MEMORY OF THE FUTURE? DIGITAL ARCHIVES IN PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

Tobias Eberwein
Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, AUSTRIA

Corinna Gerard-Wenzel
Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, AUSTRIA

Questions

Public Service Media (PSM) produce the most different audiovisual products, which they either preserve for legal reasons, to re-use for their own purposes, or for financial gain (Snoeren, 2016). However, they also store audiovisual broadcasts with distinct social and cultural intentions. In the individualized, differentiated and polarized societies of today, social cohesion is under pressure – a trend that is further aggravated by the increasingly fragmented use of media. Under these circumstances, building up common societal goals, interests and identities – or a collective 'cultural memory' (Erll and Nünning, 2008) – becomes all the more important. Technological innovations and digitization open up new possibilities for generating cultural memory, as data can be stored and made accessible more easily. This is particularly important for PSM because they have to fulfill a remit of education and cultural diversity, among other things – and are able to provide large amounts of texts, images and audiovisual materials on a non-commercial basis.

However, in their daily work, PSM archives encounter various legal restrictions and ethical problems. For example, while it is not new that audiovisual materials potentially infringe copyrights or personal rights of others, the digital storage and duplication of such materials reinforces these problems, as recent discussions about the 'right to be forgotten' show (see e.g. Ausloos, 2012). The public interest in creating common identities by open and publicly accessible archives thus often directly opposes the personal integrity of individuals.

What ethical problems and legal restrictions are digital archives by PSM across Europe currently facing? To what extent do these issues hinder the generation of cultural memory? What strategies are PSM in different journalism cultures pursuing to overcome the obstacles? To answer these questions, a three-step research design was applied in a comparative international study that combines cultural theory and empirical communication research with the perspectives of media ethics and media law.

Theoretical background

The study finds a theoretical starting point in the concept of cultural memory that can be defined as the tradition in us, which is transmitted via generations over texts, pictures and rituals and affects our worldview (Assmann, 1995). It consists of two components (Assmann, 2008): Communicative memory is shorter, often comprising only a few generations, and is limited to oral and written communication on a daily life base. By contrast, cultural memory, in a narrower sense, represents objectivized culture and is marked by its distance from daily life.

Digitization makes the public availability of audiovisual content for everyone possible. This also influences the functions and practices of media archives. While traditional archives in an analogue media world used to focus on the conservation of media, online archives prioritize access for users (Pajala, 2010). However, cultural memory requires institutions of preservation, while communicative memory is non-institutional – and is not formalized or stabilized by material symbolization (Assmann, 2008). Hughes (2015) considers that it is a necessary requirement that public institutions provide for publicly available data und media. However, access alone is insufficient. Additionally, the possibility of use and re-use in education and research is required. Public Service Media are the perfect place to realize these aims, as they affect collective identity building (Hagedoorn, 2013). Therefore, the creation of cultural memory can be described as one of the central functions of PSM in a digital network society.

However, these goals of cultural memory and safe-guarding public access are thwarted by the individual interests of the producers of the audiovisual archive, the broadcaster itself, and the people that are the subject of, or appear in, the audiovisual material (contributors).

Methods

In order to illuminate this conflict between public and individual interests, a three-step empirical research process was realized in four different European countries that represent a range of political, social, economic and cultural dimensions of media systems (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004): the United Kingdom, Finland, the Netherlands and Austria. The study combined document analysis, problem-centered interviews and database-driven case studies: In a first step, basic data about the archives of the PSM organizations were collected via desk research, which included an evaluation of the relevant scientific literature, relevant copyright and media laws on the national and on the European level, the broadcasters' websites as well as various internal documents (such as editorial and archiving guidelines, codes of conduct, etc.). Second, problem-centered interviews with up to five representatives of each broadcasting organization

(e.g. archivists, ombudsmen, journalists, representatives of the legal department, etc.) were conducted, in order to shed light on the question of how the legal and ethical implications affect archiving routines – and how this impacts on the aim of generating cultural memory. The interviews made it possible to identify and systematize examples of archived contents that illustrate ethical and legal problems, which were then, in a third step, assessed in detail. For this purpose, the archive catalogues of the different broadcasters were searched for specific cases, which could eventually be evaluated on the basis of the previously collected background knowledge.

Findings

The paper highlights various tensions between personal rights and collective interest in the process of creating cultural memory in the digital age: One of the main transformations in archiving that digitization has brought about is the way in which the material is publicly accessed and the proportion of the material that is publicly accessible. Digital archives certainly make it easier to store content – and are thus a valuable asset for Public Service Media in their attempt to fulfill their public remit. However, digitization has also caused significant risks for PSM archives, such as technical sustainability and long-term availability of formats, copyrights and personal rights issues. For the daily working process, digitization has changed the role and self-esteem of the archivists, as their work goes beyond simple documentation and they are now more concerned with issues of quality and ethics. At the same time, the role of journalistic actors as content producers is also in transition, as one additional challenge they have to face now is the fact that the consent of the contributors appearing in the program has to be much wider, also containing any cases of publication on the Internet.

The paper describes these and similar challenges in detail – and concludes with proposals for media policy.

References

Assmann, J (1995) Collective Memory and Cultural Identity. *Cultural History/Cultural Studies* Spring/Summer 1995: 125–133.

Assmann J (2008) Communicative and Cultural Memory. In: Erll A and Nünning A (eds) *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, pp. 109–118.

Ausloos J (2012) The 'Right to be Forgotten' – Worth remembering? *Computer Law & Security Review* 28(2): 143–152.

Erll A and Nünning A (eds) (2008) *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter.

Hagedoorn B (2013) Television as a Hybrid Repertoire of Memory. New Dynamic Practices of Cultural Memory in the Multi-Platform Era. *View. Journal of European Television History & Culture* 2(3): 52–64.

Hallin DC and Mancini P (2004) *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hughes L (2015) The Public Has a Right to Memory. *Our Beeb. The Future of the BBC*. Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourbeeb/lorna-hughes/public-has-right-to-memory.

Pajala M (2010) Television as an Archive of Memories? Cultural Memory and its Limits on the Finnish Public Service Broadcaster's Online Archive. *Critical Studies in Television* 5(2): 133–145.

Snoeren J (2016) *Archiving the Airwaves. Accountability of the Dutch Public Broadcasting System*. Master Thesis, University of Amsterdam, NL.