

The same but different? Constructing the history of the Holocaust on Wikipedia

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In our paper, we discuss how digital humanities tools can be used to facilitate comparative research on collaborative history-writing about historical trauma. The increasing use of digital media for remediating the past has attracted significant scholarly attention in the recent years (see, for instance, Garde-Hansen, Hosking and Reading (2009) and Hoskins (2016)). Yet, the long-term consequences of digitalization of historical events, in particular the highly traumatic ones, remain unclear. By enabling dynamic interactions in the transnational online environment, digital platforms can encourage the dialogue leading to the formation of more inclusive views on the past (Jones and Gibson, 2012). However, the same platforms often facilitate the distribution of historical hoaxes and conspiracy theories increasing societal polarization and supporting populist claims (Harambam, 2017).

An illustrative example of these complex interactions between collective remembrance of past traumas and digital technologies is Wikipedia, the world's largest online encyclopedia. Built upon the neutral point of view (NPOV) principle, which encourages fair and unbiased representation of the encyclopedia's subjects, Wikipedia offers a unique transnational space for collective history-writing (Dounaevsky, 2013). Yet, the platform's idealistic aspiration towards representing the troubled past in a neutral way is often undermined by disagreements between its authors. Consequently, instead of serving as a cross-cultural forum for negotiating the past traumas, Wikipedia often turns into a memory battlefield used by individual actors for promoting their preferred historical narratives (Rogers and Sendjarevic, 2012).

To achieve better understanding how internet users interact with historical traumas through collaborative history-writing, we look how the Holocaust memory is constructed and negotiated on Wikipedia. So far, only a few studies (Pfanzelter 2015; Wolniewicz-Slomka, 2016) discuss the role of Wikipedia in the context of the Holocaust remembrance; yet, all of them focus on the platform's use for representing separate episodes of the Holocaust. By contrast, we look on the broader context of the Holocaust memorialization and ask if collaborative history-writing on Wikipedia can encourage the transnational dialogue about the traumatic past or, instead, create additional obstacles for it by promoting hoaxes and igniting hate. Specifically, we analyze to what degree the differences in historical paradigms between Eastern and Western Europe are projected on Wikipedia and how the collaborative history-writing about the Holocaust is influenced by the amalgamation of cultural practices, individual agendas and platform policies.

We implemented our analysis in two stages: first, we used a web crawler to retrieve articles about the Holocaust on Wikipedia and map of semantic relations between these articles in Eastern (i.e. Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, and Belorussian) and Western European (i.e. English,

German, and Dutch) versions of the encyclopedia. Then, we employed social network analysis to compare how these relations vary between different Wikipedia versions: specifically, we examined how specific episodes of the Holocaust are integrated into the larger WWII narratives and which of these episodes are more exposed or marginalized. Our findings indicated a number of distinctions between specific language versions in relation both to the presence/absence of specific episodes and the centrality of these episodes.

Secondly, based on the mapping, we identified articles which were central for the semantic structures of the Holocaust representation in specific language versions. We then explored these articles using qualitative content analysis. Specifically, we looked on their discussion pages to examine how Wikipedia authors collaboratively construct the Holocaust history and solve disagreements about the interpretations of its specific episodes. While doing so, we analyzed how Wikipedia authors employed different discursive strategies (Kriplean et al., 2007; Makhortykh, 2018) to legitimize their stance on the specific episodes of the Holocaust; examples of such strategies varied from references to prior consensus to threats of sanctions against ideological opponents. Our analysis indicated the presence of distinct approaches to negotiating the traumatic past between specific language versions which can be attributed to the cultural differences in the ways Wikipedia practices and norms are interpreted and instrumentalized by individual authors.

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