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Platformed Pasts: Social Media, Historical Understanding, and the Reframing of Public Memory

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Abstract. How Social Media Reshapes Historical Knowledge: Changes in the Spread, Value and Public Debate of History Online. Based on previous studies in media memory, public history, algorithmic amplification, and online misinformation, this paper will present four qualitative case studies of recent online historical debates: the Blair-Brown relationship within New Labour, the use of the Iraq War as a reference point for discussions on American interventionism and Venezuela, debates over the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in response to Donald Trump's criticisms of the alliance, and Holocaust denial on digital platforms. Not all social media use needs to be reflected in school activities. Its impact is relatively small; it is a personalisation of institutional history, a mobilisation of the past for political purposes, a method of correcting problems through historical knowledge, and it also shows the gap between what scholars believe and what the public believes. Therefore, this paper will not ask whether social media are good or bad sources for history. On the other hand, social media is also providing different circumstances for learning about history and assessing it. Source criticism, contextual comparison and evidentiary discipline need to be learned by young children to grasp history in the digital age.

Keywords: social media, historical understanding, public memory, historical analogy, Holocaust denial

1. Introduction

Social media is now a very popular channel for people to spread, learn about, discuss and dispute historical narratives [1-4]. TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and X are now more and more used for leisure activities, but they have also been employed by people to discuss politics and history. Historical literacy in this paper refers to both knowledge of facts about the past and the ability to judge evidence, significance, cause and effect, and the use of historical comparison. Therefore, one might believe that social media is not introducing a whole new form of historical record. Instead, it alters the scale, speed and form of the circulation of historical claims, thus changing the conditions for the formation of historical understanding.

It is not the first time either. Historians and media scholars have long known that popular history, in newspapers and on television, often simplifies, dramatises or selects only certain parts of the past to attract public attention [5-7]. Social media are not simple; they are more elaborate and complex in form. Algorithmic visibility, short-form video, searchable hashtags and rapid reposting privilege

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have become historical claims that are engaging, memorable and emotionally direct. As a result, online historical interpretation is often concentrated in a few explanations and others are overlooked [8-11].

Therefore, this paper will not determine whether social media is a good or bad carrier of history. Instead, it asks how social media reshapes the understanding of history. The four case studies of the original argument are New Labour, the Iraq War and Venezuela, NATO and Trump, and Holocaust denial. The above cases are retained because they exhibit different modes of making the past publicly visible online: personalisation, analogy, reactive correction and evidentiary destabilisation. The argument is that social media does not offer a new way to learn about history; instead, it can help people develop independent critical thinking skills by having them distinguish between narrative and evidence, historical analysis and political application, scholarly consensus and opposition, etc.

2. Literature review

According to the research on media memory, the collective memory of a society is constructed by various forms of media rather than directly inherited from the past [1, 2]. Digital environments are interactive, familiar and daily tools for memory. Ben-David, Meyers and Neiger propose that social media memory is shaped by platform-specific rhythms and by the interaction of data-driven visibility and bottom-up user participation [3]. Richardson-Walden and Marrison also show that Holocaust memory on social media is widespread in platforms, forms and communities [4]. The above studies provide support for the starting point of this paper: social media should be regarded as an environment that regulates which historical claims are displayed and how convincing they are.

The second body of literature is popular history and the public dissemination of the past. De Groot believes that popular histories package historical experience in an emotional way that is easy to access [5]. Edy and Kitch have shown that journalism makes collective memory available for interpreting current events and endorses certain narratives about the past [6, 7]. Social media enhances the older tendencies of public history by making it participatory, compressed and emotional. Although they have the same qualities to engage the public with history, they may also lead to oversimplification and decontextualization.

The third is personalisation, misinformation and echo chambers. Research on political personalisation has shown that digital media can highlight leaders' personalities and affective self-presentations more prominently than institutions and structures [12]. Studies on echo chambers and filter bubbles have shown that in the online world, people are more likely to share the same views and avoid learning from different perspectives [10, 11]. For the sake of history, one must remember that viewers will not receive the past as a single, unified system of facts but rather as an accumulation of various narratives, edits and comparisons, and scholarly disputes.

3. Methodology

A small-scale case study will be conducted. The four cases are not to be considered a sample of all historical content on social media. Instead, they have been chosen as the example cases because they each show a different mode of historical mediation. The New Labour case demonstrates personalisation; Iraq and Venezuela are representative cases; NATO and Trump represent a reactive correction; and Holocaust denial indicates the collapse of the consensus on evidence. Thus, the aim is to explore how the same general material can be interpreted in various ways and thus change people's views on history.

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This paper analyzes secondary historical research in conjunction with close readings of repeated forms of online historical discussions, such as short-form political edits, comment-thread analogies, and corrective responses to public political discourse. As the basis for evidence is illustrative rather than statistical, the results are presented as mechanisms of mediation rather than measures of frequency. An additional boundary for the methodology of the Holocaust section is that the denialist claims are not reproduced in detail. They are only discussed in the context of a type of false information that undermines the credibility of historical evidence.

4. Analysis

4.1. The personalisation of New Labour

Social media is changing how New Labour is understood by shifting the focus from institutional reform to the friendship and rivalry between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown [12, 13]. A new problem in historiography has arisen due to the change in the above situation: Has the emergence of short-form digital media, by chance, led to a return to the leader-centric model of history and thus shifted away from the institutional, class and structure-oriented direction chosen by historians after the social turn? Traditional accounts of New Labour emphasize structural reasons: the 1997 electoral landslide, the independence of the Bank of England, constitutional reform, modernisation of public services, and foreign-policy choices such as Iraq. TikTok and other platforms have also been used to portray the relationship between Blair and Brown as political psychodramas. Edits splice news clips, dramatic music and captions to suggest that the two men have been unfaithful. The format does not introduce the rivalry; rather, it serves to organise the existing rivalry.

The alleged Granita deal of 1994, a private meeting between Blair and Brown in Islington after the death of John Smith, is often regarded as the starting point for the betrayal in the New Labour project. Later, the following are arranged as the confirmation of that arc: Brown's announcement of Bank of England independence in 1997, Blair's failure to commit to a clear departure timetable after the 2005 election, and Brown's eventual accession in 2007. Short-form videos use indirect language, visual signs of discomfort and negative headlines to tell the story of a friendship that has gone bad.

What changes on social media here is not the historical record itself, but the meaning attached to it. Policy decisions are viewed as power struggles, and institutional reform is regarded as the result of individual competition. Therefore, a more reasonable historical interpretation should avoid both ends. It should not ignore personality and informal power, but it should not reduce New Labour to a two-person drama. The Blair-Brown effect is likely a mediator, not a direct cause, of these factors. Therefore, social media can be used to develop critical thinking in history classes and help students distinguish between personal emotions and objective analysis of events.

4.2. Iraq, Venezuela and historical analogy

A second case is a new discussion in the public sphere regarding the legality of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and this history has also been used in debates about American interventionism. Online discourse often uses Iraq and other instances in Venezuela to question the legitimacy of unilateral pressure or intervention [14-18]. The main legal dispute in Iraq involves the basis for the claim of weapons of mass destruction, which has later been ruled without merit, and the lack of explicit authorisation from the United Nations Security Council [15]. The Iraq Inquiry in Britain has continued to criticize the intelligence, planning and legal foundations of the war [16].

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Social media does not necessarily contradict the above. Iraq is often cited as a negative example in the discussion online for intervention based on uncertain intelligence or wide-ranging self-defence interpretations. The above will be useful because it will maintain the legal process and historical responsibility in the public discussion. At the same time, there is the problem of anachronistic projection. Iraq was fully occupied by a US-led coalition after a large-scale invasion. Most of the talk in Venezuela is about recognizing the opposition leader, sanctions and regime-pressure talk, rather than open war [17]. Social media analogies fail to present the differences in history clearly, thereby hindering comparison.

Therefore, this case serves as a reference. Therefore, history is used to provide support for other areas. Iraq is a typical case for interventionism, but the scope, legal process, evidence and circumstances of comparison need to be considered. Social media has not changed the judgment that Iraq is still legally and politically disputed here, but it has shown how easily precedent can be used as a weapon in contemporary disputes.

4.3. NATO, Trump and reactive historical correction

A third type of pattern has appeared in the social media discussion about NATO due to repeated questions by Donald Trump on the purpose of the alliance. Online spread of these remarks led to historical rectification. In 1949, NATO was officially established as an alliance of collective defence under Article 5 [19]. It also appeared in the early Cold War period, when the United States had already committed to supporting the states under threat of Soviet expansion through the Truman Doctrine [20]. NATO has thus provided the foundation for the American military presence in Europe and serves both US and European security interests.

Responses on social media to Trump's speech often referenced this history and argued that NATO had only increased American strength, not limited it. Research on NATO burden-sharing debates shows that presidential pressure and alliance politics have become prominent subjects of public discussion about the alliance [21]. At the same time, some parts of it have also served as sites for revising history. Users used Cold War history to show the shortcomings of a purely transactional account of NATO.

But this correction is still reactive. The history of NATO is frequently presented not in isolation but as a response to a current political demand. It is thus not the same problem as that for New Labour. The risk is not simply over-personalisation but presentism: the institution's past gains meaning only in relation to answering a current dispute. Therefore, social media has shown that historical sites are constantly being reinterpreted based on the political situation today.

4.4. Holocaust denial and evidentiary consensus

The final and most serious cause is Holocaust denial. The issues of interpretation, cause and decision-making in Holocaust studies do not involve whether the genocide took place. Historians also debate how to use either an intentionalist or a functionalist explanation for the development of Nazi policy on the Final Solution [22]. Such discussions are based on the same set of data. Holocaust denial, on the other hand, denies that foundation. It attempts to deny or alter the established facts of the Nazi genocide against European Jews and is widely recognised as a form of antisemitism and historical revisionism [23, 24].

Social media has changed the scope and form of dissemination for denial and distortion. Digital platforms can help people who have been separated by distance for a long time get to know one another and share common ideas through algorithms [10, 11]. Short videos and comment threads can

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merge critical questions with negations by posing them as "independent enquiries" of scepticism. Studies of Holocaust memory on TikTok show that this platform can make Holocaust memory more participatory and interesting, but there are also risks of trivialisation or decontextualisation in the form of play [4, 9, 25, 26].

This case is not like New Labour, Iraq and NATO. Social media supports reinterpretations, framings and analogues. Thus, it no longer has the quality of evidence. It is not that there is no scholarly discussion; there is. Whether the public can distinguish scholarly revision from denialist distortion is the problem. Therefore, this case provides support for the main idea of this paper: In the digital age, learning history should cover both analyzing the past and safeguarding the conditions under which historical truth can still be relied upon.

5. Discussion

Social media is now also being used to transmit historical knowledge. First, it individualises history. Institutional reform in the New Labour case is a tale of the competition between Blair and Brown. Second, it uses historical analogies. Iraq is an example that is used to evaluate the later discussion of Venezuela and interventionism. Third, it is responsive. NATO's history will be shown in light of recent discussions and is not to be viewed as objective institutional statements. Fourth, it makes the evidence inconsistent. Holocaust denial shows that academic certainty does not automatically become public certainty online.

The above will achieve a good balance. Social media is not to be considered a bad place for history. Introduce historical topics to the public, have users compare various cases, and reveal weak political claims. At the same time, its platform logic often favours simplicity, conflict, emotion and speed. Therefore, the goal is no longer to transmit knowledge but rather to help people analyze how that knowledge has been presented in the past. It has increased the demand for source evaluation among students.

The paper has the following deficiencies. The number of times such patterns occur on various platforms and whether all users have seen this content are also unknown. It will only serve to teach some ideas. It is a way of conducting historical research that sets up a research question, identifies related mechanisms, applies relevant materials, and separates evidence from interpretation.

6. Conclusion

Social media has not offered an alternative theory of history, but rather changed the spread and popularity of historical arguments, as well as how these arguments have become contested. Across New Labour, Iraq and Venezuela, NATO, and Holocaust denial, it has shifted what is given more attention to the public, how causes are presented, and how examples from the past are used in public discourse. In some cases, it motivates people to reinterpret it by putting people first. Others support the above conclusions with historical evidence to refute the current political idea. In the Holocaust-denial case, it shows that the scholarly consensus is not automatically the same as the public consensus.

Thus, people can learn about history through digital platforms. Readers need to differentiate between narration and proof, analogy and equivalence, historical study and political usage, modification and denial. Therefore, social media has not altered the past itself, but rather changed the environment in which people view, discuss, and make use of that past. Therefore, a new historical method has been required, and the reliability of history is now based on how this new method presents and supports knowledge.

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