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Published online: 13 May 2020.

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# The era of the user. Testimonies in the digital age

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**ABSTRACT**

In her seminal work, 'The era of the witness', the French historian Annette Wieviorka has described the rise of the witness as key figure in the cultural memory of the Holocaust and the Second World War since the 1960s. This article elaborates on the concerns Wieviorka has expressed regarding what she referred to as the new technologies of dissemination, which have become ubiquitous by now: searchable online portals to video testimony collections. These testimony portals have two important characteristics: they 'force' users to choose from a large number of testimonies; and they reconfigure the relation between witness and audience. In effect, as will be argued with as will be argued with the notion tertiary witnessing, a different approach to testimonies has emerged, in which the user is central, not the witness. An online questionnaire and the web statistics of the online portal getuigenverhalen.nl ('eyewitness stories') provided data on the use of this portal and users' perceptions of eyewitness accounts. These data not only offer detailed information on the important issues Wieviorka addressed. They also substantiate the notion that we have entered a new phase in public memory of the Holocaust and the Second World War: that of the 'era of the user'.

## Introduction

Since the 1980s, eyewitnesses have become key figures in public memory of the Second World War, throughout the Western world. This 'era of the witness', as the French historian Annette Wieviorka (1999, 2006) called it, is characterized by two reinforcing processes: an increasing prominence of eyewitnesses and their accounts, and a growing concern about the temporality of their presence. Anticipating the forthcoming disappearance of these eyewitnesses, many initiatives have been undertaken to preserve their memories for the future (Sabrow and Frei 2012). One of the most large-scale examples is the Visual History Archive (VHA), also known as the Spielberg collection, after the initiator, film director Steven Spielberg. This collection

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contains video-interviews with over 53,000 eyewitnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides, from 64 countries (Bothe 2019; Apostolous and Pagenstecher 2013; Keilbach 2013). Digitization has moved the process of interrelated production and reception of eyewitness testimonies towards a new phase. Since about 15 years, a shift can be observed from collecting and preserving to disclosing eye witness accounts for wider audiences (Scagliola and De Jong 2013). We see this in museums, where displaying audio or video testimonies has become standard, especially in museums related to the Holocaust and the Second World War (de Jong 2018). Simultaneously, more and more educational projects are being developed around video testimonies (see, e.g. Pagenstecher and Wein 2017; Nägel and Wein 2015). Also, in the last couple of years, multiple oral history collections have become available online, and can be watched across institutional and national borders. This is because institutions such as Yad Vashem and the VHA have started to publish parts of their interview collections on social media (Bothe 2014). But additionally, online portals with advanced search functionalities have been created. Full text search on the digital transcripts, with which the corresponding audio or video files have been aligned, allows for the automatic retrieval of any interview fragment of interest. The current state of the art is the VHA's online educational platform IWitness, which enables users to watch, search, share, and even edit testimonies within a secure, password-protected space.[1] IWitness embodies what Wieviorka described 20 years ago, well informed about Spielberg's plans. She wrote:

> The video's [are] to be digitized and indexed. On the technological cutting edge, these digitized testimonies are supposed to become available on a server, so that the young people whom the Spielberg project hopes to educate can consult extracts from these testimonies on their computer screens with the help of an index. They will also be able to consult all sorts of related information: the witness' family archives, photo's related to the events the witness describes, a map indicating the site of the camp or ghetto in question, and so on. It is clear that we have come a long way from the clandestine writings of the ghettos [...]. What will the testimonial landscape look like if and when new technologies of dissemination become ubiquitous? (Wieviorka 2006, 116)

It is this last question that will be central in this article. For Wieviorka, this question was not meant to express hopeful expectations regarding technology and its opportunities for historiography and public memory of the Holocaust and the Second World War. Rather, her question stemmed from strong concerns, rooted in both ethical and historiographical issues. These concerns, which will be elaborated below, touch upon two important characteristics of video interview portals: First, the fact that video interview portals 'force' users to choose from a large number of interviews; and second, the reconfiguration of the relation between witness and audience that this new medium entails.

## Method

The online portal *getuigenverhalen.nl* ('witness stories') is chosen as a case study. This portal gives access to nearly 500 video interviews about the Holocaust and the Second World War in the Netherlands. It is hosted by the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, and originates from a large funding program of the Dutch national government. This program was launched in 2007 to collect, secure, and disclose the heritage and memory of the Second World War. Among the supported initiatives were many oral history projects, each targeting a different region, witness group, or aspect of the history of the Second World War. For example, one project evolved around classmates and neighbors of Anne Frank; another was centered on the resistance activities of people from the Dutch East Indies, and, furthermore, interviews have been conducted with Dutch former SS members. The online portal has been created in 2010, offering an over-view of the different oral history interview collections that had been created as part of the national funding program, and giving unlimited access to nearly all of the video interviews – some are not available online because of privacy restrictions. Furthermore, each paragraph of the interview transcrip-tions was labeled with one or more keywords, which were indexed, time-coded, and aligned with the videos. In this way, the interviews have been made fully searchable at fragment level. As a consequence, after entering any term of interest in the homepage's search bar, the system retrieves every fragment from the whole collection that contains that specific term. Additionally, the homepage offers some suggestions for interesting inter-views, as well as a functionality to browse themes or topics into which the interviews have been grouped.

The use of the online portal Getuigenverhalen.nl has been subjected to a quantitative analysis. The web statistics as available in *Google Analytics* offer information on the frequency and duration of the consultation of the homepage and the subsequent subpages, i.e. the video interviews. Furthermore, in order to gather information about the portal users – their interests, opinions, and user experiences – an online questionnaire was attached to the portal during a full year – from May 2016 until May 2017.[2] Portal users were invited to participate via a request with a link in a small textbox on top of the homepage, which could be closed at any time. In this way, 176 people have been found willing to take the time to fill out the questionnaire, or a part of it. Since the questionnaire was not adverted for, and the link has not been published elsewhere, these respondents are all 'spontaneous' users of the portal. The questionnaire contained 12 questions. Besides some multiple choice questions about topic(s) of interest, purpose(s) of visiting, user category (student, researcher, journalist, heritage profes-sional, etc.), and age group, there were open questions on users' opinion

on the portal's functionalities, as well as on eyewitnesses as historical source. Furthermore, respondents were asked whether they had found what they were looking for on the website, with room for additional comments. This question appeared particularly insightful. Separately and combined, these data not only offer valuable and detailed information on the important issues Wieviorka addressed. They also substantiate the notion that we have entered a new phase in public memory of the Holocaust and the Second World War: that of the 'era of the user'.

## Soundbites, or users (in)ability to choose from an abundance of interviews

As Wieviorka sensed in 1998, online portals to testimony collections do not simply provide access to the life stories as recorded and preserved. Rather, the unlimited access and search options as offered by the online portals have turned these collections into archives from which one can pick and choose anything of interest. Wieviorka expressed her concern about this, quoting the French Holocaust survivor Anne-Lise Stern: 'Where is all this listening to survivors leading [...]? Toward soundbites, I fear, which future generations will play with and enjoy' (Stern in Wieviorka 2006, 135). Testimonies, so is argued, become commodities, subjected to the interests of the public. The web statistics of the portal *Getuigenverhalen.nl* fully confirm Wieviorka's characterization of video interviews as soundbites. It appears that an average site visit takes only 2 minutes and 31 seconds. It is important to note that this number includes, besides the inevitable referral spam, every consultation of the homepage or one of its many subpages, i.e. the interviews. Indeed, many users just visit the site to explore what is there, and do not watch an actual interview. They read the descriptions of one of the originating oral history projects, or check out the themes into which the interviews have been divided. The portal was consulted about 26,000 times in 2017, which is on average more than 2,100 times a month. But it is true that, looking at the interviews only, the longest session ever took 29 minutes. This means that no one has ever watched an entire interview, which takes mostly about 90 minutes.

Interestingly however, the questionnaire seems to both confirm and nuance this volatile use of the portal website. To start with the former: about half of the respondents indicated that they did not find what they looked for on the website. Remarkably, none of these respondents filled out this question's accompanying comment field. This may indicate that these 'unsatisfied' users did not exactly know what to expect or to look for to begin with. What, for instance, to type in the search bar, when one just does not know what is there? Web portals to interview collections such as *Getuigenverhalen* inevitably demand that site visitors choose between

interviews, witnesses, topics, fragments. The mere fact of one being able (or having) to choose is a key feature of this medium, and entails the promise of disclosing testimonies in a tailor-made way. But this very feature puts users in a different, much more active position than they may be used to. Attending a guest lecture of an eyewitnesses in a school or a museum, visiting an exhibition with audio or video clips from testimonies, or watching a documentary that contains testimony fragments, mostly requires a rather passive role of a user. In these settings, the witness, the curator, or the documentary maker is in charge of what is being told, for how long, and in which order and context. Contrarily, interview portals are user-guided. As several scholars in digital humanities have pointed out however, offering user-friendly ways to explore online heritage collections and to get an overview of their content is known to be difficult (Ruecker, Radzikowska, and Sinclair 2011; Whitelaw 2015; Muiser et al. 2017). This is an issue for every online archive, not only for testimony collections, regardless of the interests and expertise of their users.

Given the interviews' segmentation to make them searchable in the first place, and in light of the possibility of accessing only fragments, Judith Keilbach argues that, compared to the era of the videotape, searchable interview portals imply a change in attitude when watching the testimonies. In line with Wieviorka, she points out that 'one is surely less likely to listen intently in the way that viewers are often thought to do when faced with Holocaust survivor testimony' (Keilbach 2016, 121). Although viewers who put videotapes with Holocaust testimonies into VHS recorders are likely to be scholars, relatives of Holocaust victims, or other highly engaged users, online interview portals indeed seem to generate a distinct kind of interaction with testimonies. This kind of interaction is more fragmented, and perhaps volatile, but, as will be elaborated in the next section, can nevertheless be satisfactory and engaging.

## Emotional co-presence and critical distance

Whereas about half of the respondents indicated they had troubles finding their way through the abundance of interviews and fragments as offered on the website, the other half of the respondents apparently found what they were looking for. In the comment field, this group of respondents wrote generalities such as 'very many beautiful impressive stories', 'all sorts of stories that bring the war to life', and 'personal emotions', but some entered much more specific search aims such as 'women of the resistance', 'interview with Gert Nales', or even 'my grandfather'. These findings nuance the critical or perhaps skeptical approach towards searchable interview portals and their users as voiced by Wieviorka. The concept of tertiary witnessing as elaborated by Caroline Wake may serve to better understand the complex

relations between a witness and a portal user, and specifically, the entanglement of proximity and distance towards witnesses that searchable online video interview portals entail, or produce.

As Wake has pointed out, watching a recorded video interview engenders a distinct kind of witnessing, that is characterized by both spatiotemporal distance and emotional co-presence (Wake 2013, 111). A viewer of a video interview has not been 'there', neither when the narrated events occurred, nor when the interview took place. Yet, rightly because of their acute awareness of that distance, viewers of video interviews can experience a sense of involvement and affective engagement (130). It is this paradoxical combination of both spatiotemporal distance and emotional co-presence that defines, according to Wake, what she calls tertiary witnessing.

If this blurring of the boundaries between witnesses and users is indeed key to tertiary witnessing, i.e. to the practice that online video testimony portals as a medium generate, it is important to ask how this reconfiguration comes about, or, in the words of Wake, what exactly produces users' 'acute awareness' of their spatiotemporal distance towards the witnesses. Referring to Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's influential concept of remediation, Wake argues that this awareness results from the hypermediacy of video testimony. Remediation, as being the representation of one medium in the other – in this case an eyewitness interview in a searchable online portal – is configured by two interrelated logics, which Bolter and Grusin refer to as immediacy and hypermediacy. The former is a 'style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium and believe that he is in the presence of the objects of representation', while the latter style of representation contrarily aims to remind the viewer of the medium (Bolter and Grusin 1998, 272–73). The responses in the questionnaire indeed reflected these notions of immediacy and emotional co-presence. Particularly insightful in this respect was the question what, according to the users, makes an eyewitness a relevant source of information about the Second World War. What stood out in the responses was the many references to the notion that witnesses are people *from the past*. 'Directly involved', and 'first hand' are frequently mentioned examples of this notion. Or: 'An eyewitness can provide relevant information because he or she has experienced the events him or herself, so that the memory becomes living and real'. Others simply stated: 'The truth', or: 'A witness has been there himself, can tell the real story', also referring to the witnesses' historicity or 'pastness'. These respondents thus voice the notion that witnesses embody the bygone past, as relics as it were, and possibly consider eyewitness accounts as genuine memories that are in no way constructed, performed, and mediated (Finney 2017). Eva Ulrike Pirker and Mark Rüdiger refer to this notion as the 'mode of the authentic witness', which includes objects, sites, and persons with a seemingly direct link to the events depicted. Central

here is 'the suggestion of an original, a relic from the past, which seems to have an effect through its historical genuineness' (Pirker and Rüdiger 2010, 17). Sara Jones has pointed to the importance of the eyewitness' body in this context, that testifies to the authenticity of his or her experience. Their physical presence, as mediated by the portal website, testifies of their genuineness and credibility as providers of historical information (Jones 2017, 146). One respondent phrases this embodiment literally: 'Eyes that have seen it. Ears that have heard it. This is crucial information'. This embodiment makes the past tangible, and allows people to have a sense of contact with the past (Jones 2010, 200; Landsberg 2004, 2). In some cases, the respondents of the questionnaire underlined the importance of emotions of a witness when telling the story. This seems to be regarded as a sign of sincerity and realism as well, as if these are the emotions from the past that have been stored inside the witness, and are released by telling the story in the present: 'With a witness, [...] only the emotion has remained'. Or: 'Because a witness represents the human aspect (feelings)'.

Others, however, mention emotions in relation to themselves, or the public in general. This group of responses contain remarks such as: 'To be able to see from someone what one has felt and feels about the war and the impact of it brings up more. You can better imagine how and what;' 'The emotion in the eyes and the realization that it is not so far away in time'; 'They tell the stories from first hand. This makes the biggest impression.' This kind of responses moves away somewhat from the 'pastness' of the witness, and anchors the relevance of testimonies more in the present, in their function of *transmitting* information onto or *evoking* emotions within the user. This corresponds to what Owen Evans has called the 'authenticity of affect', a mode in which the emotional 'residue' of a representation surpasses its factual, 'conceptual' elements. (Evans 2010, 173–174; Jones 2017, 141). Although still supporting the notion of experienced emotional co-presence, this experience might also result from the expectations that portal users have of the encounter with an eyewitness testimony as being emotional. As Ulrich Raulff has argued in case of memorial sites, visitors increasingly presuppose and demand their visit to a Holocaust memorial to contain 'a special emotional dimension' (Raulff in Assmann and Brauer 2011, 74).

Whereas the comments of this group of respondents reflect a sense of immediacy and genuineness, their user experience is also and inevitably affected by a sense of hypermediacy. In case of searchable video interview portals, this hypermediacy may result from the search instructions on the homepage, the fact that the interviews are grouped into themes, the very presence of a search bar, and, perhaps most poignantly, the play buttons alongside the pictures of witnesses, which represent the actual interviews. In fact, it is all the things that centralize the user of the video interview portal instead of the witness that produce the hypermediacy of this medium. As

Wake underlines, 'hypermediacy makes us aware of the medium or media, and (in sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious ways) remind us of our desire for immediacy' (Wake 2013, 125). Emotional co-presence thus results, more precisely, from the desire of the user to bridge the distance between the witness and the portal user, or perhaps, of the user's act of partly or virtually having bridged the distance that time, place, and the medium involve. This touches upon Alina Bothe's conceptualization of digital testimonies as 'virtual in-between of memory' as a term to represent the sphere where witnesses translate experiences into narration and where users interact with and immerse deeply into testimonies despite the boundaries of time and space (Bothe 2012, 2019). This virtual or in-between space ('Zwischenraum') is characterized by immersion, interactivity and instancy, of which the latter refers to permanent actuality as virtuality's characterizing time form (Bothe 2012, 8). This notion of the in-between space seems productive in that sense that it allows for a certain openness with which virtual encounters between witnesses and portal users need to be perceived. It is in these virtual encounters, as Bothe states, that the meaning of testimonies, and therewith, the meaning of the memory of the Shoah, is negotiated. Whereas Martin Sabrow defined a witness as a traveler between two worlds – the experienced past and the values of the present, in this conceptualization, it is thus the user, not the witness, who performs the act of bridging, and, therewith, negotiating the meaning of the past in the present. Recent work in history didactics shows that this negotiation can also entail a critical perception of witnesses and their accounts (Bertram 2017; Hogervorst 2018). This critical distance seems to be primarily produced by the specific configuration of the testimonies as searchable collections. As part of these collections, in which multiple testimonies are mediated alongside another, eyewitness accounts are not only supported by the overlapping and converging narratives of numerous other eyewitnesses (Jones 2017, 146), but may be also nuanced or contradicted by divergent interview fragments. For this reason, searchable interview portals potentially allow for a more critical stance towards testimonies. The invitation to search and compare different experiences, accounts, and perspectives not only moves away from the individual witness as bearer and narrator of lived experiences. It also possibly transcends the focus on emotional identification and empathy as has become ubiquitous in oral history and Holocaust education (Felman 1991; Llewellyn and Ng-a-fook 2017; Bornstein and Naveh 2017). Herein lies thus an important didactic argument for engaging with testimonies via online portals, especially when their design facilitates perceiving these soundbites as only small parts of much larger networks of meaning and evidence (Jones 2010), which can be subjected to both emotional identification and critical reflection.

## The search bar and the tertiary witness

*Getuigenverhalen.nl* offers four ways to explore the collection. Users who don't have a specific interest, or don't know what to expect in the collection, are served by a small section of 'special interviews'. This has the form of three small pictures of a 'talking head' accompanied by a play button, the name of the originating interview project, the name of the interviewee, and the first two sentences of his (all three interviewees are men) biography. Second, when scrolling down a bit further, there is a section of 'highlighted projects': three black and white historical photographs, much larger than the talking head pictures above, containing the name of the originating oral history project, for instance 'Fleeing from Overloon forced by the occupier', and the first sentences of the project description. While these project titles all somehow refer to the content of the interviews, many of them are remarkably poetic or abstract, such as 'Reis van de razzia' (Journey of the razzia, about forced labor) or 'Bommen en habijten' (bombs and habits, about convent sisters). These poetic and appealing titles stem from the originating oral history interview projects and were used in their funding applications. They thus particularly reflect the perspective of the project initiators, as well as that of the archival institution that acquired these interviews under those project names. A user might easily feel disengaged by these rather abstract titles. Thirdly, at the bottom of the homepage, there is a section with themes into which the collection is grouped. Three themes, again in the form of black and white pictures, are presented alongside another, but, unlike the project section, this section has small left and right arrows which suggest that there is more to explore. Indeed, clicking an arrow leads to six other themes. This section allows for browsing the collection according to more or less abstract concepts that might be of interest of a user, such as 'daily life', 'evacuation', or 'imprisonment'. The forth way of exploring the collection is in fact most central on the homepage, above the different browsing functionalities mentioned here: the search bar.

Using the search bar is the most interactive way of engaging with the interview collection. In other genres of mediated testimonies such as museums, documentary films, and [non-searchable, SH] online archives, testimonies are often grouped and presented under common denominators such as location, theme or historical event (Keilbach 2013; Jones 2017). In this way, the individual accounts of witnesses are used to express and support the larger narrative of the exhibition or the documentary film (de Jong 2018; Arnold–de Simine 2013; Jones 2017), or to guide users according to the logic of the archive (Jones 2017, 144). Contrarily, searchable online archives allow for exploring a collection along one's own terms. The implementation of search functionalities in interview collections has become increasingly common in recent years. Although it has been argued that the ability to search

fragments of interviews by means of keywords is in sharp contrast with the videotapes of the analogue era that required linear playback (Keilbach 2016, 221), not to speak of the differences with live testimony as Wieviorka has underlined, the actual use of this search functionality, and its possible effects on the interaction with, and perception of testimonies, are under-elaborated. Also Caroline Wake's sophisticated unraveling of the different layers of witnessing involved in video testimony is based on non-searchable online and offline media. How does the concept of the tertiary witness relate to online interview portals as a medium when focusing on searchability as their key characteristic?

As Wake points out, the experience of a tertiary witness is characterized by a sense of powerlessness. Unlike an interviewer, who was present at the time and place of the testimony, and who can therefore be called a secondary witness, the characteristic experience of a tertiary witness is an inability to respond (Wake 2013, 131). Yet, searchable – interactive – interview portals challenge this notion of the characterizing muteness or powerlessness of a tertiary witness. In a certain way, the search functionality of an interview portal enables a dialogue with an eyewitness, with search terms originating from implicit questions instead. The difficulty of responding via a search bar, i.e. to create an indirect and mediated dialogue between a witness and a portal user, my partially lie in the fact that it invites *a user* to start the interaction, and not the witness. This is both due to the search functionality itself, as well as to the design of the portal home page, on which the search bar is the most visually prominent way to explore the collection. Starting the interaction like that requires a certain degree of prior knowledge of the substance of an interview or the collection. Moreover, an effective interaction demands that users are aware that it is the *transcripts* of the interviews that they are searching. That means that users have to type in some of the literally mentioned words of the interview in order for the system to retrieve any relevant results. The 'response' therefore not only takes place at an unnatural moment, but needs to depart from the perspective of the (primary) witness or the interviewer (the secondary witness), instead of the user him- or herself (the tertiary witness).

An automatically collected set of search terms that were entered by portal users partly shows the 'miscommunication' that can occur. Eighteen percent of these search terms were names of specific locations, such as Zweden (Sweden), Gaaspstraat (Gaasp street), Museum Boijmans or Westerbork. These geographical names are likely to occur literally in a transcript of an interview. The same goes for person names, which were entered in 36 percent of the cases. More difficult it gets with topics (42 percent). Terms as krant (newspaper), pers (press), moeder (mother), bewakers (guards), and over-leden (passed away) are also likely to occur in an interview. Quite many site users, however, entered queries of more than one word, or even phrased their

query as a question. Since the system treats every entered term as single search word and adds the results, it is very unlikely that these particular users found relevant interview fragments. 'Was he jewish?', as was one of the collected search terms, gives no less than 20,825 fragments in 103 interviews. The same question put between quotation marks (a so called Boolean search operator for exact phrases) gives no results. In other cases, the search terms are either too generic (the camps, interview) or too specific (werken bij arts in Grootegast/working at doctor in Grootegast) to be successful. The web statistics nonetheless show that users who use the search bar (thus rather than browsing the site along preselected themes and highlighted interviews on the homepage) consult four times more pages (interviews) and stay longer, 12.33 minutes in average. Although 35 percent of the users who use site search drops off after having entered a term, a substantial part of the users who watch an interview after having entered a term consecutively searches and watches, up to 11 times. In a way, this resembles the notion of a mediated dialogue between an interviewee and a portal user. To return to Bothe's notion of the in-between space, the online interview portal is a site of memory that exists only virtually and in which through virtual dialogical acts an in-between of memory is produced (Bothe 2012, 9). Especially with elaborate search instructions and a more user-oriented design, tertiary witnesses can truly, although virtually, interact with primary witnesses, and no longer seem unable to respond.

## Conclusion

In this contribution, two important characterizing features of searchable online video interview portals have been outlined. First, there is their reconfiguration of the relation between interviewees and the audience of their testimonies. The fact that witnesses are visible on a screen, and the specific design and functionalities of these portals, engender what Wake has called emotional co-presence of portal users, while fostering a more distanced, comparative approach which centralizes the user instead of the witness. The distance as generated by the computer screen has in fact an important didactic potential, for it enables a broadening of the focus on emotional identification and empathy as has become ubiquitous in Holocaust education (Bertram 2017; Hogervorst 2018).

The second characterizing feature of video interview portals is the implication that their users need to choose from a large number of diverse personal accounts, and thus need to take up a much more active role than in their previous, more traditional encounters with testimonies. In the mediated form of a searchable online portal, video interviews indeed become a set of 'soundbites' that users are free to choose from, play, or stop. Particularly the search functionality leads to a fragmentation of interviews,

and, as a consequence, a possible loss of both the biographical context of the interviewee and the narrative context of the interview (Hogervorst 2019). Nonetheless, keyword search also seems to enable a postponed and mediated 'dialogue' between a witness and a portal user. It is thus rightly the searchability of video interview portals that challenges the notion of tertiary witnessing as conceptualized by Caroline Wake.

As was foreseen by Wieviorka in the 1990s, the current testimonial landscape is characterized by new, and so far underexplored forms of dissemination. Besides the searchable online video interview portal, as was the point of focus in this contribution, there are many projects with second or even third generation witnesses. Moreover, both in the United States and the United Kingdom, Holocaust survivor holograms have been created (Givoni 2016, 215–216), which, with help of automatic speech recognition, live questions of the audience can be matched with previously recorded answers of a 3D-filmed interviewee. One thing that online video interview portals, second generation testimonies, and survivor holograms have in common is that they are always and inevitably compared with the live presence of eyewitness. It is rightly the centrality of eyewitnesses in our current memory culture as having emerged from the 1960s onwards that imposes such a comparison on testimonies in mediated forms. Often, these forms are regarded as surrogates, which all the more illustrates the validity of Wieviorka's conceptualization of Holocaust memory culture since the 1980s as the 'era of the witness'.

Moreover, these new, mediated forms have engendered a different approach to witnessing itself. While Wievorka asked how 'present and future listeners' would perceive Holocaust testimonies, these listeners have now been conceptualized as witnesses themselves, although in a third instance. This conceptualization indeed entails a radical democratization of witnessing. Calling a viewer of a recorded interview with an eyewitness of a past event a witness, implies that tertiary witnesses can obtain some of the knowledge about that past event, in a way that allows them not only to incorporate it as their own, but also that they can transmit this embodied historical knowledge onto others. This hopeful notion counterbalances as much as reflects the rather fatalist discourse on the waning of the survivor generation that has been characterizing public memory of the Second World War since the 1980s – indeed, since the era of the witness.

During the era of the witness, however, we not only have acquired very little knowledge about actual reception processes, but we are about to repeat that mistake in our lack of study of digital historical cultures, as Michael Gray has argued (Gray 2015, 105). This article aimed to contribute to putting the user central in the discussion. Also in academic research on testimony, we should move to the next phase: the era of the user.

## Notes

1. https://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/(March 2019).
2. The questionnaire and the responses are deposited at DANS Data Archive Networked Services and available via https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-xbq-jgw4https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-xbq-jgw4.

## Notes on contributor

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