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George Floyd and cosmopolitan memory formation in online networks: A report from Northern Europe

George Floyd y la formación de memoria cosmopolita en redes sociales: Un informe desde el norte de Europa

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Abstract

This work analyses the presence and management As personalized digital networks have increased in cultural and political relevance, there is a more urgent need to understand their role in democratic memory-formation. Moreover, scholars have suggested that, in a globalized digitalized age, collective memory could extend to transnational publics. This study aims to advance the understanding of memory on global social networks by investigating the way the death of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 was treated and understood by Twitter-users outside the United States. Using a combination of big data and contemporaneous qualitative interviews with users in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, the paper brings the concept of cosmopolitan memory into the social media era. The study finds that users fused the event and its aftermath with observations of injustice in their own countries. However, this process operated differently among users of different ideological outlooks. Another key finding is that users on the radical right resented the uptake of the event as a cosmopolitan memory, and employed techniques termed as "combative counter-memory."

Keywords

cosmopolitan memory; counter-memory; mixed methods; race; right-wing; Twitter

Resumen

A medida que las redes digitales personalizadas han crecido en relevancia cultural y política, la necesidad de comprender su papel en la formación de la memoria democrática se ha vuelto más urgente. Además, los académicos han sugerido que en una era de globalización y digitalización, la memoria colectiva podría extenderse a públicos transnacionales. Este estudio tiene como objetivo avanzar en la comprensión de la memoria en las redes sociales globales al investigar la forma en que los usuarios de Twitter fuera de los Estados Unidos trataron y entendieron la muerte de George Floyd en el verano de 2020. Usando una combinación de big data y entrevistas cualitativas contemporáneas con usuarios en Noruega, Suecia y Dinamarca, el artículo trae el concepto de memoria cosmopolita a la era de las redes sociales. El estudio encuentra que los usuarios fusionaron el evento y sus consecuencias con observaciones de injusticia en sus propios países. Sin embargo, este proceso funcionó de manera diferente entre los usuarios de diferentes puntos de vista ideológicos. Otro hallazgo clave es que los usuarios de la derecha radical resintieron la aceptación del evento como una memoria cosmopolita y emplearon técnicas de "contramemoria combativa".

Palabras clave

derecha política; memoria cosmopolita; contramemoria; métodos mixtos; raza; Twitter

1. Introduction

In May of 2020, a video went viral on Twitter. It showed the death of a Black man in Minnesota, USA, by a police officer. The murder of George Floyd galvanized the already active Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the United States. More than that, however, it galvanized people who had not previously been part of the movement – both in and outside the U.S. BLM protests took place across Europe in June and July, mirroring those in the U.S. (El País, 2020). The event inspired questions about racial justice not only in the U.S. but in other countries as well.

Pivotal political events have long been the basis of collective memories formation within nation-states (Foucault, 1977; Halbwachs, [1952], 1992), and it has been proposed that such forms of memory could be global as well (Levy & Sznajder, 2002; Ryan, 2014; Saito, 2021; Volkmer & Deffner, 2010). An important part of this is the coverage of the event in the media (Garde-Hansen, 2011). However, the death of George Floyd and its aftermath played out not just in newspapers and television, but foremost online, on digital platforms that are globally available. The Twitter hashtags #BLM and #icantbreathe came to represent the movement in the collective culture.

Personalized transnational networks are now integrated into democratic politics (Blasco-Duatis & Coenders, 2020; Guerrero-Solé, et al., 2022; Larsson & Moe, 2014; Orbegozo-Terradillos, Morales-i-Gras & Larrondo-Ureta, 2020). However, their role in the formation of collective memories is still little understood (Birkner & Donk, 2020). Neiger, Meyers & Zandberg (2011) write that media must be understood as both tools and agents in the process of public remembering – that is, media both document and create collective memories. Digital social media platforms introduce new dynamics to this process, as they allow for real-time interaction, curation, and co-creation of events, paving the way for more horizontal memory formation (Reading, 2011) and even counter-memory (Birkner & Donk, 2020). Moreover, these reflexive platforms have been found to be especially prone to conveyance of misinformation compared with traditional media systems, potentially altering “individual and collective memories in a worrying way” (Sánchez-Castillo & López-Olano, 2021: 1).

This article aims to advance the understanding of the way globalized social media contribute to democratic memory formation, viewing the death of George Floyd as a transnational event (Volkmer & Deffner, 2010). While some research has explored the spatial and material forms of collective memories associated with Floyd and the BLM movement (Heersmink, 2021; Mendes, 2021), so far surprisingly little academic attention has been paid to what the event can tell us about cosmopolitan memory formation through digital networks.

This article uses interview and tweet data from Twitter users in Scandinavian countries collected around the time of Floyd's death. Norway, Denmark, and Sweden offer interesting examples for study because of their stark historical differences on the issue of race with the United States, while also being recent sites of populist–nativist and neo-Nazi sentiment (Eriksson, 2015; Lundby & Repstad, 2018).

Furthermore, the use of contemporaneous interviews offers an unrepresented methodological approach in the area of media and memory, a field where studies often rely on historical documents and recollections (Neiger, Meyers & Zandberg, 2011). The data presented here show memory formation in-process (recognizing, of course, that collective memories are subject to constant re-negotiation [Misztal, 2005]). The participants in these interviews were found in Twitter data collected using the DMI-TCAT (see e.g. Orbegozo-Terradillos, Morales-i-Gras & Larrondo-Ureta, 2020) and data from their timelines offer supplemental information on the users' relationship to the event on Twitter.

This article is structured as follows. I will first examine the previous empirical and theoretical scholarship on media and democratic memory, followed by an examination of the theory of cosmopolitan memory. I then consider the particular circumstances of Twitter and discuss the case study. Next, I lay out the way participants were chosen and the method for analyzing their interviews and tweets. Finally, the article presents the findings of a thematic analysis, contextualized by previous research, and offers the implications for democratic societies.

1.1. Democratic memory and media

Memories are an individual experience, but since the mid-20th Century, sociologists have come to understand the powerful role of memory as a collective phenomenon. In the influential *The Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs outlined a Durkheim-inspired vision of how individuals' understanding of past events are informed through a relational process. In this process, collective memory forms through a continuous interaction between individual and collective, each feeding back on itself (1992 [1952]: 40).

Since studies have helped make clear that mass communication is an important player in this process, providing a means for collective mnemonic practice of commemoration (Saito, 2021: 223). Not surprisingly, memory studies and media studies have had a close relationship. In an exploration of this relationship,

Garde-Hansen (2011) writes that "'media witnessing' has now become one of the key concepts for understanding the relationship between experiences, events and their representations" (3). That is, most of the memories shared by citizens are now of events they experienced solely through the media.

Collective memory, formed with the help of the media, is necessary for mythmaking in modern societies, and as such it is a highly contested process (Molden, 2016; Tello, 2022). This is especially true of the treatment and memorialization of traumatic events and periods of injustice. Foucault suggests that hegemonic histories, particularly those promoted by governments through monuments, are subject to challenge through what he called "counter-memory" (1977: 160) – that is, mnemonic resistance by people who remember "against the grain" of the canonized narrative (Medina, 2011: 12). In his examination of memory in democratic societies, Brendese (2014) argues that memory is continually subject to power relations that shape what is remembered by whom, and in what manner, and also what is forgotten (2).

This process is at times formalized, as seen in the proposed Democratic Memory Law in Spain which would revisit the crimes from the Civil War (1936-39) and open up the possibilities of prosecutions. In the case of the Black Lives Matter movement, a less formal procedure of memory renegotiation has taken place in public spaces with the erecting of new monuments and removal of others (Mendes, 2021; Heersmink, 2021). In either case, what is remembered and what is forgotten has critical implications for the stories that the societies tell about themselves, the building of trust and cohesion, and the solutions that publics seek to future problems (Misztal, 2005).

In the following section, I examine how this process may be scaled up beyond the nation-state.

1.2. Cosmopolitan memory

In recent decades, scholars have noted that the dual processes of globalization and digitalization open up new questions on memory formation. In a 2002 article, Levy and Sznajder argued for the "decoupling of collective memory and national history" (2002: 89). They examined treatments of the Holocaust, which they argued was not only a German–Jewish memory, but had become a "cosmopolitan memory" and a moral lesson shared by people across Europe and the United States through representations in film, print, and photographic media. Levy and Sznajder argued new "memoriscapes" were opening up through global media and suggested that a key question for scholars is "how do these transnational memory forms come about and what do they consist of?" (2002: 88).

The concept of cosmopolitan memory has become an important touchstone for theorists of global society who suggest that global media have provided a view into the "suffering of foreign others" (Saito, 2021: 230). Volkmer and Deffner argue processes of "transnational discursive remediation" have established a transnational "eventsphere" in which events are understood no longer as merely local but as global phenomena (2010: 226). Yet there is an interplay with the local/national. Octobre (2021: 280) argues this is a hybridizing process in which global culture is experienced in concert with national culture through 1) universalization of the particular and 2) particularization of the universal. A central question is what *other* memories an event is compared to. Picking up the thread of memory as contested, Ryan (2014) notes that conflicts can arise between in this process between cosmopolitan memory and national. She writes:

The effectiveness of cosmopolitan memory as a moral lever is not assured, and even its adoption cannot ensure positive outcomes for victims, as its tenets are nationalized and its discourse distorted, in some cases, to serve the national interest (2014: 513).

Ryan usefully nuances Levy and Sznajder's theory, concluding that internal processes are as important as global processes in the development of cosmopolitan memory. In the following section I will explore the implications that global digital media platforms have for collective memory information.

1.3. Twitter, memory, and counter-memory

In contrast to the top-down, elite forms of mediated memory formation – forms such as newspapers, films, and songs – social media potentially make way for a more collaborative approach and greater democratization of memory making (Garde-Hansen, 2011) by giving more power to what Molden calls the "carriers, consumers, reproducers, but also challengers of this history" (2016: 125).

Although this field of study is still under development, empirical research has confirmed the popular opinion that online activity increases during and after major tragedies (Eriksson, 2015). Eriksson's own analysis focused on Twitter in the wake of the terrorist attack in Norway by neo-Nazi Anders Behring Breivik. She concluded the platform offers a means of processing collective trauma and "fulfills a need for meaning-making within the public sphere that is outside of the mass media discourse" (Eriksson, 2015: 368), thus allowing users to be part of the creation and diffusion of collective memory.

Eriksson notes that her data encompassed not just Norwegian Twitter users, but an international audience following news of the attacks. The global memory potential of social media has been explored in more detail by Reading (2011), who argues Twitter and other platforms contribute to what she calls the global memory field – “globalital” embodying both digitalization and globalization.

Reading argues social media create a fundamentally different situation for collective memory formation. To illustrate the point, she offers a comparison between the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and the shooting of a protester captured on video during the 2009 Iranian elections:

In the public witnessing of the Battle of Waterloo, material practices and discursive formations were limited to the written press. The subsequent cultural memorialization of the event has taken place in multiple forms and include tourist visits to the site of the battle itself ... paintings, stories, and references within popular songs. ... The digital witnessing of Neda, in contrast, took place within minutes and hours (2011: 248).

Reading (2011) proposes six dynamics of memory formation that are different in the age of digital media. *Transmediality* identifies the material form through which an event is witnessed. *Velocity* refers to the rapidity of memory formation. *Extensivity* is how widely the event was known; *modality*, referring to the way the event is transmitted and experienced. *Valency* refers to the way memories are bonded to other memory assemblages. *Viscosity* characterizes how easily the event is turned into different versions. And finally *axes*, meaning whether the event is transmitted vertically (e.g. from the press) or horizontally, from person to person.

Such features have been brought to the fore in further work by Birkner and Donk (2020) who propose a subfield of social media memory studies is needed. They document a case of memory and counter-memory formation on Facebook during a debate about changing the name of Hindenburg Square in Münster. Birkner and Donk suggest Foucault's (1977) concept of counter-memory is especially salient in the new media age. They find Facebook was used by the right to put forth a positive version of Hindenburg – a framing different from that found in the mainstream local media. “This should be investigated more broadly in the future, as we still know little about the [memory] functionality of counter-public spheres in Web 2.0” (Birkner & Donk, 2020: 379).

2. Case background: Race in the U.S. and Scandinavia

George Floyd was killed on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, after being pinned under three police officers who believed he'd bought cigarettes with counterfeit money. The incident provided a focal point for a long-running discussion about the legacy of racism in American institutions, particularly the police. Protests broke out across the country and continued through much of the summer. It was noted to be a turning point on race in the U.S., visible in unprecedented shifts in public opinion about racism (Saad, 2021).

Such swings in opinion arguably marked an important moment in American collective memory. Brendese (2014) argues that the legacy of slavery in the United States continues to inform American democratic memory. Slavery began in the American colonial era and lasted more than 200 years, ending only through the bloody U.S. Civil War (1861-1865). “America's slave past simultaneously wields incredible power over the present but is rendered unspeakable in political discourse” he writes (2014: 63). Brendese suggests that the United States has a “segregated memory,” and that particularly on the political right, a history of white victimhood has been collectively developed through right-wing media. Banks finds that Fox News especially has used a technique of “post-racial rhetoric,” in which it is Black Lives Matter protesters who are construed as racist (2018: 716).

In contrast, Scandinavia presents a radically different context on the issue of race. This Northern European region is made up of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, which share similar languages and histories. Scandinavian countries were comparatively minor actors in the African slave trade (Schnakenbourg, 2020) and until the post-World War II era had relatively little in-migration (Migrationsverket, 2020). The countries have a reputation for being highly egalitarian and have positioned themselves as global leaders on the issue of human rights (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Nativist-populist parties have had to tread lightly in Scandinavia, still marked by their experiences with Nazism during the war. However, with the increase in immigrants from Middle Eastern countries in recent decades, nativist-populism has become more mainstream in Scandinavian politics (Lundby & Repstad, 2018).

Despite different political systems and histories, Scandinavia has become a political reference point in American debates over multiculturalism. At a 2017 rally in Florida, Donald Trump decried “what happened last night in Sweden,” referencing a (non-existent) terrorist attack by immigrants (Chan, 2017). Scandinavian news media in turn have been highly attuned to American racial debates in recent years, perhaps spurred on by the Trump presidency, which news consumers experienced as a shocking

disruption to usual news flows (Moe, Ytre-Arne & Nærlund, 2019). Political communication on Twitter from the United States is often cited in Scandinavian media, and even becomes part of Scandinavian public culture. A 2021 article in Norway's *Aftenposten* documented the importation of "woke-ness" and "cancel culture" from American identity politics (Hagesæther, Johansen & Bjørge, 2021). Though Twitter is a niche platform in Scandinavia (Newman et al., 2021), it is popular among Scandinavian political elites and the politically engaged (Larsson & Moe, 2014).

Inspired by previous research on democratic memory and media, and presenting the death of George Floyd as a transnational event in the online "eventsphere," this paper asks, how social media users articulate the collective memory of George Floyd's death. This question is explored through the following three subquestions:

RQ_a: How do users express the collective that "witnessed" Floyd's death?

RQ_b: What other memory assemblages do users connect Floyd's death to?

RQ_c: What strategies of counter-memory formation do users employ?

In the next section, I describe the data and methods used to answer these questions.

3. Methodology

This paper draws on a combination of interviews with 23 users and their Twitter data. The users are located in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark and interviews were conducted via Zoom from late May 2020 to March 2021. The interviews were part of a larger research project on transnational political networks, with the aim to understand how Twitter users experience the confluence of politics from different geographies online. As part of this project, large scale data collections were made using the DMI-TCAT tool (Borra & Rieder, 2014). The collections included the 2016 U.S. election, the 2018 Swedish election, the 2019 Danish election, and the first four months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Random samples were also taken. Several hundred-thousand Scandinavian users were identified computationally in these collections using language and location markers in user profiles (see Bruns & Enli, 2018, for similar methodology).

Prospective participants for the qualitative interviews were identified based on their involvement and visibility in networks in the data collections of Twitter data. The participants were reached through private direct messages (DMs) on Twitter.

The interviews were not originally focused on the issue of race, but subjects were allowed to bring up topics of interest, and one of the consistent topics was the killing of George Floyd and the BLM movement.¹ Moe, Ytre-Arne & Nærlund (2019) describe a similar phenomenon in their study of Norwegian news consumers, conducted in the fall of 2016, in which the election of Donald Trump became an unanticipated focus of the material. As in that study, the surfacing of Floyd's death in the interviews is itself indicative of the presence of the event in the subjects' memories.

Of the 23 participants, three are in Denmark, eight are in Sweden, and 12 are in Norway. Eight participants are women; the average age is 45; four have an immigrant background. Follower count (recorded at the time of the interview) varied from 281 to 136,000; the median count is 3,272 followers. Of these, 15 characterized their politics as being left of center; 2 of these 15 see themselves on the radical or far left. Eight of the participants characterized their politics as right of center; 6 of these 8 lean toward the cultural or radical right embodied by nativist-populist parties.² Table 1 lists background information on each participant.

The interviews followed a semistructured interview guide and lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. In advance of each interview, data from the participant's Twitter timeline was collected with the participant's permission using the DMI-TCAT, and examples of tweets were presented as prompts for the participant. Throughout the interviews, the author engaged in a verification process as advocated by Kvale (1996) by asking multiple questions to get at the same point, paraphrasing the participant's perspective, and asking the subject to clarify or elaborate on points they raised.

Table 1: List of participants

Anonymized identifier*	Country	Followers	Age	Gender	Immigrant background**
P04	Norway	1929	49	F	no
P05	Norway	3340	56	M	no
P06	Denmark	345	49	M	no
P07	Norway	320	23	F	no
P08	Norway	120600	31	F	no
P09	Norway	6045	52	M	no
P10	Sweden	14200	62	M	no
P11	Denmark	20200	39	F	no
P12	Norway	595	54	M	no
P13	Sweden	12100	47	M	no
P14	Norway	39100	48	M	no
P15	Norway	757	58	M	no
P16	Norway	3272	45	M	no
P17	Sweden	281	36	M	yes
P18	Sweden	7399	60	F	yes
P19	Sweden	2830	29	M	no
P20	Denmark	9450	54	M	no
P21	Norway	3701	"40s"	F	no
P22	Norway	136300	43	M	yes
P23	Sweden	384	56	F	no
P24	Sweden	1969	38	M	no
P25	Norway	1830	32	M	no
P26	Sweden	1125	44	F	yes

*Additional research interviews were conducted prior to Floyd's death which are not included in the analysis

**Either the subject or their parents immigrated to a Scandinavian country from outside of Scandinavia

Source: Author

The audio of the interviews was recorded and initial transcripts were algorithmically generated through NVivo or Amazon AWS transcription services. This was followed by manual review and revision of the transcript in conjunction with audio playback. A multi-step method of qualitative content analysis, categorization, and hermeneutical interpretation was then performed by the author on the tweets and transcripts, with concepts of democratic memory, cosmopolitan memory, and counter-memory providing a theoretical backdrop.

This method distilled the data material into four common themes that more specifically answer the research questions. In the next section I first describe the prevalence of Floyd's death in the data, followed by an investigation of each theme and how it emerged.

4. Results

4.1 Pervasiveness of the topic

The first reference in the material to George Floyd's death occurred only two days after his death. P04, a teacher in Norway who often tweets about politics, retweeted a CNN reporter the day before our interview:

Minneapolis mayor says police officers have been fired in George Floyd case (retweet by P04).

The subject of Floyd himself did not come up in the interview, though American politics in general were a central focus.

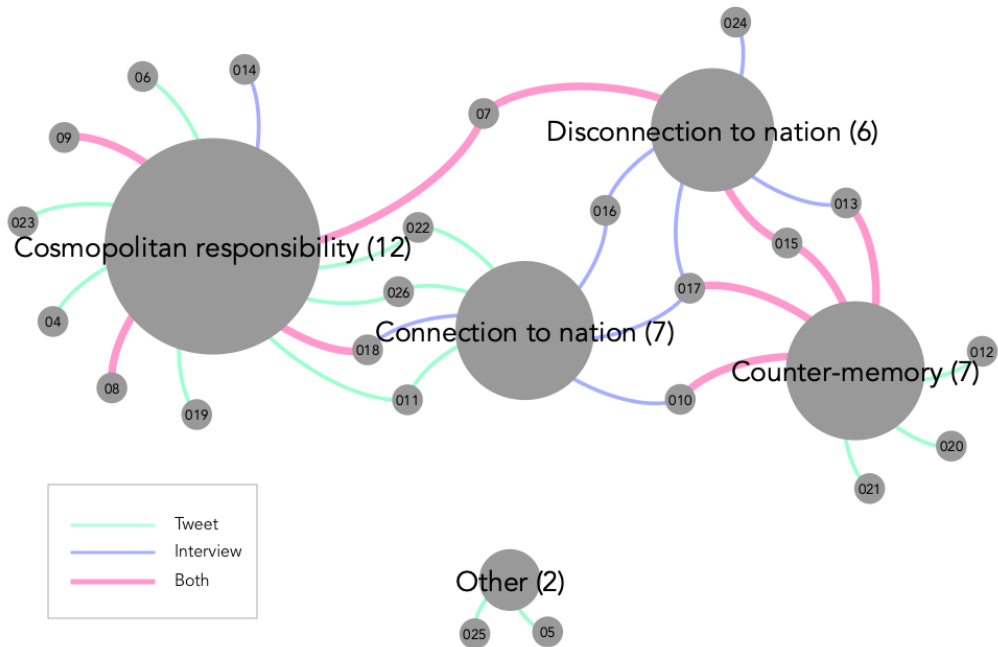
Especially with the 2016 election of Trump ... I feel I need to understand it. And you often see in the Norwegian newspapers that they are referencing the tweets from Twitter. But you can see it in real time if you're on Twitter yourself (P04).

The outsized role of U.S. politics was also echoed throughout the interviews. P05, a Norwegian physician, explained:

When you live in a very small country, you have to [follow U.S. politics] ... because it influences our own society to such a great degree (P05).

This provides some context for the prominence of George Floyd's death in the data material. All 23 participants addressed either his death or the subsequent protests in their tweet data, in their interview, or both. This data has been visualized in Figure 1, where each theme is connected to the participants who articulated it. Themes are sized according to the number of participants who articulated it; the proximity of certain themes to each other is the result of having participants in common.

Figure 1: Graph of participants' articulation of themes



Source: Author's data, graphed in Gephi. Numbers in parentheses are the number of participants who articulated each theme. Participants P25 and P05 are associated with "Other" because though they tweeted about George Floyd, none of the four themes were articulated in their tweets or interviews.

4.2 Theme 1: Cosmopolitan responsibility

The first participant to bring up the Floyd case in the interview was P08, a Norwegian woman with a large following on Twitter. She was discussing using Twitter to have some sort of impact on politics she cared about and said she wished she could join the BLM movement in the U.S.

Like I'm so impressed by the people protesting now and being out on the streets every single day. And I often get the feeling that I'm not doing enough. And this [tweeting] is what I can do. This is what I'm able to do from Norway (P08).

Such sentiments of wanting to feel a part of an effort were shared by other participants. P16, who is actively involved in Norwegian politics, learned about the incident from his English-language online networks and wrote about the incident in Norwegian. In contrast to P08, the Norwegian political commentator P16 was not trying to have an impact in the U.S., but rather bring the issue to Norway. "This is what I do," he said, "I try to take international discussions to Norway and present them to a Norwegian audience and hope that kind of can enrich the domestic discussion."

In these responses, we see the articulation of a cosmopolitan responsibility, a "logic of feeling and thinking that takes humanity, rather than nationality, as a primary frame of collective memory" (Saito, 2021: 224). In some cases, this is largely symbolic. In others, users try to take an active role from afar. For example, P09 is a Norwegian involved in "hacktivist" networks. He described joining forces with BLM-connected networks in the U.S. after Floyd's death:

We went from 1.7 million followers to over 8 million followers in under one week. So now we're working with them. And the biggest challenge to how to handle and teach 13, 14, 15-year-olds that want to save the world (P09).

Other users expressed a sense of collective solidarity. P07 is a Norwegian university student in her early 20s who mainly used Twitter to talk with her friends in other parts of Norway and Europe. She tweeted about the protests following Floyd's death:

I don't generally think destruction of property is right, but I sure as hell get that a rioting is the language of the unheard. The racism and taking of black lives has to have consequences. #BlackLivesMatter (tweet by P07)

During our interview, P07 described the way Twitter had introduced her to new concepts surrounding race, gender, and equality, including terms like intersectionality and systemic racism. She said Twitter gave her first-hand information about events like the Floyd case that she felt the Norwegian media didn't cover.

I get very frustrated and annoyed. Because, like you have discussions, and then you read the [Norwegian] news and it's people who are discussing if racism even exists. And it's like so far removed from the discussions we're having [on Twitter] and it feels like a step back (P07).

In tweets, participants also expressed a sense of "we" and universalization of Floyd's death and the subsequent protest movement. "Floyd's death wasn't just one incident of police violence," tweeted P22, "it was a symbol of racism everywhere."

4.3 Theme 2: Connection to nation

If the previous theme reflects what Octobre (2021) calls universalizing the particular, then the next theme moves more toward particularization of the universal. In interviews and tweets several months after Floyd's death, participants began articulating the event as not only a global or American one, but also as a national event.

The user who was perhaps most passionate about the issue was P18, Swedish woman who consults for Swedish government agencies. By the time of the interview with P18, she had added the BLM hashtag to her personal description on Twitter. She was asked about this during the interview:

Interviewer: You have the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in your profile. I was curious why this is meaningful to you.

[Gasps] Oh, God. I watched the video of George Floyd calling for his mother. I cried. I really cried. [gets a little choked up] I could cry now. And it hurts so much, listening to [U.S. Attorney General] Barr and Trump saying that they don't have systemic racism in America, when we have the same racism here in Sweden! (P18)

The incident was still vivid to P18, but it was not just about Floyd's tragic death. The issue was about racism in both the United States and in her own country. In the interview, P18 was asked to elaborate on the connection she saw to Sweden, where deaths at the hands of police are highly unusual. P18 connected the issue to her own life and children:

You know, I didn't think the Swedish police were violent before. When I lived in my bubble. But then I have two sons, 24 and 20 years old, and they told me some stuff that I really didn't believe before.

Interviewer: So you're saying it's not that different?

No. And also, when the Black Lives Matter protest started in America, they also started here in Europe. In Stockholm, we had protesters. We had those in France, in different European countries. So I mean, there are Black people everywhere, and they have felt the same discrimination. Wherever they live. So, we have to deal with that. Everywhere. Not only in the States (P18).

The participant references the protests that had taken place in Oslo, Stockholm, and Copenhagen, along with other European capitals – in a way, becoming a form of local commemoration (Saito, 2021).

P16 noted that the BLM movement had become part of national political discourse, as well as discourse including within his own family:

When I wrote about Black Lives Matter, it was because I thought that nobody else was going to do that. And then that didn't turn out to be the case at all. ... And I have an 11 year old son, and he knows everything about Black Lives Matter now (P16).

P17, a Swedish man adopted as a child from central Africa, said that it was hard to speak about U.S. politics as being only that nation's politics; the debates around race that had started with the Trump presidency had helped made U.S. racial politics part of Swedish politics: "We're interlinked in a very special way."

In tweets in their national languages, participants spoke directly to fellow Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes:

We need a more honest debate on racism in Norway. We have widespread attitudes and structures that are racist. Yet we only talk about America (retweet by P16, translated by author)

If you think racism is only an American problem, then read this story by Sony Kapoor about his experiences in Denmark and other European countries #blacklivesmatter #racisimindenmark (tweet by P11, translated by author)

4.4 Theme 3: Disconnection to nation

However, some of the participants had reservations about the convergence of Scandinavian and American race politics – even some of those largely sympathetic to the BLM movement. For example, P07, the Norwegian university student, described a Twitter exchange she'd had about the Disney movie *Frozen* and the portrayal of a Sami character. The Sami are indigenous to northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. P07 spoke about the online exchange cautiously ("I don't feel 100 percent comfortable. I don't want to take the lead in this discussion because I'm not Sami myself" she explained.) But she recalled:

Someone had drawn the character from *Frozen* with very dark skin. ... And I think that might be a bit misguided. Because, as my friend [who's Sami] says, it's silly – she's very pale, but she's still part of an indigenous population. And people say it's because Americans don't understand that indigenous people can look white (P07).

Subjects in later interviews also described fatigue from the "reality show" of the American presidential race and the constant coverage of American political news in Scandinavian media. In an interview shortly after Biden's inauguration in 2021, P24, a Swedish man who studied theology, described frustration with the way American race politics had been brought into Swedish culture:

We have a different history over here -- because we haven't had slavery here as in America. So when you [apply U.S. race politics] you not only create issues that perhaps aren't there. And the nuances of what we should be talking about over here [local issues] is sort of overshadowed or over-coded by an analysis shaped in a vastly different context (P24).

P24 added that it's not that race struggles in the United States aren't important, "It's just, it's not our struggles."

4.5 Theme 4: Counter-memory

Despite the above mentioned reservations, many of the interview subjects described the death of George Floyd as an important global event. This was true of the subjects whose politics leaned right of center as well. However, some right-wing subjects articulated the memory in very different ways from those described above. This appeared especially among subjects originally chosen because they represent the small but vocal nationalist-leaning segment of Twitter in Scandinavia.

P15, for example, is a Norwegian corporate consultant. In July he tweeted out a video allegedly at a BLM rally in which a white woman was attacked. (Fact-checking sites later found the video was from 2014.) We discussed the tweet during the interview:

Imagine if there had there been a group of white people who treated a black person like that, it would have been riots. So [this tweet] is not from a racist motive, it's just – How far is this one-sided story going to be presented?

Interviewer: Do you think that this issue is relevant for Norway?

Yes. It becomes so. Because the whole thing about Black Lives Matter has been put on posters here in protests. For example, after the George Floyd killing, there was a huge gathering before the parliament in Norway – must be 50,000 people – with signs and all that. Black Lives Matter was then one of their slogans (P15).

The participant goes on to say that the thousands of people were allowed to gather despite the Covid-19 restrictions in place at the time. In that way, and in what he sees as a lack of publicity around BLM violence, P15 expresses sense of unfairness in the way BLM is treated. *This*, he argues, is the relevance for Norway. P15 separates the issue of George Floyd's death – which he describes as a "horrible thing" elsewhere in the interview – from the subsequent BLM protests. Later in the interview, he remembers being pulled over several times for speeding on his visits to the United States. "I know that when you're stopped by police in the States, you just sit still. You don't do anything."

Other users similarly sought to distinguish the tragedy of George Floyd's death from the cosmopolitan outpouring it had provoked. P10, a Swedish blogger, suggested the BLM movement was part of an election year tactic: "It's polarization. The thing around George Floyd has been used by the Democrats for partisan politics I would say."

For P13, a Swedish Twitter user known as a right-wing provocateur, the protests in Scandinavian countries were an expression of narcissism, masked as cosmopolitan concern. In the interview, we discussed a video he shared from a BLM protest in Gothenburg, Sweden. P13 laughed at a protester in the video:

That guy is standing and apologizing for being white. This could be a *Monty Python* sketch. Come on! Once again, they think that "I'm the good guy." You can even see in his face how good he feels standing there. ... And he's even standing there with his Africa shirt. It's like, *that* guy is a racist. For real. *He* is a racist. That is how a racist acts. That's how I see him (P13).

It was not uncommon for these users to turn the issue of memory around. Several tweeted in disbelief about the effort to remove Confederate flags and statues of historic figures. P20, a Danish attorney, tweeted that BLM was a "hateful" movement that favored "discrimination" against other (presumably white) people – an echo of the post-racial rhetoric favored by the American right (Banks, 2018).

Users in this segment of the right also tended to highlight a different aspect of violence – namely acts perpetrated or believed to be perpetrated by people at BLM rallies. P13, taking a more serious tone than above, warned of the lasting memories from witnessing violent acts. He compared riots in the U.S. to a personal experience from when he was a videographer overseas:

I was in Iraq and they killed two guys in front of me. I went back to my hotel room and sat for two days and did nothing. ... Nobody's prepared to see someone get killed. That's what I find so interesting about the riots [BLM protests] in the States – that people are so calm about the violence. They're like "it's just the leftists, it's okay, they're doing it for good cause." But no, they aren't. They are as bad as ISIS. Violence is violence. There is no good violence (P13).

For the participant, the association to witnessing death was not with the video of George Floyd, but with the videos of violence at BLM rallies.

Thus, for these participants, the collective memory was not about Floyd's death so much as what they saw as the brutal reaction to it. Notably, P17, the Swedish man born in central Africa, was the most conspiratorial about Floyd's death. In his interview he questioned Floyd's innocence, and suggested funding for BLM came from global elites seeking to divide people:

The worst wars are ethnic wars. No one wins. And it's a very dangerous situation because they're using people's ignorance to create fear. They're trying to make minority groups think that they are in a situation where the system wants to, or that police want to get away with shooting Black people. To hunt them down. I mean it's just lunatic. Crazy.

Interviewer: Are people ever surprised that you as a Black man are so critical of the Black Lives Matter movement?

I would say no, because it's so many people who are Black who see through this. We're not the loudest voices because the media select people who are loud, because maybe they want to clickbait or whatever. But it's a lot of us (P17).

In this last line, P17 invokes a transnational community of marginalized people who have a different view from the official writers of history. In the following section I will synthesize the major findings of this research and discuss their implications in relation to existing literature.

5. Discussion

Though it was known that the death of George Floyd gained international resonance, this paper has helped clarify the way that event was experienced and co-created by social media users. In doing so, the paper offers new insight into the process of cosmopolitan memory formation. Previous literature has proposed that democratic memory formation on social media is more rapid, more contested, and less bounded by the nation-state (Reading, 2011). The research presented here helps nuance these concepts in several ways, not the least by adding a cosmopolitan element as proposed by Levy and Sznajder (2002), though seldom applied to social media.

We see, for example, the way individuals a continent away learned quickly through their Twitter networks of the death of George Floyd, a local event in the Midwest region of the United States. The availability of the video online of his death meant that people in Scandinavia could "witness" the event in what Reading (2011) would call the same *modality* as Americans themselves. In this regard, memory formation of the videoed event was a globally shared experience, not dependent on elite news media, with social media providing means for collective and co-creative mnemonic practice (Saito, 2021).

Integral to this process is the understanding of who the collective is. Halbwachs argued that memory is collective not only because individuals make up a group, but because they are aware of their presence in the group (1992 [1952]: 40). We see this awareness in the participants' understanding of the event as shared – both at a global and a national level, and both online and offline. For example, the participants' frequent mention of the BLM demonstrations in their home countries and across Europe seem to serve as visualization proof for the imagined collective.

Of course, geographic context still matters. The Scandinavian countries have very different histories from the U.S. regarding race and multiculturalism. And as the participants describe in the interviews, they are at a remove from the issues and the heart of the citizen action in the weeks and months that follow Floyd's death. Yet we hear in at least some of the responses a sense of urgency and cosmopolitan responsibility. The desire to take part from afar calls up Levy and Sznajder's assertion that cosmopolitan memory is a "measure for humanist and universalist identifications" (2002: 88).

Moreover, some of the participants express a desire for an application of the cosmopolitan collective memory to the national collective (see Ryan, 2014). That is, they connect the killing of George Floyd to issues being discussed, or not discussed, in their own countries. Participants see the violence against Black citizens in the U.S. as similar or the same as threats facing minorities in their own country, incorporating the cosmopolitan memory of George Floyd into national assemblages of democratic memory (Misztal, 2005; Reading, 2011; Saito, 2021).

5.1 Strategies of combative counter-memory

The other major contribution of this paper is to document the counter-measures used in opposition to collective memory formation. Perhaps in reaction to Floyd becoming a global and national "political-cultural symbol" (Levy & Sznajder, 2002: 88), we see users on the radical right especially engage in what could be considered *combative counter-memory strategies*. I use "combative" here to convey a sense of urgency in the face of a still-developing conflict over how an event will be remembered; in other words, this is less a "transformation of history" as Foucault described, than a transformation in real-time (Neiger, Meyers & Zandberg, 2011). Even so, like Foucault's counter-memory, these strategies are still meant to address what the participants see as a hegemonic narrative, in this case coming from mainstream media and other elites. The term combative counter-memory thus diverges from the more passive "absence of complicity" that Ryan describes (2014: 511) or debates over historical facts in online counter-publics as documented by Birkner and Donk (2020).

With this distinction in mind, the strategies that surfaced in the interviews included

- re-nationalizing the incident to the U.S. –that is, situating it in a distinct and non-universal national context– or even a local context by pointing out that police killings are relatively rare even in the U.S.
- the uptake of audio-visual material that offer a depiction – or alleged depiction – of BLM events that countered the mainstream narrative. Audio-visual material, as Sánchez-Castillo and López-Olano (2021) write, can be a particularly potent form of “truth” telling on social media.
- transnational support for artefacts of previously hegemonic U.S. collective memory – especially Confederate statues and symbols. Removal of these is among the demands of the BLM movement (Mendes, 2021; Heersmink, 2021).³

However, one of the more complex forms of counter-memory was the use of memory assemblages. As described in the literature (Brendese, 2014; Garde-Hansen, 2011; Levy & Sznajder, 2002; Reading, 2011; Volkmer & Duffner, 2010), memories do not exist in isolation, but are associative. Reading has called this the “valency” of the memory, or “the extent to which memory assemblages through multiple discursive formations and material practices form bonds with other memory assemblages” (2011: 249). For example:

In the case of the witnessing of the Battle of Waterloo, at the time, these were primarily dialogical involving bonds to the event itself. With Neda, the witnessing assemblages were ‘polylogical’ and ‘polylectical’ with multiple bonds to other memory assemblages of other events (2011: 249).

This is to say that valency on social media, where everything is together with everything, is more dynamic. Participants thus put forth a counter-version that was equally focused on violence, but associated it less with violence against George Floyd and other Black Americans killed by police. Rather, it pivoted the theme of violence to riots associated with the BLM movement, which in turn were part of memory assemblages related to the Islamic State, crime in Swedish immigrant communities, and ethnic wars. Oddly, in a way this was also a cosmopolitanization of the original event, in that it drew universalized moral lessons from the events in the U.S. As P13 put it, “Violence is violence.”

Finally, it is also worth noting that resistance to the national application of George Floyd – or at least the political movement his death inspired – is not exclusive to those with nationalist ideologies. Without applying the above counter-memory strategies, P24 especially expressed reservations about the conflation of American and Swedish structural racism. This sentiment is somewhat anticipated by Ryan’s research, although unlike the case in Austria that Ryan studied, it does not appear that “recalcitrant national myths” (2014: 510) are responsible. (For example, a desire to maintain the egalitarian image of Scandinavia.) At least among the participants interviewed here, they instead expressed a weariness about imposing a prefab, American superstructure of “wokeness” in a way that might erase the root causes of Scandinavian countries’ own challenges with race, religion, and integration (see Lundby & Repstad, 2018).

6. Conclusion

Although the data material can only reflect the perspectives of the 23 people included here, the recurrence of certain themes helps construct a deeper understanding of democratic memory formation on social media.

In particular, the research presented here has provided richer empirical grounding for the theory of cosmopolitan memory formation, or what Saito calls, “how to remember what happened to foreign others” (2021: 230). Using an innovative approach of contemporaneous qualitative interviews supported by large-scale data collection, the paper documents the formation of collective memory of George Floyd’s death through online networks. It identifies themes of *cosmopolitan responsibility*, *connection to nation*, *disconnection to nation*, and *counter-memory*.

With regard to the first question (RQ₁) on how users understand the collective that “witnessed” Floyd’s death, we see an articulation of both a global collective, where local events become universal moral stories (Levy & Sznajder, 2002), as well as a national collective where the event of Floyd’s death is re-particularized to a Scandinavian context (Misztal, 2005; Octobre, 2021). This allows the event to be both universal and particular (Octobre, 2021). And in this regard, the findings illustrate the way Floyd’s death becomes more personal to users through memory assemblages (RQ₂) that include local protests, debates over race and ethnicity, and even participants’ children.

However, the rapidity and visibility of reactions on social media also mean oppositional users are ready to resist what Ryan (2014) calls the “superstructure” of cosmopolitan memory. The final contribution of

the paper (RQ_c) is the identification of counter-memory strategies (Foucault, 1977), made to be more immediate and *combative* through the structures of social media. The paper identifies strategies such as re-nationalizing the event, use of audio-visual "truth," and support for controversial historical artefacts. However, the most important was recasting the event in a way that emphasized the violence of BLM protesters rather than the violence against Floyd.

The findings demonstrate that social media can facilitate the rapid transnational formation of democratic memory, but also that this process is a contested one. In one sense, this is a democratization of democratic memory formation (Garde-Hansen, 2011) – in that users can witness events without mainstream media and take part in memory co-creation – but it also has implications for the cohesive nature of democratic memory, the stories that people tell about the past, and the way citizens make sense of their role in the future (Misztal, 2005).

Further research could explore how these dynamics play out in other contexts and on other platforms. It may be that larger European countries with fewer cultural ties to the U.S. may have different relationships to Floyd's death and other events. Users in countries such as France, Spain, and Italy that have extensive national media systems and rely less on global imports may also experience cosmopolitan memory differently online. Hopefully the methods and concepts described here can provide an opening for other qualitative and quantitative treatments.

7. Bibliographical references

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Notes

1. Additional research interviews were conducted prior to Floyd's death; for the purpose of this paper, this data has been omitted.

2. In accordance with Norwegian research data rules, individual participants will not be identified with a political affiliation. The wording of tweets has also been changed to protect user privacy.

3. These statues represented a kind of counter-memory themselves, erected decades after the Civil War, largely from 1890 to 1930 (AHA, 2017).

