

Media and the past – Mediating the past

Looking back through media in a forward-moving world

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ABSTRACT

The issue *Media and the Past: Mediating the Past* starts from the premise that the past is not fixed but continuously reinterpreted in relation to the present, and it presents the argument that media play a decisive role in these processes of collective remembering and meaning-making. By shaping how pasts are communicated and contested, media act as key sites where collective memory is negotiated and mobilised. We situate the seven contributions in the issue within contemporary transformations in politics and culture, characterised by a hybrid media environment comprised of legacy media, digital platforms, and GenAI, which raises new questions about power, authority, and visibility in memory discourses. Against this backdrop, we introduce the assembled contributions, highlighting their shared interest in how engagements with the past across different domains are mediated, and outlining their relevance for ongoing debates in society as well as media and communication research.

KEYWORDS: collective remembering, counter memory, digital memory, future imaginaries, mediated pasts, memory discourse, political communication

Introduction

“What’s done is done” is an old saying that indicates the past cannot be changed and that one must live with its consequences in the present and future. Although this understanding may seem intuitive, the past is in fact subject to relentless scrutiny and reinterpretation, as its meaning evolves alongside the present (Assmann, 2008: 56–57). Seeing the past through the lens of a present in flux that creates “retroactive expectations” (Koselleck, 1985: 275) demands a constant re-evaluation of its meaning, ultimately changing how it is remembered over time and how it is affecting current practices in multiple ways. While there are efforts to capture the past “as it was”, for example, by historians trying to institutionalise authoritative accounts of what happened (Nora, 1989), the past is, in many regards, a discursive matter – continuously shaped and re-shaped through ongoing social and mediated discourse. Acknowledging this is particularly relevant for understanding how societies collectively remember and mobilise the past through media, and for paying attention to which actors possess – or lack – the power to stir mediated memory discourses (Milani & Richardson, 2023).

Mass media (Hajek et al., 2015), social media (Smit, 2018), and increasingly AI applications (Hoskins, 2024) not only shape public communication and negotiation of the past, but also function as archives and technologies, providing numerous gateways to our pasts. It is media that allow the decoupling of memory from individual bodies and direct experience, making lived pasts and vernacular memories (i.e., “personal cultural memory”; van Dijck, 2004), accessible to wider audiences. Media allow expanding the horizon of remembering to “prosthetic memories”, that is, memories not based on one’s own past experiences but gained through media, where they travel beyond immediate social circles and the human lifespan (Landsberg, 2018).

Without disregarding the beauty of reminiscing and dwelling in the past enjoyed by many people, its political and cultural significance unfolds in collective remembering. Public engagement in mediated memory is not about remembering the past for its own sake; it is highly instrumental. Mediated pasts thus play a crucial role in shaping perceptions, identities, and societal values, thereby contributing to an understanding of what is of collective importance and what constitutes the foundation for (un)desired imaginaries of the future (Angell & Larsen, 2022; De Saint-Laurent, 2018; Kantola, 2014; Sandford, 2019).

The number of voices and positions in these memory discourses has increased over time, especially connected to media technological change that allowed more individuals and communities to participate in public discussions related to the past. Negotiating the past in digital media environments has become increasingly networked and allows citizens to contribute bottom-up with their mediated memories and historical references by posting about them or linking to other (un)official, (semi-)public digital sources (Garde-Hansen et al., 2009; Hoskins, 2014). This becomes a powerful counterweight when dominant memory agents neglect or suppress pasts of communities in their communication, potentially rendering

subsequent social media discourses sites of resistance against “mnemonic hegemony” (Molden, 2016: 125). On social media platforms, this comes with platform affordances facilitating networked publics (boyd, 2011), which actively shape through algorithms, features, curated content, and moderated spaces how pasts and futures are discussed.

This political and cultural significance of the past is not always reflected in media and communication studies, as the field tends to adhere to a certain presentism as it is repeatedly enchanted by the next new media technology unleashed on society and the way it might revolutionise how we live and communicate (Driessens, 2023). In recent years, however, the past has increasingly imposed itself on the field as it has gained attention in both societal and academic discourses on post-colonial legacies (Mechkarini et al., 2023; Therkildsen & Villadsen, 2024), the omnipresence of pop-cultural nostalgia (Becker & Georgiou, 2024), or climate change (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2025). It has become apparent that the past is not only a timely topic but, more often than not, is deeply intertwined with the latest media technology and societal change.

Most attention for the past, though, might have drawn the wake and success of populism and its romanticisation of supposedly pure, secure, and better bygone times (Menke & Hagedoorn, 2022; Merrill, 2020; Pettersson & Sakki, 2017). The rise of right-wing populism and its systematic exploitation of a longing for the past is linked to seemingly endless global crises, creating fertile soil for past-oriented sentiments in many democracies. Feeling overwhelmed and lost has become a common experience in many people’s everyday lives (Rogenhofer et al., 2023), dampening expectations for the future and paving the way to a glorification of the past. The latest geopolitical return to nationalism and imperialism (Johnson, 2026) draws legitimisation from exactly those sentiments of rootlessness that have been nurtured by populists over the last few decades. And yet, with most eyes on these developments, it is all the more important to also turn the spotlight on the numerous democratic, constructive, and inclusive uses of the past that can be found across society and deserve our academic attention.

Against this backdrop, the 2026 issue of *Nordic Journal of Media Studies* directs scholarly attention toward “media and the past: mediating the past” by exploring how media content, discourses, practices, and technologies shape engagements with the past across domains such as politics, journalism, online culture, popular culture, and sports. Collectively, the seven articles demonstrate that evoking the past does not necessarily constitute a restorative project. Investigating the past and its uses in media might reveal what is considered worth preserving today, which past imaginaries of our present did (not) come to fruition, and how today’s engagement with the achievements and mistakes of the past is used to imagine and legitimise certain paths into the future. Furthermore, while the past seems to be omnipresent in politics these days, several articles demonstrate that it is of no less importance for people’s social, cultural, and political meaning-making through fandom, playful online communities, and entertainment media, such as film and television serials (Armbruster, 2016;

Garde-Hansen, 2009; Humphreys, 2020). The past is used in numerous ways to compose cultural narratives, contributes to identity formation, and can influence social cohesion. In this nexus, media serve as powerful mediators between the past, the present, and the future, thereby having a significant and active role in whose pasts get (no) recognition and (no) consideration in society (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2022; Molden, 2016).

The aim of this issue is, therefore, to investigate these dynamics for a varied and nuanced exploration of how media contribute to the construction of shared pasts and the negotiation of diverse collective identities. Consequently, examining how media contribute to the preservation, reinterpretation, and challenging of narratives about the past becomes imperative to understanding societies and where they might be heading.

Political uses of mediated pasts

Several articles in the issue conceptualise and study the past regarding its political uses, meaning, and impact. They thereby contribute to a growing body of literature in the Nordics and beyond with a broad scope and diversity in the political relevance of memory agents, issues, and discourses in society, ranging from mediated memory in institutional politics to more mundane media cultural representations (Kelpšienė et al., 2023; Menke, 2025). In the more traditional sense of politics, mediated pasts are used strategically to compete in the political arena and win voters through past-related political campaigning.

This strategic use of mediated pasts in electoral politics is examined in the article “Posted pasts: Strategic uses of the past in the 2022 Danish and Swedish national election campaigns on Facebook”, by Kalle Eriksson and Marie Meier. Through the framework of positive, negative, and ambivalent campaigning, Eriksson and Meier study how history and memory were employed by parties and party leaders to legitimise their own political positions as well as to discredit their opponents. What they discover is that there is no blueprint for how parties and party families across the political spectrum strategically use the past, and that contextual and national factors play a significant role. Scandals and snap elections, like in Denmark, reduce the temporal horizon to recent pasts that encompass most of the communication, while ideologically charged elections about the future of democracy, like in Sweden, where a populist right-wing party was leading the polls, expand the temporal horizon, for example, by drawing on the dark history of National Socialism as a cautionary tale.

While there is a growing field investigating the significance of mediated pasts in institutional politics, other increasingly politicised areas have received less academic attention. One of these areas is sports, a domain deeply rooted in its legacy of fandom, identity, and emotion (Gill, 2012; Nosal et al., 2024), which is often at odds with the economic logics by which it is permeated. That is particularly the case for popular sports, where commercial interests might be prioritised over remaining true to the legacy and values with which fans grew up (Gillooly et al., 2022). This becomes especially problematic in cases affecting

fans' morality and values, for example, when authoritarian states politically instrumentalise the sport by sponsoring major tournaments to improve their nation's image (Kazakov, 2025).

As David Farrell-Banks and Samuel Merrill demonstrate in their article, "The nostalgic (de)legitimation of sportswashing: Social media and legacy media reactions to the Saudi Arabian state takeover of Newcastle United", fans' nostalgia can play a substantial role in the (de)legitimation of such so-called sportswashing. Drawing on social media and legacy media reactions to the Saudi Arabian state takeover of the football club Newcastle United, Farrell-Banks and Merrill outline how nostalgia becomes a means – instead of only an end – in the weighing of the financial gains and moral costs. Fans and supporters draw from the nostalgic legacy of the club, its glorious history, and esteemed past figures to both legitimise and delegitimise the new ownership, exposing how contested, mouldable, and highly emotional the past becomes in politicised discourse. The study further demonstrates how divisive it can be if the collective memory, on which shared fan identity is built, splinters along political lines, while the authors still see potential for the use of "activist nostalgia" in rallying for resistance and opposition.

Difficult pasts and (in)accurate representations

Memory discourse of social and political relevance is not only to be found in politics and journalism. Mediated popular culture also significantly contributes to the salience of collective memory in the wider societal discourse, creating visibility for the pasts of different groups and communities. That is particularly important for those communities that have been suppressed, ignored, or forgotten, and whose mediated pasts are an essential part of their fight for societal recognition and equal rights. The polyphony of memory diversifying hegemonic memory discourses indicates a healthy, inclusive democracy (Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2020), and, we would argue, especially when it reaches the realm of popular culture. However, the incorporation of marginalised pasts into broader public memory is rarely immediate; rather, it unfolds through gradual and contested processes.

This dynamic is carefully outlined by Michael Nebeling Petersen in the contribution "Mediating the AIDS crisis: The affective and queer politics of cultural memory in film, television, and digital media". With the aim to provide a framework "that clarifies how mainstream film, television, and digital media have shaped AIDS memory over time", Nebeling Petersen identifies three waves starting in the 1980s that tell the history of the AIDS epidemic and how it affected the queer community through different narratives and aesthetics. These phases, as Nebeling Peterson shows, were always mirroring the societal discourse about queer and gay people; hence, the depictions started with censored stories about tragedy and moral lessons in the 1980s before popular movies in the mid-2000s began "reintroducing the AIDS crisis to mainstream global consciousness through nostalgia, affective witnessing, and selective commemoration". In the third phase,

starting in the late 2010s, the AIDS epidemic is increasingly remembered through intersectional storytelling, exploring also systemic social and political dimensions. The article illuminates how an invisible past that was at first ignored because it mostly affected sexual minorities gained recognition over several decades of political activism, eventually resonating in these three increasingly nuanced phases of cultural remembrance and representation. Such efforts for social and cultural recognition are as numerous as there are groups and communities diverging from the majority and its hegemonic past. While their pasts are one thing that separates minorities from the majority, defining them as different through their unique collective memory and identity, generating visibility for that past can also be an entry point to understanding and acceptance.

This is evident both in Nebeling Petersen's example of the AIDS epidemic and in Maria Löblich's contribution to the issue with the title "'Like a small trip back to the GDR'? East German evaluations of the television serial *Weissensee* and its authenticity in a dynamic discourse landscape". In the article, Löblich studies East Germans' reading positions that define their assessment of the representation of life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). By not investigating the content of the serial for historical accuracy, but rather the audience's assessment of authentic representation of their former lifeworlds and experiences in the GDR, Löblich gives voice to those who still feel misunderstood and looked down upon in a reunited Germany. What she demonstrates is that media representations reproducing the dominant discourse not only become a prism of media memory through which a group is seen, but through which a group eventually starts to see itself and its own past. In the case at hand, that is the pedagogic West German narrative of the dictatorship that simultaneously drowns out former citizens' mundane everyday life experiences in the GDR. While more nuanced and authentic representations have emerged in German popular culture and discourse, as evident in *Weissensee*, Löblich concludes that these only start to develop impact on East Germans' reading positions, "but have not (yet) expanded the horizon to relocate oneself in the past". Ultimately, the findings highlight the importance of the coexistence or symbiosis of different memory narratives to achieve appropriate recognition – in this case, for each the dictatorship and its victims and the identity-defining everyday life experiences, which are both valid and crucial for a collective memory shared by East and West Germans.

The question of accurate representation of the past is not only influenced by political efforts to change societal perceptions, but also by how media and media technologies shape, enable, or prevent representation. It has always been a central question in memory discourse who has access to media and can generate visibility for their version of the past (Molden, 2016). These questions persist and might become even more prevalent with new technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). To better understand the impact of GenAI on collective memory, Nuppu Pelevina and Erkki Mervaala probe three large language models (LLMs) in their article, "Whose story wins? LLM-powered chatbots as sites and agents of memory-political contestation and corporate greenwashing". Pelevina

and Mervaala use climate change, security politics, and colonialism as three historically disputed topics to assess GenAI chatbots' role as novel "sites and agents of memory-political contestations". While there is an increase in studies on memory, history, and GenAI (Hoskins, 2024; Makhortykh et al., 2023), the article offers a novel Nordic viewpoint and additionally contributes to previously underexplored dimensions, that is, "discursive features, intersections between state-led and industry- or corporate-driven narratives, and AI memory politics in understudied regions and languages". The overall picture gives reason for concern: LLMs exhibit a generally low, yet varying historicity when prompted about the topics, might downplay alternative or critical perspectives, seem to reproduce corporate framings from corporate digital sources, and do not provide Indigenous perspectives unless explicitly prompted. Returning to the initial argument that the past is a discursive matter, GenAI chatbots raise epistemological questions the authors tackle: Whose version of the past is reproduced? How do those accounts enter LLMs, and in what framing are they presented? What are the potentials for targeted manipulation, and how can accuracy, inclusivity, and transparency be established? While not all these questions can be answered or solved due to the novelty and black-box nature of LLMs, Pelevina and Mervaala rightfully raise them, thereby challenging tech companies' and other powerful actors' influence on both the technological and discursive means of how societies remember the past.

Media as beloved technologies and carriers of the past

While the article by Pelevina and Mervaala reminds us to keep the political economy and power structures of media in mind when we assess memory discourses, it is also important to recognise how media can create memorable experiences in people's biographies. Media technologies stand out in comparison to other artefacts of human remembering. For one, it has been shown that media users often develop an emotional, often nostalgic connection to media of specific importance in their lives (Bolin, 2014; Niemeyer, 2014), something media and communication scholars have been increasingly studying in recent years (Kappes & Menke, 2024). Certain media contribute to formative processes shaping individuals on both a personal and social level when they allow connecting with communities through shared media infrastructures, content, or practices (Keightley & Schlesinger, 2014; Neiger, 2020). There can be a strong bond with such media technologies and their social functions, resulting in feelings of nostalgia for them while simultaneously trying to cope with the constant introduction of new media shaping modern life (Kalinina, 2016; Menke, 2017).

However, this does not necessarily end in a passive mourning and longing for past media technologies, as demonstrated in the article "Digital afterlives: Tracing the resurrection process of dead online cultures", by Lilli Sihvonon and Elina Vaahensalo in this issue. In their conceptual work, Sihvonon and Vaahensalo ask how digital platforms in decline and at the brink of "dying" are resurrected to revive online cultures and objects dear to their members. The ambition of the

authors is not to simply present cases in a media archaeological study, but to advance their previous work on the life-phases of online cultures and platforms (Vaahensalo & Sihvonen, 2022). A conceptualisation of resurrection after online cultures have presumably “died” is developed in three dimensions: “the narrative resurrection, which never materialises; partial or resuscitative resurrection, where a passive object is revived; and complete resurrection of a dead object”. What stands out is the complexity that needs to be taken into account regarding the practices, resources, and capabilities to resurrect online cultures, which often rely on digital platforms and infrastructures over which users have little to no control. Hence, Sihvonen and Vaahensalo demonstrate how resurrection becomes a matter of power, which must be gained through the dedication of those motivated by nostalgia and a strong conviction to preserve or revive what they fear is being lost. This work is far from being only of theoretical value, as shown not only by the empirical examples of IRC-Galleria, Vine, and Habbo Hotel in the article; it also helps us understand cases of life-phases and resurrection that create broader political attention, like the European citizens’ initiative “Stop Destroying Videogames” (Ondruska, 2024). This initiative is supported by close to 1.3 million signatures and has been lobbying in the European Commission to hold game publishers accountable for providing gaming communities access to old, digitally purchased games that would otherwise be discontinued for being unprofitable. How such initiatives gain momentum can only be understood by knowing why and how users become politicised and empowered to resurrect media some consider obsolescent, claiming the right as consumers and dedicated community members to keep their beloved media alive.

The relationship can, however, also be reversed when media allow keeping a changing culture alive, for example, when a subculture and its community go through a generational renewal. This scenario has been investigated by Dag Balkmar and Jono Van Belle in their article, “Skateboarding memories and social (in)cohesion: Mediated subcultural memory and ‘grey’ belonging”. While many skateboarders “outgrow” skateboarding because of its risks and appeal to youth, Balkmar and Van Belle ask which role different media play for older Swedish skateboarders trying to stay connected to the community, while remembering their own experiences or mediated, prosthetic memories and inspirations that contributed to establishing skateboarding as a subculture in Sweden during their youth. Through interviews with “grey” male and female skateboarders, Balkmar and Van Belle unfold a media universe of old and new media: Skateboard magazines and VHS tapes allow the “grey” skateboarders to remember and share the collective memory of early skateboarding coming to Sweden from the US. New media, such as community Facebook groups, are described as places where the “grey” skateboarders experience transgenerational connection, share their own skateboarding videos, and pass on values that evolved in the subculture since the 1970s. The article highlights how mediated pasts are a core dimension of generational relationships and a fundamental element of social cohesion through the reciprocal exchange between older and younger generations. Thereby, the study advances not only research on skateboarding

as an ageing and increasingly diverse subculture, but also contributes with a positive example of intergenerational mediated memory. This complements work in memory studies, which often focuses on the transmission of trauma between generations and not often enough on the role of memory in passing on leisure culture and community values (see Jacobs, 2016; Proietti, 2025).

The future of mediated pasts

The variety of media the contributors to this issue investigate gives an impressive overview of how versatile media's role is in our engagement with the past. It also underlines how media as technologies always come with affordances that define how and in which ways the past can (not) be communicated. Memory discourse cannot be understood without considering how it is intertwined with media change and the power of media technologies and institutions. They should be studied not just as channels or platforms but as actors with their own agendas about how the past is communicated and by whom. The question is who "the media" are in the future. Journalism has always been a critical agent in facilitating memory discourse while also providing the public with a first draft of history through daily news (Neiger & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2016; Schudson, 2014; Zelizer, 2008). Even though not without its own problems concerning access for everyone to those memory discourses, journalism adheres to professional standards and ethics, ideally shaping the quality and trajectory of the public negotiation of the past. Such normative frameworks, as we find them in journalism, are not guiding memory discourses in more unregulated environments.

Online memory discourse, while less gated and more democratised, often lacks markers to identify trustworthy authoritative voices and provides little transparency about memory agents' intentions. While there is potential for vulnerable groups and minorities to create visibility for their pasts and introduce counter memories (Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2022; Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2020), questions about the influence of malicious actors and the platforms themselves arise. Social media and increasingly GenAI shape memory discourses as much as, if not more than, journalism and legacy media. To address this development, digital memory studies have emerged as a field at the forefront of media technological changes that impact how societies remember (Hoskins, 2017), and media and communication studies play an important part in this inquiry. One of the major questions, which Plevina and Mervaala already raise in this issue, is how the construction of the past can be anchored in a common understanding of truth, accuracy, and authenticity while leaving space for an open discourse about different interpretations of the past. How can disinformation about the past be differentiated from legitimate interpretations in a world in which GenAI can be used to synthesise pasts en masse and flood memory discourses with hallucinated or engineered narratives and visuals (Hoskins, 2024; Makhortykh, 2024; Menke et al., in press)? Answering these questions informs the research agenda for the coming years, hopefully also

taken up by media and communication scholars, yet without losing sight of the many positive and constructive avenues new media technologies also create for collective remembering.

What follows this issue about media and the past?

Since this issue titled *Media and the Past: Mediating the Past* offers a bouquet of articles that probe how the past becomes meaningful in the present in numerous ways, its gaze is primarily directed backwards, asking how societies, groups, and individuals make sense of the present and future through looking at mediated pasts. In the 2028 issue, *Media and Futures: Mediating Futures*, *Nordic Journal of Media Studies* will turn its gaze forward to explore how media contribute to the creation and circulation of imaginaries of the future. And still, while both issues gaze in their specific directions, the current issue already establishes that neither the past nor the future can be understood independently of the other, and that both only come into being as they are constructed from the present, in which we think, act, and imagine the world with and through media. In this sense, the temporal categories of past and future are not fixed entities, but continuously negotiated and reconfigured in mediated practices, with concrete societal implications. The reader is therefore invited to join the ongoing conversation between the two issues, as well as between the past and the future.

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