

WW1 (fallen) soldiers on-line: databases as traces of collective memories

Frédéric Clavert, Luxembourg Center for Contemporary and Digital History (University of Luxembourg)

Since 2014 — and even since November 2013 in the case of France — former belligerent Nations are commemorating the Centenary of the Great War. It is probably one of the first, if not the first, major series of commemorations that are taking part within our digital and connected through social networks on-line contemporary world. Since April 2014, we collect tweets that contains keywords related to the centenary: we try to study effects of social networks on-line, especially the consequences of *real-time* circulation of information, on commemorations of the past.

In the case of French-speaking activity about the Great War on Twitter and elsewhere on the web, one of our findings is the unavoidable presence of the French Ministry of Defense's platform *Mémoire des Hommes*. This platform is the home of the "Deads for France" database (*base de données des Morts pour la France*), which is the most quoted francophone reference on Twitter when the Great War is discussed or remembered (Clavert 2017). Twitter is not the only place where the *base de données des Morts pour la France* is the most quoted reference, as it is also the case with the main web-based Frenchspeaking forum about the First World War (Beaudouin and Pehlivan 2017). This database gave birth to an intense crowdsourced activity of indexation, with many volunteers transforming this database of images of acts declaring soldiers and civilians *morts pour la France* into a database of proper text, *ie* text seen as text by computers.

The prevalence of this database raises many questions. In a previous paper (Clavert 2017), we discussed that this database is becoming a *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1984) – a place (a virtual one in this case) where a collective past is remembered. In this paper, we would like to understand further how such databases as the *base de données des morts pour la France* are the result of processes that are linked to collective memories. Instead of studying only practices as we did in the aforementioned paper, we will investigate the databases themselves.

Thanks to a preliminary inventory of on-line databases of (fallen) soldiers of the main belligerent countries (Clavert 2018), we will try to compare them by elaborating an analysis grid inspired by, among others, Serge Noiret's one on websites (Rygiel and Noiret 2005, 29–32). To our knowledge, such an analysis grid does not exist for databases.

This comparison will have several dimensions: the publishing model (private or public, open access or not), the digitizing/datafication model, the targeted audience(s), if an interaction with a large audience is sought, the metadata scheme (if possible) and, of course, their precise subject (are they databases of soldiers only? Of fallen soldiers? Of soldiers' graves? Are they only dedicated to the Great War?). We will particularly try to analyze how a link between individuals (the soldier) and collectivities (place of birth, place of death, the name and number of the regiment, the grave, etc) is made. The aim is to define how a database can be

seen as traces of collective memories and how a historical criticism of databases can add to our knowledge of collective memories.

Last but not least, we will try to integrate our paper within the long story of the uses of databases by historians. The uses of computing by historians have been mostly based on databases (see for instance: (Thaller 1986)). They have elaborated many databases and databases management systems and critically thought about the uses of their own databases. But what happens when they have to use databases that were not made by them? How to see a database as a primary source or, rather, as a “meta-source” (Genet 1986) ? How to elaborate a historical critique of such meta-sources ? Though some literature does exist on this subject (Milligan 2013), historians have not yet fully answered this question.

- Beaudouin, Valérie, and Zeynep Pehlivan. 2017. ‘Mapping the World War I on the Web’. Research Report. Bibliothèque nationale de France ; Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine ; Télécom ParisTech. <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01425600>.
- Clavert, Frédéric. 2017. ‘Échos du centenaire de la Première Guerre mondiale sur Twitter’. *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps*, no. 120 (May): 18–25. http://www.cairn.info/resume.php?ID_ARTICLE=MATE_121_0018.
- . 2018. ‘Traces de mémoires collectives et bases de données de la Première Guerre mondiale’. Billet. *L’histoire contemporaine à l’ère numérique* (blog). 11 January 2018. <https://histnum.hypotheses.org/2743>.
- Genet, Jean-Philippe. 1986. ‘Histoire, Informatique, Mesure’. *Histoire & Mesure* 1: 7–18. <https://doi.org/10.3406/hism.1986.904>.
- Milligan, Ian. 2013. ‘Illusionary Order: Online Databases, Optical Character Recognition, and Canadian History, 1997–2010’. *Canadian Historical Review* 94 (4): 540–69. <https://doi.org/10.3138/chr.694>.
- Nora, Pierre. 1984. *Les lieux de mémoire, tome 1 : La République*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Rygiel, Philippe, and Serge Noiret. 2005. *Les historiens, leurs revues et Internet : France, Espagne, Italie*. Publibook. Paris.
- Thaller, Manfred, ed. 1986. *Datenbanken und Datenverwaltungssysteme als Werkzeuge historischer Forschung*. St. Katharinen: Scripta Mercaturae.