COMMUNIST HISTORY RELOADED

FROM DIGITAL UTOPIA TO LOST HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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A few years ago, it was becoming common for historians to think about digital technology as a useful tool when handling larger amounts of data in their research. Yet it would have been difficult to convince anybody that the technological turn itself needed to become an object of inquiry, or that it would substantially transform the work of an historian. Archival sources still seemed a blessed sacrament kept in the tabernacles of public and private collections. Remixing archives equalled to breaking a serious taboo in the discipline.

It was the CADEAH project, dealing with popular appropriation of digital audiovisual heritage, that brought us, historians from the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Science in Prague, together with media sociologists and ethnographers from Utrecht University as well as DH and IT specialists from HumLab at University of Umea.[1] Thanks to these partners and their experience in interdisciplinary communication, the historians in the team never felt "lost in translation" between high tech and humanities, between a transnational perspective and East-Central Europe's specific past, or only very rarely so. Owing to this challenging collaboration we were among the first in the community of academic historians to realize how widespread – and multifaceted – the practice of all kinds of appropriation of historical material was. Maybe this tremendous pain of giving up much of what we had taken for granted made us a bit prepared for the step that in between followed, as the drudgery of photography manipulation and video deepfakes became a snap for AI apps. Now that the technology has mastered the instruments of language, image and sound, completely new, previously non-existing documents can be created and historical accounts generated any second. In the words of philosopher and historian Yuval Noah Harari, by learning the art of storytelling, the "AI has hacked the operating system of human civilisation."[2]

When confronted with such disturbing amounts of novelty, historians tend to suggest to see longer continuities and be aware of the history – and historical connotations – of the supposedly brand new phenomena, hoping to be able to offer answers that other disciplines as well as public policy, inundated with AI legal regulation and effects for education and labour market, seem to miss. We did something similar within the CADEAH project, as we decided to explore the digital life-after-life of the originally pre-digital history, namely of the many often contradictory aspects of the communist dictatorships in East-Central Europe.

The first finding concerned the official *politics of history*. Vítězslav Sommer described the "digital utopia" built around the state-funded digitization of the archival materials of the communist State Security. The policy promised that while "every citizen would, from the comfort of his or her home and using his or her computer, study documents on communist repression, learn the truth about the past and embrace its correct interpretation", the society would finally reach the public "coming to terms with the communist past".[3] Sommer showed that the digitization's generous public funding and a powerful political backing turned the seemingly neutral technology into an instrument producing a dominating interpretation of the past, which saw the repressive policies as the only characteristic of the communist era.

Adéla Gjuričová's research[4] focused on popular creative approaches to digitised audiovisual material with history-related content, archival sources and professional arts production, and their implications for general social phenomena such as historical consciousness and collective memory. The user practice was conceptualised as *appropriation*, which enabled inclusion of a number of different modes from mere sharing of material under a title and description, through sophisticated remix, to digital manipulation and deepfakes. Applying critical discourse analysis on a selected volume of examples, the study addressed the following questions: What strategies do creative users apply when appropriating the material? Do various forms of appropriation of audiovisual footage cause shifts in the established historical narratives? And does the memory of historical events change in the digital era?

The research identified four distinctive types of strategies. In the first one, creators *appropriate established narratives* to join or oppose a moral position included in it. Indifference to historical accuracy is characteristic, and so must be the simplicity and familiarity of the narrative, since this is how its connection to the product, and its commercial or emotional exploitation, is built.

The second strategy, *appropriating archival footage*, was exemplified on a sample of remixes of well-known Červený Hrádek Speech by the Czechoslovak Communist Party Secretary General Miloš Jakeš. Their historical analysis made it possible to see that already the original version, that contributed to the radicalization of anti-communist sentiments in Czech society in 1989, was a remix. It showed the form as not exclusive to the digital era, but also as a medium with a decreasing quest for originality. Yet even while repeating the same joke over a well-known footage, users can change some parts of the form, adding a different sound, subtitles, or change a part of the video track, and thus easily shift the content's connotations, foreground and background different content particles, and effectively transform the message.

The third type, labelled *remix wars*, dealt with amateur videos imitating the traditional genre of documentary film and even using footage from existing documentaries. Besides never mentioning the original source, date or copyright, most examples in the corpus did not seem to have been produced to actually convince anybody from the opposing camp or to carry on with a debate. Neither did they seek to shift any established historical narrative. Instead, they only put visual content in a certain context and produced a meaning as a result. The collected examples have been posted on sites whose audience declared their identity in comments or when sharing the material. They were merely designed to strengthen the tie with the story worshipped by the group and to declare dishonest those who disagree.

The last type we explored – coined *beautiful socialism* – was especially difficult to tackle using traditional historiographical concepts and methods. We are clearly witnessing a rise of large participatory cultures around fan-made videos combining special music styles, such as vaporwave, with audiovisual footage from the Socialist era in East-Central Europe, Asia and even Cuba. Here the original messages seemed totally suppressed and the visual side only became an ornament to music.

What does all this imply for the current cultures of history? The source, its authenticity and even exceptionality tends to become less important to digital users. In other words, the footage has to be familiar to the viewers, then they react to it. The second tendency is that large parts of historical contexts can be totally omitted or changed in popular re-use (Andrew Hoskins coined this principal accident of digital memory as *emergence*).[5] And finally, new types of consumers of digital historical products seem to arise. People build communities around supposedly shared memories, such as escaping through the Iron Curtain or being oppressed by communist police. They tend to strongly identify with such stories, although in technical sense they have nothing in common with them. That is by no means new. Social groups, influenced by nationalist or socially critical activists, always tended to create relatively stable common *collective memories*. Yet now the whole concept seems to be facing serious challenges, since in digital media memories are authentically shared through one's presence and activity in the digital platform, but without any common social, ethnic, or geographic background and a group interest.

Historical consciousness is considered a general human competence and proclivity. Without the basic coherence and stability, based on knowing the source and the context, what is left is emotionally powerful representations of "remembering together"[6] something the complexities of which we do not – and even do not wish to – understand.

Notes

1. The consortium consisted of historians Adéla Gjuričová, Petr Roubal, and Vítězslav Sommer, media sociologists and ethnographers Eggo Müller and Abby Waysdorf, and the HumLab team was led by Pelle Snickars and Maria Eriksson.
2. Yuval Noah Harari argues that AI has hacked the operating system of human civilisation. *Economist,* 28 April 2023.
3. Vítězslav Sommer, "Decommunization as a digital utopia: Digitization of the communist State Security archives in the Czech Republic," *Střed / Centre* 13, no. 1 (2021), 82–109.
4. Adéla Gjuričová, History Reloaded: The Communist Past in Digital Space. *Iluminace* 33, no. 3 (2021), 27–42.
5. Andrew Hoskins, "Digital media and the precarity of memory," in *Collaborative Remembering: Theories, Research, and Applications*, eds. Michelle L. Meade, Celia B. Harris, Penny Van Bergen, John Sutton and Amanda J. Barnier (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), 371–385.
6. Roger I. Simon, "Remembering together: social media and the formation of the historical present," in *Heritage and Social Media. Understanding heritage in a participatory culture,* ed. Elisa Giaccardi (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2012), 89–106.

Biographies

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