

NON-HUMAN ACTORS AND IDENTITY PERFORMANCE ONLINE

ANASTASIA PUPYNINA

pupynina@linglit.tu-darmstadt.de

Anastasia Pupynina received her diploma in Social Anthropology and Sociology from the University of St. Petersburg and a master's degree in European Cultural Studies from the University of Constance in 2014. She then started her writing her PhD thesis in Constance on the topic "Communicative Practices of Transnational Memory in Online Forums" under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Thomas Weitin. Since April 2016, she has been a research assistant at the Technische Universität Darmstadt, continuing the work on her dissertation.

KEYWORDS

identity performance, transnational memory, reduced social cues model, CMC

PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 2, November 30, 2016

HOW TO CITE

Anastasia Pupynina. "Non-Human Actors and Identity Performance Online." *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 2 (2016). <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2016/12359/>>.

Permalink URL: <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2016/12359/>>

URN: <urn:nbn:de:hebis:26-opus-123590>



Non-Human Actors and Identity Performance Online

1_Introduction

In 2014, Bruno Latour began his keynote speech at the Digital Humanities Conference in Lausanne by describing several fallacies typical of the discourse in the digital domain.¹ He started with the *cloud effect fallacy*, a tendency to construct the digital as a non-substantial, ephemeral field, whereas in reality, it has a strong material component. As an example, he stated the vast electricity consumption of Google's data centers: according to the reports of the *New York Times*, they continually consume as much electricity as a city with 200,000 households.²

The discussion around two anti-terrorist laws that were recently passed in Russia became a further illustration of this fallacy. Named after their creator Irina Yarovaya, the so-called "Yarovaya package" featured, among other things, a change in the law "On Communication," which made it obligatory for mobile operators to store on Russian territory information on the exchange of messages and calls between users for three years, and the contents of the exchanges for a period up to six months beginning in July 2018. While human rights organizations criticized several aspects of the law due to its inconsistencies with the constitution, objections of a different kind were voiced from mobile operators. Until July 2018, every operator is obliged to provide the equipment necessary for the storage of its massive amounts of data. According to the second-biggest mobile operator in Russia, Megafon, this would cost approximately 200 billion rubles, which is four times higher than the company's overall annual profit.³

In this article, I draw attention to a different fallacy regarding online communication, particularly in the field of memory studies research. Often the focus lies on the macro-level impact and potential of the internet, emphasizing global connectivity and democratization of the medium, while the micro-level processes do not get as much attention. The latter component is, however, crucial to understanding the influence of the internet on society, as studies on online echo-chambers have shown over the past two years.⁴

I support the claim with data from the Axis History Forum, contributing to the research of transnationality in memory studies. More often than not, memory scholars focus on memory production instead of the reception of memory projects in the public. When it comes to the internet, websites and web projects are often thematized; however, the reception of these, as well as the online communication regarding memory, is

often overlooked. During the close reading of the Axis History Forum as a platform for transnational memory practices, I repeatedly came across a specific introduction pattern that didn't align with the understanding of both transnationality and the memory practices in the online sphere common in the field. I argue for an interpretation of this strategy with the help of an extended reduced social cues model that involves the impact of both the computer as a medium and the website as a non-human actor.

2_Performing Transnationality in Online Introductions on the Axis History Forum

Since December 2014, I have been researching how collective memory of the Second World War is practiced online. The most prominent object of my study so far has been the Axis History Forum (AHF),⁵ where amateur historians come together to exchange information on different aspects of the Second World War. Despite the initial focus on the Axis powers, all topics related to World War II are presented and discussed there. The forum positions itself as a non-academic and non-political platform. Almost 70,000 users are registered on the site, and altogether, they have written around 2 million posts and comments.

In this article, I focus on one of the most commented threads on the forum — the “Intro” thread in the sub-forum “The Lounge.” “The Lounge” features over 186,000 posts and is the biggest sub-forum on AHF. Here, users can exchange information on topics that are not necessarily related to Second World War. The popularity of this sub-forum suggests that, apart from being interested in war history, forum users also constitute an online community. In the “Intro” thread, users contextualize their interest in World War II, usually through biographical information. Since other topics, and especially other sub-forums, have a very specific thematic focus or suggest a certain interactional scenario (e.g., quiz threads, where each new comment contains a question and the answer to the question in the previous comment), the intro thread marks the space for personal introduction and identity performance. It has a certain interactional scenario as well: the biographies aren't commented on, and as soon as a discussion emerges around someone's story, the moderators ask to move the discussion to a more appropriate sub-forum. Therefore, each individual story cannot be commented on in detail.

The forum administration hasn't set up any rules to formalize the introduction, and therefore the users are free to mention anything that seems relevant. As a result, the

texts deal with a wide range of topics, from family and jobs to hobbies and pet situations. A significant amount of users mentions their marital status and occupation, as well as the reasons they signed up to AHF.

Though there are different motives for signing up, it is possible to outline the most common ones. The users are either writers in need of historical verification, military collectors, role players, or veterans and/or descendants of veterans. The missing visual input is sometimes made up for in the introduction — the users can attach a picture and often do. The pictures sometimes feature the users in front of a war memorial and serve different purposes — to show their engagement with the subject, to provide visual input, and to be recognized offline. There are no official meetups; however, many users mention their location and invite others to contact them if they are in the neighborhood.

Most veterans' descendants are interested in those parts of WWII history in which their ancestors participated. This includes the military divisions they fought in and eye-witness reports by them or soldiers of the same occupation. They thus show an active interest in the history of a certain national army. Without consciously intending to place their interest in family history within a national framework, they engage in discussions about the wartime history of the associated countries. Their interest in family history is thus put in a national setting:

Post by Entropy >> 07 Jan 2003, 04:46

Hullo / Hello / Czesc / Salud (that's all I know / can remember right now, sorry!)

I found this site a few months ago but only came back a few days ago, started reading, and decided to register. I rediscovered it through what I now know as the old ezboard forum (really enjoyed some of the Civil War debates there); as it more fits my interests, I especially hope that the History Forum reopens.

I'm American, late twenties, laying out of school yet another semester.

My interest here is in this forum is in learning about some of the battles my grandfather (U.S. Army 508th Parachute Inf.) was in, from the Allied and Axis point of view. I'm just now starting to sort out the nuts and bolts of his placement in the service, time of service, etc. – regretfully, I can't ask him (and he'd never talk about much when I did ask as a child), because he left this vale of tears 10 years ago.

I know my political history and domestic history, but am pitifully weak on WW2 battle history -- I've come to pick your brains. :D⁶

The need to fill a gap with missing information and the experience of the previous generations seems to be one of the main motives in the case above. Others are to understand the political context of one's own childhood and to establish a connection with it through family history.

In the following post, we see various commemoration practices that are performed, besides joining an online forum, such as visiting battlefields and cemeteries:

Post by Colbro » 09 Jan 2003, 18:51

Hi there everybody. My name is Colin and I'm 59 years old. Have been interested in WW2 since I was a kid, when we were very much caught up in the aftermath, with rationing, utility and austerity. I am now retired but worked as a geologist and later in marketing and quality control.

I am also interested in WW1 and am a member of the Western Front Association, have visited the battlefields, Ypres, Somme, Chemin des Dames, Verdun etc.

This Sept I visited Arnhem, Colditz, Berlin, Moehne Dam and the Reichswald war cemetery, where I found the grave of my second cousin. He is buried with another 5 crew members of his Lancaster, the 7th member survived and was taken POW. The raid was called Operation Ladbergen, I'll tell you more about it later. The photo is me outside the Reichstag.⁷

Colbro has visited various *lieux de memoire* and from his post, it is unclear whether he deliberately went to the Reichswald war cemetery searching for his cousin's grave or just happened to find it (the latter is, however, quite unlikely). The ambiguity in his description hints at the interchangeability of grieving for his family member and grieving for the whole bomber crew.

But even more interesting is the introduction strategy of those users who cannot identify with one nation when it comes to war history. They usually write longer biographies and state their transnational family history as the motivation for their interest in WWII:

Post by seaburn » 07 May 2013, 21:54

Hi all, I joined last month and am enjoying browsing the topics and tapping the brains of the multitude of venerable members. I live in Ireland with my husband and three children. I attach a photo as some have done to encourage others to do so, it's nice to put a face to a post, n'est pas? The military history of my family is chequered, my maternal Grandfather volunteered for the British army and fought in the trenches of WW1. He was injured by shrapnel on the first day of the battle of the Somme, but returned to the front after convalescing. Meanwhile some years later my paternal grandparents met and fell in love while fighting against the British in the cause of Irish freedom! I also have a great uncle who fought on the Irish Republican side after independence and had to go on the run to England. He subsequently joined the British army and fought in WW2....So as you can see we are all a bit mixed up....I put it down to being an Island people (Not enough genes in gene pool!). I took my mother to the WW1 battlefields some years ago to follow her Dad's footsteps. But since I was a child and first saw the 'World at war' I have been interested more in WW2. I am intrigued by the personal stories from those times and my bookshelves reflect this interest. I have also over the years read up on The Vietnam war, The formation of the State of Israel, the conflict in Northern Ireland among others but it's the 'The third Reich' that has always been the main interest for me, it both repulses and fascinates me in equal measures. Cheers !⁸

In the post above, the interest in WWII was triggered by a movie, however, it had a rich context of an intertwined military record of her family from which to emerge. The picture is clearly attached in order to provide the missing visual cues: “to put a face to a post.”⁹

Some users have ancestors who belonged to groups on different sides of the front. In the following statement, the user Tim first states that he is interested in the war “purely for historic reasons,” and then proceeds to describe a complicated family history, which makes it obvious that a “purely historic interest” is a hard thing to grasp:

Post by sr20ser » 22 Dec 2005, 19:16

Hello all.

My name is Timothy Hill. I am a 24 year old engineer at a small company that manufactures many different items with lasers. I have live in the US my entire life, but have had the great honor of visiting many countries via. work. I have visited many historic sites in Germany, Poland, France, and the list goes on.

i have been interested in the axis powers for a very long time in my short life. My motives for doing so are purely for historic reasons. My family is of Polish decent (mother side) and my fathers side is from Sweden. My grand father was a member of the German army during WW2, and much of his military past is never spoken of by him or the family. i am trying to learn more about what he did while he served, but am finding it hard. My mothers mom was an inmate of Sobibor and her mother was presumable killed in Auschwitz. For the stated reasons, it is the purpose of me trying to learn more about the war and the history of what caused the war and the motives as to why such horrible things happened during.

-Tim¹⁰

Some of the statements are highly personal. One user tells the story of her search for relatives in Eastern Prussia, mentioning her mother being taken captive and put into a concentration camp. In her emotional introduction she also states her plan to revisit the places her mother has been to:

by irina456 » 01 Oct 2009, 18:44

hi--my name is Irina and i am searching for relatives from east prussia! I have just recently found my nephews and nieces in germany from my brother Gunter Assmann-- My mother came from Angerapp East Prussia and said one time grandfathers brother came to the United States in the early 1900's and they lost contact with him and no one knew where he went--so Assmann any Assmanns in United States might be related to me also--Anyone with that last name please contact me--we might be related--you never know--I find trying to follow my mothers steps during her captured by the russians fascinating--she never said much except going thru poppy fields and then to the concentration camp where she was kept 4 yrs after the war--i want to see the holes she had to crawl thru to bring those trees into the coal mines--this has been driving me insane for the last year and i dont know why--maybe i have a brother there also--my cousin let it slip out when he visited a few years ago--maybe i am the one who brings the whole family together after

being thrown all over the world--just maybe you never know--well you all have a great day ciao :D¹¹

The online forum thus becomes a space where people with a transnational family history can perform their identity without the need to assign their story to a national front. The interactional scenario embedded in the website and moderated by the site administration enables users to share their story casually with others.

3_Theoretical Framework

In their introduction to the book *Memory in a Global Age*, Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad named three levels of transnational memory carriers: the level of individuals, the level of media, and the institutional level.¹² One of the goals of transnational memory studies was, therefore, to examine the so-called ‘new’ media and the ways that memory narratives transcend borders online. In the aforementioned introduction, this is meant in regard to a transnational globalizing public sphere where, in Assmann’s and Conrad’s words, “decisive events are increasingly witnessed synchronically in real time by a worldwide spectatorship in a global arena of attention.” From their point of view, the possibilities of the internet can be expanded even further: they mention that “through the Internet and its interactive communication forums, this global arena is linked to new forms of democratic participation.”¹³ The case of introducing oneself on a forum for hobby historians fails to classify as a “decisive event”¹⁴ viewed by a global public sphere, yet it still contributes to fostering complicated transnational identities and challenging the tunnel view on history. What is missing in the transnational memory concept?

Many recent theoretical discussions problematize the dominating effect of nation on memory: a “transnational”¹⁵ or “transcultural”¹⁶ turn is in motion, raising questions about the central position of the nation in memory studies without denying its importance. The volume *Transnational Memory*, edited by Chiara DeCesari and Ann Rigney, has institutionalized this theoretical development and became a modern classic in memory studies, followed by *The Transcultural Turn* by Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson.

DeCesari and Rigney used the definition of transnationality brought up by transnational studies theorists Sanjeev Khagram and Peggy Levitt. Transnational studies understand social entities as “transnationally constituted, embedded and influenced social

arenas that interact with one another,” rather than entities operating “somewhere between the national and the global.”¹⁷ The family histories described above fulfill the criteria of transnational social entities and thus challenge the existing narratives of cultural memory, as well as the concept of nation. The role of the new media, on the other hand, needs a clearer definition.

The key to the interpretation of these practices of sharing family history lies not in their transnational component, but in an essential aspect of online communication, which facilitates the exchange of intimate stories and reduces the fear of being judged. Instead of looking for similar mechanisms in other studies on transnational memory, it turned out to be more fruitful to look for an explanation in studies on computer-mediated communication (CMC). The impact of internet usage on identity performance has been observed in many cases unrelated to memory studies: for example, Stefanie Duguay presents different strategies used by young LGBTQ people to come out online using different platforms;¹⁸ two stories about young people finding psychological support on Tumblr have been published in *The Guardian* in the past six months;¹⁹ and Anne Hsiung has mentioned the soothing effects of online forum communication on cancer patients, where both informational and emotional support is provided.²⁰

In one of the aforementioned Guardian articles, Amanda Holpuch tells the story of a clinical psychologist who entered the Tumblr mental health community and started advising people anonymously using a Tumblr page herself. She had a certain policy regarding personal information: “And while the site lists Smith’s credentials, it does not identify her by name. ‘Nothing I do on Tumblr is complicated by gender bias, racial bias, anything like that,’ she said. Smith thinks that is an advantage when providing advice to people who sometimes assume she is a man, or an American, or a bunch of other people she is not.”²¹

The cases where communication via the internet helps people to overcome physical, psychological, and social boundaries have been researched in social psychology and communication studies for some time now. The effects of computer-mediated communication within organizations have also been analyzed since the 1980s.²² Lee Sproull and Sarah Kiesler have found out that when CMC is implemented into communication within organizations, it leads to changes in communication, such as status equalization and a higher engagement in decision-making. When individuals are using a computer, they aren’t influenced by visual input that would provide them with information on

their counterpart's social status, gender, etc., just as in the case of the clinical psychologist who advised patients online. Therefore, the usage of the computer facilitates engagement, which is important to the cases mentioned above.

The influence of reduced social context cues has not been widely implemented in the analysis of the impact of new media on cultural and memory studies, while it is evident, that it is this mechanism that enables users to perform identity in the studies mentioned above. The sharing of personal stories online is thus, on the one hand, facilitated by the online sphere in the form of the interactional space provided within the website and, on the other hand, by the computer, which establishes a situation where social context cues are reduced and their influence minimized. It is therefore of the greatest importance to the studies of online culture to take into account the findings of the field of CMC and incorporate non-human actors into their analysis and interpretation.

Endnotes

- ¹ "Digital Humanities Conference," Opening Night Bruno Latour, accessed November 4, 2016, <<https://dh2014.org/videos/opening-night-bruno-latour/>>.
- ² James Glanz, "Google Details, and Defends, Its Use of Electricity," in *New York Times*, September 8, 2011, accessed September 9, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/09/technology/google-details-and-defends-its-use-of-electricity.html?_r=0>.
- ³ Maria Kolomychenko, "'У нас много законов, которые, к сожалению, не работают' — Гендиректор 'МегаФона' Сергей Солдатенков о взаимодействии бизнеса и власти"; ["'We have a lot of laws that do not work' — 'Megafon's' general director Sergey Soldatenkov on the interaction between business and the authorities"; English translation by the author] in *Kommersant*, July 7, 2016, accessed November 3, 2016, <<http://kommersant.ru/Doc/3031678>>.
- ⁴ See for example Vyacheslav Polonsky, "The biggest threat to democracy? Your social media feed," in *World Economic Forum*, August 4, 2016, accessed November 4, 2016, <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/08/the-biggest-threat-to-democracy-your-social-media-feed/>>.
- ⁵ "Axis History Forum," accessed November 7, 2016, <<http://forum.axishistory.com>>.
- ⁶ "Axis History Forum," accessed November 16, 2016, <<http://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=5378&p=116581#p116581>>.
- ⁷ "Axis History Forum," accessed November 16, 2016, <<http://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=5378&p=118070#p118070>>.
- ⁸ "Axis History Forum," accessed November 16, 2016, <<http://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=5378&p=1790860#p1790860>>.
- ⁹ Seaburn, "Re: Introduce Yourself," April 11, 2013, accessed November 8, 2016, <<http://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=5378&p=1790860#p1790860>>.

- 10 “Axis History Forum,” accessed November 16, 2016, <<http://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=5378&p=820036#p820036>>.
- 11 “Axis History Forum,” accessed November 16, 2016, <<http://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=5378&start=1320#p1381193>>.
- 12 Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, introduction to *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, eds. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 1–16, here: 3.
- 13 Assmann and Conrad, introduction (cf. note 12), 4.
- 14 “Axis History Forum” (cf. note 7).
- 15 Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney, *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2014).
- 16 Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson, *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2014).
- 17 Peggy Levitt and Sanjeev Khagram, “Constructing Transnational Studies: An Overview,” in *The Transnational Studies Reader: Intersections and Innovations*, eds. Peggy Levitt and Sanjeev Khagram (London: Routledge, 2008), 1–22, here: 20.
- 18 Stefanie Duguay, “‘He Has a Way Gay Facebook Than I Do’: Investigating Sexual Identity Disclosure and Context Collapse on a Social Networking Site,” in *New Media & Society* 18.6 (2016), 891–907.
- 19 Jonno Revanche, “Tumblr Was My Saviour: It Made Me See I Wasn’t Monstrous and Unloveable,” in *The Guardian*, August 23, 2016, accessed September 9, 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/24/tumblr-was-my-saviour-it-made-me-see-i-wasnt-monstrous-and-unloveable>>; Amanda Holpuch, “‘I Just Feel Less Alone’: How Tumblr Became a Source for Mental Health Care,” in *The Guardian*, May 19, 2016, accessed September 9, 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/may/19/tumblr-mental-health-information-community-disorders-healthcare>>.
- 20 R.C. Hsiung, “The Best of Both Worlds: An Online Self-Help Group Hosted by a Mental Health Professional,” in *Cyber Psychology & Behavior* 3.6 (2000), 935–950.
- 21 Holpuch, “I Just Feel Less Alone” (cf. note 19).
- 22 Lee Sproull and Sarah Kiesler, “Reducing Social Context Cues: Electronic Mail in Organizational Communication,” in *Management Science* 32.11 (1986), 1492–1512.