Museums in a Digital Culture

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6 Between History and Commemoration

The Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands

Serge ter Braake

When the Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands (from here on DM) was put online in 2005, its creators took a bold step. The primary aim of this monument is to commemorate all Dutch Jewish victims of the Second World War. The victims are listed with their full names and, whenever possible, their address during the war, profession, pictures, and biographical characterizations. Even before it was put online, the DM generated harsh criticism because of its supposed invasion of people's privacy. The influential Dutch professor emeritus of cultural history Hermann von der Dunk even called the DM a “tasteless trivialization” because it would be placed in the online world amidst the news, commercials, and pornography.

Despite the criticisms, one might argue that the DM is a project that was bound to happen. Remembering the dead takes a prominent place in Jewish tradition, according to which a person dies twice: once when her spirit leaves her body and once when she is forgotten. The murder of six million Jews has understandably increased this religious and cultural need to immortalize the dead, to ensure that their spirits somehow live on. Additionally, memorial initiatives in general have become more widespread since the First World War. The advent of the Internet in the 1990s

1 http://www.joodsmonument.nl/. I was an editor for the monument between 2007 and 2012. All URLs were last retrieved on 15 October 2014.
2 The creators of the monument were the late professor Isaac Lipschits, the International Institute for Social History, and community builder Mediamatic LAB (in 2013 acquired by Driebit).
with its easy access and low-cost possibilities gave a new impulse to the remembrance of the dead.\(^6\)

The visualization of the DM is quite ingenious. The DM opening page, sometimes mistaken for a “big block of colored dots,” is the actual monument (see figure 7).\(^7\) Every dot represents a single person. Clicking on a dot directs the user to the personal page of the victim, making it possible to switch easily between remembering all victims and individual people. The dots are grouped alphabetically by hometown, and the six different colors represent men and women from three different age groups. They are visible on both the personal and family pages.

From the outset the DM had two main objectives: “The first is to preserve the memory of Jews in the Netherlands who perished in the Shoah; the second is to enable survivors and other interested visitors to find out more about the victims of the Shoah.”\(^8\) Other objectives of the monument are the provision of educational material, stimulating research and the digitizing and preserving of historical records. In 2007 the DM officially became part of the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam after its editors had already moved there from the International Institute of Social History in 2006. At the Jewish Historical Museum the goals and ambitions of the DM were further developed. To meet the demands of visitors to the monument, the community Jewish monument (from here on referred to as the Community) was put online in the course of 2010, a separate website but fully linked to the DM. It offers visitors the chance to get in touch with each other, to add their own information, and to indicate their relation (if any) to people on the DM.\(^9\) By doing so the static nature of the monument is thrown open and the potential of the web is used more fully.

The goals of the DM are quite ambitious. There are necessarily tensions between commemoration (which often is not helped by precision and objectivity), history (which aims at being precise and objective), memory (which often claims to be precise and objective, but is not), the large set of data (that is not precise and does not claim to be so), online communication, open data, and privacy issues. The main question of this chapter therefore is: Is the DM able to achieve its goals and function as a monument and

\(^7\) [www.joodsmonument.nl/page/552712, (FAQ, # 3)].
\(^8\) [www.joodsmonument.nl/page/274285].
historical information provider at the same time? By looking at the history of the DM from different angles, I hope to assess the success, or lack thereof, of the DM and determine how such a monument can be designed more fruitfully in the future.

**Foundation and Goals**

The driving force behind the DM was Isaac Lipschits, professor of modern history at the University of Groningen (1930-2008). After his retirement he decided to try to preserve the memories of all Jewish victims from the Netherlands rather than “only Anne Frank.”

His idea did not stand on its own; around the same time, several books were published to commemorate Jews who perished during the war. The idea to include more than generic information on all victims, however, was unique and would not easily find shape in book form. The publication of just the names of all Dutch Jewish victims in the book *In Memoriam* (1995), for example, took no less than

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858 pages.” The possibilities were discussed with several influential Jews, and the idea of the DM was born. Lipschits himself later admitted that he hardly knew what “digitization” was at that time.12

In many ways the DM is more ambitious than its counterparts elsewhere in the virtual world, which usually limit themselves to the mention of the name, date and place of birth and death, and sometimes date of deportation.13 In addition to these basic facts, the DM also endeavors to include for every person their precise address at the beginning of the war, their profession, their position in a household and institution, multiple pictures, and biographical information. As the website’s own explanatory section puts it, “The basic aim is to try to show the circumstances of each individual life.”14

The two initiatives which have most in common with the DM are the Israeli Yad Vashem memorial site15 and the Dutch “Een naam en een gezicht” (A name and a face) project from Memorial Center Camp Westerbork. Both are, like the DM, part of a museum. The difference is that the Jewish Historical Museum is not a memorial museum/center itself but leaves that role to the affiliated Hollandsche Schouwburg, the former place of deportation to Westerbork for Amsterdam Jews. The Yad Vashem database aims to include all Shoah victims worldwide. However, it lacks the professional visualization of the DM and provides far less detailed information. The database from the Memorial Center Camp Westerbork cannot be consulted online and therefore remains “walled-in knowledge.” Visitors can contact the memorial center for information, but an actual visit to Westerbork – in the east of

11 In memoriam.
14 http://www.joodsmonument.nl/page/274281.
the Netherlands while most Jews live in the west – remains the best way to access the information there.  

A Heterogeneous Dataset

The DM has two main goals: commemoration and information provision. Both from an academic and a commemorative point of view, the DM needs to contain accurate information if it is to be taken seriously. Reliable data on the more than 100,000 Dutch victims of the Shoah had to be assembled and entered into a database. In this section I will describe what steps were taken to achieve this and what steps were taken to further enrich the data.

When Isaac Lipschits started his work on the DM, he was amazed at how complete the archives of the war were. The most important sources used for the DM are the (nearly complete) registration lists that were compiled following the Nazi order of January 1941. The lists vary slightly for every Dutch municipality, but they usually contain information per household living at one particular address. These lists were automatically matched with the names and dates of birth in In Memoriam, the book containing “all” names of Dutch Jewish victims of the Second World War.

People who appeared on these registration lists and were listed in In Memoriam were given a place on the DM, using the address and profession at the time of registration. They were placed there together with the other members of their household inasmuch as the records allowed these to be reconstructed. Before it went online in 2005, the monument was tested by an expert on accuracy, who looked at the reconstruction of 100 families. The expert found a 1% inaccuracy in the way members of households were linked to each other (for example, a son listed as a husband). One and half percent of the 330 people in the sample were matched incorrectly from the registration lists to In Memoriam. This seemingly small error in percentage still meant that there would be thousands of mistakes in the DM in the tested categories of information alone.


18 See the “verantwoording” in In Memoriam, xv.
It was decided that the percentage error was acceptable, and the DM was put online. Visitors to the website could fill in a form to add their own information (from memory or research), send in pictures, or point to mistakes, which was then processed by the editors of the DM. There was an unanticipated and overwhelming response from survivors, descendants, genealogists, and (amateur) historians, and the DM was quickly flooded with thousands of messages. The editors had to check all information for accuracy, edit the text and, depending on the original message, translate it into English or Dutch. Between 2005 and 2010 around 30,000 messages were processed this way. During most of this time, the editors were three months to one year behind schedule, at times to the embarrassment of the Jewish Historical Museum.

Thanks to all the new information, the DM quickly became a database with information with a highly heterogeneous provenance and therefore trustworthiness: secondary literature like books, articles, and reference works of any kind and quality; amateur and semi-professional genealogical websites; first, second, and thirdhand memories; photographs; other memorial websites; interviews from the Shoah Foundation; museum objects; and archival primary sources. Such enrichments would never be possible in a traditional memorial book.

The monument and its editorial system had apparent flaws. There were, quantitatively speaking, far too many mistakes in the monument to begin with, making it a recipient of harsh criticism from families of victims, genealogists, and historians. Processing corrections to the mistakes took far too long, causing frustration (“Why is the spelling of the name of my grandfather still not corrected?”) and indifference (“Why would I provide my memories if I will not live to see the results?”). Finally, most of the time it was completely unclear where information came from, with unfortunate consequences: genealogists feared information was stolen from their websites, family members saw new information on their ancestors’ pages which they could not account for, and academics avoided the monument as an unreliable source of information.

To remedy some of these flaws, the Community was built as a separate website. This site was put into use in stages over the course of 2010.19 All the information on the DM is also on the Community. The DM was left intact for people who prefer its simple, clean layout, and it is still used to automatically feed updates on the basic information of the victims to the Community. On the Community people can add their stories, pictures, and any other additional information themselves. Since the editors could now

19 Joods Historisch Museum, Jaarverslagen 2009 and 2010, 32 and 44 respectively.
concentrate on correcting the basic personal information on the DM, the website also became a more reliable source of information.

By connecting all kinds of data, quite meaningless by themselves, together in one database, the DM became a rich source of information. The question remains what role the DM plays in the *interpretation* of that information.20 By their nature, monuments do not provide detailed contexts. The interpretation of the information on the DM, however, was partly provided by a glossary and a special topics section which were only “a few clicks away.”21 For educational purposes, one of the goals of the monument, extra material was developed for schools.22 For more in-depth information on the persecution, however, the user is referred to the material already present in the *Hollandsche Schouwburg*, which is also part of the Jewish Historical Museum (now called the Jewish Cultural Quarter). Further context for the monument is therefore created by the institution it is embedded in.

We can conclude that at the start the DM failed as an information provider. Both from a memorial and a scholarly perspective there were too many mistakes in the data. Naturally, ten years and tens of thousands of additions and corrections later, the reliability, and therefore its potential use as a monument and a historic database, has improved. Since visitors could send in additional information, the DM’s database quickly turned into a very heterogeneous dataset with information stemming from all kinds of sources. Thanks to the Community, new information can always be traced back to the person who provided it, thereby solving the unclear provenance issue.

**Easy Information and Digital Commemoration**

A website allows people to browse, click, search, and access more information more easily at the risk of getting a more fragmented and decontextualized picture.23 In this section I will discuss how the digital nature of the

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21 http://www.joodsmonument.nl/page/550153. The glossary was enriched with new entries in the course of the years. See for example: http://www.joodsmonument.nl/page/550562,(news item April 2009).
monument helped in achieving its goals of being both a source for historical research and a place for commemoration.

As seen in the previous section, the DM did not start out well as a source for historical information because of its many inaccuracies. The flood of corrections and complaints from users strongly suggested that the level of precision was deemed unacceptable by many. A bigger handicap for research is that information on survivors of the Holocaust was deliberately left out due to privacy restrictions. However, since the creators of the monument at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam were aware of the research potential of a complete dataset, they released an “academic” and anonymized version of the database. Despite the data anonymization, the dataset was not brought online. As far as I know, little research has been done with the aid of this database.

Even though the DM is a visualization of only a part of the extensive database that was created, it still offers a lot of research potential. Many corrections have been made in the original database since 2005, which makes it a more reliable source for the data it does include than the academic release. The tens of thousands of biographical additions, added pictures, and links to other databases have highly enriched its research potential. For enhanced digital research however, the DM suffers from the fact that it is quite old. Within a few years, the DM started to suffer from having to rely on a relatively old-fashioned content management system that made work relatively slow and circuitous. Improvements cost money and when implemented always cost time to debug. When in 2008 the idea was raised to link the databases of the DM and the Dutch National Committee for 4 and 5 May, all the links had to be established by hand by a volunteer, which took him over a year. Manual labor also was dominant for the

Web Science (WebSci’n) Koblenz, Germany 14-17 June 2011, section 1. See also Arthur, “Exhibiting”, 34.

24 Between 2005 and 2010 about 3.75% of the messages consisted of complaints, 22.5% of the messages were corrections (a total of more than one quarter of all messages). Roose, Digitaal Monument, 71. Taking an average of 350-400 messages, this means that the DM received about 100 corrections and/or complaints every month.

25 Anonieme dataset joodse gemeenschap in Nederland, 1941, IISG.

26 Ter Braake and Van Trigt used it to create some tables on the occupation of Jews in several industries: S. ter Braake and P. van Trigt, Leerhandelaar, looier, lederfabrikant. Het success van Joodse ondernemers in de Nederlandse lederindustrie (Amsterdam: Menasseh ben Israel Institute, 2010), 31-32.

27 http://www.joodsmonument.nl/page/550562. “In the first week of December [2009] we updated the monument to a newer version. A couple of things do not work yet as they should.”

other projects in which documents, for example from the Jewish Historical Museum collection, were linked to the DM, or biographies written by Isaac Lipschits were added.29

When the Community was developed in 2009, more attention was paid to “opening up” the data for further study and browsing. Related articles would appear on the right side of the screen, and one could tag people in stories and photographs. This allowed me to write a story on the forced selling of agricultural lands during the war and tag the 400 people who appear in my database of Jews who were forced to do so during the war.30

Through the Community, people can interact directly, ask for help, and work on projects together. In other words, the Community is what Van den Akker calls “participatory, interactive, dynamic, and collaborative, enabling direct communication.”31

The Community still does not actively encourage the possibilities of a higher level of digital historical analysis. This has to do with both the privacy limitations and the original goals of the project. The data are not converted to “linked data” or other standardized data formats, which makes it difficult to analyze it outside its own API. It is possible to link the data on the Community to related articles on other communities built by Mediamatic, but this option was decided against to avoid “pollution.” Queries can only be released on the raw data when you know how to contact the website’s administrators. Privacy issues form an extra reason to “wall the data in” and protect it from the outside world – gathering systematic information on Dutch Jews on the basis of documents put together on Nazi orders can lead to both emotional and legal consequences when it is done without caution.

As mentioned above, the DM and Community are visualized in such a way that they enable the commemoration of both groups and individuals. To enhance the memorial potential of the Community, it was made an integral part of several museum projects, breaking down the digital walls. In 2010 a so-called Ikpod was developed that allows visitors to the Hollandsche Schouwburg to access the Community by holding the device against its memorial wall with (last) names. Since 2012 the Open Joodse Huizen (Open Jewish Houses) project runs every year around 4 and 5 May (the Dutch national days of commemoration of the dead and celebration of the liberation), which encourages people to commemorate the Jewish

29 http://www.joodsmonument.nl/page/550562 (news item April 2009).
30 http://www.communityjoodsmonument.nl/page/285975.
victims in smaller groups in the houses where they lived before deportation. People are also encouraged to hang posters in their windows, stating what Jews were deported from there during the war. With a Jewish Houses app (for smartphones), people can see where in their street/neighborhood Jewish people lived who were deported and killed during the war. In these ways the analogous archival data which was translated into a digital visualization becomes physical again.

To summarize, the DM is a project that originally was limited to digitizing available historical records and aggregating them into one website visualized as a monument. For quantitative analyses an anonymized database is available on request. The web 2.0 applications of the Community allows for the coexistence of research and commemoration. The possibilities for high-level historical analysis are limited however. For commemoration the DM offers an alternative to a physical monument. People who prefer to commemorate the dead individually in their own time can find most characteristics of a physical monument on the DM.

**Between History and Memory**

The DM combines a wide variety of information from memories and historical records. Often, however, memory and history present us with different and opposing information. In this section I shall describe how the DM deals with these possible discrepancies and what that means for the DM as a place of commemoration and research.

Memory is notoriously unreliable since people (unknowingly) reshape their memories based on later knowledge or events. This is especially true when the memory is about events that traumatized people. That being said, at times the historian has no other choice than to rely on memories. Furthermore, the way people experienced historical events is now considered to be a valuable addition to the historical record. Later testimonies rarely add to our factual knowledge, but they do give insight into what

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events meant for the people who lived through them. Commemoration often aims to reaffirm one’s identity, while academic history is mostly concerned with historical accuracy. When these goals clash, emotionally charged debates may follow.

It is difficult to study memory and history as independent from each other since they are often intertwined. Personal memories are tainted by knowledge acquired afterwards, as written down in history books or narrated in documentaries, and by the collective memory of an event. History in turn runs the risk of shaping itself around the ideas imprinted in collective memory. This phenomenon is especially clear when studying the history of the Holocaust. There are plenty of examples of survivors of the Holocaust who model their memories on historical accounts. In the Netherlands, for instance, the standard works of Jacques Presser and Louis de Jong have become part of the “collective memory,” distorting the memories of individuals. Historiography, on the other hand, also models itself on collective memories. Historical interpretations that disagree with such collective memories may lead to emotionally charged polemics. Without going deeper into the detailed discussions on the role of memory in history, we can conclude that there is an undeniable interplay between memory and history.

36 The term collective memory was made famous by M. Halbwachs, Das Kollektive Gedächtnis (Frankfurt am Main, 1991).
37 Bigsby, Remembering, 10-12; 19; S. Hogervorst, “De enige informatiebron is onze herinnering; Geschiedschrijving over Ravensbrück door overlevenden en anderen,” Biografie Bulletin 21 no. 2 (2011), 50-57 (50-51); B. Siertsema, “Kampgetuigenissen: Herinnering in teksten,” in De dynamiek van de herinnering. Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog in een internationale context, eds. F. van Vree and R. van der Laarse (Amsterdam 2009), 106-127. It also is striking to note that prominent figures from history like Anne Frank and Adolf Hitler are mentioned in memories more often than could be expected or historically supported. See for an unlikely example of both: USC Shoah Foundation, USC-SF nr. 21178 (interview Marion Adler).
38 F. van Vree, In de schaduw van Auschwitz: herinneringen, beelden, geschiedenis (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 1995), 14, 103-104.
39 Kenan, Between Memory and History, xiv-xv.
40 E.g. B. van der Boom, “Wij weten niets van hun lot: gewone Nederlanders en de Holocaust” (Amsterdam: Boom, 2012), 427. See also Van der Boom’s blog: http://wijwetennietsvanhunlot.blogspot.nl/.
41 The academic writing on collective (or collected, common, or shared) memory is massive and beyond the scope of this article to deal with in such a manner as to do justice to the observations of many leading philosophers and theorists. The observation of an undeniable interplay between
As we have seen previously, the DM offers people the opportunity to add their own, or secondhand, memories to the database. The question here is how the DM deals with the interplay of and friction between history and memory. The DM is a virtual place where different memories come together; it therefore is a place of collected memory.42 A wide variety of people contribute to this mnemonic community, both from Jewish and non-Jewish origins and from all parts of the world.43 We have already seen, however, that in the beginning, participating in this mnemonic community was limited for several reasons; most importantly, all information had to be checked for accuracy by the editors. With the core data, this was not as problematic as with the personal memories. It is usually possible to check the spelling of a person’s name, the date of birth, or place of residence, but it is rarely possible to check if someone had red hair,44 often wore a white skirt,45 or was an outstanding football player.46 The editors were instructed to use common sense to determine whether information was reliable or not, especially by taking into account what relation the information provider had to the deceased.47

The editors’ interference with memories inevitably meant taking something away from the memory. First of all, the editors intervened with the language used. Spelling and grammar were corrected, and excessively emotional language (like “dirty krauts”) was rephrased. Incoherent and too lengthy contributions were rewritten and shortened. Things that were highly unlikely or obviously incorrect were corrected (like a year of deportation) or left out. References to people who survived the war were anonymized in accordance with the data protection laws. For the same

memory (in any form) and history is sufficient for the analysis here. For further reading, see for example: Margalit, Ethics of Memory, 50-52; Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory, 14-15; W. Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies,” History and Memory 41 (2002), 179-197, (189, 197).

42 On the difference between collected and collective memory, see for example Arthur, “Trauma Online,” 71.

43 In 2008 the Digital Monument received not only more than 143,000 visits from the Netherlands, but also over 9,000 from the United States, more than 5,000 from both Israel and Germany, over 4,000 from Belgium, nearly 3,000 from the United Kingdom, nearly 2,000 from Canada, over 1,300 from France, and 1,000 from Australia. Fewer visitors came from countries in South America. Joods Historisch Museum, Monument statistiek 2008.pdf (9 January 2008-8 January 2009).


46 Hartog van Rhyn: http://www.joodsmonument.nl/person/451595.

reason the gender of surviving children was anonymized. To guarantee the privacy of the contributors, all additions were placed anonymously. This resulted in many biographical contributions having “addition of a visitor to the website” as its provenance information.48

No matter how understandable the editing process was at the time, it caused some serious problems for the monument and its function as a mnemonic community. Firstly, the anonymization of the contributions made the provenance information quite useless. If there is no way of knowing who provided the information, there is also no way of assessing whether he or she is a reliable witness and of interest for follow up contact. Understandably there were many requests from third parties to get in touch with the person who provided information or a picture.49

Secondly, the editorial process was an attempt to transform memories into accurate representations of the past, while memories are valuable precisely because they are personal and may differ from the generally accepted historical account. Thirdly, conflicts over the contents on the website could arise; often memories conflict and what should the editors do when such memories are provided? Place them both or choose the most likely version? Or in other words, give preference to the monument as a place of collected memory or as a historical information provider? What if either choice hinders people in commemorating the dead? As far as I know, no policy regarding these issues was ever made. Fourth, the editing of biographical information took a lot of time. From a sample of 320 messages between 2005 and 2010, Rose calculated that about 36% contained additional biographical information.50 Finally, and perhaps most importantly, many contributions were not placed on the monument because they did not contain any information that could be used; more than one third contained information on the visitor him/herself (e.g. “I am one of four surviving grandchildren”), a request for information, a request for contact, the offering of help, or the offering of goods.51 All these messages were treated as useless for the DM.

The editorial system therefore hindered the role of the DM as an instrument for research and especially in its function as a place of commemoration.

49 Two of the standard sentences from the editors of the monument were created to answer such requests: Joods Historisch Museum, Digitaal Monument, standaard zinnen.doc (version 25 mei 2010).
51 Roose, Digitaal Monument, 71.
Once again, the Community took away many of the identified limitations. On the Community, people can create an account and add information and pictures themselves, even about themselves, without the interference of the editors. Because people can immediately see who made a certain contribution and how to contact the person, the Community is a worldwide mnemonic community where collected memory shapes the image of the past. Conflicting memories, and memory conflicting with history, can now be made visible.52

In conclusion, we can say that from a historic, mnemonic, and commemorative point of view, the DM fell short in its first years. Not only was the information not reliable enough, as we saw, but there also was not enough room to correct this information quickly, to add one’s own memories uncensored, and to see what memories belonged to whom to assess its reliability. It also was not clear whether the DM would give precedence to historical accuracy or personal memories. The Community solved the issues of provenance of the information and enabled people to add their own information directly and uncensored. The members of the Community became directly responsible for their input, rather than the editors of the DM.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands (DM) as a virtual place for commemoration, as a provider of historic information, and as a digital project. I have tried to assess how successful the DM was as a digital project in achieving its at times difficult to reconcile objectives: commemoration (which is often not helped by precision and objectivity), academic history (which has to be precise and objective), memory (which often claims to be precise and objective but is not), the analysis of large sets of data (which is not precise and does not claim to be so), online communication, open data and privacy issues – all had to be dealt with. By analyzing the monument from these different angles, I hoped to find an answer to the question if it is possible to combine these objectives successfully and how similar projects can be designed in the best possible manner in the future.

First, there is the DM as a digital project. We can conclude that it succeeded in digitally bringing together a wide variety of analogous sources.

52 See also Arthur, “Trauma Online,” 69.
Privacy issues, however, prevented the DM from including information on survivors of the Holocaust. Furthermore there are, understandably, no tools for academic analysis of the data on the DM since that would diminish its memorial function. Still, web 2.0 technologies were used for the Community to open up a dialogue among the visitors of the monument, to share stories and experiences, and to provide the provenance of new information.

Regarding the DM as a source of historic information, we can conclude that it succeeded in bringing together heterogeneous data, connecting them in a clever way, and providing a visualization that enables easy access for both the lay and the professional user. We also need to conclude, however, that the error margin was too high when the DM was put online in 2005. Additional biographical information came from all kinds of sources, but personal memories were all anonymized, making it very difficult (and only with a tortuous intervention from the editors) to trace the provenance information. Only when the Community was put online in the course of 2010 were the provenance issues resolved. The DM also became a more reliable source of information, after years of manually processing corrections.

Since many additions to the DM were memories (not necessarily first-hand), we can also speak of the DM as a source of collected memory. In turn this aggregation of memories feeds back into the collective memory of people about the Holocaust. The DM binds together an “artificial mnemonic community” of people worldwide from all kinds of religions and backgrounds who wish to commemorate or study the Holocaust.

There also is the question of whether the DM and Community are digital places for commemoration. This question cannot be answered easily since people commemorate in individual ways, which makes it hard to determine whether someone actually uses the DM to commemorate the dead. With its editorial system, the DM leans more towards historic objectivity than the Community, which allows the addition of all kinds of memories, interpretations, and links. For people who believe that the information on the dead should be restricted – some think the name alone suffices – the DM is the best choice for commemoration.

The DM opens new possibilities for switching easily between commemorating all Jewish victims in a general visualized monument and commemorating individuals with their own photos, address, personal, and biographical information. The question remains if a non-physical monument viewed on a technical device can evoke the same feeling as a physical monument where thousands of people gather. The large numbers of visitors and additions are an indication of success but in themselves do not justify the DM as a monument since it does not follow automatically that the DM
is used as a place of commemoration. Several museum projects link the DM to the outside world though, like to the wall of names in the Hollandsche Schouwburg, which also makes it part of the offline memorial culture.

The DM was subject to harsh criticism even before it was put online. What did it do to mute these criticisms? In the beginning it was not well received; there were too many mistakes, the number of additions it received was far higher than estimated, the editorial process was too slow, and the provenance of the added information unclear. As a consequence it was neither taken completely serious as an information provider nor as a monument, since accuracy is one of the requirements for both academic research and commemoration. A lot of time (years), effort, and money were put into manually correcting the information on the DM. There was also a tension between history, memory, and commemoration that could not be smoothed over with the interface and policies at that time. The online options for an environment of dialogue were not tapped into yet and the question is if that would have been feasible back in 2005. The creation of the Community in 2009 helped to overcome most problems; dialogue was enabled, different memories and historical research could coexist, group projects were facilitated, and memories could be placed without interference or editing.

So what does this teach us about digital projects of this size and nature? First of all, projects this large, especially when they are dealing with a painful subject, should not be put online before they are accurate enough to pass the tests of critical users. It is of course difficult to know when this is the case, but when simple calculations based on error percentages show that there are thousands of mistakes, most projects are not good enough yet. A lot could be gained in the communication with the outside world by presenting a project as a work in progress. Furthermore, it is important to find a balance between what should be kept in the hands of the professionals and what should not. For the sake of uncensored exchange and interactivity between users and to cut down on manpower expenses, a lot can be said for leaving most to the users themselves.