Methodology: Researching digital memory work
As the previous chapters have argued, memory work, the object of study of this dissertation, can heuristically be dissected into three components: practices, technologies, and cultural forms. This chapter sets out to operationalize the phenomenon of digital memory work into empirical research. This means answering three interlinked questions: What human and ‘nonhuman’ actors are involved in memory work on platforms? How do platforms themselves engage in memory work through their procedural logics and mechanics? How do platforms shape the practices and cultural forms users employ in memory work and, vice versa, how are platforms shaped by this? These questions aim to show the dynamic and complex interactions between platforms and users.

In order to answer these questions, different types of textual analysis (discourse and content analysis) are employed and amended with a critical approach toward platforms and their operational logics and mechanics. In this chapter, I outline how and why these two methods can be combined in order to operationalize research into digital memory work. In the second part, the three case studies are introduced and rationales are given for these choices. This is also the part in which the three platforms under investigation are briefly introduced: YouTube, Facebook, and Wikipedia. The methodological approach taken might be best described as a mixed method case study design, because, per case study, a single and specified phenomenon and period of time is under scrutiny, using a set of methods which suit the case. The case studies and their respective methodological approaches are outlined in figure 4.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Case study 1</th>
<th>Case study 2</th>
<th>Case study 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Chemical weapons attack on Ghouta, Syria</td>
<td>Shooting of Michael Brown and the protests in Ferguson</td>
<td>The downing of MH17 in Ukraine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>21 August 2013</td>
<td>9 August 2014</td>
<td>17 July 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platform</td>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Wikipedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary human actors</td>
<td>Witnesses, uploaders</td>
<td>Protesters, page administrator, page visitors</td>
<td>Wikipedians, one-time editors, sock-puppets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary technologies</td>
<td>YouTube’s interface and search algorithm, recording devices, editing software, camera phones</td>
<td>Facebook’s interface and algorithm, recording devices, editing software, meme generators, camera phones</td>
<td>Wikipedia’s interface, text processing software, Wikipedia’s CMS, editing software</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary practices</td>
<td>Video-witnessing, uploading, tagging, titling, describing</td>
<td>Sharing, posting, commenting, liking</td>
<td>Editing, selecting, writing, referencing, debating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary cultural forms</td>
<td>Witness videos, video mash-ups, photo slideshows</td>
<td>Videos, photos, memes, written posts and comments</td>
<td>Wikis, talk page entries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### How to study digital memory work?

How can we operationalize theoretical ideas into research on memory work on, by and through social media platforms? Platforms invite different medium-specific practices. These are socio-technical, since users interact with a platform’s technological design and architecture whenever they tag, describe, like, comment, share, reference, or edit online. They also structure mediated material in so that the past is re-presented in specific ways and that certain reconstructions of the past become more visible than others on them. At the same time, people may use platforms in ways unforeseen by their designers. As a consequence, memory work is studied in this dissertation as practiced in interaction with technologies and realized in cultural forms. Hence, the case studies revolve around the outcomes of interactions with the platforms’ technological design, their interfaces and features. That is, empirical chapters study 1) the traces users leave and 2) the content they produce on platforms: texts. One important methodological assumption of this dissertation is that research can investigate practices and the outcomes of interactions with technologies by studying text.

The cases thus require methods that allow analysis of memory work on the level of practice, technology, and cultural form and content. The primary research approach taken in the case studies is qualitative. Qualitative inquiry is “an umbrella term used to describe ways of studying perceptions, experiences or behaviors through their verbal or visual expressions, actions or writing” (Salmons, 2016, p. 3). Brennen (2012, p. 15) also stresses the interpretative work qualitative researchers conduct: “Qualitative researchers understand that while words and concepts have important denotative meanings, they also have connotative interpretations that are important to consider.” Qualitative projects, thus, traditionally, have a human-centered focus. However, as has been argued before, research has to take technology seriously as an actor within a broader network of interaction and association. Technology enables, shapes, and restrains perceptions, experiences, and behaviors, and assists and extends verbal and visual expressions, actions and writing. A weakness of a technology-based approach, Van Dijck (2013, pp. 26-27) writes, is that it “pays scarce attention to content and cultural form as a meaningful force in the construction of technology and users. In the context of social media, content and form are a significant factor.” Therefore, the empirical chapters view human and nonhuman actors as mutually shaping each other and their memory work.
In order to trace both the agency of human and nonhuman actors in digital memory work, two main methods are employed: textual analysis and platform analysis. The rest of this section explains why these methods were chosen and how they were generally employed in the case studies. An obvious critique of the choice of either methods that cover mediated content or media themselves is that they do not engage with people directly. Is this dissertation not investigating memory, something that is located as much in individuals, as it is in groups? A reply to this critique might be that this study is interested in the role of media, as specific technologies of communication, influencing memory work, something that is increasingly mediated and involves media. Analyzing the media content and the materiality of media technologies allows researchers to draw conclusions about particular representations of the past and the role of technologies in shaping those representations. Important to remember is that this section means to give a broad overview of the approaches to research taken in the empirical chapters. Per case study chapter, specific methodological tools and steps will be discussed, as well as the limitations.

**Platform Analysis**

While not fully committing itself to its agenda and procedures, this dissertation borrows elements from what has loosely come to be labeled as platform analysis. Stemming from software studies, platform analysis is a yet developing critical approach and theory geared towards the study of social media platforms. A consequence of its relative novelty, platform analysis offers not a clearly defined methodological roadmap, but instead adopts a political-economic and critical-theoretical stance towards the design features, affordances, and operational logics of social media platforms. These characteristics are informed by platforms’ ideologies and business models. Platform analysis basically asks: what do social media want from their users in order to generate financial, social, and/or cultural capital?

What do we analyze when we analyze platforms? An answer is provided by Van Dijck's (2013, p. 29) definition of platforms:

> Technologically speaking, platforms are the providers of *software*, (sometimes) *hardware*, and *services* that help code social activities into a computational *architecture*; they process (meta)data through *algorithms* and *formatted protocols* before presenting their *interpreted logic* in the form of user-friendly *interfaces* with *default settings* that reflect the platform owner’s *strategic choices*. (emphasis mine)

A platform-analytical approach can therefore focus on any of the components of platforms emphasized above. This dissertation concentrates primarily on interfaces, default settings, and the procedural logic of platforms, because these aspects actively invite, steer, and shape memory work on platforms to the extent that they are *part of* it. Following this line of thinking, the case studies scrutinize the ways in which the respective platform invites
and shapes specific user practices and content creation. This ranges from curating a video on YouTube, to commenting on a Facebook post, to editing a Wiki (see fig. 1). Especially interfaces (what do users see when using a platform) and technological features (what can users do with a platform) are important in studying memory work on them. The interface, writes Patelis (2013, p. 120), is a “non-neutral entity,” a “cultural text that aspires to power and that frames specific forms of interaction.” Interfaces are designed with a specific goal in mind. They are the perceived affordances from the designer’s perspective (reflecting their “strategic choices”) and users interact with them in ways that may follow intended usage or deviate from it.

Social media platforms are highly templated; that is, users are given boxes to be filled in by them. Facebook asks “what’s on your mind?” Twitter asks “What’s happening?” Google and YouTube ask you to search or upload material. And Wikipedia would not exist without the continuous effort of its editors. Social media platforms continually ask for input that can easily be “read” by their owners, by means of, for example, algorithmic processing. Also, with Wikipedia as the notable exception, “social media have a congenitally double nature: on the one hand they are the loci of fulfillment of communications that are central to the functioning of democracy, indeed, for society as a whole; while on the other hand, they must realize profits” (Patelis, 2013, p. 118). They have been designed “on the basis of specific values and with the aim of specified interaction” (Patelis, 2013, pp. 119-120). This makes social media platforms ideological through and through. This latter thought drives this dissertation’s critical outlook on social media platforms.

Besides scrutinizing the technological and economic-ideological aspects of platforms, platform analysis might also involve so-called “digital methods.” Digital methods, writes Rogers (2013, p. 1) form a particular “methodological outlook for research with the web” that studies and repurposes “methods embedded in online devices” (p. 1). For example, algorithms determine visibility of content and “search engines author new orders of things in the sense that they rank sources for any topic” (Rogers, 2013, p. 6). Interpreting the hierarchies in search results (what shows at the top of search results?) can, therefore, be a form of social research itself. In the case study chapters on YouTube (chapter 5) and Wikipedia (chapter 7) some basic digital methods support the main methods employed. More generally, this dissertation follows digital methods’ stance that social processes such as memory work can be ‘read through’ the lens of the device (or platform, in this case). This does not mean that social scientists need to become computer engineers. They can, however, investigate the outcomes of interactions with them, or how their procedural logics and interfaces present reality to their users. This is also noted by Bucher (2012) in her article on Facebook’s now-defunct algorithm EdgeRank, which ordered users’ Newsfeed. She writes, “what is important is not necessarily to know every technical detail of how a system works, but to be able to understand some of the logics or principles of their functioning in order to critically engage with the ways in which systems work on a theoretical level” (p. 14).
This dissertation follows Bucher’s way of thinking regarding the procedural logics of platforms, yet it also moves beyond a focus on the medium itself. The central analytical focus in the case studies lies on the outcomes or products of user engagement with platforms: text. However, one of the methodological arguments here is that, on social media platforms, text and technology are inseparable: whenever users engage with social media they produce text and vice versa. This is the reason why, in the case studies, textual analysis is amended by platform analysis as a means to make sense of realized practices.

**Two types of textual analysis**

Texts, writes Brennen (2012, p. 193) are “things that we use to make meaning from” and as such they “provide traces of a socially constructed reality.” Texts may reveal the “social practices, representations, assumptions, and stories about our lives” and through critical scrutiny and interpretation by the researcher these might be revealed (Brennen, 2012, p. 194). ‘Texts’ on social media platforms are seen as ‘data’ or ‘content’ by platform owners; they constitute the material that is produced, changed and shared by users. This material can be used and/or monetized in specific ways, depending on the platform. In this dissertation, texts are treated as culturally meaningful objects that take shape in particular cultural forms and are carried and re-presented through mediating technologies, in this case social media platforms.

A “text” can be any type of cultural content (e.g. spoken, written or visual), as Rose (2012) writes. Textual analysis, therefore, can be mixed well with platform analysis: where the latter focuses on the carrier, the former focuses on the carried. Two types of textual analysis are applied in this dissertation: critical discourse analysis (CDA) and content analysis (CA). Below, both methods will be discussed in terms of their broad theoretical underpinnings. In the case study chapters, the procedural steps taken will be discussed in more detail. A downside of using texts, or “extant data” as Salmons (2016, p. 33) calls online written or visual text, is that it might not fully reflect people’s full points of view or experiences. The point in studying textually realized memory work, though, is that this will be carried forward into the future, rather than the potentially ephemeral acts of face-to-face communication, for example.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

In this dissertation, I employ a specific strand of discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA). This form of textual and contextual analysis sees language as social practice through which power relations are (re)established and performed. This aspect of CDA makes it an appropriate method as to reveal how different actors aspire to power through their textual interactions and products. Fairclough (1995), one of the founders of CDA, defines discourse as “(i) a language text, spoken or written, (ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), (iii) sociocultural practice” (p. 97). Practice is, in this view, inscribed in text. CDA thus allows an analysis of practice through textual analysis. Similarly,
Wetherell and Potter (1988, p. 169) write that people “do things with their discourse.” In other words, discourse functions toward particular goals such as explaining, justifying or blaming but also, more broadly, ideological effects that are legitimizing certain worldviews.

This is an important addition in the light of the object of study here, memory work. In essence, CDA revolves around the question how discourse “relates to and is implicated in the (re) production of social relations—particularly unequal, iniquitous and/or discriminatory power relations” (Richardson, 2007, p. 42). As chapter one to three argued, what is re-presented in the present and carried into the future is the result of a continuous power struggle. CDA, as it is applied in this dissertation, aims at revealing this struggle. As such, CDA is both a theory and method and is used to study the dynamics of power—particularly pertaining to questions of voice and inequality—within particular discourses. This is pivotal, since I conceptualized memory work as a particular type of discursive practice, which is concerned with interpreting and re-presenting the past in the present, and carrying it into the future.

CDA, however, is not only concerned with how these power dynamics play out within a text. The method also concerns itself with the “social processes and structures which give rise to the production of a text, and of the social structures and processes within which individuals or groups as social historical subjects, create meanings in their interaction with texts” (Wodak, 2001, p. 3). This aspect of CDA makes it a suitable approach to, for example, show how a community of practice emerges within the context of Wikipedia. Through what people do and say on Wikipedia, a specific set of norms, values and hierarchies emerge, which, in turn, affect other Wikipedians’ doings and sayings, as chapter seven will further demonstrate.

Another reason why discourse analysis is a well-suited method for analyzing textually realized memory work is given by Brennen (2012, p. 197): “[t]he use of the term discourse analysis reminds researchers that it is through our use of language that our reality is socially constructed.” Memory work is preeminently a process of social construction that involves language or another semiotic system of signification. As the first two chapters have demonstrated, we can only make sense of or attach meaning to our pasts through such systems; they are the building blocks for the social frameworks of memory, as Halbwachs would say. They guide the interpretations of and reflections on the past. As a method that focuses on language and text, discourse analysis is suitable to unpack the explicit and implied meanings and assumptions within memory work, specifically on the level of text.

This latter aspect relates to an important concept in CDA: intertextuality. Intertextuality, writes Rose (2012, p. 191) “refers to the way that meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts.” Intertextuality, therefore, gives meaning to texts and practices, next to contexts of production and interpretation. As a range of discursive practices, memory work relies heavily on intertextuality. In the rich symbolic environment of platforms and the Web in general, intertextuality is key. Cultural forms that are important for memory work, such
as iconic images or phrases, are encoded with meaning that can only be decoded (and re-coded) by others sharing the same cultural frame of reference. CDA allows for the tracing of such meanings in relation to how social actors struggle for power in and through memory work.

Despite its established research agenda, argue Wodak and Meyer (2009), “rigorous ‘objectivity’ cannot be reached by means of discourse analysis, for each ‘technology’ of research must itself be examined as potentially embedding the beliefs and ideologies of the analysts and therefore guiding the analysis toward the analysts’ preconceptions” (pp. 31-32). This constructivist remark is important, yet it must not be seen as hindering the analysis but instead as enabling it. It liberates the analysis from strict methodological confines and allows associative and inductive theory-building.

In the chapters in which CDA is applied (6 and 7), I operationalize the method in different ways. The main reason for this is that I analyze specific platforms which enable, shape, and constrain specific cultural forms and content. Also, chapter 6 (on Facebook) revolves around multimodal forms of discourse (written text, images, and videos), whereas chapter 7 (on Wikipedia) is concerned with only written text. These differences require a tailor-fitted application of methods. I will elaborate on the specifics of these approaches in the methodological sections of the empirical chapters.

**Content analysis**

CDA can be assisted by the counting of particular categories in the content of archives, or the occurrence of words and images in them. This tells the researcher more about the occurrence and co-occurrence of themes and issues within memory work on platforms. In chapter 5 (on YouTube and Syria) and in chapter 7 (on Wikipedia and MH17), CDA is amended by such basic “content analysis.” According to Bryman (2012), “content analysis is an approach to the analysis of documents and texts (which may be printed or visual) that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner” (p. 289). It is, therefore, a quantitative, deductive method that tests theories, rather than generates them, even though there are also forms of content analysis that are qualitative (Mayring, 2000). Bryman (2012) writes that “the process of analysis is one that means that the results are not an extension of the analyst and his or her personal biases,” but rather that “once formulated, the rules can be (or should be capable of being) applied without the intrusion of bias” (p. 289). Questions asked in content analyses are often relatively easily operationalizable: who, what, where, and how much (Bryman, 2012, p. 291). Content analysis can thus focus on different kinds of units of analysis, ranging from significant actors (who, what), words (how, why), subject and themes (how much, what, where, how), and dispositions (what, how, why) (Bryman, 2012, pp. 295-298).

Content analysis employs coding schedules and manuals that allow other researchers to replicate the analysis. Reliability is guaranteed through inter-coder reliability tests (between different coders) and/or intra-coder reliability tests (testing the consistency of an individual
coder). The advantages of content analysis are that the method is very transparent, allows longitudinal analysis, is unobtrusive (that is, the researcher has minimum influence on the collected data), is highly flexible, and can generate conclusions about groups that might be hard to reach or analyze in real life (Bryman, 2012, pp. 304-305). Some disadvantages of the method are that it is impossible to have a coding manual that is completely free of researchers’ interpretation—they are themselves embedded within cultural contexts. And, most importantly, why-questions are hard to answer (Bryman, 2012, pp. 306-307). Content analysis is applied in chapters 5 and 7 mainly to assess the dominance of certain types and forms of texts.

**Introducing the case studies**

Three platforms will be the focus of attention in the empirical chapters: YouTube, Facebook, and Wikipedia. These platforms were chosen because each of them has a dominant position within the new media ecology, up to the point that, at least in ‘Western’ countries, they have become ingrained in everyday life. These platforms inform us about the world and allow us to share our own perspectives about it. YouTube is the go-to platform for video watching and sharing, Facebook for social networking, and Wikipedia for consultation and production of general (and sometimes specialized) knowledge on a wide range of topics. These platforms are different from ‘broadcast’ or ‘legacy’ media in the sense that their content is produced by users; without user input, they would not exist. This does not mean that they are disconnected from these ‘older’ media. Platforms and legacy media use each other. All three platforms under scrutiny present themselves as neutral intermediaries in the types of communication they enable. They all, however, have their own idiosyncratic ideologies, histories, and technological features and affordances, which this dissertation studies separately in order to demonstrate their roles in digital memory work.

YouTube, Facebook, and Wikipedia are, besides social media platforms, also massive archives containing user-generated content, which is ordered and structured in specific ways. The content on YouTube is archived and made searchable by the curator-practices of users; Facebook re-presents and orders content on individual Newsfeeds and groups according to the principles of personalization and interaction with content; Wikipedia is a vast encyclopedia which contains lemmas on, among others, historical events, places, and people and is constantly updated and rewritten by its community of editors. All three are major platforms in the new media ecology: they attract many users and are important filters of information. In the following sections, brief descriptions of the platforms are provided, followed by a short introduction and rationale for the specific case. They are more thoroughly discussed in terms of their operational procedures in the case studies.

Even though the case studies are separate research projects, they are connected. They aim to show how specific human actors engage in memory work on social media platforms. Witnesses, activists and protesters, and Wikipedia editors construct the past in specific ways and often for specific goals. They share their versions and interpretations of and on
the past and actively strive to carry these into the future. Simultaneously, though, the goal is to demonstrate that these platforms themselves possess agency in these processes as well. Ultimately, the intention of these case studies is to show that both humans and platforms are concurrently involved in the politics of memory.

**YouTube**

On April 23, 2005, the first video was uploaded to YouTube. “Me at the zoo,” shows one of the platform’s founders, Jawed Karim, standing in front of the elephants at the San Diego Zoo and commenting on their long trunks. As in a classic dotcom success story, Karim and the other founders, Chad Hurley and Steve Chen, became multimillionaires a year and a half later, when Google acquired the company (Snickars & Vondereau, 2009, p. 9). Less than a decade after Karim’s original post was uploaded, YouTube grew out to become a culturally significant and economically profitable platform. Monthly, it has over 1 billion unique visitors, together watching over 6 billion hours of video. It operates in 56 countries, is available in 61 languages, and 70% of the material on it originates from outside the US, making YouTube a global phenomenon (Youtube Statistics, n.d.). According to web traffic data site Alexa, the website is the second most-visited globally, right after its mother company Google.

A video-sharing platform, YouTube aims to provide “a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small” (About YouTube, n.d.). Beyond its economic success and corporate aims, however, YouTube hosts a rich cultural archive. The site’s first slogan, “Your Digital Video Repository,” rather than “Broadcast Yourself” captures its essential function, namely being an archive produced and curated by users (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 149). YouTube’s particular affordances, regulations, architecture and the practices related to them enable, support and shape this function. This makes the platform an essential part of not only the new media ecology, but also the new memory ecology. As the case study contends, the platform does not only provide a gateway to the past, but also actively filters it through its algorithmic processing, which is partly based on users’ curating practices.

The academic work on YouTube is growing steadily, but remains quite small in the light of the daunting figures stated earlier. The first book-length studies, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (2009) and *The YouTube Reader* (2009), provide critical readings of the platform as a key player in today’s media ecology. Both books point at the methodological issues that arise when analyzing an unstable research object like YouTube. Not only does the content (archive) of YouTube change, but also the interface and its uses vary. One strategy to face the problem of how to study YouTube is to focus on what its technological underpinnings are that invite and shape certain uses and practices. The affordances that make YouTube a success mainly relate to the archiveability and spreadability of its content. YouTube’s archival content is spreadable, because it is easily accessed, linked to, shared
Chapter 4 | Methodology: Researching Digital Memory Work

and discussed. Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) argue that the platform’s easy-to-use embed option, for example, makes content spread across the internet (p. 6). Automated embedding of YouTube clips on Facebook timelines and ready-to-copy embed codes allow for seamless diffusion of content from the platform to other places online.

The chemical weapons attack on Ghouta

Besides millions of hours of pet and prank videos, YouTube’s archive also contains videos of politically significant events, many of which are made and uploaded by witnesses of these events. One such politically contentious event that was filmed by witnesses was the aftermath of the chemical weapons attack on the neighborhood of Ghouta, Damascus, on August 21, 2013. More details will be provided in chapter five, but what is important to note here is that much uncertainty ruled about whether or not it was actually a chemical weapons attack and who were the perpetrators behind it. An important reason why this case was chosen is because professional reporters were not on site during or after the attack. The only footage available was produced by activists and civilians and hence provides an opportunity to investigate what happens with witness videos in a media ecology in which such material provide records of disruptive historical events.

The event and its circumstances are thus a case in point regarding the politics of memory work: the videos and their uploaders make powerful truth claims about what occurred during and after the attack. Moreover, the case study explores the visibility of videos made by witnesses—a cultural form I call witness videos—of this atrocity in YouTube’s archive. Not only does the chapter investigate how these witnesses have recorded their experiences in specific ways and have made conscious choices about what to film, but also, importantly, how they made their videos findable in YouTube’s archive. Witnesses, after they have uploaded their videos on YouTube, make choices about how to tag, title, and describe them. The stages of memory work involved in this process—from filming to curating videos—are the central focus of this case study. Although the future memory of the attack is constituted by witness videos, it is powerfully shaped by various actors, both human and nonhuman.

This is, however, not where the analysis stops. Witness videos may be found by others who take parts of these videos and mix them with other scenes from other videos and curate these ‘remixed’ videos in ways that might make them more easily findable than their ‘originals’. On the level of recording, we can analyze practice by looking at the camera movement and angle and ways in which witnesses add to the veracity of their recordings, for example by focusing on details. On the level of curating, tagging, titling, and describing are important practices that are traceable in YouTube’s metadata. This gives insight into users’ realized interactions with YouTube’s interface and features. These mechanisms of memory work are empirically explored by qualitative and quantitative analyses of metadata and (remixed) content.
Facebook

Facebook has come a long way since it launched as thefacebook.com from founder Mark Zuckerberg’s Harvard dorm room on February 4, 2004. According to Internet World Stats (2016), as of June 30, 2016, Facebook has 1,679,433,530 subscribers worldwide. According to Alexa, per June 2017, Facebook is the third most-visited website in the world. Zuckerberg and the Facebook’s co-founders Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz, Andrew McCollum, and Chris Hughes first designed Facebook as a service for Harvard student to create profiles and look each other up. Within months, the service spread to other elite US schools. By 2006 it was available to everyone with internet access and by 2008 it was available in Spanish, German, and French (Brügger, 2015). Where Facebook first started as a social network, it quickly grew into a platform where people can share what they are doing or “what's on their mind” (as it now asks). User can share material on their personal pages or those of their friends (per default settings), or within closed and open group pages.

Facebook has been a commercial enterprise from the beginning, when users were confronted by banner advertisements. Today, the platform essentially is a data-gathering company. The more Facebook knows about its users, the more precise the data it sells to third parties is. These third parties are mainly advertisers who use user data to personally target Facebook users. To this end, Facebook stimulates users to make connections in the forms of so-called ‘likes’. It’s principle of connectivity is still there, but connecting to products, places, and other media is now as much part of it as is ‘friending’ (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 47). This technology-supported form of connectivity impacts what users see and do not see when they visit Facebook. Facebook actively filters information—on the basis of the principle of personalization—which is then presented on users’ homepages, or ‘Newsfeed’. Another aspect that determines visibility of content is their ‘weight’. Weight is determined by the level of interaction (likes, shares, and comments) there is with content (Bucher, 2012; cf. chapter 7). Thus, Facebook actively mediates information about the world, whether this is an update from a friend or a news story, to users on the basis of past behavior.

Justice for Mike Brown

The second case study investigates how Facebook users engage in memory work on the page Justice for Mike Brown and how the platform plays an active role in it. The page, set up a day after the police shooting of the African-American teenager Michael Brown on August 9, 2014, aided in organizing and spreading information during the protests in Ferguson, Missouri. More contextual information will be provided in chapter 6, but the main reason why this case was chosen is because the page invited different types of memory work to emerge, ranging from commemorating Brown to appropriating iconic symbolic material from previous protests. Hence, this chapter rethinks the role of memory work within contemporary digital activism.

---

18 For a comprehensive overview of the various stages in Facebook’s short history, see Brügger (2015).
Protest repertoires—the strategies, symbols, and practices protesters employ to achieve their goals and to construct their identity—have come to increasingly involve platforms. Memory work is an important part of this, especially in the case of protests against racial injustice in the US, which draws from the Civil Rights era. The chapter argues that this memory work provided the means through which protesters could identify with the movement, but simultaneously that Facebook’s technology leads to representing events within a minimum of reductive narrative frames. Protesters and activists have always been engaged in memory work, but what happens when this takes places on a platform such as Facebook?

**Wikipedia**

Created in 2001, Wikipedia, owned by the Wikimedia Foundation, is the oldest platform investigated in this dissertation. The platform is a collaborative encyclopedia created by and for users. Wikipedia’s About page reads that the English version houses nearly 5.5 million articles and over 38 million articles in total, written in over 250 languages. As of May 2015, the general website has 16.5 billion and the English page 7.9 page views per month (Wikimedia Report Card, n.d.). According to Alexa, per June 2017, Wikipedia is the fifth most visited site globally, right after Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Baidu. The platform was founded by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, as a branch of their presently terminated project Nupedia, an encyclopedia exclusively produced by experts. Wales and Sanger strived to create a system that was open to anyone and that was quickly filled with entries, unlike Nupedia, whose production process was tedious. This followed the principle of the wiki—“a website on which users collaboratively modify content and structure directly from the web browser” (Wiki, n.d.).

Like traditional encyclopedias, Wikipedia helps to transfer knowledge of past events, people, things and places into the future. Also like traditional encyclopedias, its contributors select what does and does not belong in it. Unlike traditional encyclopedia, however, anyone can, in principle, contribute to it. This makes the platform interesting in terms of memory work, especially regarding historically and politically significant events. By means of their practices, Wikipedia editors (Wikipedians) construct specific versions of events. This case study dives into the group dynamics behind these practices by investigating the archived talk pages—the space in which Wikipedians discuss and debate articles and their fellow editors’ choices. Talk pages provide insight into the process of memory work, because here editors engage into debate about how the past is re-presented in a wiki. Moreover, talk pages show how hierarchies play out and norms and values are shaped and negotiated. On the basis of this hierarchy, access is granted to technologies that can prevent or reverse editing. This is important in terms of memory work, because these technologies effectively silence alternative voices that do not fit within dominant discourse or do not comply with Wikipedia’s community ideology.
The downing of MH17

The third case study concerns the downing of flight MH17 on July 17, 2014, and the wiki that was created after it. The downing of MH17 has been, up until this date, a contentious event that is intrinsically connected to broader geopolitical tensions between Russia and its allies on one side and, broadly speaking, the European Union and the United States on the other. This most visibly plays out in global media coverage, where facts and fictions collapse and converge. Russian media coverage, especially that of RT (Russia Today, Russia’s state-financed news network) and state-owned press agencies, told significantly different stories about the events surrounding the downing than American and European media did. Moreover, there is evidence that Russia employed its “troll army”—paid bloggers and commentators that purposely disrupt online discussion—to spread misinformation on social media and throughout the Web (Sienkiewicz, 2015, pp. 213-215). On the other side, American government officials and news outlets were quick to point fingers at the Kremlin as being (in)directly responsible for the atrocity. Because Wikipedia entries are primarily based on mediated content, this debate was also visible in the talk pages. Unlike the chemical weapons attack on Ghouta, video and photo material concerning the downing was scarce. Therefore, Wikipedians were extra vigilant about the sources that were used by fellow editors to verify information on the disaster. Wikipedians’ memory work regarding the downing of MH17, then, revolves around the inclusion and exclusion of information and its selection and appropriation in a form that fits Wikipedia’s standards and community guidelines. Before we turn how these power dynamics within memory work play out on Wikipedia, however, the next chapter investigates how they take place on YouTube.