Holocaust Related Websites Between Media Discours, Politics of Memory and Politicking

Eva Pfanzelter

Institut of Contemporary History
University of Innsbruck
Christoph-Probst-Platz
A-6020 Innsbruck
Tel.: +43 (0)512 507-4408
Eva.Pfanzelter@uibk.ac.at

In the early 1990s French cultural historian Pierre Nora spoke of a new "age of commemoration", German historian Christoph Cornelißen labelled the development with the term "memory boom". Both tried to describe the accelerated increase of memorial sites, which was accompanied by a profound change in the culture of remembrance. In Europe this upward trend was characterized by a geographic expansion: the commemoration of the dictatorships in the east of the continent became increasingly more important. In the United States of America and in numerous South-American as well as Asian states the consequences of war and tyranny were discovered as objects for the culture of remembrance. In different African nations memorial sites are of a more recent date and focus on apartheid, dictatorships and racial discrimination. At the end of the 1990s, the internet joined in as a new field of presentation for memorial sites. In the beginning it was used as an

additional advertising channel for these institutions, but over the intervening years it has become an indispensable tool for the mobilization of different social groups and for the politics of memory.

All relevant institutions of remembrance such as archives, museums and memorials use the internet at a very professional level as a tool for self-presentation and as a forum for discussion aimed at an international and interdisciplinary audience. For the adolescent "next holocaust generation" these sites on the internet are opinion-forming. Beyond that, they bring up new issues and have a decisive impact on the holocaust debate as well as on the historical discipline. At the same time the internet presence is used for active politics of the day.

Numerous examples show that the medium internet is deliberately used in a different way than other media. High flexibility is required because of the different needs of teachers and learners, of researches and a broad non-identified populace. But memorials, museums, archives and news groups also make politics on the internet and consciously use "their" public in order to push decision-making procedures. On the other hand, the institutions and their web presences are misused as weapons in political conflicts, as for instance in the discussions about the memorial site of the Italian concentration camp Risiera di San Sabba. Finally, these institutions also shape the contemporary historical discipline: For example they introduce and form oral history methods and standards, because similar practices in other scenarios do not enjoy the same attention. The digital collections of documents, photos and videos, the compilation of interviews, discussion records, digital material etc. introduce a high level of professionalism which quickly becomes the state of the art in the scholarly world. Last but not least, these internet practices contribute considerably to the construction of memory, thus confronting researchers and historians with many new challenges.

The internet presences and practices of memorial institutions and networks emphasize that there are new decision-making structures in society which largely exceed the possibilities of traditional mass media. They show that there are new forms and new forums of public life which emerge and function differently, which diffuse information and activate people in a different way generating more than passive reception. This research project aims at analyzing these phenomena on a multi-perspective focusing on the two central priorities: politics of memory and media theory.

The sample of websites that are going to be examined consists of websites of real institutions like museums, archives, memorial places and memorial institutes as well as virtual holocaust websites, which have established themselves as umbrella organisations and/or net-communities. The sample currently includes:

Jewish museums

Holocaust museums

Institutes

Archives and/or document collections

Organisations/NGOs

Networks

Others

The continually adapted list of samples can be found on the project-website.