, it makes compatible the different memories of different generations, through a hegemony exercised by the formations in power. Finally, the third theme is the role of the media, which, with their differences, exert a powerful function in setting collective memories, inserting themselves into the widest range of instruments of collective memory, from monuments to archives.

From the emergence of these themes I have defined a multidimensional model that seeks to illustrate the functioning of generational memory.

The first element in this model is the dialectic nature of what I have called social memory, in which, rather than coexisting, public memory (that is, the set of memories institutionalised and celebrated as foundations, or at least recognised as important) and individual memories conflict and intersect. Here the role of generational memories is clear, because they bring together the memories of individuals into broader units of meaning, which make for self-recognition, legitimation and comparison with other memories.

Hence social memory, despite being to all effects a collective memory, is not *the* collective memory, because it tends to designate one group dialectically in relation to another. It really seems to be constituted through the encounter/clash between private memory and public memory, between the will to power of the winners, who seek to shape it, and the resistance of the losers, who struggle to save it, in the confrontation-clash between the different generational memories, in a continuous and dynamic attempt to define what ought to be 'officially' remembered and what does not necessarily have to be.

The second element consists of the changeable nature of the memorial function of the media, which – especially in the post-digital revolutionary phase – seem to be capable not only of favouring memory, but also its cancellation. The third element, finally, is the strategies of conservation and forgetfulness, coexisting in society and also active through the media. While, on the one hand, these strategies are explained by the hegemonic conflict for the definition and control of social memory, on the other they depend on the affordances of memory technologies. It may therefore prove interesting, in the years to come, to insist on the consequences of multiplying the memory capacity of the Cloud and the effects that it may produce in the sense of the importance of memory as agency. An example is the legislation on the right to be forgotten, which for the first time seems to reveal a desire not to remember, curiously different from the millennia-old efforts to rescue events and individuals from the oblivion of history.