Orson Scott Card’s 1986 novel, *Speaker for the Dead*, presents a society in which the dead may be mourned not only with the assistance of clerics and the customs of traditional religions, but also by summoning Speakers, who serve ‘as priests to people who acknowledged no god and yet believed in the value of the lives of human beings’, acting at the request of the family or community of the departed ‘to discover the true causes and motives of the things that people did, and declare the truth of their lives after they were dead’. Speakers are not eulogists; they speak *for*, in place of, rather than *about*, the dead; they take control of the private knowledge of the deceased and disseminate it on their behalf, healing relationships that had been damaged by secrecy, misunderstandings or incorrect assumptions during the lives of the deceased.

In the wake of the 2015 killing of twelve people at the offices of the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, thousands of individuals – many of whom had never before seen a copy of the paper – changed their Facebook statuses and profile pictures, or broadcast Twitter updates, to proclaim ‘Je suis Charlie’. A month previous, a similar outpouring of digital sentiment took place in response to a New York grand jury’s decision not to indict white police officers who had been filmed choking to death a black man named Eric Garner: the hashtag #icantbreathe. Approximately eighteen months later, the shooting of fifty people during Latinx Night at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, gave rise to #WeAreOrlando. In this paper,

Notes for this section begin on page 186.
I wish to consider these mourning rituals not as an entirely new phenomenon, but as a continuation of a much longer historical trend in which, as I have argued at some length in previous publications, public memorialization functions to construct and enforce a collective identity. I do not intend to repeat that previous argument within this essay; I am instead more interested in discussing the politics of the ‘us’ – the imagined community that is constructed in part by these commemorative rituals – making some suggestions about whether, and how, the problematic notion of collective identity is transforming in the digital age.

Card’s Speaker for the Dead offers a remedy for, and thereby assurance against, the terrifying void of death – not the void that each individual might encounter at the end of their own life, but the void of unfinished business, unresolved relationships, an inability to account or compensate for loss that confronts those who remain behind. This is a fear that has given rise to countless ghost stories and, I wish to suggest, also underlies appropriative mourning movements such as je suis Charlie, #icantbreathe and #WeAreOrlando. Laying claim to the identity of the victim of a widely publicized tragedy offers an opportunity for symbolic roleplaying, in which the individuals claiming the identity are able to mitigate against their terror of death by agitating for ‘justice’ on behalf of the victim(s), thereby reassuring themselves that the tragedy is an anomaly in an otherwise securely ordered world, and that such anomalies can be, and have been, put to rights. At the same time, claiming an identity in common with others may promote social solidarity; it can play a role in what Hannah Arendt theorized as ‘worldmaking’, the formation of a body politic in which the safeguarding of individual identities is the precondition for the existence of commonality. However, it also carries a risk of eroding the individual identities upon which any worldbuilding project must rest, leading instead to what Arendt terms ‘worldlessness’, the loss of a common space, a retreat from the negotiations required by public life, in favour of a primary existence within the familial or even individual sphere. These hashtags therefore offer a window into a powerful set of complex identity negotiations that are fundamental to the functioning of contemporary politics.

At the risk of stating the obvious, it is worth noting at the outset that the internet is a large, and constantly growing, virtual space. It is not a monoculture. The major social networking sites – Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Reddit – are each hosts to hundreds, if not thousands, of subnetworks, formed both from personal contacts between users (‘friends’ or ‘followers’) and from more loosely organized shared interests (hashtags, groups and subforums). However, the largest two of these – Facebook and Twitter – incorporate both top-level and local ‘trends’, which may serve to draw par-
particularly popular items to the attention of users even when the social sharing mechanic around which each site is built has failed to do so. Thus, particularly popular trends are likely to register in the awareness of users even if they or their immediate contacts are not active participants in transmitting them. To the limited extent that it is possible to speak of ‘internet culture’, it is these trends that constitute it; it is these events that are the most useful examples on which to found a discussion of the potential of the internet as a political space. These event-driven memes are, however, distinct from the classic image memes that have mostly been the focus of meme studies.

When I am talking about politics or the political, I am doing so in the technical language that Hannah Arendt developed in her 1958 book, *The Human Condition*, to describe one of three main spheres of human activity, alongside labour (sustaining the life cycle through the cultivation of food and other biological necessities) and work (the production of material objects, which themselves endure beyond the period of human activity required to bring them into being). For Arendt, the main purpose of these spheres of activity – the purpose of life, if you will – is worldmaking: the world is not simply a space we inhabit, not the location of our being, but an idea that we are constantly struggling to bring into being. In my reading, Arendt does not impose a false separation between labour, work and politics (which she also refers to as ‘action’); she is quite clear that each is at least partially dependent upon the others. But for her, political action is the most interesting, most difficult and therefore the most important sphere of human worldmaking activity. Political action, unlike the other sorts of activity she discusses, is always contingent and uncertain. Unlike labour and work, which are each interactions with the material world, action functions entirely in the realm of ideas; the products of action have, in themselves, no concrete existence. So worldmaking involves a complex set of mitigations, in which labour and work look to the realm of action for the narrative structures that endow their activity with meaning, while action looks to labour and work for the material actualization of its imaginative potential, a process which Arendt calls ‘reification’.

The contingency of action, however, is not fully addressed by recourse to other spheres of activity; Arendt devotes considerable space to the dilemmas of irreversibility and unpredictability, which she argues are mitigated only by means of further action – the acts of forgiveness and promise-making, respectively:

The unpredictability which the act of making promises at least partially dispels is of a twofold nature: it arises simultaneously out of the ‘darkness of the human heart’, that is, the basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow, and out of the impossibility of foretelling the
consequences of an act within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act."

It is worthwhile to note that at this point in Arendt’s scheme, action’s dilemmas do not arise from action itself, but from the presence of other people whose actions may impinge upon our own. We cannot predict the results of our own action because we never know what others might do – our world-making is thus always a negotiation with others.

In a shorter essay, ‘Introduction into Politics’, written around the same time as *The Human Condition*, Arendt clarifies exactly what she means by ‘world’, writing,

> Wherever human beings come together – be it in private or socially, be it in public or politically – a space is generated that simultaneously gathers them into it and separates them from one another. Every such space has its own structure that changes over time and reveals itself in a private context as custom, in a social context as convention, and in a public context as laws, constitutions, statutes, and the like. Wherever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in-between state that all human affairs are conducted."

The world, then, is the space that humans have in common, and worldmaking is the task of tending to that commonality, creating structures – both physical and conceptual – which enable and enhance our existence as individuals living in relationships of mutual responsibility with and to other individuals. There is an important distinction here between commonality and collectivity: the former enhances the capacity of the individual through a system of relationships of mutuality with other individuals. The latter obscures the boundaries between individuals, and in so doing renders both relationship and mutuality impossible.

**Defining ‘Digital Culture’?**

The question about the extent to which digital culture influences culture offline is contentious and unlikely to be settled any time soon. In many social networks, the option of anonymity is integral to the formation of community, by custom if not by deliberate design; attempts by networks such as Google Plus and Facebook to force users to identify themselves by their legal name have proven both contentious and ineffective. Anonymity does not obscure only detailed demographic data; the potential for a single individual to create multiple identities on any given network can make even very basic usage statistics difficult to ascertain. The most concerted attempts to study social network demographics have been undertaken by marketing
firms and, largely limited in geographic scope, have generated little useful data for researchers interested in potential cultural transference across national and linguistic boundaries. Due to the tendency of memes to spread from one social network to another, understanding the demographics of any single social network will still not offer a complete understanding of cultural influence. While the memes I am particularly concerned with spread back and forth between Twitter and Facebook, I will focus my analysis primarily on Twitter due to the larger amount of publicly available data. In 2016, seventy-seven per cent of all Twitter accounts are registered outside of the United States. In a raw numerical analysis of accounts active every month, the US is dominant (followed by the UK, Canada, Australia, Brazil, Germany, Netherlands, France, India and South Africa), but measuring per capita use—the number of Twitter users in a country relative to national population, which can be taken as a very rough measurement of Twitter’s potential for social influence—tells a rather different story, with the top nations being Kuwait, Netherlands, Brunei, UK, USA, Chile, Ireland, Canada, Sweden and Puerto Rico.

Even this loose data sketch is already suggestive of a potential disparity between the producers and consumers of internet culture; the ‘we’ constructed by Twitter hashtags is influenced by American and British culture to a greater extent than that ‘we’ is likely to influence their offline equivalents. There are a few other characteristics of the ‘us’ of digital culture that can be derived either directly from network usage data or else by inductive reasoning from this data:

- We have the ability to read English (although advances in machine translation are quickly changing this).
- We have sufficient access and leisure time to be reasonably invested in digital culture. While technological advances are continually lowering the threshold for entry, digital culture is still largely a domain of relative economic privilege.
- We quite literally do not see race—unless content producers are making a deliberate effort to show us race. The invisibility of physical markers in digital space contributes to a flattening of perception; it is easy to assume that the person on the other end of an online interaction is, in essence, another ‘us’, unless and until they demonstrate otherwise. Such demonstration can, and does, occur through the use of subcultural referencing and marked language.

This last point is where I want to focus for the remainder of this essay: the assumption of homogeneity and the penalties attached to dissent.
Be(ing) Unique. Just Like Everyone Else

It is tempting to understand this assumption in unambiguously positive terms, as digital anonymity permitting individuals to meet and know each other as substantial persons, citizens of a co-created world (in the Arendtian sense) in which they have been freed from the burden of prejudice linked to accidental characteristics such as race, gender or economic status, and have fulfilled the promise of Galatians 3:28: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you have all become one in Christ.’ Viewed in this light, personally assuming the mantle of victimhood is not simply symbolic roleplaying intended to mitigate against the unreliability of the world made manifest in the events that prompt such expressions, but is a much deeper act of solidarity.

But how adequate is the world that is being built in this way? What does solidarity mean in this context? Clearly, it is not affiliation based on shared characteristics, either the location-based characteristics identified by Durkheim as mechanical solidarity or the labour-based interdependency he labelled ‘organic solidarity’. Nor is it the political solidarity that has become the common currency of race and gender justice movements, in which members of a minority group who have nothing in common save for their race, gender, religion, etc., nevertheless depend upon one another, as members of a group constituted around a shared characteristic, to act, whenever and however possible, in one another’s interests insofar as those interests are defined by that shared characteristic. Here, however, no clear degree of interdependence exists; the vast majority of people using the hashtag do not appear to share any obvious characteristic connected to the individuals or events being commemorated. They are not African American, French secularists, publishers of satirical news magazines, Queer or Latinx. The hashtag is eliding difference rather than creating space for it. What is being enacted, then, is a mere simulacrum of solidarity.

Or perhaps it is, instead, a process by which the utterance itself brings solidarity into being, by creating or enhancing a previously nonexistent or unacknowledged commonality with the actual victim. In this latter light, such expressions of solidarity are instead moments in which the potential creation (and redemption) of a/the world is made manifest in the collective exercise of human agency. This would make the hashtag function in a manner similar to the liturgical community, which through shared practice holds a space for a vision of the world that is in practice always yet to come. I am wary, however, of ascribing an excess of redemptive potential to technological innovation, just as I am wary of the theological narrative that underlies such a view. It seems to me far more likely to lead to what Arendt terms ‘worldlessness’, the loss of a common space – a retreat from the negotiations
required by public life in favour of a primary existence within a familial, or even individual, sphere, where difference need not be confronted as a fact of life.

There is ample evidence to support the protest that the erasure of difference means, in practice, the erasure of those who are different. We can see this in the long history of religious conflict between Christians and Jews, in which Jews have been subjected to forced conversion or extermination in order to further the project of Christian universalism. Similar attitudes and tactics have also been deployed against indigenous populations and people on the disability spectrum.

More recently, the perception of anonymity as the default in digital space has been posited as a contributing factor in some of the more widely publicized campaigns of online harassment against minorities, such as Gamergate, in which women who comment on the prevalence of violent misogyny portrayed within video games are subjected to sustained barrages of violent and misogynistic threats broadcast across social media. There are endlessly proliferating and contradictory accounts of the history of and core aims of Gamergate, owing in large part to its lack of formal organization, which leaves it open to definition by any individual who chooses to identify as part of Gamergate; a common claim is that Gamergate itself is a movement to promote ‘ethics in game journalism’, and the harassment that has become associated with it is the work of individuals operating opportunistically on the fringe of the movement. This account has not been particularly convincing even to journalists covering the hashtag, with the exception of personalities who themselves aligned with and participated in the movement, such as Milo Yiannopoulos, whose involvement in the movement was part of a series of events that eventually led to him being banned from Twitter for persistent and repeated harassment of women.

Academics who have analysed Gamergate have tended to conclude that it is a defensive reaction against the appearance of diversity.

One persistent theme in this harassment is the claim that victims, by calling attention to the ways in which they differ from the anonymous norm, by speaking as women, have not only passively invited but actively sought the negative attention to which they have been subjected. In this light, what is being enacted in digital utterances such as ‘Je suis Charlie’, #icantbreathe, or #WeAreOrlando is, however strong the intention towards solidarity that prompts them on an individual level, also a process in which distress at the unreliability of the world is mitigated precisely by causing actual victims, and therefore actual victimization, to disappear from view. The logic at work here appears, at first, as a twin to the logic of Hannah Arendt’s critique of innocent Germans describing themselves as morally guilty after the Holocaust: ‘The cry “We are all guilty” that at first hearing sounded so very noble and tempting has actually only served to ex-
culpate to a considerable degree those who actually were guilty. Where all are guilty, nobody is.' The theme of collective guilt is one to which Arendt returned with regularity, and with regards to which she engaged in a lengthy dispute with Karl Jaspers, who argued for the importance of a felt corporate guilt in the project of postwar politics. Arendt’s position is that an emphasis on corporate guilt (as opposed to collective responsibility) permits individual actors – who due to the particular nature of their crimes are unlikely to feel guilt – to remain free and untouched. She cites in support of this argument a dispute over the extension of the statute of limitations for Nazi crimes, during which the German minister of justice argued against a continued focus on individual actors on the grounds ‘that further zeal in looking for what Germans call “the murderers among us” would only result in complacency among the Germans who are not murderers’. In Arendt’s view, the collective and the particular, while both necessary to the project of politics, are also in competition with one another, and an exclusive focus on one drains the other of significance. Just as moral culpability is diluted to the point of meaningless when it is distributed from individuals who have committed particular acts and spread across an entire society, so too harm is diluted when it is distributed from individuals who have suffered particular wrongs.

If #icanbreathe but I’m still standing here talking to you, then, hey, maybe breathing isn’t actually such a big deal after all.

This is the point at which the logic of distribution breaks down and becomes not particularly logical at all: unlike responsibility, which is linked to a particular act only at the moment of that act and thereafter exists only as an intellectual construction, harm begins in a physical act and, as we have learned from Elaine Scarry, is thereafter physically inseparable from the person who is harmed. Responsibility may be diluted, because responsibility has no physical existence (although giving it a physical existence has long been a favoured sport of novelists); the only equivalent operation that might be performed on harm is to lessen our awareness of its link to a particular physical person, and lessen thereby the moral claim that any particular individual may make in light of the harm they have suffered.

When distributed responsibility meets distributed victimization, the predictable result is an uncomfortable stasis: we are all somewhat culpable, we are all somewhat injured, and so the best thing we can do for ourselves is to quietly get on with our (individual, disconnected, unworldly) lives. Again, there are some who would argue that such a stasis is, if not an absolute ideal, then certainly a pragmatically acceptable basis for a society to function. However, the stasis avoids precisely the negotiation of difference, the gathering in and separating from, which is the basis of the shared world required for society to exist at all. The stasis is easily disrupted, and individual claims to actual victimization become particularly threatening, to the
point that when such claims appear, they are often treated as attacks not only on social cohesion as a whole – the fictional, anonymous digital ‘we’ – but also on every other individual in the collective, as it threatens the assumptions necessary to their understanding of the world as a place of security based upon sameness.

This denial of difference, which in Arendt’s terms constitutes a flight from the world, is typified by the dynamics around the protest movement that began in response to the 2012 killing of seventeen-year old Trayvon Martin by self-appointed neighbourhood watch coordinator George Zimmerman, #BlackLivesMatter, which immediately inspired a counter protest movement, #AllLivesMatter. #AllLivesMatter claims that focussing on the particular tendency for black lives to be regarded as at best disposable, and at worst threatening to social cohesion through their very existence, oppresses white people – by making race an issue, #BlackLivesMatter has dissented from, and thereby undermined, the assumption of homogeneity that governs online communities, as well as the American national myth of the melting-pot.

Of course, movements towards social equality – which requires the recognition rather than the overcoming of difference – being characterized by those who largely benefit from inequality as ‘making trouble’ is nothing new; we do not need a nuanced understanding of Arendt’s thought, or of digital culture, to discuss this phenomenon. But we do need to understand the particular ways in which digital culture amplifies this argument. The language of the collective, ‘us’ versus ‘them’, has always been a tool that enables attitudes that would not be tolerated in a polite society if they were expressed on an individual level. Because online interaction is stripped of many of the identity signifiers that inform judgement offline, the language of the collective has acquired a much stronger claim to neutrality than it holds when a speaker’s national, ethnic, gendered, religious and economic particularity is evident. The dangers of this amplification of collectivity and minimization of difference within digitally curated communities have become clear in the wake of the 2016 American election, in which the utterly incompatible narratives of two different groups of voters were reinforced, rather than challenged, by the continual recirculation of memes and ‘news’ stories of dubious provenance.

Not only is the claim to neutrality in digital collectives not truly neutral, it is also sharply limited in its scope. In spite of the viral spread of the photograph of Aylan Kurdi washed up on a beach in Turkey in the summer of 2015, in spite of the multiple calls to political and humanitarian action to address the refugee crisis, nobody has said ‘We are all Aylan’. Nobody has said ‘Our children are drowning’. Even the expansive,
unstable identity culture of the internet has its limits. The digital ‘we’ is not universal; it cannot stretch to include Syrian refugees.

There is an obvious objection to be raised here in the form of two memes that arose in response to *je suis Charlie*: *je ne suis pas Charlie*, which was used to express discomfort precisely with the identity claim *je suis Charlie*, largely on the grounds of distaste for *Charlie Hebdo*’s style of satire, and *je suis Ahmed*, which commemorated Ahmed Merabet, a Muslim police officer who was killed by the gunmen as they entered the office of *Charlie Hebdo*, and which attempted to add nuance to the public discourse surrounding the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, which otherwise tended to present an undifferentiated Western, secular ‘us’ whose value of free speech (with no regard given to effects of that speech upon its audience) must be defended against the racially and religiously particularized Muslim Other. In the first instance, however, what is being contested is not really the boundary of the collective, but its character: the utterance is ‘I am not Charlie’, not ‘Charlie has nothing to do with me’; the underlying logic of the utterance is that I am, in some tangible way, similar enough to Charlie that there is a need for the distinction to be pointed out – I am a participant in a ‘we’ in which most others have declared themselves to be Charlie and I am dissenting from that particular declaration, in this particular instance, without thrusting either myself or Charlie outside of the ‘we’. The second case, *je suis Ahmed*, may – possibly, within some particularly contrived argumentative limits – represent a genuine boundary negotiation, but it is still quite limited in scope. Ahmed Merabet, the son of Algerian immigrants, was born and raised in Paris, and died in the line of duty as an officer of the *police nationale*. He was a textbook ‘good immigrant’ (indeed, so good that he was not actually, properly speaking, an immigrant at all), which is to say that the traversal of the us–them boundary had already been accomplished, during his life, by his own efforts and those of his parents. In fact, *je suis Ahmed* undoes this traversal, thrusting Ahmed back outside of the collective, emphasizing his supposedly more natural affinity to the ‘them’ of the attackers, in order to demonstrate the permeability of that boundary to those who may have been otherwise prone to forget.

The conclusion we can draw from all of this is, while worrying, also limited. The available evidence compels me to argue that social media is, in Arendt’s terminology, a tool that aids in the accomplishment of its task without substantially altering the nature of the task itself – though the key word here is ‘substantially’: I am not saying that it changes nothing. Digital communication has accelerated the rate at which action is reified and disseminated, but primarily among individuals who were already political actors. It has accelerated the fragmentation of cultural narratives, but the roots of that fragmentation can be traced back easily to the 1970s (and realistically to the
nineteenth century), long before the internet was a factor. It has enabled the projection of action across a wider geographical range, and permitted negotiations between actors across traditional national and cultural boundaries, but the difference between social media and previous communication technologies appears, in this respect, to be one of degree rather than kind. Anything digital communication has done in this regard has also been done, albeit on a more limited scale, by some other medium – although we might fairly note that no previous medium has been quite so accessible in so many different ways all at once. We are, in short, making some adjustments to the scale of the world and the other actors with whom we negotiate our belonging within it, but this adjustment is mostly incremental. The major alteration that Twitter brings to such negotiation is the anonymity of the medium (which is itself not really an innovation; the pamphleteers of previous centuries also had the option of anonymity). This alteration should be viewed with caution: it has a tremendous potential to enhance not worldmaking, but worldlessness. It permits individuals to imagine themselves not as inhabiting a community of equals where everyone has the same capacity to act according to their diverse interests and desires, but as part of a collective in which no negotiation is necessary or even possible, as the basic similarity among all actors means that the needs and desires of one are interchangeable with the needs and desires of all. The rise of neoliberal and radical libertarian politics in the decades since Arendt’s death shows that this concern remains current.

In her work on collective guilt, Arendt makes a clear delineation between guilt and responsibility, the latter of which may be collective in a meaningful sense: ‘As for the nation, it is obvious that every generation, by virtue of being born into a historical continuum, is burdened by the sins of the fathers as it is blessed with the deeds of the ancestors.’30 The appropriate action in light of this political responsibility is ‘to renew the world, and this we can do because we all arrived at one time or another as newcomers in a world which was there before us and will still be there when we are gone, when we shall have left its burden to our successors’.31 The unpredictability and terror of the world we move through is still mitigated only by the very thing that makes it unpredictable: the promise that we are not alone, but surrounded by, inheriting from and acting as custodians for, other humans who are also free to act. There is no technological redemption in the offing. The tools that we have at hand will only amplify, and perhaps accelerate, the process of worldmaking or world disintegration for which we, as individuals acting in negotiation with other individuals whose actions are outside of our ability to control or predict, retain responsibility.

Alana M. Vincent is senior lecturer in Jewish studies at the University of Chester (UK). She is the coeditor of Jewish Thought, Utopia, and Revolution
(2014), and author of *Making Memory: Jewish and Christian Explorations in Monument, Narrative, and Liturgy* (2013) as well as a number of articles and book chapters on modern Judaism, Hannah Arendt and collective memory.

**Notes**

10. See, e.g., M. Duggan et al., ‘Social Media Update 2014’, Pew Research Centre (2014), which uses data obtained from telephone interviews conducted within the US only. See also A. Mislove et al., ‘Understanding the Demographics of Twitter Users’ (2011), which begins with a much larger dataset based on self-reported user data, but restricts its more finely tuned analysis to only US-based accounts. For some notion of the scope of data excluded from these studies, compare http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/ (retrieved 10 September 2015). See also A. Maddox, *Research Methods and Global Online Communities: A Case Study* (Routledge, 2015).
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Memes’, New Media Studies Magazine 7 [2013], 152–83, understanding the demographics of any single social network will still not offer a complete understanding of cultural influence.


14. Berean Study Bible; however, I am taking some liberties with the translation, which more traditionally reads ‘all of you are one in Christ’, in order to emphasize the transformation from the status quo suggested in this verse.


**Bibliography**


Speakers for the Dead


