Introduction

In this chapter we focus on the question of methodological procedure in the investigation of personal and public memory and the manifold relations between them. We do so because issues and concerns relating to methodology have been largely neglected in memory studies.¹ There are various reasons for this neglect, but among them is the perceived need for an emergent field first and foremost to establish its theoretical credentials and develop its key conceptual tools. We agree that this is an important task, and over the years we have read with interest, and contributed to, the theoretical discussion and debate that has taken place over the relative merits of terms defining particular dimensions of memory as well as the alleged consequences for memory, in its different dimensions, of such developments as the commodification of memory artefacts or the globalized production and distribution of cultural goods and services.² Such debate has proved useful in helping the field to come together and in refining our understanding of what is at stake in changing aspects of public remembering, but at some point we have to face the problem that without being empirically grounded in some way, any area of debate remains speculative, its claims not given any concerted demonstration, its assertions made without substantive evidential backing. At some point in any research project conceptual tools have to be applied, theories tested and challenged. It is precisely at this point that the neglect of methodological issues and concerns becomes most evident. You can check this easily enough by turning to the indexes of various books in the now burgeoning literature on memory. If you are looking for the words ‘method’ and ‘methodology’, which you could then follow with a suitable link to pages within the main
body of the book, you will be disappointed. These words are generally absent. This is just one confirmation of their neglect, and in seeking to redress it we shall begin by giving a broad outline of why thinking about methodological approaches and practices will help in further developing the field of memory studies and moving it towards greater coherence. We base this around three key issues.

The first of these concerns the many academic disciplines and areas of enquiry that contribute to the field and inform the interests of particular scholars. These range across the humanities and social sciences, and increasingly refer to work on the neurological as well as cognitive functions of remembering. Developing the methodological premises and purposes associated with memory research is one way in which the field can be made more interdisciplinary, rather than simply displaying a swag-bag multidisciplinarity. Though a fully synthesized field may be an unrealizable ideal, and even an undesirable aim, interdisciplinarity is a state worth aspiring to if it not only brings contributing disciplines more closely together but also transcends current limitations and transforms at least some of the intellectual components which characterize the current arrangements within a field of study.

The second key issue involved in the significance of methodology for the field is that memory, in its various dimensions, is mediated more and more by one or other form of communications technology. The manner and scale of such mediation obviously varies according to what the technologies afford, and how they operate, with a major issue being the relations between memory production and consumption. Perhaps the most important distinction that needs to be drawn here is that between media involving few in concentrated production catering for many in widespread consumption, the media conventionally associated with the term ‘mass’, and media involving few in production and few in consumption, the media conventionally associated with vernacular culture. Today this distinction remains important but is increasingly blurred. For example, photographs of past or recent events carrying different kinds of memory luggage may be posted on any among a range of dedicated photo-sharing websites and so seen by far more people, across far broader spatial distances, than used to be the case with family photos housed in albums or shoeboxes, while a blog intended only for the eyes of a few friends may rapidly go viral and lead to many unintended consequences, not least those of entering the public record and becoming part of public memory. The Washington blog of Jessica Cutler is a telling case in point. Nevertheless, what may be accomplished by the internet and social media does not mark a sea change in how cultural