Media, Memory and Movements

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How do social movements keep track of what they are doing? How is collective memory of social struggles shared among movement actors, and what role do communication media play in this process? Scholars interested in the subject of memory have noted long ago that major transformations in individual and collective memory have been closely tied to revolutions in communication, and that the history of memory is, at its core, a history of media (see Yates, 1966; Le Goff, 1992). The recent proliferation of digital, mobile communication technologies has likewise not gone unnoticed by scholars in the field of 'new memory studies' (Erll, 2010; Huyssen, 2000; Garde-Hansen et al 2009) – as noted by leading collective memory expert, Anna Reading, '[h]istorical events and social memories are increasingly articulated and accessed through the means of interactive digital technologies' (2003: 67).

Studies comprising this growing, interdisciplinary literature, which draws heavily on media studies, have started to examine the potential of the internet and related new media to enhance historical consciousness and empower the construction of 'history from below,' whether through the use of social networking sites (Garde-Hansen, 2009), the selection of online profile photos to commemorate political martyrs (Assmann and Assmann, 2010), or the deployment of global cultural icons to mend political differences perpetuated by divisive collective memories (Bolton and Mazurovic, 2010). In light of such innovative uses of digital media for collective memory purposes, Garde-Hansen has concluded

optimistically that a 'shift in power relations is occurring, such that the powerful archiving force of the institution (museum, government, church, law or mass media) and corporations that may seek to preserve knowledge and history on their own terms seems to be challenged by the present archiving power of increasingly popular and easy-to-use digital media' (2009: 147-48). But does increased 'archiving power' permitted by new media mean that contemporary social movements (at least in those parts of the world with ubiquitous access to digital technologies) possess unparalleled historical consciousness of past social struggles – what I will refer to in this paper as 'activist memory'? To answer this important yet so far neglected question, this paper draws on insights arising from empirical research on the alter-globalization movement (AGM) in Canada, whose history and temporal values, practices, and orientations, including those pertaining to the past i.e. history and memory, formed the subject matter of the author's doctoral dissertation, titled *Time, Technology and Troublemakers* (Pietrzyk, 2013).

Commonly considered to have emerged in the mid- to late 1990s as a united front of transnational opposition to sweatshops, consumerism, and neoliberal capitalism more generally, the AGM peaked at the turn of the millennium, then declined in most places in the repressive political climate created in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11. Briefly if spectacularly resurgent in 2003 as massive street protests against the subsequent US invasion of Iraq, the AGM proceeded from there in distinct ways depending on domestic political opportunities (see della Porta, 2007); however, apart from sporadic bursts of activity, such as the periodic protests against the gatherings of the Group of Twenty (G20) (e.g. in Toronto in 2010), as of the mid-2000s the AGM can be safely said to have ceased its existence as a coherent 'cycle of contention' (see Tarrow, 1998). Its activists (including the

author of this paper) moved on, in many cases to other causes and movements.

For the purposes of this paper, the most significant aspect of the AGM and one that most clearly attests to its usefulness as a case study of contemporary activist memory, pertains to its activists' prevalent and defining use of what was then a relatively novel technology of communication, i.e. the internet. As celebrated by a wave of enthusiastic scholarship from the turn of the century (e.g. Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Castells, 2001; Hardt and Negri, 2002), the novel ubiquity of new media in social life, including social movement organizing, enabled the AGM's characteristically decentralized, horizontal, and highly networked mode of mobilization, commonly considered as 'new media activism' in communications literature. Given that the AGM remains the original instantiation of this particular, largely internet-reliant mode of activist engagement, the findings of this study on activist memory within the (highly heterogeneous) AGM can be considered generalizable more broadly, beyond the AGM as a singular wave of protest.

Among the advantages enjoyed by AGM activists and other actors engaged in new media activism, the most pertinent for our purposes is the capacity of contemporary activists to harness digital technologies and platforms to record, store, and disseminate various media artifacts of activist memory. Equipped with internet-enabled mobile phones, activists and citizen journalists can now quickly and easily record movement events and activities in multiple media formats and share them instantly online, including social media, alternative news websites, and activist blogs. With a plethora of digital tools at their disposal, it may be surmised that contemporary movement actors' activist memory – understood as historical awareness of past social struggles shared within and across movement cycles, networks,

and organizations – has never been stronger.

However, while it is important to acknowledge the technical capacity of the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) to facilitate the rapid sharing and easy, ample storage of historical information, the argument advanced in this paper is that the same technologies are militating against strong activist memory by diminishing cognitive (i.e. individual) memory on which collective memory fundamentally depends, as well as by profoundly altering the hegemonic temporal cultural conditions in which robust and 'living' collective memory may thrive.

In support of this argument, the following discussion is organized in four parts. The multiple meanings assigned to the concept of collective memory are considered first of all, in order to specify those most relevant to our assessment of the state of activist memory within 'new media activism' as exemplified by the (Canadian) AGM. The next section weaves together the insights of memory, time, and media studies, particularly the 'Toronto school' of communication, to further elaborate and provide the conceptual and anecdotal basis for the argument outlined above. The paper's third section evaluates this argument empirically by drawing on qualitative data collected from seventy semi-structured interviews with Canadian global justice activists. As will become clear, although further empirical research is required, the wide availability of digital tools of collective memory does not translate into a robust activist memory brought to bear on the daily praxis of contemporary movement actors. The paper's conclusion considers the insights of both theorists and activists concerning the importance of the oral tradition as a vital yet neglected 'best practice' of communicating collective memory in the digital age.

The Power of the Collective: memory and identity

To begin, it is helpful to establish the intersecting dimensions of what has been variously termed collective, cultural, or social memory. Building on the work of Maurice Halbwachs, who is widely recognized as a founding figure of the field of collective memory studies, Astrid Erll has usefully differentiated among three types of collective memory: 'social' memory (cultural practices that are the starting point for memory research in the social sciences), 'material or medial memory' (the focus of interest in literary and media studies), and 'mental or cognitive memory' (i.e. organic memory, which operates on individual level and is the domain of psychology and the neurosciences) (Erll, 2010: 4). In contrast to much if not most existing scholarship in the humanities on collective memory, the focus of this paper is not on specific media artifacts (which might involve cataloguing and analyzing the contents of movement documents and digital artifacts like websites). Informed by a theoretical perspective rooted in Canadian communication thought, this paper instead engages with activist memory in its other two dimensions, cognitive and social, while also looking to highlight the largely overlooked role that ubiquitous, high-speed new media play in shaping both.

Moreover, while scholars have recognized that historical knowledge of social struggles from both near and distant past is a significant factor when assessing the capacities and political potentials of oppositional social movements (della Porta and Diani, 1999: 184-85), scholarly discussion on the topic so far has been largely limited to analyses of movements for national determination and on the nation as a mnemonic community – as exemplified

most famously by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's (1992) analysis of the role of 'invented traditions' in securing the legitimacy of European states following the demise of absolutism.

The importance of collective memory to social movements extends beyond its role in the formation of nationalist ideology, however. As noted in the 1920s by Maurice Halbwachs, social groups use collective memories as tools with which to create a common vision of history and the world, and by extension, to stabilize a sense of collective identity and solidarity (Halbwachs and Coser 1992). Individual memories are never purely individual, since they are never formed inside a social vacuum. Insofar as collective identity may be said to drive collective political action, as highlighted in particular by New Social Movements theory, collective memory can be understood as a vital factor in fomenting social activism (see Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Moreover, social movement actors' practices of collective memory, comprising both remembering and commemoration, influence interpretation, in turn mediating the opportunities that arise and the actions taken (Uehling, 2000). Finally, not only do activists inherit movement structures and models from their predecessors: at the same time, they hopefully learn from the experiences and errors of movements that came before them, and strive to go beyond them. In short, the capacity to apply the lessons of past struggles can significantly influence the trajectory and outcomes of collective action.

Medium Theory, Memory, and the Mind

To begin our examination of the cognitive patterns and cultural conditions that shape activist memory in the context of the dominant culture of speed, it is instructive to consult the writings of the Toronto school of communication and its approach to the study of

communication known as 'medium theory.' According to Ronald Deibert (1997), medium

theory was crafted to show how historical change emerges as a result of shifting relations

involving media of communication. Medium theorists examine the structural features of

various media when trying to understand how each medium differs from others in terms of

its political-economic, psychological and sociological implications. A key facet of medium

theory is the belief that 'media are not simply neutral channels for conveying information

between two or more environments, but are rather environments in and of themselves'

(Deibert, 1999: 273).

Applying this perspective to memory studies, Astrid Erll has observed in like vein that

'[m]edia are not simply neutral carriers of information about the past. What they appear to

encode – versions of past events and persons, cultural values and norms, concepts of

collective identity – they are in fact creating. In addition, specific modes of remembering

are closely linked to available media technologies' (Erll, 2011: 114). Drawing directly on a

famous dictum by Marshall McLuhan, she remarked furthermore that since media are

extensions of our organic memories, 'the medium is the memory, in that it shapes our acts

of remembering in ways of which we are often not even aware' (ibid: 116).

As noted by Harold Innis and other members of the Toronto school, historically, the

transmission of cultural heritage and collective memory was inextricably dependent on the

oral tradition and the power of individual, that is organic or cognitive memory. Unable to

set down their thoughts in writing, members of pre-literate societies relied upon a variety of

mental tools, or ''mnemotechnics,' such as rhyme, rhythm, cadence and meter, to aid them

in the effort of retaining vital cultural information (Innis, 1951; also see Ong, 1982; Yates,

1966). The main task of education was consequently to train, cultivate and improve the memory, and those who developed outstanding memories were esteemed as living libraries and the carriers of sacred traditions (Gandz cited in Watson, 2006: 355). The invention of writing and later, the printing press, enabled the process by which memory could be 'outsourced' or transferred from the human psyche to external media, and thus rendered more permanent (depending on the structural properties of the given medium). However, the 'mnemotechnics' associated with the oral tradition remained widely in use, bolstered by the persistence of the 'classical view' of memory as key to the transmission of cultural heritage inherited from the Greeks (Carr, 2011: 181).

Today, however, new media technologies appear to increasingly serve as a replacement for, rather than supplement to, individual, cognitive memory. There seems to be little observable incentive to commit anything permanently to personal memory; there is simply little perceived need for it, given that mobile media allow for simple recording and instant retrieval of desired information. On the other hand, from a perspective rooted in medium theory, there may well be a psychological price to pay for this development, with a growing body of scientific research disclosing troubling implications for personal memory of its near-wholesale outsourcing to personal digital devices.

A group of Japanese researchers, for instance, has linked severe memory loss experienced by increasing numbers of young people to a growing dependence on computer technology. A preliminary study of one hundred people between the age of twenty and thirty-five revealed that serious problems with their memory afflict more than one in ten; those afflicted reported an inability to recall names, written words, or appointments. The severity

of their memory problem even forced some to leave their jobs. The researchers argue that devices like electronic organizers 'lead to diminished use of the brain to work out problems and inflict "information overload" that makes it difficult to distinguish between important and unimportant facts.' 'It's a type of brain dysfunction,' said Toshiyuki Sawaguchi, a professor of neurobiology. 'Young people today are becoming stupid' (cited in Norton, 2001: A1).

While this statement may seem hyperbolic, anecdotal as well as empirical evidence does suggest that the daily use of hyper-fast, heavily visual ICTs promotes the development of certain mental skills and habits at the expense of others – an insight originally advanced by the Toronto school. While we are generally becoming better at visually rotating objects in our minds, for example, we also suffer from short attention spans and a restlessness that interferes with our ability to concentrate, and by extension, to remember. A permanent state of distraction makes it more difficult to absorb and retain information, given that it takes about an hour for working memory to become consolidated into long-term memory in the 'deep storage' of our brains, as new protein strings are formed via a phenomenon known as 'neuroplasticity.' As noted by Nicholas Carr in his book *The Shallows: what the internet is doing to our brains*, the 'key to memory consolidation is attentiveness. However, the unstoppable flow of images and information bombarding us via our various digital media overwhelm our working memory, and inhibit the formation of long-term memory.' In light of the above, Carr concluded that 'the Web is a technology of forgetfulness' (2011: 193).

Activist Memory in the 'Culture of Speed'

From the perspective employed in this paper, the proliferation of new media carries additional implications for activist memory insofar as media technologies play a central role in the structuring of time-space relations. Here, it is again instructive to consult the insights of the Toronto school of communication. According to Harold Innis, depending on its structural characteristics, each medium militates in favour of the formation of some mental habits, structures or biases, and by extension, certain orientations to action against others (Innis, 1950, 1951). Innis was particularly interested in the influence of communication media on how different civilizations apprehend and organize themselves in terms of time and space – the two fundamental indices of human experience. To his mind, the general trend in innovation in media technology has been toward ever 'lighter' and more ephemeral communications technologies that are highly efficient over distances but of short duration, contributes to a lack of interest in problems of duration – what he called the 'obsession with present-mindedness' characteristic of modern western culture (Innis, 1951: 76).

In recent years, the pervasive cultural neglect of time that so troubled Innis has been taken up by a growing number of scholars, who have theorized the profound changes in the social dimension of time wrought by the ICT revolution as 'time-space compression' (Harvey, 1989), 'time-space distanciation' (Giddens, 1990), or the 'acceleration of just about everything' (Gleick, 1999). Virtually all of the scholars interested in time and temporality agree on the central role played by capitalism in driving the process of social acceleration (e.g. Agger, 2004; Hassan, 2009; Rosa, 2013; Tomlinson, 2007). In analyzing the basic dynamics of capitalism, David Harvey has identified two incessant drives: the drive 'towards the

reduction if not elimination of spatial barriers, coupled with equally incessant impulses to-wards acceleration in the turnover of capital' (2000: 98). Harvey thus affirmed that the connection between social acceleration and the fundamental dynamics of capitalism involves not only competition, but also the need to commodify (labour) time and accelerate the turnover time of capital. Likewise, from a medium theory perspective, one cannot evaluate the impact of new time-and-space annihilating technologies, including new media, without also examining the material foundations of society involving its means of production, distribution and consumption as well as the structured relationships related to them.

But while the structural forces driving social speed-up are not new, in recent years, the ubiquity of new media such as smart phones, tablets, and other portable devices, means that the daily lives of more people in more parts of the world are becoming increasingly subject to the tyranny of aggravated time pressures. As time scarcity becomes a prevalent social malaise, human lives become ever more closely attuned to the exigencies of the post-Fordist regime of flexible accumulation and 'a previously unattained degree of constant temporal availability' required of today's workers (Nowotny, 1994: 100).

In the attendant cultural milieu wherein speed and novelty are fetishized, contemporary social movements, I contend, including but not limited to the AGM, reflect rather than resist the hegemonic speed imperative. Manifesting a resultant tendency toward what one activist friend of mine termed memorably 'an addiction to urgency,' contemporary social justice activists are typically preoccupied with the present and with short-term concerns, with little time left over for relatively slow and non-urgent activities, including those related to activist memory.

This view was strongly articulated in an online comment penned by two frustrated global justice activists, in which they bemoaned an 'unhealthy lack of trying to reflect on what has been done (actions, campaigns, movements, etc.), learn lessons, share those lessons and tools with others, and in a more long-term way recuperate genealogies of movements' struggles' (Cobarrubias and Casas, 2007). As they further remarked:

> Activists do not know how to learn from their history – how to keep it alive – or even how to produce and share or own history with others... Often, even simple things like keeping track of a collective's activities, being able to share its history with others, are left by the wayside in the grind of daily activist work or organizing response actions. Groups that are fighting against the same exact targets don't know what people three or four years ago did, what worked and what didn't... [I]t's a question of a lack of historical memory – not only of what movements did 100 or 70 years ago but of what they did 10 & 20 years ago (ibid).

Does the above lament authored by two AGM activists represent an accurate and fair assessment of the state of activist memory within contemporary social movements? Is their critique shared by other contemporary activists? To answer these questions, in the ensuing section we examine empirical evidence from a case study of the (Canadian) alter-globalization movement and its activists' values and practices pertaining to collective memory (as one of the temporal practices investigated in the larger project) (Pietrzyk, 2013).

The Interviews

More specifically, the ensuing discussion is based on qualitative evidence gathered from over seventy in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Canadian global justice activists, carried out in person and on the phone in 2010 and 2011 with the aid of the 'snowball method.' Once collected and transcribed, the interviews were coded using *Nvivo 9* software on categorical themes pertaining to specific episodes of contention in the Canadian trajectory of the movement, as well as the temporal orientations and practices of its activists, including those related to collective memory.

Not all seventy research participants had ready reflections to share on this topic; however, those who did speak on the question strongly confirmed the study's hypothesis. The interviews disclosed that AGM activists (in Canada) overwhelmingly and expressly affirm (read: pay lip service to) the importance of collective and institutional memory – with the exception of one young anarchist, who freely expressed a distaste for history and all that 'dead shit.' At the same time, when it comes to translating this appreciation into action, a decided majority admitted that despite the wide arsenal of digital technologies with which to produce and share activist memory, there persists a troubling and widespread lack of 'living' collective memory within social movements.

Echoing the insights of the Toronto school, one AGM activist spoke passionately about the role of media in contributing to this disturbing lack; in his words, the reason 'has to do with technology and its impact on our level of knowledge.' As he put it:

> There's a general trend in culture away from retaining information, so there's a
>
> tendency among activists to not know a lot of their history or history of people
>
> in the same room as them who actually did that organizing. So if we sat down
>
> and did activist story time, I'm sure people would be blown away by what
>
> people had done, we know so little about each other.

The tendency toward the aforementioned 'addiction to urgency' means, moreover, that activists are more likely to eschew the time-consuming process of building lasting movement infrastructure in the form of stable organizations and institutions. A working sub-hypothesis of this study was that this proclivity carries additional challenges for social movements' collective memory to the extent that sustained movement infrastructure in the form of lasting institutions and organizations is more conducive to robust activist memory than ephemeral, event-oriented networks and coalitions.

As discussed above, the AGM remains exemplary of 'new media activism' whose characteristic trait is its flexible and decentralized, network-based composition, one that mirrors the horizontal, anarchistic structure of the internet itself. While there are many benefits to this mode of organizing, including resilience in the face of government repression, a less advantageous outcome of the general shift toward this organizing model has been the loss of organizational continuity. As noted by the Canadian journalist and political activist Naomi Klein, the AGM's activity was geared primarily to organizing transient protests against transient international summits, thus it would 'appear, grab world headlines, then disappear.' It was this model that ultimately made it easier for the movement to 'fall apart' following the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent clampdown on

political dissent (ibid).

The widespread 'episodic summitry' organizing model, as one activist called it, which is based on short-term coalitions and electronic networks, renders more difficult the processes of sharing and learning from activist memory. As noted by a Vancouver-based organizer, the alter-globalization movement's decentralized, amorphous structure proved both a strength and a weakness: 'It means there's no centralism and no hierarchy, but it also means there's not always common points of reference.' A Quebecois activist likewise attested to the difficulty of engaging in collective reflection and memory-making in the aftermath of coalition-led events, such as protests against the summits of global governance institutions:

> different groups may reach very different conclusions and may not even know
> what conclusions other groups drew from their experience, so it's not common
> to reach some kind of common conclusion ... People can only hope that people
> have drawn similar lessons from previous experiences but there is no way to
> actually know that.

As a result, he added, with each new mobilization, 'activists were always in some sense starting from scratch in terms of what should be done.'

A related problem faced by social movement organizations, including those that took part in the mobilizations of the AGM, proceeds from the increased reliance on short-term contract staff and temporary interns. The resultant high turnover in personnel militates against robust institutional memory, a problem bemoaned articulately by a professional organizer

who has worked for several major NGOs, including Greenpeace Canada and the Council of Canadians, a left-wing advocacy organization. He recalled an internal debate about the ideal frequency of the staff meetings at Greenpeace – at issue was whether it should be a longer yearly meeting or a shorter bi-annual meeting. Since new volunteers were not familiar with the arguments exchanged over this very question in previous years, they unwittingly rehashed the same debate over and over. 'It's the exact same argument!' noted the organizer. 'It's cyclical, and it stunned me, because I was there long enough to notice it.' While working at Greenpeace, he admitted to seeing 'a lot of reinventing the wheel' within the worldwide network of hundreds of fellow action coordinators tasked with organizing and training volunteers:

> You'd think they want to talk to each other: 'how did you do this, how did you do that? Anyone know how to do this part, climb a rope?' etc. There is some training and get-togethers once a year, but for most part we are not interested in how other people do it. We want to do it our way, use our own ideas, and do it better… In activism in general, if you hire a new organizer they tend to be ambitious and want to change things, and do things better, and they don't necessarily understand why things are done the way they are.

As the above comment illustrates, there appears to be little incentive among contemporary activists to consult the lessons of the past. From the theoretical perspective employed in this paper, a major reason for this is that within the 'culture of speed,' the past no longer seems relevant, or a source of lessons applicable to a rapidly shifting present. In this cultural context, history and memory become relatively marginalized. There is simply less

perceived need and time for them.

This insight was proactively conveyed by many among my activist respondents, and further affirmed by others when brought up for validation during subsequent interviews. An anti-war activist from Toronto, for example, confirmed the temporal constraints upon reflexive practices, including those of memory, in observing that activists 'feel so pressured by day to day demands, getting this many posters distributed, or booking this space, or getting buses to demo, day to day things. You become immersed in a blizzard of details and you don't take enough time to step back and look at what we did.' As remarked by another Greenpeace campaigner who contributed to organizing the Toronto anti-G20 protests in 2010, as a result, activist memory is 'something that more attention needs to be paid to, and more time taken to think about that and too look at those lessons learned. And that's something I found is also hard to get some people to pay attention to… [to take] time to digest and process things instead of just always racing and doing more and more and more and more, cause there's always going to be more to do.'

Counter-Memory or Corporate Media Memory?

The lack of 'living' activist memory – that is, memory carried around in individuals' heads and capable of being brought to bear on daily interactions as activists -- poses another problem, insofar as it reduces movements' capacity to challenge mainstream media coverage of movement activities with a counter-hegemonic 'memory from below.' The apparent lack of a robust activist memory despite the ubiquity of digital media means that the dominant collective memory of the AGM tends to mirror the corporate news agenda and

is therefore largely comprised of images of violent street confrontation between protesters and the police. While the experience and memory of confronting the state in the streets can profoundly politicize a protester and in this aspect, help empower social movements, arguably it also obscures the memory of the protest's objectives, tactics, trajectory, and most crucially, the lessons learned.

Preliminary evidence from the interviews suggests that mainstream news media narratives shape not only what the general public remembers of street protests and other social movement activities, but also what the activists remember for the most part, as well. For instance, among those research participants who expressed some level of familiarity with the history of Canada's first big anti-globalization protest (in Vancouver in 1997), the most commonly recalled memory pertained to the pepper spraying of the protesters by the police. What seems to have gotten lost in the history of the demonstrations – according to one of the organizers and to this day, one of Canada's most notorious anti-authoritarians – is the history of year-long coalition building involving university students and various community groups on Vancouver's downtown east side, one of the country's poorest urban neighbourhoods. Although it arguably holds more inspiration and potential lessons than the admittedly more dramatic story of police brutality, this story has been largely and regrettably forgotten among activists themselves.

Likewise, in commenting on the collective memory shared by activists of the biggest AGM protest to take place in Canada (against the Free Trade Areas of the Americas, in 2001 in Quebec City), one of the organizers remarked:

The only thing you hear of: in Quebec City there were thousands of people and

there were mass demonstrations and they used tear gas and pepper spray and rubber

bullets. That's the kind of stuff you hear. You don't hear about the organizing that

went on, the grassroots movements, the popular education. In Quebec City, we went

a couple of weeks before and knocked on doors and talked to people, and did mass

leaflet drops. You don't hear any of that!

The above comments collected from interviews with Canadian AGM activists confirm a

sub-hypothesis of this study erected on the basis of anecdotal and secondary literature,

namely that activist memory mirrors the biases perpetuated by mainstream media in

amplifying the memory of movement events involving drama and spectacle, while

forgetting about the less spectacular but no less vital work of popular education and

building relationships within and across movements. In reflecting on this regrettable state

of affairs, the inevitable question that arises is: what is to be done? It is to this question that

the paper's following and final section turns.

Making Memory Matter

Invited to offer suggestions concerning ways to (re)vitalize activist memory, the most

recurrent theme among my research participants proved to be the need to incorporate

collective memory into day-to-day dialogic interactions constitutive of activist praxis. For

instance, according to a recently retired campaigner for one of Canada's most progressive

private sector labour unions, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), although written

materials are helpful in educating the union's activists about its history during regularly

scheduled educational retreats, most of the lore is shared *after* class:

> Activists will often say to me that they learned as much from discussing things
>
> with each other after class, on the patios behind their rooms and residences, as
>
> they do in the class. In the class room we have only so much time to cover the
>
> curriculum, there's 20 minutes of discussion on this or that and then you have
>
> to move on. Where you get into real conversation about how something really
>
> happened, it can take a few hours.

Other activists echoed this point of view. According to a prominent migrant justice

organizer from Vancouver:

> experience is gained over time so there is no way to sit down and explain to
>
> somebody the last ten years of history of a movement or an organization. It's
>
> something you pick up over time. We need to shift away from a Eurocentric
>
> focus of documenting everything and putting it in one place. Storytelling and
>
> ancestry is organic and dynamic and grounded in relationships.

Likewise, a young environmentalist from Toronto remarked that, when it comes to

collective movement memory, 'a lot of it is stories, not documents, it's people's

experience ... For me, that's the way that information is going to be transferred in the most

honest way, for people to be able to hear and ask questions of someone else's experiences,

what they did and why and what did they learn about it.' Her comment further attests to the

vital importance of dialogic, face-to-face transmission of 'living memory' among groups

and generations of social movement activists.

Today, however, storytelling as a practice of dialogic memory exchange and interpersonal learning has largely fallen into disuse. In considering the reasons, it is again instructive to consult the insights of the Toronto school. For Harold Innis in particular, the disintegration of the oral tradition in modern society was accelerated by mechanical mass communication. 'The quantitative pressure of modern knowledge,' he wrote, 'has been responsible for the decay of oral dialectic and conversation' (Innis, 1995: 351). The process of systematizing and amplifying the reproduction of contemporary (mostly commercial) sources of information – what Innis called 'the mechanization of knowledge' – involves significant implications for intellectual and cultural capacities insofar as it fosters a 'dispossession of time and the resources of memory' and renders marginal 'non-rational' forms of knowledge, including history, myth, and the oral tradition (Berland, 1999: 305).

Although not in direct conversation with Innis, the writings of Walter Benjamin add further credence to this insight. According to Benjamin, '[i]f the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs' (2011: 101). While mechanically reproduced, individually consumed media are able to convey great amounts of information, Benjamin viewed oral communication as uniquely capable of conveying those aspects of knowledge involving wisdom and counsel. 'The nature of every real story,' he noted, 'is that it contains, overtly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist of a moral; in another, of some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers' (ibid: 100). In short, as implied by both Innis and Benjamin, it is precisely from the

uniquely dialogic nature of storytelling embedded in face-to-face communication that potential efflorescence of 'living' and not only 'archival' social movement memory may arise (see Assmann, 2010).

Conclusion

This paper has used empirical research from interviews with (Canadian) global justice activists to suggest that while the internet and related new media are technically capable of serving as an easily accessible and virtually unlimited archive of digital memories, the same media paradoxically serve to devalue and diminish collective memory within high-speed societies and by extension, within contemporary 'new media activism,' of which the AGM is exemplary. Not only does the increasing reliance on digital media to store memories diminish personal mnemonic capabilities, the proliferation of these technologies has also fundamentally contributed to social speed-up, reducing the perceived relevance of the past for the present and the amount of time activists are willing to devote to non-urgent activities such as (historical) reflection. Finally, while they permit an unprecedented spatial reach and a high degree of decentralization, ICTs are by the same token relatively less conducive to the creation of durable movement infrastructure and the consolidation and transmission of movement memories. As we have seen, among the inimical consequences of activist memory's neglect is the tendency to perpetually reinvent the proverbial wheel, and the persistence of corporate rather than counter-memory.

By way of a final remark, the above discussion has also demonstrated that when it comes to activist memory and the role of media therein, it is important to distinguish between

'archival' and 'living' collective memory – a conceptual distinction closely akin to that articulated by Aleida Assmann between the 'archive' and the 'canon' (2010). From the perspective employed in this paper, it is clear that digital media technologies are structurally biased to promote and facilitate the former over the latter. To the extent that they can be said to shape mental patterns and cognitive memory and play a key role in promoting the preoccupation with speed and short-term concerns, these technologies can be said to diminish rather than empower activist memory (defined as historical awareness that informs praxis). Accordingly, future successes of contemporary social justice movements may well depend on the ability of activists to recognize the way in which time-annihilating technologies such as the internet are shaping their ways of thinking and related orientations to action, and to re-think and re-evaluate their uses of such media. Making time for this kind of reflection would be a good first step. Making time for meaningful activist memory shall hopefully follow.

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