Connective Memory Practices:
Mourning the Restructuring of a War Desk

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This exploratory study is about what transpires when a newsroom restructures its war desk. Drawing on Hoskins' notion of "connective memory," I examine how a single newsworker's tweets about the reorganization of a war desk provoke different responses among news consumers, journalists, veterans, active-duty military personnel, and others. Drawing on a case study involving At War, a section of *The New York Times*, I consider the ways in which Twitter draws readers and writers together and fosters memory work. Their responses: (1) seek to pinpoint what precisely is being lost; (2) object to the decision to reallocate journalistic labor to other beats; (3) express sadness for military communities facing unfulfilled information needs; (4) anticipate the likelihood of increasingly uninformed civilian audiences; (5) blame the "journalism industry" for defunding international conflict reporting; and (6) mourn the persistence of war.

Keywords: conflict reporting, newsroom restructuring, forever war, journalistic memory, Twitter testimonials

On October 16, 2020, *The New York Times* announced that it would be restructuring At War, a special section that it had maintained over the years to explore "firsthand accounts of conflict" (Katzenberg, 2020, p. 1). Earlier that week, the project's editor, Lauren Katzenberg, had taken to Twitter and published a 172-word message, stretched out over six tweets, that announced the newsroom's decision. Her statement read as follows:

Some personal news: @nytimesatwar will be winding down this week. @JohnIsmay and I will be supporting election coverage for the next few months and then move into permanent roles that we can talk about at a later date. @cjchivers will remain at the magazine and @tmgneff continues his reporting from Kabul. We'll keep bringing you the newsletter every week and we'll be sharing Times stories via the Twitter account, but the original reporting that the reincarnated version of At War has produced the past 2.5 years will cease. There are fewer and fewer spaces that exist to examine the experiences of war and the toll they've taken on both Americans and the citizens of other nations for whom the cost of recent conflicts is almost insurmountable, yet too often forgotten. I'm incredibly proud of the stories we've told for as long as we did and grateful for the support we've received from our community. At War would not exist without you. Thank you. We have one more piece coming Thursday by @nickturse, so stay tuned. (Katzenberg, 2020)

Katzenberg's communication provoked over a hundred responses from journalists, readers, and others, who took to Twitter to mourn the project, express frustration with the diminished state of conflict reporting, and eulogize the journalistic and editorial contributions that fulfilled the information needs of diverse publics, including U.S. civilians, active duty servicemembers, military families, and individuals living in conflict zones around the world. News of its upcoming closure traveled fast and far. At War had existed from 2009 until 2016 as a blog and then, after a brief hiatus, returned from 2018 onward under the official helm of *The New York Times Magazine* (Craven, 2020).

In this study, I examine how Katzenberg's memory narrative of her war desk provoked connective memory work among news consumers and media practitioners. Building on the call for a "connective turn" (Hoskins, 2011) in memory studies, I demonstrate the potential for Twitter to serve as a rich and ephemeral memory site, wherein digital objects collide and provoke different forms of memory-making practices among diverse actors. With the restructuring of a U.S. newsroom in the backdrop, this study asks the following questions:

RQ1:   *What can the journalistic memory work of one media practitioner on Twitter provoke?*

RQ2:   *What types of online memory practices follow the restructuring of a war desk?*

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Contextual Background:
The Precarious Industry of International Conflict Reporting

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When it comes to the industry of military and conflict reporting, recent data points reveal a sector in decline, with substantial reductions in journalists and the shuttering of certain projects altogether. In April 2020, *The Military Times* furloughed many of its journalists and later in the year turned many of its furloughs into layoffs (Craven, 2020). Elsewhere in the world, other journalistic projects devoted to covering military operations, international conflict, and the U.S. defense industry in particular faced decline. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, a nonprofit media organization based in London, announced that it would shutter its Shadow Wars project, an initiative that aimed to broaden the bureau's drone warfare work and to trace "the effects . . . evolving practices of war have on the

civilians on the ground" (Fielding-Smith & Purkiss, 2018, para. 7). Many of these initiatives were not entire newspapers but rather parts of commercial and nonprofit news organizations that were focused on filling information needs of communities that could be impacted by or were involved in sustaining U.S. military operations.

Media scholars have a long legacy of studying journalistic practices associated with news production in conflict zones as well as press representations of active-duty military personnel and military veterans (Allen & Seaton, 1999). Much of the study of defense reporting has focused on frames and reporting practices—how journalists operate and collect information in warzones and convey that information to civilian audiences (de Fransius, 2013). Others have focused on how international conflict reporting has relied on the labor of largely underpaid media practitioners (Seo, 2016). Despite this rigorous scholarship, little attention has been paid to the business decisions of news organizations operating in conflict zones and how these decisions can lead journalists to enact their own memory work.

Journalistic Memory Work and the History of "Saying Goodbye" to Newsrooms

Memory work, as Rik Smit, Ansgard Heinrich, and Marcel Broersma (2018), explain "is a discursive process—comprising practices, cultural forms, and technologies—wherein the past is shaped and constructed in the present and carried into the future" (p. 3210). Media practitioners serve as cultural vehicles through which public knowledge about the past is shared (Schudson, 1992) and interpreted (Zelizer, 1993). They tend to play an integral role in covering key public events, so much so that some scholars (Zelizer, 1993) argue that journalists are responsible for creating a "repertoire of past events" (pp. 223–224) that influence how future events are understood, analyzed, and judged by the public. With the decline in the health of U.S. news industries (Barthel, 2016; Pickard, 2020), many journalists have sought out ways to document the closure of newsrooms and say "goodbye" to colleagues (Mathews, 2020; Usher, 2010). Journalistic memory work, which sometimes manifests as sharing remembrances of a newsroom, can thus give media practitioners the opportunity to mourn the closure of specific projects, historically situate their precarity, and resist the decisions of media executives (Spaulding, 2016).

The mnemonic work that journalists do in the context of a newsroom's closure has previously been studied in terms of how journalists themselves reflect and process the loss of a workplace. Usher (2010), for example, examined how journalists who have either been laid off, taken a "voluntary buyout," or left the industry become interpreters of shifts within the news industry. Spaulding (2016) describes the poetics of "goodbye narratives" by examining the reflective stories written by former employees of *The Baltimore Sun* regarding their experiences as media practitioners; she regards these communications as a form of ritual communication, a "sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality" (Carey, 1989, p. 33). These two studies share an important commonality: They both examined the production of journalistic memory work as it unfolded on websites that were maintained, curated, and monitored by journalists. Spaulding's study analyzed a website produced by fired *Baltimore Sun* staffers, *Telling Our Stories: The Days of the Baltimore Sun* (Salganik, 2010) and Usher's research drew on the "last words" of journalists as they were posted on a U.S. journalism blog on Poynter.org, Romenesko. These websites effectively functioned as bounded memory sites, where journalists' interpretations of industrial decline were available in a relatively controlled mnemonic environment.

Connective Memory Practices: Twitter as a Site of Remembering and Mourning

Where do journalists go to mourn and remember newsrooms that are restructured? To answer this question, we have to first consider where journalists go to express themselves. Many communication scholars have watched journalists flock to Twitter (Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013) and noted their enthusiastic use of the platform (Farhi, 2009). At the time of its launch in 2006, some commentators made a point of describing it as a "microblogging" service, while others called it a "social network" site (Burgess & Baym, 2020, p. 8). Journalists have turned to Twitter not only to find sources (Carlson & Lewis, 2015) but also to communicate directly with news consumers (Hanusch & Bruns, 2016) and share memories related to their craft. Twitter has periodically turned into a repository of collected memories, or what Jeffrey Olick (1999) calls "aggregated individual memories of members of a group" (p. 338). In this piece, drawing on a specific case study, I argue that Twitter itself also becomes connected to a broader mnemonically oriented sociotechnical system, as people take to the Internet to amplify certain types of memory narratives, such as when journalists say goodbye to newsrooms.

In a recent study, Sharon Ringel and Roei Davidson (2020) urge researchers to consider journalists' tweets as digital artifacts; they posit that in posting and erasing content on their Twitter profiles, journalists are shaping collective memory (Han, 2020). It is unclear, according to this framework, how to tell specifically whose tweets take on a *collective* meaning; a journalist may post a tweet, but the platform's social architecture and preexisting user base ensures it will not be seen by an entire nation (Lazer et al., 2021). For this reason, in understanding the mnemonic potential of social media platforms, it is helpful to draw on a different framework to trace journalistic memory work as it unfolds. In recent years, memory scholar Andrew Hoskins (2011) has proposed "connective memory" as memory that is shaped as individuals interact with different objects, interfaces, and technologies. This framework holds that certain digital artifacts may be "discovered" instantaneously or wholly out of context and that they can still hold mnemonic significance. Hoskins's (2018) notion of connective memory allows for a consideration of how a journalist's single tweet might be shared among the "multitude." As Hoskins (2017) explains, "the memory of the multitude is all over the place, scattered yet simultaneous and searchable: connected, networked, archived" (p. 86). Twitter and journalistic expression on it allow us a limited but meaningful window into how the restructuring of a war desk provokes mnemonic entanglements between news consumers and media practitioners.

In the coming paragraphs, I draw on the idea of connective memory to situate journalists as members of the "multitude" (Hoskins, 2017), whose digital artifacts often collide with and encounter others on Twitter. In a case study, I examine how one journalist's tweets mourning a rupture in a newsroom interactively travel through a social media platform and provoke fellow journalists and news consumers. I demonstrate how a single newsworker's communications on Twitter can become entangled with various memory agents, who, in fact, do not function as a collective but instead mourn and mark the closure of media projects differently. Through this analysis, it is evident that digital traces of journalistic memory work can prompt connective memory practices among different stakeholders in the journalism industry.

Method: Searching for Memory Narratives of News Consumers and Newsworkers

In this study, I examine over 187 digital artifacts that surfaced on Twitter after *The New York Times* announced that it would shut down At War, a dedicated forum for exploring the experience and costs of war. This research is a case study, research that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Yin, 1989, p. 23). This study explores the ways in which news consumers, journalists, and others encountered the journalistic work of editor Lauren Katzenberg during the 10 days that followed her announcement at 3:25 pm on October 13, 2020, that the original reporting associated with the project would cease.

Twitter allows editors and journalists at news organizations to interact with audiences that they might not otherwise reach through their traditional newspapers, such as *The New York Times*. Thus, an editor's lamentation posted in the form of a Twitter thread reaches different stakeholders affected by the closure. In this case, I focus on Twitter, as only nine individuals commented on Katzenberg's (2020) essay on *The New York Times,* "Turning the Lights Down on the At War Channel." Her Twitter thread, on the other hand, provoked far more responses, which were expressed through simple retweets, retweets with comments appended (known as quote tweets), or direct replies. Thus, during October 13–23, 2020, I collected data—187 texts, which I treat as digital artifacts—from the individuals who used the "quote tweet" or "reply" affordances to respond to Lauren Katzenberg's announcement on Twitter. By visiting Katzenberg's thread once each day between October 13 and October 23, 2021, I sought to collect tweets that might otherwise be deleted with the passage of time (c.f. Ringel & Davidson, 2020); I screenshot these tweets initially, returning each day and capturing new tweets that had been added to the thread. Then, wanting to create more of a publicly accessible archive, between October 23 and November 1, 2020, I drew on Archive.today technology, revisited each tweet that I had individually screenshot, and created a Web archive of each publicly available tweet that engaged with Katzenberg's thread from an unlocked Twitter account during the aforementioned timeframe; this approach allowed for the capture of hyperlinks, hashtags, and images. I adopted this method with the knowledge that connective memory practices are operating in an informational environment that is "potentially perpetually 'in-motion'" (Hoskins, 2011, p. 271), and thus, I acknowledge that though these tweets have been archived and cited in this research article, they are part of a platform that is subject to continuous design change. These texts altogether totaled more than 15,298 words in length.

Given the open-ended nature of the digital artifacts, in concert with the exploratory nature of the study, data analysis started with a system of open thematic coding. All the archived texts involving At War posted in relation to Lauren Katzenberg's thread were broken into units of meaning (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which were then grouped under themes. Data analysis, taken together, led to an understanding of how news consumers and media practitioners responded to Katzenberg's initial memory work. It is worth mentioning that, because of the unstable nature of the web and the platform architecture of Twitter itself, this collection of digital artifacts cannot be deemed complete (Yang & Wu, 2018). Drawing on a contained corpus, I examine how journalists, readers, and others conduct memory work in the aftermath of a legacy media outlet's decision to close a special project that sought to fulfill a specific community's information needs.

Findings

This study's findings are divided into six themes that emerged across the digital artifacts analyzed: (1) an attempt to pinpoint what type of media product was lost; (2) objections to *The New York Times'*s allocation of journalistic labor; (3) a disappointment for the military community; (4) a loss for otherwise uninformed civilian audiences; (5) an awareness that legacy and nonprofit news media outlets are no longer committed to defense reporting; and (6) a sadness prompted by the persistence of "forever war." I trace the different responses to Katzenberg's memory practice, probing what mnemonic contestation her words provoked.

In tracing the trajectory and interactions of Katzenberg's tweets, it becomes possible to observe the emergence of a mnemonically oriented "multitude" (Hoskins, 2017), wherein users coalesce around the evidence of her memory work and attach to it their own memories, feelings, and concerns about the past and future of international conflict reporting. These members of the multitude involve the people who respond to her memory work by expressing their own sentiments on the platform. By following the trajectory of Katzenberg's communications, we can observe how news consumers and newsworkers connect with her text, mourn, and reflect on the risks of restructuring a war desk.

A "Void," a "Space," a "Platform," a "Project" Gone

After Katzenberg announced the "winding down" of At War, many journalists, readers, and others turned to Twitter to discuss, contextualize, and situate what type of media product was being lost. Sara Samora, a U.S. Marine veteran and reporter with the *Houston Business Journal*, wrote, "I'm crush[ed] to hear this. At War had some of the best reporting and stories regarding the military and war. You, John, and the rest of the At War staff have done an amazing, beautiful job. There will definitely be a void once it winds down" (Samora, 2020). Daniel Langhorne, the engagement editor at The War Horse, a nonprofit news outlet devoted to covering stories about military service, lamented, "You and John offered an essential platform for everyone impacted by conflict" (Langhorne, 2020). Alex Ward, a national security reporter at Vox, framed the closure of the journalistic endeavor in slightly different terms: "An important loss for the military and defense community, and for the rest of the world who read their important stories. At least the amazing talents of @Lkatzenberg and @johnismay aren't being lost at NYT, but we'll still mourn the end of a necessary project" (Ward, 2020).

Reckoning With Past Economic Decisions, Reimagining Future Ones

Another category of mourners included readers, journalists, and other Twitter users, who directed their grief toward the news executives of *The New York Times* or toward its industrial status as a commercial news organization. Aaron Glantz, a senior reporter at *Reveal*, directed his own sentiments toward *New York Times* executive editor Dean Baquet, who holds the highest ranked position in the *Times'* newsroom. He tweeted:

> I am still really torn up about this. I fervently hope @deanbaquet and @nytimes leadership finds other ways to deeply cover the human experience of war. Thank you @Lkatzenberg and the whole @NYTimesAtWar team. We are still, in fact, at war. (Glantz, 2020)

Others took a less targeted approach, instead tagging the *The Times*' primary Twitter account. Matt Zeller, a U.S. Army veteran, wrote:

> I can't help but think this is the wrong move @nytimes. America's wars aren't over. @NYTimesAtWar is so beloved because it gives a voice to countless veterans & their issues, concerns, & causes. We may soon be at war at home. If anything, you should be increasing their staff. (Zeller, 2020)

For Zeller and others, there is an attempt to mourn the passage of At War by comparing it to other sections of *The New York Times.*

Mourning a Loss for Defense Reporters, Veteran Audiences,
and the Military Community

For others, the void left behind by At War's departure was a distinct loss for the military community, including active duty servicemembers, veterans, and military spouses. Laura Joyce-Hubbard, an MFA candidate at Northwestern University and veteran, wrote for her community in her lament: "On behalf of all my fellow veterans—many no longer with us—thank you for your service in reporting these critical stories" (Joyce-Hubbard, 2020). Jodi Vittori (2020), an adjunct professor at Georgetown University and the National Defense University, tweeted, "As a veteran [of] the Iraq and Afghan wars, I've really appreciated your telling these war stories, especially the ones not usually told in 'normal' war reporting. Thank You!" Laura Goodson, a poet and self-identifying veteran's advocate, wrote, "Grateful for all the times that @NYTimesAtWar gave a voice to the same concerns & stories I hear from veterans—thank you" (Goodson, 2020). Fred Wellman regarded the loss of future coverage as a loss for the veteran community. He tweeted, "I've been a PR guy focused on veterans' military issues for a decade. @NYTimesAtWar told unique important stories in a market with few outlets for them" (Wellman, 2020).

Reckoning With a Future of Less-Knowledgeable Civilian Audiences

Others framed the winding down of At War as a loss not only for the military community but for diverse civilian publics that might struggle to access information about the costs of war and the impact of conflict on diverse stakeholders. Priyanka Motaparthy, the director of the Counterterrorism, Armed Conflict, and Human Rights Project at Columbia Law School, focused on how At War rendered certain aspects of warfare visible and helped readers think more critically about how faraway military operations reverberate globally: "The less visible these stories are, the more the public exists in a bubble shielded from the impacts of war abroad and at home" (Motaparthy, 2020). This same sentiment echoed in Nathalie Grogan's tweet. Grogan, a researcher at the Center for a New American Security, wrote, "I'm sorry to hear that @NYTimesAtWar is ending, the writers and editors did a great job in communicating the costs of war to the public" (Grogan, 2020).

Eulogizing a Journalism Industry

Another group of mourners identified the loss of At War as part of an event chain facilitating the industrial decline of military news coverage. Jasper Craven, a freelance investigative journalist covering the military and veterans, framed At War as a node in a network of military news outlets facing industrial precarity, closure, and collapse. He wrote, "There are fewer + fewer outlets reporting on mil/vet issues. @NYTimesAtWar was just shuttered, @MilitaryTimes has furloughed people, @starsandstripes was on the chopping block. I now write a newsletter on these issues. Please support it, and subscribe: https://battleborne.substack.com/subscribe" (Craven, 2020). For Ian Overton, a writer and human rights campaigner, the loss of At War represented a sign of a journalism industry in decline:

> The Bureau of Investigative Journalism has just stopped its US Covert War Project. Oxford Research Group is shutting at the end of the year. NYTimes's At War is ending. These cuts and closures to deep research have consequences. They always do. (Overton, 2020)

A number of commenters discussed what it meant to lose one of the only sections in a legacy media outlet that rigorously aimed to fulfill the information needs of civilian and military audiences. James Vizzard, a veteran and graduate student at George Mason University, wrote, "At War has done fantastic work and filled a need in the most mainstream media outlet that is mostly only found in specialty outlets. They'll be missed" (Vizzard, 2020). Steve Schwab, the CEO of the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, an organization supporting the spouses, parents, family members, and friends of wounded, ill, or injured veterans, noted:

> This is really sad news—and a sign of the times. The @nytimes was the only national news organization that continued to report consistently on the longest period of war in U.S. history through @NYTimesAtWar. And that ends this week. (Schwab, 2020)

For Schwab and others, eulogies situated the newspaper section as a unique publication in its framing, fact-checking, and circulation.

Mourning "Forever War"

For many others, what was most troubling about *The New York Times'*s decision to close At War was not so much the decision itself but rather the newsroom's timing. For many commenters the loss of At War symbolized an inability by media executives to recognize the importance of U.S. military operations and U.S. involvement in wars, especially in the Middle East, as newsworthy, and a lack of desire to fulfill the information needs of diverse audiences, including veterans, active duty servicemembers, military families, and civilians invested in understanding conflict. Riffing on *The New York Times*'s slogan—"All the News That's Fit to Print"—First Lieutenant Walker D. Mills, an infantry officer with the U.S. Marine Corps and student at the Defense Language Institute in California, wrote, "When America's 20 year war is no longer news 'that's fit to print.' You will be missed @NYTimesAtWar" (Mills, 2020). Writer Christie Aschwanden argued that war was a type of event that necessitated continued and future journalistic coverage. She wrote, "The wars haven't stopped, and neither should the reporting" (Aschwanden, 2020).

Discussion & Conclusion

How do we make sense of these mnemonic collisions that occur on Twitter, as one memory agent responds to another? Put differently, what can the memory work of a single journalist reveal and provoke among other users of networked media? Though much has been written on how journalists of soon-to-be-ex-newspapers and their audiences say goodbye and express their grief, scholars researching journalistic memory work and the closure of newsrooms have tended to focus their attention on the narratives of media practitioners (Usher, 2010) or news consumers (Mathews, 2020) but rarely the two together. These "goodbyes" have also tended to focus on the loss of a whole—the total dismantling of a newspaper—instead of instances where journalistic labor is redistributed within the same newsroom. It is evident that as media executives restructure newsrooms, journalists may feel compelled to engage in memory work; records of their remembrances may collide with other memory-making practices among news consumers *and* newsworkers.

By April 2021, editor Lauren Katzenberg had deleted her initial tweets and also erased any record of her previous editorial affiliation with At War from her Twitter profile (Katzenberg, 2021). Yet, in so doing, she did not permanently erase records of her journalistic memory work—for her tweets, by that time, had received considerable journalistic coverage and were accessible in the Wayback Machine and other web archives (Katzenberg, 2020). Her deletion did not *undo* her own memory work, or the remembrances it provoked among other news consumers and newsworkers. It did, however, speak to Hoskins's (2011) argument that:

> Connective memory here can then be characterized as a "trajectory" of remembrances or monumentalization, but one that can acquire stability in its "new mass" that it accrues through its travels in time. But connective memory is not ultimately reducible to external, media- or archival-based trajectories, but needs to be seen in relation to how such trajectories intersect, collide with, and potentially transform individual human memories that have trajectories of their own. (p. 276)

Katzenberg's tweets may no longer be actively colliding with those who initially responded to her eulogy to At War, but they provoked memory work that remains in circulation as of the time of writing. Her erasure did not stop members of the multitude on Twitter from publishing their own sentiments, memories, and feelings or taking to other platforms. However, her action *does* challenge the ability of future memory agents to identify and engage with her deleted sentiments; they would likely have to search for digital traces of her tweets on publicly available archives, such as the Wayback Machine. Attempts by media practitioners to remove their messages from platforms such as Twitter become increasingly futile, for "there is no ending online. There's no closure, no linear basis" (Ernst, 2006, p. 110).

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