Retrospective Sanctuaries: Investigating Conflicts in Retrospective Facebook Groups[1]

By
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Abstract

This article investigates conflicts in retrospective Facebook groups, i.e., groups created with a particular interest and focus on the past, to analyse how members of these groups understand the past and how they negotiate, resist and challenge each other's notions of the past. The data comes from a netnographic fieldwork within six such retrospective groups. Theoretical inspiration is drawn from Actor-Network-Theory (Harrison 2013, Latour 2005). The analysis thusly focuses on human (the members of the groups) as well as non-human actors (the operative logic of Facebook) and study how these produce associations between the past and the present. An overall result of the study is that the retrospective Facebook groups are not characterised by conflict. Instead, they are produced as places of sanctuary, where associations with the past becomes a basis for a nostalgic feel-good culture. However, the analysis also shows that the sanctuaries build on the production of a discontinuity and a conflict between the past and the present. Using Boym's concept of ruinophilia, as well as Bauman's concept of retrotopia, the article discusses how the conflicted discontinuity between the past and the present produces an us-and-them relationship where group members can come together in a nostalgic as well as a critical care for the world as it (in their perspectives) was supposed to be. The analysis also illustrates how members' use of sources and references becomes a mere stylistic performance of authority, as the operative logic of Facebook not only enables but also constrains group interactions, reducing the members' possibilities of having profound interactions and negotiations based on their memories and notions of the past. The article hereby contributes to the emerging research on digital memories in general, and memory work on Facebook in particular.

Keywords: Digital memory, Connective memory, Digital heritage, Nostalgia, Disputes, Authority, Social media, Facebook

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"The Past Is Looking Brighter and Brighter"
- Jim Campilongo, *Dream Dictionary*

Introduction

Log on to Facebook, type in the name of your hometown in the search field and you are likely to discover that there is a group dedicated to the history of this particular place, presumably with a name like "Remembering our old [city]" or "Our [city] of the past". Actually, chances are you are already a member of such a group. If not, you might be a member of a group focused on a specific decade, say the 1950s or 1980s. You might also have come into contact with groups focused on artefacts from the past, or groups with a general history interest, discussing everything from origin civilizations to the Cold War. These groups can be seen as part of a larger retrospective trend that shapes the ways in which we relate to the past, the present and the future (Ekelund 2017, Gumbrecht 2014). Zygmunt Bauman (2017) has discussed this trend in terms of "retrotopia". With this, he argues that instead of investing in the future as a time and place where things have the potential of being better, we now look to the past as the idealized and utopian place.

The emergence of social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, plays a part in this retrospective trend, as they affect not only how people live their lives and connect with others in the present, but also how they remember and make connections with the past. There is a growing body of research on this. Studies have illustrated that Facebook (as well as other SNSs) has produced a personal memory and archive fever (c.f. Garde-Hansen 2009), that Facebook has become an important space for memory communities and memory work (Robards et al 2018, Smit, Heinrich & Broersma 2018), and that Facebook have developed more and more into focusing on an automated production of memories where algorithms select relevant old posts and revives them as "memories" for the user to share (Jacobsen & Beer 2021). Furthermore, Facebook has become a platform where online nostalgia businesses operate and produce commodified memories, ready-made for users to share (Niemeyer & Keightley 2020). Memories and associations with the past have thus become a tool to create ties between the users and the platform on several levels. Facebook can even be said to be an actor that shapes and interferes with our engagements with the past (e.g., Smit, Heinrich & Broersma 2018). Investigating how associations with the past are produced on Facebook is thus important to understand the shifting character of heritage, memory, and history culture. Andrew Hoskins (2017a) has argued that the digital era and the "connective turn" has generated a memory boom and an "unprecedented uncovering and regenerating of the past". This, he writes, "has undermined that scarce thing called heritage" (2017a:2) by which he means the traditional and official heritage institutions.

Using Rodney Harrisons (2013:14) definition of heritage as relationships with the past produced through networks of actors in the present, we can thus understand retrospective Facebook groups; groups created with a particular focus on the past, as digital spaces in which heritage and memory are negotiated and thereby become part of how individuals relate to and understand the relationship between the past, the present and the future.

Within the emerging field of digital memory studies (e.g., van Dijck 2007, Garde-Hansen, Hoskins & Reading 2009, Lagerkvist 2013, Harju 2015, De Kosnik 2016, Reading 2016, Hoskins 2017b, Ekelund 2020), to which this article ultimately seeks to contribute, studies have highlighted how the connective turn has generated existential challenges with regards to how an era that celebrates hyper-connectivity, speed and instantaneity affects our use of history, the ways in which we remember the past and the production of heritage. Using the concept of communitas, Amanda Lagerkvist has illustrated that the hurriedness and fragmentation generated by the connective turn has been tackled by individuals through collective digital memory practices in which they seek cohesion, meaning and a sense of continuity (Lagerkvist 2014 & 2015). On the same topic, Martin Pogačar has phrased the term "co-historicity" to investigate the individuality in how individuals, engaged with other individuals in digital forums, knit together their personalised historical timelines into a collective audio-visual material (Pogačar 2017). Hoskins has stressed that with the connective turn we have seen the end of collective memory and instead entered an era of "a memory of the multitude". This, he argues, means that the cohesiveness of the collective has been replaced by a "multiple social subject" which is based on what individuals have in common, rather than a sense of shared identity and unity (Hoskins 2017c). Building on these thoughts, in this article I will contribute to the study of digital heritage and memory by investigating contested topics, disputes and conflicts: the stuff that threaten to untie the collective of actors. Exploring conflicts will not only help to understand how individuals understand the past for their own intents and purposes, but also how they negotiate, resist and challenge each other's notions of the past – what we might call a struggle for authority. Focusing on conflicts, disputes and the struggle for authority, I will be able to discuss the role of conflicts, as well as how the interface and logic of Facebook shapes how individuals interact with each other in digital heritage and memory practices.

Investigating Digital Production of Associations Between the Past and the Present

Theoretically, I draw from Harrison's discussion on heritage as "a production of the past in the present" (Harrison 2013:32). Harrison is inspired by Bruno Latour

and Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) where a central idea is that "the social" is not thought of as a phenomenon that pre-exists the doings of actors (e.g., Latour 2005). Rather, the social is performative, it is produced through the associations made between actors. Latour describes ANT as a "sociology of associations" where the task of the researcher becomes to trace the associations, to find out how the actors themselves define, order and produce the networks that make up their specific social situations (Latour 2005:23). In this case, with my interest in the production of relationships between the past and the present, an ANT approach means studying what can be called synchronic associations – connections made between actors in a specific time, that is, the present – as well as, and maybe even more importantly, diachronic associations – connections made over time, stretching from the present to the past, or in-between different pasts. Another central idea in ANT is that agency is not seen as an individual quality, but as a collective capacity – an effect of an assemblage of actors (Latour 2005:46-50). Important here is that the platform of Facebook cannot be regarded as a neutral and passive space in which the users' interactions take place. Rather, Facebook's interface, operative logic and use of algorithms enables as well as constrains how interactions, meaning and associations are produced and construed. Therefore, we must consider the platform itself as a sociotechnical assemblage and "non-human actor" (Smit, Heinrich & Broersma 2018, Ekelund 2022a).

Using this perspective means that heritage is explored as a practice where the past is constantly in the process of assembling, and where this assembling is performed by human as well as non-human actors who might strive towards multiple and conflicting ends (Harrison 2013:33). Thus, studying power relations, in this case how authority is voiced and established, is never a question of individual actors. Instead, it implicates the study of associations between actors – how actors build associations and networks that promote and establish certain voices, while questioning and destabilizing others.

The article's data comes from a netnographic fieldwork conducted in 2019. Netnography is an ethnographic approach to the study of social interactions online that uses online conversations as its data, in this case the interactions produced by members of retrospective Facebook groups (Kozinets 2015). Using netnography, I followed the interactive flow of posts, pictures, videos, links, comments and discussions within six retrospective Facebook groups during a year. This means that I regularly logged into the groups to read the posts and discussions and to make fieldnotes for each group, noting the types of posts, comments and discussions that had taken place.[2] Using these notes, I was able to return to specific posts for a more thorough analysis. In total, I went through approximately two thousand posts during the fieldwork, out of which I returned to roughly two hundred for a more qualitative analysis. In this process of analysis,

I coded and sorted the data into different categories and topics – one of which was conflicts and disputes. In the analysis for this very article, I also retraced a specific topic further back in time, as one of the conflicts that arose in one of the groups referred to posts made in the group previous to my fieldwork.

The Facebook groups studied all use Swedish as the language of communication and were selected based on two criteria. A first criterion was to include a wide variety of groups. Based on my initial searches, I decided to include groups of three different categories. First, local history groups focusing on a particular place or city. Second, groups focusing on remembering a specific decade. And third, groups interested in discussing the past in broader and more general terms. Two groups in each category were chosen. Hereby, the data offer a diverse perspective on how associations between the past and the present are practiced in a digital social media setting. The second criterion for selection was the size and activity of the groups. During my initial searches, I concluded that there are retrospective groups with as little as ten members as well as those with 100 000 members or even more. To make a qualitative netnographical approach possible, and at the same time select groups large enough to have a substantial flow of interactions, I chose groups with 1000 to 15 000 members who produce at least ten posts per day. Based on my observations, the members who are most active in the groups are almost solely white. It is difficult to distinguish their class or profession. However, with regards to age and sex, they are diverse groups, including both young and old, both women and men – although there is a predominance of men above the age of 50.

Studying people's digital interactions raises several ethical questions (AoIR Ethics Working Group 2012). One of which is the issue of informed consent. Following the recommendations of Kozinets (2015:153), I contacted the group administrators and gained their approval to include their groups in the study. Thereafter, I made a post in each group where I acknowledged my presence, informed about the project, its purpose and how the data collected would be kept and used. I encouraged the groups' members to ask questions if they had any, but mostly my post got "likes" and comments such as "go ahead" or "knock yourself out!". I also encouraged members who did not want to be included in the study to contact me. Only one person contacted me in this regard. Still, it is difficult to know whether the group members regard their posts and comments as public or private. Of the six groups, four are private and "closed" which means that only members can see the posts. The remaining two are "public" and anyone can read the posts and discussions – still, members of these groups can regard them as private and intimate spaces. Since the groups have thousands of members, it is impossible to know whether the members regard the information they share as public or private. Therefore, all personal information, as well as the names of the groups have been anonymised.

The article's analysis is carried out in four parts. First, I provide an overall account of the retrospective groups and argue that they, rather than being characterised by conflicts, form zones of sanctuary. After this I dive into two conflicted topics that arose in two of the groups. Thus, in the second and third parts of the analysis, I investigate how the relationship between the past and the present is produced as conflicted. Hereby, I illustrate that a diachronic dis-association between the past and the present enables the group members to find a synchronic common ground on which they can base their interactions. In the fourth and final analytical part, I turn my attention to disputes and disagreements between group members. In particular, I discuss how members try to establish authority in these interactions. Here, I also elaborate on how the logic of Facebook shapes the ways in which associations between the group members, as well as between the past and the present, is made. This final analytical section leads us into a concluding discussion.

Places of Sanctuary

During my fieldwork in the Facebook groups, I often found myself with a smile on my face. Sometimes by being overwhelmed by the number of posts and comments in the groups. But most of the time because of the sheer amusement and nostalgia being shared and "liked" in the groups; a flow of beautiful stories and memories of the past – including everything from old buildings, music videos from the 1980s to black and white photos of ancestors. One post in particular comes to mind. Shared in one of the local history groups, the post consist of a black and white photo of an old man sitting in a rowboat, accompanied by a text telling the history of how this old rower used to transport people over the city's canal during the 1920s, 30s and 40s – before the business was passed on to his son.[3] The post got hundreds of likes and 15 elaborate comments where people shared their own memories of the rower. Furthermore, the post generated additional posts where other members of the group shared pictures, knowledge and memories of their own – regarding this man and his business. With this, and many other examples in mind, I imagine that I was not the only one in the groups to find myself with a smile on my face. Rather the opposite. After a year of netnographic fieldwork, I can conclude that these are groups where the past is produced as a time of happiness and beauty. The absolute majority of the posts and discussions are of a shimmering nostalgic character. Many posts consist of photos in black and white or with a retro hue, reminiscent of the retro filters available in smartphone camera applications, creating a romanticized view on the past. Some members declare that the photo posted is "a beautiful one", others react by clicking "like", "love" or "wow" or by

writing bittersweet comments such as "Absolutely beautiful! Unfortunately, a time past".

Katherina Niemeyer (2014) has connected the current memory and nostalgia "boom" with the increasing use of social media platforms, and there is a growing number of studies investigating the role of nostalgia on SNSs such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (e.g., Jacobsen & Beer 2021). Empirically based research on retrospection, memory and nostalgia on Facebook remains rare (Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020). However, important studies have indicated that Facebook produces and shapes an archive fever and a constant production and sharing of memories (Garde-Hansen 2009, van Dijck 2017), that there is a close relationship between memory work and expressions of nostalgia on Facebook (Robards et al. 2018, Davalos et al. 2015, Gregory 2015), that Facebook offers the potential to progressively engage with the past, present and the future (e.g., Kalinina & Menke, 2016), and that the platform has opened up for an online nostalgia business (Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020). These studies emphasise that we need to be aware of, and critically study how Facebook and the logic of its interface shapes the interactions that takes place on the platform. Related to this, Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis (2018) have discussed that Facebook promotes a "culture of likes", which is primarily manifested by the like-button and the absence of a dislike-button. This, they argue, produce a strive for "affective feedback loops", that is, a desire amongst its users for recognition and reward, and, in effect, for a feeling of belonging (2018:84). The design of Facebook can thus be said to influence the interactions within the retrospective groups and, in effect, promote like-able and nostalgic portrayals of the past (Ekelund 2022b). As a result, the Facebook groups, in general portray the past as something distinctly different from the present and as something to long for. Oftentimes, this was articulated by the inclusion of details and curiosities separating the past from the present – in the post about the rower this was done by stressing that the cost for a ride over the canal was as little as "5 öre", a coin that is no longer in existence and with today's measures is worth less than half a British penny.

During the fieldwork, I also found a general endeavour among the group members to simply share memories and knowledge of the past. Sometimes by writing posts about memorial sites, sometimes by sharing photos of people or things together with stories such as "I remember this track from the 80s, I used to dance to it all night long with my friends". Repeatedly, members posted photos and asked for help with dating them. Other members then used their knowledge and memories to help. In one of the local history groups there was a member sharing a black and white photo of her late parents, presumably taken in the centre of the group's city, with the question of when this photo could have been taken.[4] Behind the young couple you could glance a clothing boutique and a cinema, and with

this information the other group members went to work. They discussed when the cinema had closed down, which it apparently had during the 1970s, they discussed when the clothing boutique had been established at this address, and so on. More than 20 members joined the discussion, which went on for a week. Finally, they arrived at the conclusion that the photo must have been taken in 1968 or 69.

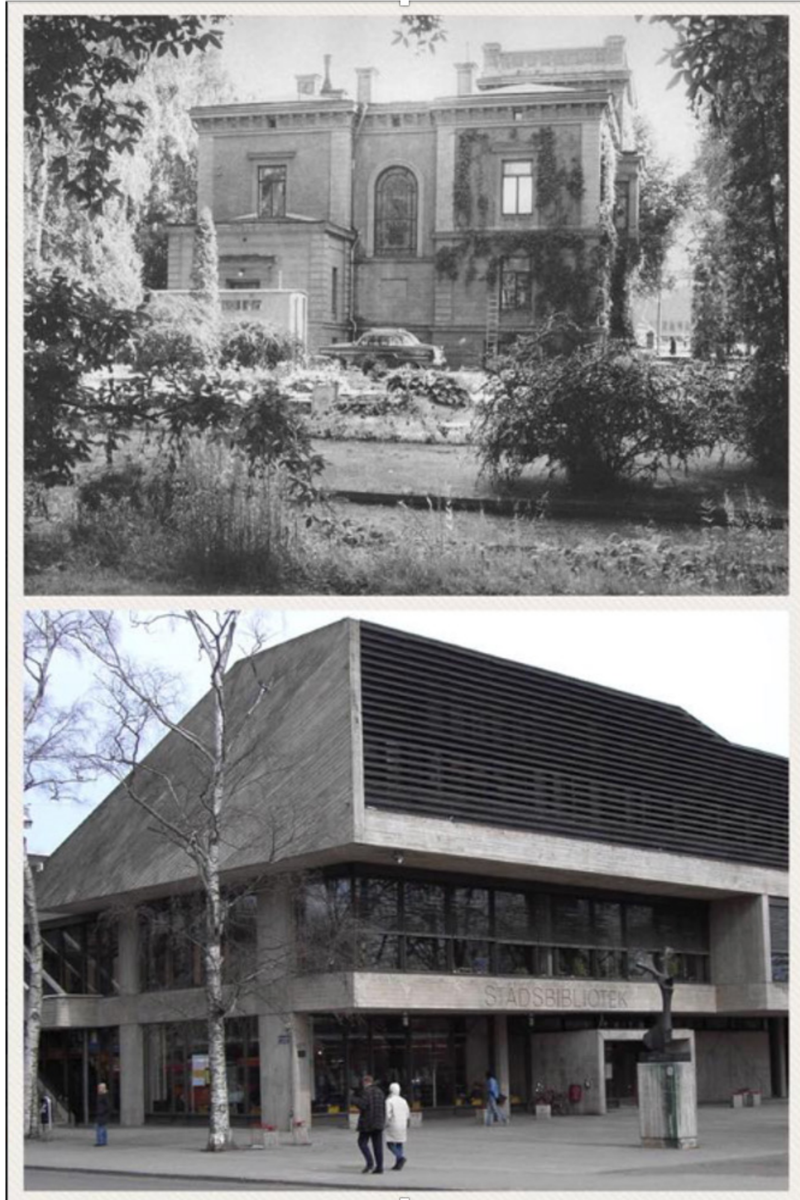
Although elaborate and enduring interactions like this took place in the groups, the majority of posts and comments were of a much briefer and more fragmented character and most of the time, members posted photos or stories, seemingly just for the joy of sharing these memories, with other members adding pictures, memories or knowledge of their own in the comments, about for example a particular street, a building, a punk record or tin brand. Thus, individual voices telling stories about the past, or sharing memories of the past, soon become a multitude of voices, all with the intention of sharing and liking often very specific parts of the past. This provides an important insight into the interactions of the groups; the majority of the interactions between the group members take the form of a nostalgic memory work. In general, then, these retrospective groups are not zones of conflict. Rather, they form places of comfort: digital assemblages to log on to when in need of smiles, nostalgia and a sense of commonality.[5] This is established by a multitude of actors dis-associating the past from the present, which, in effect creates a temporal discontinuity. The past becomes its own thing, something distinctly different from the present. It can thereby be used to establish a place of sanctuary in the present. In actuality, these sanctuaries of nostalgia and commonality build on an underlying conflict, a dichotomizing relationship between the past and the present. As we will see in the next two parts of the analysis, this way of dis-associating the past from the present also influences the explicit conflicts that take place in the Facebook groups.

Being Outraged by the Demolition of the Past

During the fieldwork, I mainly observed two cases of conflicts taking place in the groups. The first of which was in one of the local history groups. First, I found a post with the straightforward question: “The box or the yellow building? Which of these proposals would you like to see in [our city]?”.[6] The post linked to another post from a Facebook page with the name “The Architect Rebellion – Let’s build beautifully again”. This original post pictured two very different types of buildings. The first, which was also the actual proposal put forward by the contracted architect’s office, was characterised by a quadrangular shape and large glass panes. The other proposal, put forward by the Architect Rebellion, was in the style of 19th century architecture – a yellow building with lots of small windows, rounded corners, decorated details and a green roof with several pinnacles. In a couple

of days, the post had received more than a hundred comments. Noteworthy was that only three of the members who commented had found the glass building, as they put it, more "interesting" and "appropriate". The absolute majority of the members, however, simply commented: "The yellow house!". A couple of them also wrote more elaborate comments: "We need more human feelings in society, not more unemotional robots. I think that the yellow house feels more artisanal and as having a soul". Another wrote: "I am so tired of all the soulless and rusty shoeboxes being built. What happened to the harmony of [our city]?". The post generated a choir of voices singing the appraisal of an older, and, in their perspective, "more historical" architectural style that was associated with an authenticity related to human feelings and qualities. The glass building, by contrast, was seen as a soulless robot and several members stressed that they had seen enough of this type of architecture. The post hereby illustrated a practice of a conflicted relationship between the past and the present, or rather a reality built on human qualities gathered from the past and a reality built on a present which had lost touch with its human qualities. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the group members took the side of the past.

Among the comments I also found those that referred to previous posts and discussions on the same topic, which I located using the search function in the group. All these previous posts were made by the same group member, and they all focused on the same topic: the architectural styles of a (post)modernist present in relation to a more historical or classicist past. In several posts, during 2017 and 2018, with the recurring heading "BEFORE AND AFTER. DID IT TURN OUT WELL?" this member had shared pictures and links from another group named "BEFORE AND AFTER – Let us never forget the demolition hysteria!". Much like the post discussed above, they depicted two buildings: an old building which had been torn down, and a new modernistic building which had replaced the old one.



(Figure 1. Posted in "Local history group 2" 11/10 2017)

In one of these posts (fig.1), we first see an old villa, with a grand terrace and a lush garden.[7] The photo is in black and white, but the light of the sun, which falls behind the villa, makes the building seem to glow. The text reveals that the villa was built in 1889 by a local wholesale supplier, and that it was demolished in 1970 to be replaced by a library built in a "brutalist" modernistic style. A photo of this

library is found directly beneath. At first glance, it is hard to imagine that the photos are of the same geographical place (which is partly due to the buildings being depicted from different angles). One would also be forgiven for thinking that the photo of the library is in black and white, but it is not. Looking closely at the sky behind the building, as well as a pair of jeans on one of the passers-by, you find hints of blue. The rest of the picture, however, is in a greyscale. The library is grey, as it is made in concrete, and the villa's lush garden has been replaced by grey asphalt. Two leaf-less and thin birches rise from the pavement. The two photos articulate an apparent contrast between the past and the present – the past as beautiful and lush, the present as sterile and gloomy. This is also emphasised in the post itself, which concludes: "With other words – the past was better".

It should be pointed out, that this as well as the other posts on the same subject, sometimes generated differing reactions from the group members. Most found it very sad that beautiful old houses had been torn down and replaced by "ugly" and "appalling" buildings. Other members stressed that the new and modernistic buildings certainly are not beautiful, but that they, as in the case of the library, still are "modernist gems" and "something to be proud of". Nonetheless, these members did not want to defend the demolition of the old villa or the other old buildings that had been torn down during the so-called demolition hysteria of the 1960s and 70s. Instead, they argued that the new modernist buildings should have been built somewhere else and that the old buildings should never have been demolished.

These recurring posts led to one of the group members writing a response where he wanted to nuance the discussion: "Because of the posts on the demolitions in the city centre", he wrote, "I hereby publish this map from the book '[Our city] before the excavators'."[8] The member first explained that the map illustrated that many old buildings had been demolished and that no one could argue against the "mass demolitions". The purpose of the post was therefore not to counter the previous posts on the subject. "However", the member wrote, "I want to stress that these houses [that had been demolished] were in inferior conditions". He then pointed out that the map also showed how specific parts of the city centre had not been demolished, through which he argued that there was a rational argument and an idea behind the decision making of the modernist project. Commenters thanked the member for being "level-headed" and "reasonable", but still no one defended the so-called mass demolitions. Thus, even the less conflict-oriented of these posts (re)produced the dis-association between the past and the present.

The recurring discussions on the demolition of old buildings can be related to Svetlana Boym's (2011) discussion of "ruinophilia": a particular fascination for ruins that has emerged in the 21st century. Boym argues that our "contemporary ruin-gaze" has made us aware of a historical, spatial and physical discontinuity.

An awareness that, "instead of marvelling at the grand projects and utopian designs", gives us a critical perspective where we begin to discover the cracks and crevices of modernity. She also stresses that: "[r]uins make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place, tantalizing us with utopian dreams of escaping the irreversibility of time" (2011:1). In connection with these thoughts, I would argue that the posts in the local history group depicting old and modernist buildings side by side, can be seen as putting two types of ruins side by side with each other. The ruins of the old and historic pre-modern times, which serves to remind us of a present that could have been and a future that never took place, and the ruins of modernity, the not-so-distant past that that has become our present. These two types of ruins thereby enhance not only a discontinuity and a dis-association between the past and the present. They also make visible how (parts of) the present has come into existence through a physical demolition of the past. Thus, the members can look at the past in relation to the present, and collectively scrutinise this physical discontinuity and irreversibility of time. This differentiates the ruin-gaze from nostalgia, Boym (2011) points out. Whereas nostalgia is about a personal story and longing, she writes, ruinophilia, is a critical perspective where people come together with a collective "care for the world". The ruin-gaze produced in this local history group becomes integral in producing a conflict between the past and the present. Furthermore, it seems that this conflict produces a common ground onto which individual actors can come together and "care for" our future using a retrospective lens.

Being Against a Proposed Deletion of the Past

A while after I found the first case of conflict, another flared up. This time in one of the general history groups. It came as a reaction to a proposal from the Swedish National Agency for Education. In remodelling the history subject, they suggested the deletion of "Ancient civilisations, from prehistoric time until circa 1700" from the central content of history for the secondary school. The proposal was made public in late September 2019 and during the following days five posts by different members of the group were made on the topic.[9] They linked to debate articles from Swedish newspapers on the subject, as well as to an online petition, initiated by one of the group members, for the protection of "the pupils' right to the history in its entirety". These posts generated more than 350 comments, and a heated discussion among the group members took place. Many members were outraged by the proposal – especially since it meant that antiquity would be scrapped from secondary school history teaching – and posted comments in the style of "Absolutely ridiculous that they even come up with an idea like this…", "What kind of madman figured out such a thing?", and "The entire

cultural heritage will be obliterated". Much like the nostalgic flows of interaction within the Facebook groups, these individual voices transformed into a multitude of voices and an affective feedback loop (Boler & Davis 2018). Only a few members seemed to find the proposal reasonable. One of them wrote: "Teachers are experiencing the history subject as overfull. It becomes fragmentary and it is difficult to find time for everything. The question then becomes which parts should be scrapped". Another member posted several comments, also pointing out that the history subject is "too large", as well as stressing that today's pupils can find information on "old history" by themselves, on DVDs or online. A couple of these comments were met by comments that questioned if it would ever be possible for the history subject to become overfull. They also argued for the importance of not only studying "modern history" and of learning from parts of the past dissimilar to our present. Overall, in the discussions, the group members agreed on this, even if their standpoints towards the Swedish National Agency for Education's proposal differed.

Reading the comments on the five posts, I found that discussions developed where several members connected the proposal to present politics: "This is complete madness. Soon, our children will only have socialist 'roots' to 'identify' with. No wonder everything is going down the drain". Another comment read: "The history of Sweden now begins with August Palm", referring to the tailor famous for introducing socialism in Sweden in the 1880s. Yet another wrote: "Just like authoritarian regimes the Swedish National Agency for Education deletes history that does not 'fit in'". Several members made associations to dictatorships and how history is shaped after ideological purposes in such contexts. One of them wrote:

> The history-less people, who in addition to its own history, also lack knowledge on the roots of society and the whole of Europe, is an excellent raw material for the collectivist goodness of Big Brother-society, where everyone does what they are told to do without thinking or asking questions.

In the comments and discussions, the idea of democracy – with its roots in antiquity, was a recurring theme. The proposal to delete antiquity from the central content, was thus used by some group members to build associations between the present, its social democratic government, and a threat to democracy. Other members, seemingly with political affiliations to the left, took to the comments to nuance the discussion. One of them pointed out that even if the proposal had been put forward during a social democratic government, it had been long in the making since previous governments, led by the major conservative party, had cut

down on the resources for the history subject. Although these politically imbued debates were heated, they revolved around who was to blame for the proposal, rather than the proposal itself. The conflict was first and foremost with a present in which the idea of deleting parts of the past from secondary school history teaching was even possible. This was summed up by recurring comments such as "This is so sick…but how can anyone any longer be surprised about what is happening in this country?", or "The dumbing of the present!".

This group, with its very broad focus on history, was, as I will return to in the next subsection, also the most prone to conflicts among its members. However, the heated debates around the Swedish National Agency for Education's proposal stood out from the general flow of interactions in the group. The topic became a node onto which members could direct their affect, anger and distrust. Still, it is important to point out two aspects regarding this conflict. First, this was not primarily a conflict between group members. Rather, they agreed in disagreeing with the proposed deletion of parts of the past from the history subject. Second, the conflict was not focusing on past, but on the present, and it's, in the eyes of the group members, reckless treating of the past and "our cultural heritage". Thus, this second case of conflict both highlights and deepens the dis-association between the past and the present discussed above. It produces this dis-association as an unequal relationship where the present has an unrightful power over the past. In a sense, then, this second case of conflict can be related to Boym's (2011) concept of ruinophilia and most specifically her idea that this produces a collective "care for the world". Rather than the bittersweet nostalgic memory work, these interactions have a critical and political edge to them. The disassociation between the past and the present that the interactions produce ties into Bauman's (2017) discussion on retrotopia and how the past has become an idealized and utopian place. For Bauman, "the capacity for dialogue": the possibility to conduct in meaningful interactions and negotiations with others, is essential in nuancing and resisting such tendencies (2017:164-165). How, then, are conflicts and disputes negotiated between group members in the retrospective groups? And, how does the operative logic of Facebook shape these interactions?

"What's your source?"

Thus far my focus has primarily been to illustrate and analyse how conflicts in the retrospective groups emerge through a dis-association between the past and the present. But what about disputes between group members? Even if the groups, overall, are not characterised by conflict, but rather by nostalgia, comfort and sanctuary, disputes still take place, especially in the general history group in which I found the second case of conflict discussed above. In the following I will use

this group to investigate how disputes are negotiated between group members and how authority is voiced in a retrospective Facebook group.

As stated in the group description, this general history group was created for those who have an overall interest in the history of Sweden and Europe. Hereby, it appeals to a wide variety of historical interests. Topics range from the Vikings, medieval churches and WWII, to new archaeological findings and Swedish folk beliefs. Sometimes group members post questions, seemingly to find out more about a particular event or part of the past. Other times they simply make posts to inform each other about the past. Thus, posts as well as comments often claim to bring knowledge and facts about the past in question. When other members find this information, or conclusions drawn from the information, as questionable or incorrect, the standard reply seems to be: "What's your source?". Sometimes this question was received as an accusation by the member who made the original post. In a discussion on the importance of historical knowledge for understanding the present, one member claimed that "Swedes are more knowledgeable about other cultures than the average populations of most other countries."[10] Another member commented: "Do you have any sources on that?" to which the first member responded: "YES I HAVE. THE COMPUTER AGE HAS MADE ITS ENTRANCE INTO EVERY CORNER OF THE EARTH." The request for a source was therefore remade: "Ok good. Then we can have a link to your source. A statement without a source is worth nothing. And you don't need to yell [...]". The first member then replied: "THE SOURCE IS ME! End of discussion". This, in actuality, put an end to the discussion. This example illustrates both the variety of tones in the group members' interactions, as well as how they require sources and references from each other. Oftentimes, the response to such requests was more reasonable than the example above, with the member simply sharing a link to Wikipedia or another digital source, or by referring to a book on the subject. Frequently, I found that group members seemed to expect such requests and therefore produced their references and sources in their original posts and comments. Thus, the production of references and sources became a standard setting in the negotiations between group members. At first glance it seemed to be a way of voicing authority.

One of the posts that stood out in the group, due to the heated and enduring discussions it produced, can be used as an illustrative example to develop the analysis. In the post, a member wrote about the history of the Lapps (*samerna*) and the Lapps' right to "their land" and asked what was meant with the term "The country of the Lapps".[11] The post got 299 comments and spurred several disputes about, for example, geographical boundaries of the past and the present, about who were the original inhabitants of what we today regard as Sweden, about ethnicity, the Lapps' ways of life in relation to Swedishness, as well as about historical atrocities against the Lapps by Swedes. The views and opinions of the

group members differed a lot and the members consistently tried to gain authority for their arguments. They made references to maps found online or retrieved from archives and museums to blogs writing about the history of the Lapps, to newspaper and television interviews with academic researchers, to digital lexicons (regarding the definition of specific terms), to statements made in the UN, to Swedish constitutional law, to the Swedish government's website, and to photocopies of specific pages of books on the topic. The references thus extended the discussion beyond the group itself and into other contexts of information. In a few cases, this practice seemed successful as a way of voicing authority. Such as when other members acknowledged the reference by stating that "You have a point there" or "That's true". More often than not, however, the sources did not seem to matter at all. On the contrary, in the absolute majority of cases other members did not comment on or acknowledge each other's sources and references at all. In order to discuss this further, it is important to take into consideration aspects of the connective turn. Hoskins argues that the connective turn has brought with it a "new memory ecology" that has changed the parameters of history and memory practices. He writes: "With digital searching, accessing, participating, there is little unseen, untouched or uncommented on by the multitude" (Hoskins 2017c:88-89). This, he argues, has "softened" history and changed the way authority works, no longer being something exclusive to elites and experts (2017c). In relation to this, it seems that the use of references and sources (credible or not) could be used to voice *a style of* authority within the retrospective groups. However, this became a mere stylistic performance which, in actuality, seemed to have no real effect on the interactions and negotiations between group members. Thusly, references and sources had little influence on how the past was used, negotiated, and remembered in the retrospective group.

We also need to consider the operative logic of Facebook as a non-human actor that shapes its users' interactions (Smit, Heinrich & Broersma 2018). Specific attention has been paid to Facebook's use of algorithms; how they curate and personalize the flow of content and memories of its users (Jacobsen & Beer 2021). In effect, the platform's use of algorithms orders and shapes not only how its users produce associations and memories of the past, but also which memories and which associations of the past are being produced. There is a lack of transparency in how algorithms work (e.g., Makhortykh 2021), but the effect is that some types of posts and interactions are promoted on the expense of others. Kaun and Stiernstedt (2014) have discussed how the logic of Facebook prioritizes newness and immediacy in order to engage users longer and more often. From this they draw the following conclusion: "The constant production, collection, and analysis of data result in the annihilation of interpretation. Platforms foster exchange but not understanding and engagement with actual content" (2014:1164). Thus, the

algorithms and operative logic of Facebook could be seen as an integral aspect in how authority, using sources and references, becomes a mere stylistic performance – as the platform encourages its users, in this case the members of retrospective Facebook groups, to continually look at the next post, rather than really engaging and scrutinizing the actual content in a post or comment. The very same platform that enables users to create and join groups focusing on particular parts of the past, is at the same time a force that interferes and counteracts actual group interactions. Returning to Bauman's (2017) discussion on the importance of and potential in "the capacity for dialogue" to resist and challenge the growing retrotopian tendencies, retrospective Facebook groups do not seem to fulfil this potential. On the contrary, it could be argued that the operative logic of the platform hinders dialogue and pushes the retrospective groups towards retrotopian visions and idealizations of the past.

Conclusions

In this article, I have used cases of conflict within retrospective Facebook groups to investigate how members of these groups negotiate, resist and challenge each other's notions of the past. Previous research on digital memory culture has illustrated that SNSs such as Facebook have contributed to a memory fever and nostalgia boom (Niemeyer 2014, Garde Hansen 2009, van Dijck 2017, Robards et al. 2018, Davalos et al. 2015, Gregory 2015), that Facebook as a platform has implemented an automated production of nostalgic memories (Jacobsen & Beer 2021), and that online nostalgia businesses use Facebook to circulate ready-made and commodified nostalgic memories (Niemeyer & Keightley 2020). All in all, Facebook has become a platform highly invested in and characterised by nostalgic memories. The main result when studying the data from my netnographical fieldwork within six retrospective Facebook groups supports this, as the retrospective groups are not prone to conflicts and disputes. Rather, they form digital spaces characterised by nostalgia and a retrospective feel-good culture. I have therefore argued that the retrospective groups produce synchronic associations between its members by producing the retrospective groups as digital places of sanctuary in the present.

Looking at the two major cases of conflict that I found during the fieldwork, however, I also found that these sanctuaries very much build on a diachronic dis-association, i.e., the production of a conflicted relationship and a discontinuity between the past and the present. With this conflicted relationship as a foundation, an us-and-them relationship is established, and the group members can come together in support of, in their view, an important and authentic past, and at the same time oppose a soulless present and its problematic handling of the past. As

such, my findings correspond with Lagerkvist's (2014 & 2015) discussion on how individuals seek cohesion, meaning and a togetherness through collective digital memory practices. However, my study indicates that this togetherness is not based on a sense of continuity, which is the case in Lagerkvist's research, but rather on a sense of discontinuity.

Furthermore, this discontinuity is important in order to understand the cases of conflicts analysed here as they are less about nostalgia and more comparable to what Boym (2011) has discussed as ruinophilia, where the ruins and remnants of the past critically remind us of the irreversibility of time – here most expressively put on display in the form of photos of old and now demolished buildings. Thus, the production of a conflict and discontinuity between the past and the present creates a melancholic care for the world as it, in the eyes of the group members, was supposed to be, which also implicates a critical perspective on the present as it is.

The disassociation produced between the past and the present connects with Bauman's (2017) discussion on retrotopia and how the past has become an idealized and utopian place which leaves us with a rather dystopian perspective on the present and the future. In relation to the retrospective groups, these retrotopian characteristics must be understood in the context of Facebook as a specific digital assemblage. Previous studies (Kaun & Stiernstedt 2014, Makhortykh 2021, Jacobsen & Beer 2021, see also Ekelund 2022a&b) have stressed that due to the operative logic and algorithms of Facebook, which promote immediacy and personalise the flow of content for each user, the platform must be considered a (non-human) actor that not only enables, but also shapes and interferes with the interactions taking place. This article's analysis adds to this and illustrates how the members' use of references and sources – a practice that have the potential of giving credibility and authority within the group interactions – becomes a mere stylistic performance of authority as other members, on the face of it, pay very little, or even no attention at all to these sources. Since the platform focuses on bringing a constant feed of new and personalised content to its users, the possibility to have meaningful interactions and critical negotiations based on these memories and associations with the past – what Bauman (2017) would call a "capacity for dialogue", which in his thinking is essential in questioning, nuancing and resisting retrotopian tendencies – becomes difficult as it is discouraged by the logic of the platform.

This might mean that the members of these groups, in actuality, have a more diverce and complex understanding of the past than what is visible when investigating their online interactions within the Facebook groups. In all likelihood, they might also dispute each other's notions of the past (as well as their notions of the present and the future) more often than what is visible in the flow of group level interactions. Nonetheless, after investigating conflicts and

interactions within these retrospective groups, we can conclude that the "multiple social subject", that Hoskins (2017c) sees as a central part in how the new and connective memory ecology works, does not produce multiple and complex, but rather cohesive and straightforward associations with the past. And in this cohesiveness, the past seems to be looking brighter and brighter.

Author

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[2] In netnographic research, as in all ethnographic studies, there is an ongoing debate on whether the researcher should partake in the online interaction or if he/she should be more of an observer (see chapter 8 in Kozinets 2015). As I did not want to affect the interactions that was taking place in the groups, I stayed an observer for the purposes of this project.

[3] Post made in "Local history group 1" 22/4 2019.

[4] Post made in "Local history group 2" 17/1 2019.

[5] I explore these aspects of nostalgia, memory work, commonality and affect in a forthcoming publication.

[6] Post made in "Local history group 1" 13/4 2019.

[7] Post made in "Local history group 1" 11/10 2017.

[8] Post made in "Local history group 1" 23/9 2019.

[9] These posts in "General history group 1" were made on 25, 27 & 28/9 2019.

[10] Comments on post in "General history group 1" 25/9 2019.

[11] Post made in "General history group 1" 27/8 2019.