



DIGITAL MEMORIES OF PEACE AND CONFLICT

Introduction

The Digital Age Opens Up New Terrains for Peace and Conflict Research

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■ **ABSTRACT:** The arrival of the Digital Age added a new way to preserve memories of war and conflict. These developments beg deeper reflection on the role of cyberspace and how memories of conflict have become publicly and collectively owned, shared and mediated in the digital space. Cyberspace offers a context for the deposit of digital memorials for victims and casualties of war from any adversary in a conflict. The final workshop in a three-part exploratory series entitled *Virtual Zones of Peace and Conflict* is the basis for this special section, which deals with digital memory. The three articles were selected because they reflect on the role of the Digital Age in peace and conflict studies, and specifically focus on the intersection between online (virtual) and offline (physical) realities and how cyberspace forms an enabling environment for digital memorializations.

■ **KEYWORDS:** digitalization, Digital Age, cyberspace, peace and conflict, memory, reality, warfare

We live in the Information Age, also called the Digital Age, which started with the introduction of the very first personal computer in the 1970s, initiating the Digital Revolution (Castells 1999). When the first personal microcomputer was invented, it was possible to transfer and store large amounts of information, converted into computer digits, in a very small physical space. With the advent of the Internet, it was possible to transfer this digitized information over long distances. Today, anyone with a smartphone and an Internet connection can use video and audio to communicate in real time with someone on the other side of the world. The world has become hyperconnected. Over the past two decades, the Digital Age has deeply penetrated our personal lives and society. Activists, fighters, soldiers, and citizen journalists in conflict areas are now taking to the Internet to upload their individual experiences of war and violence (Hatem Ali 2013; O’Callaghan et al. 2014). The capacity of new media to convey the common humanity of “the other” and the role of geographical distance are important aspects in the latest academic discourse on the mediatization of conflict and wars (Chouliaraki and Orgad 2011).



The Digital Age and the rapid technological developments of digital communication in the twenty-first century have opened up new terrains of research methodologies and theories for peace and conflict studies (Eriksson and Giampiero 2007; Nouri and Whiting 2015). The term “cyberspace” emerged to define the digital realm in which information is exchanged and shared over long geographical distances, a space that is virtual—not a physical or geographical place (ITU 2013). Since the 1990s, states and societies worldwide have become rapidly and increasingly dependent on digital information technologies (Castells 1999; Eriksson and Giampiero 2007; Nouri and Whiting 2015). We simply cannot imagine life without digital technology anymore. This rapid intrusion of digital technology in our lives also led to decentralization of information and to a digital divide between rich and poor. Much of the work within the field of peace and conflict studies has, until now, focused on the role of cyberspace in warfare, terrorism, and terrorism prevention (Macdonald et al. 2013; Nouri and Whiting 2015), while less attention is given to other areas such as memorialization. Besides calling for innovative research on the changes that the Digital Age brought to our daily lives, the development of digital technology that came with this age also enables researchers to get an insight into dynamics of warfare that were previously difficult to trace.

The role of the Digital Age in peace and conflict studies was the overarching theme of the project *Virtual Zones of Peace and Conflict*, led by the Centre for Resolution of International Conflicts (CRIC) of the University of Copenhagen, forming the basis of this special section of *Conflict and Society*. Between January 2015 and August 2016, CRIC organized the three-part interdisciplinary exploratory workshop series in close cooperation with academic partners at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO) and the Department of Political Sciences at Lund University, Sweden.

These workshops covered a wide variety of themes, topics, and disciplines, including political science, literature, art, and anthropology. The primary aim of the workshops was to formulate new understandings, questions, and methods of research in peace and conflict studies that take into account contemporary digital innovations. During the final workshop, invited scholars presented work within the theme of digitization of memories of conflict. Before the Digital Age, wars and conflicts were remembered by a variety of means: oral history, printing press, books, films, photography, physical monuments, personal diaries, historical archives, treaties, commemoration events, and many other nondigital means to preserve memories of war and conflict. The arrival of the Digital Age added a new kind of way to preserve memories of war and conflict. These developments beg deeper reflection on the role of cyberspace and how memories of conflict have become publicly and collectively owned, shared and mediated in the digital space.

The final workshop became the basis for this special section, which deals with digital memory within the context of peace and conflict studies. It entails the work of three different scholars, who presented their work during the final workshop, theorizing and describing the role of digital memory. Wars are normally framed and remembered as dichotomies of a violent conflict between a “victor” versus an “enemy.” Each side of the conflict decides who is a war hero, a martyr, and/or a casualty, who is worthy of being remembered by physical war memorials. However, with the emerged digital technology and networks, available to a global audience, digital narratives of war and conflict seem to display more contextual nuance and a deeper complexity, countering traditional dichotomist portrayals of war. These technological developments and new critical perceptions on war and conflict offer challenging and exciting novel avenues for research.

One of the questions discussed at length during the *Virtual Zones of Peace and Conflict* workshops focused on how we should define the virtual. Where is the boundary between a physical,

offline reality and a digital online reality in cyberspace, and how do we distinguish between what is real and what is unreal? These borders turn out to be quite blurred, and cyberspace is often subject to creating alternative parallel realities, which could be reflected in justifying politically motivated actions in real-life situations. In cyberspace, spatial realities and lifeworlds can be created, modified. And even if this does not reflect the reality in the offline world, the digital imagined world of an occupied area can be used by the occupier as a framed reality whereby the occupation is made invisible in a digital world. For example, as shown by Fabio Cristiano and Emilio Distretti in this section, the virtual tour of the City of David available for tourists does not reflect the offline Israeli occupation of east Jerusalem. Likewise, Ane Marie Kirkegaard shows that identities of adversaries can be perpetuated in cyberspace, even if these adversaries are inactive in the offline world. For example, YouTube provides a digital public space for Rhodesians to express their national identity, while Rhodesia as a nation-state has ceased to exist after the process of decolonization. Finally, cyberspace offers a context for the deposit of digital memorials for victims and casualties of war from any adversary in a conflict.

The three articles of this special section were selected because they reflect on the role of the Digital Age in peace and conflict studies, and specifically focus on the intersection between online (virtual) and offline (physical) realities and how cyberspace forms an enabling environment for digital memorializations.

Fabio Cristiano and Emilio Distretti carried out fieldwork in occupied East Jerusalem. Their article, “Along the Lines of the Occupation: Playing at Diminished Reality in East Jerusalem,” reflects on virtual spaces as projected on reality and their implications in a politically challenged physical geographical context. Niantic’s location-based game *Pokémon Go* uses augmented reality to explore geographical areas in a fun-based gaming context. Cristiano and Distretti analyze how *Pokémon Go*’s virtual representation of Jerusalem erases symbols of the Israeli occupation in East Jerusalem, legitimizing a status quo of occupation and thus providing a limited and diminished sense of reality to its users. In their fieldwork, Cristiano and Distretti have transected Jerusalem systematically using the augmented reality game. They successfully argue that augmented reality games such as *Pokémon Go* use hyperreality space to present a diminished and limited version of reality, which could be used as a means of political dissonance whereby the illegal occupation of East Jerusalem seems to be virtually justified and normalized within the digital realm of *Pokémon Go*.

Ane Marie Kirkegaard, in her article “Recapturing the Lost: Digitalized Memories of the Rhodesian Bush War,” describes how Rhodesian colonialist identity lives forth in cyberspace, on the YouTube platform. Kirkegaard describes how the Rhodesian Bush War (1964–1979) is digitally memorialized on YouTube by analyzing the narrative of 29 YouTube videos uploaded by Rhodesian nationalists or actors that identify with Rhodesian nationalism. This digital audio-visual archive found on YouTube and synthesized by the author depicts Rhodesian identity as a story of masculine heroism, keeping alive a remnant of the past, while at the same time the YouTube content forms an active part of the current identity of the very people who upload these videos. There is a certain kind of nostalgia to a colonial past depicted in the videos. Kirkegaard argues that Rhodesian identity and masculine nationalism live forth in this cyberspace, documenting the past while being mediated very much in the present.

Erik van Ommering and Reem el Soussi conclude this special section with their research on the memory project *Fushat Amal (Space of Hope)* in Lebanon, a digital memorial of 17,000 people who disappeared during the Lebanese Civil War from 1975 until 1990. In their article, “Space of Hope for Lebanon’s Missing: Promoting Transitional Justice through a Digital Memorial,” they explore the potential and limits of digitized memories, and discuss how survivors of the war use digital means to pursue recognition and justice. Van Ommering and El Soussi

have demonstrated the value and limitations of using digital archives as memorials for missing persons. Cyberspace has provided a unique venue where families can honor their missing, use the space to advocate for their rights to know more about their loved ones, and relate to other families who share the same experience. This kind of digitization of memories of conflict opens up an online space that was previously impossible to establish in the offline reality. However, the question remains in how far these projects remain in the online world and thus impact the silent denial in the offline physical and political reality in Lebanon.

As a conclusion of the exploratory workshops of *Virtual Zones of Peace and Conflict* on which this special issue is based, the participants identified several concepts as interesting to explore further as dimensions of conflict transformation in which digital memories in cyberspace play, or can play, an important role. The first dimension that was identified is “selective grievability.” Like physical memorials, digital memories can instill cross-boundary empathy, instead of indifference from nongrieving publics. As such, the selectivity of empathy for the casualties of war could be further explored within the digital realm. A second important dimension is “facilitating closure,” which asks about the lifespan of a digitized memory of conflict. On the one hand, digital memorialization can facilitate closure, while on the other hand, there is a certain kind of anxiety of forgetting and remembering—a need for victims to be able to move on without being reminded of collective traumatic events 24 hours a day. “Digital identity” also came up as interesting dimension for further exploration of questions such as, what role does the digital play in recognizing, enhancing, perpetuating, and constructing identities of self and conservation of national and cultural heritage online? “Meaning giving” is an interesting dimension to explore in the context of the Digital Age; cyberspace is used to give meaning to space and place and imagined worlds. How does this affect conflict and reflect on real-life, offline situation of war? Finally, we encourage researchers to explore issues of visibility and invisibility. Cyberspace can be used to highlight and literally make visible/audible sounds and voices of the past. Interviews recorded, digitized, and made publicly available in the form of personal testimonials compose a strong way to deposit digital memories. But where there is sound, there is also silence. Thus, we should also ask about how the digital realm is able to make the past invisible rather than visible.

With these three articles on new strategic research in peace and conflict studies that resulted from the exploratory workshops, this special section aims to initiate an academic debate on the role of cyberspace, and we hope to inspire other scholars to start exploring and better appreciate of the role of the Digital Age in peace and conflict studies.

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