Collections
Digitizing Holocaust Memories

Abstract: Digital media have enabled expansive opportunities to engage the Holocaust and its remembrance, especially by facilitating new forms of research. In particular, digitized audio or video recollections of survivors and other eyewitnesses of the Holocaust attract a wide range of users. These resources, whether “born analog” materials that have been digitized or more recent materials that were created in digital mediums, pose particular challenges with regard to their preservation, archiving, cataloging, indexing, and accessing, even as they offer distinctive opportunities for engaging with Holocaust remembrance. Digitization not only facilitates accessing these materials but also enables their remediation in new formats, shaping how these materials can be accessed through different means of distribution. These factors, in turn, inform how these resources are studied. The scope of materials includes documentations of pre-Holocaust Jewish culture, including collections of prewar photographs and Yiddish language and folklore, many of which are in digital form. But the largest corpus of resources are found in institutional archives of Holocaust survivors’ memories, housing tens of thousands of life histories recorded in audio or video formats. These collections straddle a temporal boundary marked by both the impending loss of living witnesses to the Holocaust and the transition from the “video age” to the “digital age,” making them especially resonant for studying Holocaust memory practices. At the same time, concerns for providing future generations with access to Holocaust survivors’ life stories has engendered the use of new digital technologies – interactive holography and immersive virtual reality – to present these narratives.

Keywords: archiving, digital media, Holocaust memory, Holocaust survivors, indexing, life history, remediation, video

Digital media have enabled expansive opportunities to engage the Holocaust and its remembrance. These include new forms of research, such as using non-invasive archeological survey techniques to create three-dimensional visualizations of killing sites.¹ Digital media also facilitate new means of imagining Holocaust scenarios, whether through gaming or through role-playing videos posted

on TikTok.² Among the most frequently encountered examples are digitized recollections of survivors and other eyewitnesses of the Holocaust. The range of users include high school students, genealogists, descendants of survivors, performing and visual artists, and museum visitors. These resources are also used by an array of scholars in the humanities and social sciences. In addition to those working in Jewish Studies are scholars of genocide, trauma, and memory practices, among other topics.³

Given this extensive and varied engagement, examining the nature of these resources’ mediation offers insight into the impact of the digital turn in scholarship and contemporary culture generally. Though digitized memories of the Holocaust include many written texts, this essay focuses on audio and visual examples. These resources pose particular challenges with regard to their preservation, cataloging, and accessing, even as they offer distinctive opportunities for engaging with Holocaust remembrance.

Most of this material was not “born digital” but was converted from various analog mediums to a digital format. Therefore, digitizing these resources constitutes a remediation, which shapes how they are accessed through different means of distribution – whether compact disks, downloadable files, postings on websites or social media, or online streaming video. And this distribution, in turn, shapes how these resources are studied. The following discussion considers “born analog” examples first and then turns to more recent materials that were created in digital mediums.

Digitization has made some of the earliest remembrances of Holocaust survivors newly available, sometimes after decades of absence. Among these are the pioneering audio interviews conducted by American psychologist David Boder in 1946. To document survivors’ wartime experiences “in their own voice,” Boder traveled to Europe to conduct over 100 interviews with survivors in nine different languages, using a magnetic wire recorder (then state-of-the-art equipment).⁴ In 1949, Boder published a book on these recordings, I Did Not Interview the Dead, and continued to work on them, but his interviews fell into obscurity.

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following Boder’s death in 1961.\(^5\) Then, due to growing interest in Holocaust survivor memories in recent decades, the interviews were digitized and posted on a website by the Illinois Institute of Technology, Boder’s institutional home and now the keeper of some of his original recordings.\(^6\) The website sorts the interviews by various criteria, including the language and location of the interview and the gender, religion, and wartime experiences of the respective interviewee. In addition, the site facilitates the use of these recordings, which are not of the clearest sound quality, with transcriptions, translations, and annotations, plus background information on Boder and his project. Thus, the website appears to fulfill Boder’s original aspirations to make these materials available for further study, something he could not realize in his lifetime. Yet the recordings’ digitization transforms how they are encountered, and the website’s additional content reflects the distinct interests of a later generation of scholars.

At the same time that Boder undertook these interviews, folklorists started collecting various materials from Holocaust survivors. These early efforts include Yiddish folksongs documented by Ruth Rubin from informants in Canada and the United States, beginning in 1946, and by Ben Stonehill, who made over 1,000 wire recordings of songs performed by Holocaust survivors in New York in 1948.\(^7\) Some songs pertain specifically to the Holocaust, such as those composed and sung in wartime ghettos. But these collections documented the wider repertoires of Jewish folksingers, as part of a larger range of efforts to preserve something of the cultures decimated and dispersed by the genocide. Both Rubin’s and Stonehill’s collections are now online. Their websites catalog the songs according to a thematic taxonomy and provide translations of lyrics and information on the singers and sources when known. As with Boder’s interviews, these online resources are remediations, shaped by the input of scholars and technicians, to present resources to a new generation of users, for whom the material has new value.

Efforts to document prewar Jewish culture include several projects focused on Yiddish language and culture, some of which have been digitized. The earliest of these is the Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry, initiated by linguist Uriel Weinreich at Columbia University in the 1950s. Audiotaped interviews with over 600 native speakers of Yiddish from across northern Europe have subsequently been digitized and posted online, as have scans of this project’s extensive

paper archive. More recent projects documenting native Yiddish speakers born in prewar Europe include the Archives of Historical and Ethnographic Yiddish Memories, known by the acronym AHEYM, which means “homeward” in Yiddish. This project was launched in 2002 by linguist Dov-Ber Kerler and historian Jeffrey Veidlinger at Indiana University. AHEYM includes video interviews with over 300 individuals identified as “Eastern Europe’s last native speakers of Yiddish,” all born before World War II. The project’s interview topics are wide-ranging, including “linguistic ... data, oral histories of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, Holocaust testimonials, musical performances ..., folk narratives, ... reflections on contemporary Jewish life in the region, and guided tours of [local] sites of Jewish memory.”

Weinreich’s Atlas, which made early use of computers to correlate data, focused on gathering information for research on the historical foundation of modern Yiddish dialects. AHEYM, by contrast, is more wide-ranging in content, while it centers on the recollections of Holocaust survivors who returned to their prewar homes in provincial East European towns as embodiments of a vestigial “shtetl” culture.

This impulse to document what is often called the “lost world” of East European Jewry as an act of Holocaust remembrance includes collecting prewar photographs. Though made before the war, these images acquire new significance as records of lives destroyed by genocide. Some photography collections that have been digitized and placed online focus on a particular locale – for example, Mike Marvin’s assembly of photographs from Szczuczyn, Poland, where his grandfather, Zalman Kaplan, operated the town’s only photography studio from the 1890s though the 1930s. Other collections are more wide-ranging, having been gathered and digitized by research organizations. Among these is “People of a Thousand Towns,” an indexed catalog of the extensive holdings of photographs of Jewish life in prewar Eastern Europe presented online by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. This project began in 1981, when the institute placed 15,000 digitized images on a videodisc – then a brand-new technology – linked to a computer catalog, which, at the time, could only be used on site at YIVO’s New

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York headquarters. In 2002 the photographs and catalog were placed online and made publicly accessible. This move is typical of the evolving of digitized materials; as technology advances, the possibilities for accessing resources expands.

An essential component of digitizing these photographs for researchers to access is the creation of databases of the images’ metadata. This information, extrinsic to the photographs themselves, provides the point of entry to their use, shaping how they can be searched. Databases of photographs typically include generic descriptions of their content, as well as specific information, when known: their locations and dates, the names of their subjects and photographers. Less often recorded, but no less valuable, is information about photographs’ provenance, given their sometimes charged trajectory during and after the war. Including this information distinguishes the collecting project known as “I ciągle widzę ich twarze / And I Still See Their Faces.” It was initiated in the 1990s by Fundacja Shalom, an organization dedicated to promoting Jewish culture in Poland. The project gathered photographs of Jews in the possession of Polish citizens, yielding hundreds of images. Many came from people who did not know the identity of these photographs’ subjects – only that they were Jews. Therefore, “And I Still See Their Faces” derives much of its value not from the information that the images provide about Polish Jewish life, but from the disrupted history of the physical photograph. Sometimes this history is evinced by the photograph’s damaged condition, thereby materializing the haunting power of the loss of people and their culture.

The photographs and recollections that Fundacja Shalom gathered for “And I Still See Their Faces” have been presented in a book, exhibition, and online. More recently, the project expanded and transformed its digital presence on a website called Żydzi Polscy (Polish Jews). In addition to providing materials the Foundation had collected, the website invites visitors to post their own memories of Jewish relatives as well as letters, diaries, or photographs. In this way, the Foundation asserts, the website – and the story of Polish Jewry – will not “have a last page.” Żydzi Polscy explains that it “is open for everyone, history lovers and

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witnesses, scientists and research centers, who would like to join the ... effort to recreate the world of Polish Jews.” This “continuously updated material,” renders Żydzi Polscy “a living panorama of the Jewish community in Poland.” This internet platform, interactive and renewable, fosters a virtual community of people interested in the topic of Polish Jewry and models cultural liveliness for the present activity of memory work, as this undertaking strives to animate a “lost world.”

Institutional collections of Holocaust survivors’ memories house tens of thousands of their personal histories, many now available in digital form. These efforts began in the war’s immediate aftermath and continue to the present, undertaken in a variety of mediums. For example, Yad Vashem started archiving survivors’ written accounts in the late 1940s, shortly after the State of Israel’s national center of Holocaust commemoration and documentation had been established. Yad Vashem began recording survivors on audiotape in 1954 and videotape in 1989. Overall, dozens of projects to make recordings of Holocaust survivors have been undertaken in multiple countries in the Americas and Europe, as well as in Israel and Australia. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum currently houses over 70,000 audio and video interviews with Holocaust survivors and eyewitnesses, whether online or in its Washington DC headquarters. These recordings have been gathered from almost 100 different sources, ranging from large-scale collecting projects to local community efforts and individual undertakings.

Digitization not only facilitates accessing these interviews; it also enables their remediation in new formats. For example, the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation recorded over 51,000 video interviews, mostly in the mid- to late 1990s, for its Visual History Archive (hereafter, VHA). The largest such collection by far, its holdings have been remediated in a variety of formats. Especially significant is an online platform the foundation launched in 2009 called IWitness, which provides a “guided exploration” of over 1,500 videos in the VHA, primarily for use in American secondary schools (most interviews are in English). IWitness explains that it combines learning “first hand from survivors

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and witnesses of the Holocaust” with “participatory” use of the videos through a “built-in online video editor,” which enables students to “build [their] own video projects.” Like Żydzi Polscy, IWitness uses the internet to enable interactive engagement with digitized resources – not by contributing to its holdings but by inviting their sampling. The Shoah Foundation explains that IWitness offers students the opportunity to learn about the impact of the Holocaust on individual lives while also learning “important digital media skills, including … ethical remixing, that will prepare [students to become] digital citizen[s] in the 21st century.”19 Through this platform, the Foundation promotes its videos as moral touchstones, even as it invites students to sample the collection to create new cinematic narratives. IWitness characterizes the exercise as an opportunity for ethical instruction in its own right, extending the Foundation’s conviction that viewing the Archive’s interviews has a morally galvanizing power.

One of the first major video archives of Holocaust memories established in the United States recently initiated a different kind of remediation of its digitized holdings. Begun in the late 1970s, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies recorded over 4,000 videos, now housed at Yale University.²⁰ Starting in 2019, the Archive has produced a series of podcasts titled “Those Who Were There: Voices from the Holocaust.” The series presents excerpts from audio tracks of video interviews, supplemented with narration and musical scoring. Similar to IWitness, this remediation addresses a moral imperative. The podcasts’ website explains that “it is our duty to listen and share, so that the horrific events of the Holocaust do not fade from memory.”²¹ Also like IWitness, “Those Who Were There” appears to have embraced newer media in order to engage younger audiences. As one reviewer of the project observes, it “applies a twenty-first century social media strategy to reach out to a generation … weaned on Instagram and Snapchat.”²² The pedagogical aims of “Those Who Were There” are evident in supporting materials on its website: interview transcripts, vintage photographs and documents, additional readings and historical background on the Holocaust.

By dint of the interviews’ digital format, their remediation in these projects entails both reducing and supplementing the original recordings: in IWitness,
students select clips from VHA videos; each podcast episode of “Those Who Were There” presents up to 25 minutes of audio culled from longer interviews. At the same time, both projects integrate additional elements: music and narration are added in the podcasts, and the IWitness editing platform enables students to integrate these and other elements into their videos. As these examples demonstrate, the digital remediation of works of Holocaust memory can have epistemological consequences. The original resource, itself a mediation of recollections, can be segmented and incorporated with other material, to create new works of remembrance.

Similarly, the means of accessing digitized works of Holocaust memory through cataloging, transcribing, translating, and tagging can inform how these resources are engaged, as exemplified by the Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive.²³ Among the many projects undertaken to record interviews with survivors and eyewitnesses of the Holocaust, the VHA stands out on several counts: not only as the largest such collection, but also as the most diverse, with interviews conducted in 56 countries and 32 languages, encompassing a range of Holocaust survivors and eyewitnesses. In recent years the Foundation has expanded the Archive’s holdings to include interviews with Holocaust survivors collected by other organizations as well as films and videos of survivors or eyewitnesses of other atrocities. These range from the Armenian genocide, which began in 1915, to Rohingya survivors of mass violence in Burma in 2017. The VHA is also the most widely accessible major collection of Holocaust interviews, available in a variety of formats, including documentary films, educational DVDs, the aforementioned IWitness platform, and an online archive housing the entire collection, which facilitates searching this extensive body of material with an elaborate indexing system. As a result of its pioneering work on indexing and cataloging videos, as well as creating a digital platform for their viewing online, the Shoah Foundation holds multiple patents on its technological innovations.²⁴

The scope of the VHA’s index has also evolved as the archive’s holdings have expanded – adding, for example, indexing terms specific to the interviews with survivors or eyewitnesses of atrocities other than the Holocaust (e.g., “Armenian culture,” “attitudes toward Hutu,” “foot binding”). In addition, indexing terms that are relevant to multiple atrocities – such as “political identity,” “post-conflict justice,” and “trauma-related dreams” – now enable researchers to make comparisons among these accounts of different historical events. The index indicates as

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well when search terms have been added to the VHA’s search mechanism, evincing an evolving understanding of what topics researchers may wish to explore.

The VHA is especially noteworthy because it was created on the cusp of the transition from analog to digital media. Since its inception, the Shoah Foundation has grappled with the possibilities and challenges posed by an expanding array of new technologies. The Foundation recorded its interviews in the mid-1990s on Betacam SP format analog videotapes, then the broadcast industry standard. Concurrently, digital media and the internet were coming into widespread use, fostering new possibilities for creating and engaging with information. Digital and online technologies soon became central to the Archive’s agenda, facilitating the preservation, indexing, and accessibility of its collection.

Thus, the VHA straddles both the temporal boundary marked by the impending loss of living witnesses to the Holocaust and the transition from what has been called the “video age” to the “digital age.” The Shoah Foundation set out to use state-of-the-art technology to preserve the memories of survivors as their passing approached. Yet its archive evinces how mutable memory practices are – how quickly the mediums employed have changed, plus the fact that newer mediums are less stable than older ones. In this respect, the VHA exemplifies a challenge that Holocaust remembrance has confronted from the start. As Holocaust studies scholar Alan Rosen notes, Holocaust memory projects have always “been bound up ... with technological advance and obsolescence.”²⁵

Digitizing the Shoah Foundation’s videos facilitated their cataloging and, especially, their indexing. Like other projects discussed above, digitization enables searching this large collection of videos by dint of their metadata. Moreover, the VHA’s index expands greatly the possibilities for searching within and across interviews, thereby transforming how they can be used. The Shoah Foundation initially decided to index rather than transcribe the videos, as a more expedient undertaking and a more useful aid to researchers.²⁶ As taping interviews proceeded, the Foundation began developing a matrix of search terms specific to the Archive.

Like the VHA itself, the archive’s index is vast, with over 50,000 search terms. They are keyed to particular interview segments during which interviewees discuss these terms. In addition to looking for names of particular people, places, events, or institutions, VHA users can search the content of videos through a graduated taxonomy of subject terms. The index facilitates both expanding and constraining searches. Its subject terms are generalized, enabling users to cross-ref-

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²⁶ See USC Shoah Foundation, *Testimony*, 221.
erence interviews conducted in various locations and languages and sometimes across different genocides. Each search term can also be narrowed by the criteria of interview language, gender of interviewee, and “experience group” (such as Roma survivors or liberators). Searching coincident terms (for instance, finding interviews that discuss both “early personal aspirations” and “school antisemitism”) can further winnow interview selections. Therefore, exploring this extensive body of material relies to a great deal on the archive’s choice of index terms and how individual interviews are tagged with these terms.

Though the Shoah Foundation originally decided against transcriptions, it has recently begun to add them as a searchable resource that complements the index. The Foundation explains that “the transcripts ... appear on the screen as interviewees are talking so there will not be any loss of nuance of expression or paralinguistic cues.” The on-screen juxtaposition of video, indexing terms, transcription, plus mapping of locations mentioned, situates the recordings within a complex of search tools and supporting materials. This presentation also serves to remind viewers that the individual interviews they watch are part of a larger project.

At the same time that it has expanded the scope of the VHA, the Shoah Foundation continues to explore new digital technologies for documenting and presenting Holocaust memories. Starting in 2012, the Foundation collaborated with University of Southern California’s Institute for Creative Technologies to develop New Dimensions in Testimony. This project strives to enable people “to interact personally with testimony through holographic display” of a Holocaust survivor. Questions people ask the animate image of the survivor trigger prerecorded responses, by means of a “technology called Natural Language Understanding.” New Dimensions in Testimony both extends and alters the Shoah Foundation’s mission to document and disseminate survivors’ life stories. Interactive holography shifts the mode of engaging survivors’ memories from listening to and watching the VHA’s “talking-head” video interviews to interacting with three-dimensional, full-body apparitions of survivors.

Interactive mediums are widely hailed for enhancing audience encounters with information and thereby empowering them to further action. According to the Institute for Creative Technologies, this project’s goal is to offer people “simulated, educational conversations with survivors though the fourth dimension

of time. Years from now,” the institute writes, “long after the last survivor has passed on, the New Dimensions in Testimony project can provide a path to enable young people to listen to a survivor and ask their own questions directly.” At the same time that its creators champion the project’s use of “the latest technologies,” they also assert that it “advances the age-old tradition of passing down lessons through oral storytelling.”²⁹

Notwithstanding these claims, there are telling differences between conversing with an actual person and the simulation this project offers. Unlike video interviews of survivors, the technology used for New Dimensions in Testimony requires that the exchange between interviewer and informant be atomized into discrete questions and answers. Thus, Holocaust Studies scholar Rachel Baum argues, an interactive holograph of a survivor is, in effect, “the visual representation of a database” of information.³⁰ Therefore, the exchange of questions and answers with the holograph is transactional rather than developmental. This alters the nature of the information provided as well as how it is received. Communications scholar Ekaterina Haskins argues that, when using interactive digital media, “the audience no longer acts as a consumer of a linear story [but] takes part in the experience by making choices.”³¹ Yet the holograph’s prerecorded life story in units of information, intended to answer individual questions, precludes the possibility of asking follow-up questions that probe or develop the survivor’s narrative, which can be done when interviewing a living informant, as documented in audio and video interviews.

This simulation of an actual conversation is limited both by the technology’s occasional failure to offer apposite answers to questions and by the fact that the holograph cannot respond to a question that was not anticipated when recording the survivor’s database of responses.³² Not hearing answers to one’s questions is, of course, a limitation that viewers of video interviews with survivors might also experience. However, those recordings are manifestly closed works, documenting an interaction one can audit but not enter. By contrast, the interactive holograph purports to provide the equivalent of a conversation with a living survivor.

Video interviews provide an unfolding narrative, enabling the opportunity to observe the dynamics of memory. As literature scholar James Young notes, video foregrounds the process of remembrance by recording “both the witnesses as they make their testimony and the understanding and meaning of events generated in the activity of testimony itself.” Consequently, observers of these videotapes “witness ... the making of testimony.” By contrast, interactive holographs offer multiple potential points of entry to the survivor’s life narrative, prompted by the asker’s particular initiative. One need not, for example, start at the beginning of the survivor’s life or of World War II, as some video interviews do, in keeping with the protocols for their respective projects. This open-ended interaction with the holograph relies on askers’ knowledge of what to ask, as they must initiate each exchange. The challenge this interactive format poses to users is not limited to holography. Media scholar Anna Reading observes that visitors using interactive computer displays in the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Multi-media Learning Center in Los Angeles soon lose interest after making random choices of topics to pursue and generally “prefer to make interactive choices based around ‘what they already know.’” Interactivity, she notes, “is not the same as agency.” In the case of the holographs, the technology’s novelty predominates. Engaging with it can prove enticing or daunting, as its presentation of a virtual person may seem either a wondrous or an unsettling phenomenon.

Given this challenge, the Shoah Foundation recently announced a more directly pedagogical approach to engaging with survivor holographs. In an activity called “A Conversation with Pinchas Gutter,” students first learn about this survivor’s background and practice interviewing skills; then they are invited to ask questions of Gutter’s “interactive biography.” The pedagogy for this project is equally concerned with the process of interrogation as it is with the information students acquire from engaging with the holograph. As the Foundation explains, “Students will learn the techniques for having a conversation with a survivor and how to construct questions appropriately to elicit personal, historical and universal thematic responses.”

In yet another use of new media technology by the Shoah Foundation, Gutter is the subject of “The Last Goodbye,” described as an “immersive virtual reality testimony experience” that “represents unprecedented advances in storytelling

through technology.” In this 20-minute presentation, which debuted in 2017, users don virtual reality headsets to simulate accompanying Gutter on his “final return” to the former death camp at Majdanek, where he was imprisoned and his parents and sister were murdered.\(^{36}\) The technology employed in “The Last Goodbye” provides a distinct mode of accessing survivor storytelling, with its own assets and limitations. Here, connecting with the survivor is not interactive. Unlike “New Dimensions in Technology,” “The Last Goodbye” does not proffer a conversation with Gutter. Instead, the project’s structure follows his monologue, organized by the sites visited. “The Last Goodbye” resembles survivors recounting their wartime experiences to tour groups visiting death camps. It thereby constitutes an effort to use new technology to simulate another waning practice of face-to-face encounters with survivors. Thus, when “The Last Goodbye” was presented at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, the museum explained that, “as Pinchas recounts his experiences, you walk alongside him – seeing what he sees, hearing what he hears, and learning as he guides you through an account of his own history.”\(^{37}\)

As a consequence of this cascade of new digital technologies, students, teachers, museum goers, and others are offered multiple approaches to engage with the life stories of Holocaust survivors. Each technology facilitates a different kind of encounter, with its own possibilities and limitations. The fact that some survivors, such as Gutter, offer their personal histories in multiple formats provides opportunities to reflect on the impact of each medium and format for recording and sharing a life story on both the survivors and their audiences.

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Beyond their role as conveyers of information about the Holocaust and its remembrance, these many resources are noteworthy in their own right as phenomena of digital humanities, especially for scholars who are interested in this evolving interrelation of new technologies with the documentation and study of the past. In addition, all users of digital materials such as the aforementioned examples can benefit greatly from observing that their mediation and remediation are intrinsic to these resources:

First, by examining the protocols for how the materials, whether analog or digital, were collected: what mediums were used and how were the possibilities and the value of these mediums understood. Consider, for example, decisions

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to make video recordings of Holocaust survivors as talking heads against a blank background, in their homes, or in environments associated with their wartime experiences; the decision to include photographs, documents, or other personal objects in the interview and how they are incorporated. Such decisions as these shape how the survivors’ narratives are mediated, as the narratives themselves are mediations of recalled experience.

Second, by examining how digitized resources are remediated when they are cataloged and indexed, noting how the cataloging or indexing criteria shape the ways resources are located in a collection as well as how these criteria enable or constrain what is findable within individual resources. Though this metadata and the rubrics through which it is searched are extrinsic to collections of photographs and audio or video recordings, this information serves as the point of entry to the resources themselves, defining their value.

Third, by examining the implications of remediation: for example, the transcription or translation of audio recordings, the addition of annotations, images, maps, etc., to provide context for the original resources. Consider what these additions reveal about expectations of who will use these resources and to what ends, as well as what new research possibilities these tools prompt. Moreover, consider how the remediation of so many resources on the internet enables relationships among them, linking collections within one online mega-archive, while also imposing on the delivery of these wide-ranging materials the common medium of a website.

Fourth, by examining the means used to access these resources, including the possible venues for this engagement and how they can shape users’ encounters with materials. Consider, for example, the differences among viewing the same digitized photograph or listening to the same song recording at home, in a classroom, in a library, or in a museum.

The decisions of how Holocaust memories are documented and how these documentations are remediated have important implications for their scholarly engagement. For example, communications scholar Amit Pinchevski argues that the turn to videography to document Holocaust survivor narratives, beginning in the 1970s, facilitated the advent of a scholarly “discourse of trauma and testimony.” Pinchevski posits that the medium of videotape served as “the technological unconscious,” by enabling closer scrutiny of survivors’ oral accounts than had previously been possible.38 In my own work on the VHA, its index and search mechanism enabled me to locate hundreds of instances in which survi-

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vors discuss the role of Yiddish in their lives, from which I constructed a survey of the dynamics of Yiddish as a presence in Holocaust survivors’ lives over the course of the 20th century. The result is a composite account, constructed from segments of different survivors’ narratives, none of whom provides such an overview. Rather, survivors discuss Yiddish only on occasion, usually just once, in the course of relating their life histories. In contrast to the narrative constructed from the aggregation of these discussions, the limited, inconstant presence of Yiddish in these narratives is telling in its own right, demonstrating the linguistic disruption in 20th-century European Jewish life that is, in turn, emblematic of great cultural, political, geographic, and demographic upheavals.

The larger context of the digital turn is especially resonant for works of Holocaust remembrance, as this moment coincides with the aging and passing away of survivors. Mounting concerns about how Holocaust education and remembrance can proceed without survivors have prompted turns to these various mediations of their remembrances in order to extend survivors’ presence, even striving to endow them with a kind of immortality. Yet the notion that digital media ensure stable preservation of survivors’ memories is a false friend. Digital media are distinctly mutable, composed of long strings of binary code that can easily become corrupted. These media are dependent on rapidly changing technologies, whether equipment that quickly becomes obsolete or online platforms that suddenly change or disappear without a trace.

The turn to ever newer technologies in the digital age highlights the speed with which new media become old. Eventually, their technology, sensibility, or aesthetic will appear less than state-of-the-art – just as Boder’s interviewing methodology can now sound outdated, or videos made in the last decades of the 20th century are evidently of an earlier era, marked by survivors’ clothing, speech, and home furnishings. At the same time, the cascade of innovations in digital media can also present new opportunities for documenting Holocaust memories, and not only to institutions, but also to individuals. Just as the first videotaped life histories of survivors were made by their families almost a half-century ago, similar videos are now recorded on cell phones and posted on social media platforms. With this practice, the memories of older generations are integrated into the posters’ ongoing online self-portraiture.

The tension between the desires to preserve memory and the evolving, shifting possibilities of digital media may seem challenging. However, this is emble-

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39 See Shandler, *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age*, ch. 3.
atic of memory generally, which is by its nature subjective, contingent, and relational. Therefore, as we grapple with how to understand and to work with these new kinds of resources, we need to look back in time to consider the dynamics of their development, even as we look forward, as new technologies, research interests, and practices of engagement with digital resources continue to emerge.

The field of Jewish Studies has examined the impact of earlier new mediums and media practices on Jewish life, starting with the advent of writing in relation to oral language in ancient times and extending through print, photography, sound recordings, and broadcasting. Just as reflecting on digital media in Holocaust memory practices redounds to issues of concern regarding these newest technologies in other fields of Jewish Studies, the digital turn in this field resonates with ongoing considerations of how prior engagements with media that were once new have figured in Jewish life and how it has been studied.41

References


