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POLICY MEMO

Media and Collective Memory

by Fazila Mat

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EUROPEAN
MEMORY
POLITICS

Media and Collective Memory

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Executive Summary

Collective memories are made possible through their public articulations. The media represents one of the primary public arenas where narratives of the past are shaped and reflected into the future. While news media and journalistic work emerge as playing a pivotal role in this context, new digital venues for creating news and social media have challenged legacy media's status as "first drafters of history". Despite challenges, journalists keep their pivotal role in selecting, gathering, and editing the material that shape collective memory and which historical narratives become injected into the public domain. This policy memo argues that to have a more complete, just, and inclusive collective memory, news media have a responsibility to harness past memories of voices that have been excluded from the dominant narrative to raise awareness and encourage future remedial action.

The Policy Memo

Background and research question

Societies form their identities by resorting to narratives of the past. The acceptance of a frame that establishes the boundaries and meaning of past events allows communities to create a collective identity. In this sense, the term 'collective memory' (Halbwachs, 1992/1925) has been defined as a construction that offers a version of the past, which is agreed upon by society and its institutions, and where personal and societal interpretations of events coincide. In this context, collective memory is the narrative that emerges from competing memories of the community's members and that is ultimately forged by the elite (Neiger, 2020). Nevertheless, the creation of this narrative is a continuous and multidirectional process, which is constantly redefined by changing socio-political power circumstances and agendas (Neiger et al, 2011). In this sense, what makes 'collective memory' possible is its public articulation (Neiger et al., 2011, p. 3). The media represents one of the primary public arenas where narratives of the past are shaped and reflected into the future. Our understanding of personal and public histories

is structured through what José van Dijck has termed ‘mediated memories’ (2007) with the media representing the main mechanisms which determine and sustain “mnemonic consensus” (Schwartz, 1982, p. 374).

Of all types of media, news media and journalistic work emerge as playing a pivotal role in this regard. This policy memo reflects on the influence of news media and journalistic work in forming collective memories and offers suggestions on how to strengthen their role in providing a template for the future in which past wrongs are not repeated and commitments and promises are respected.

Methodology

This policy memo is based on a critical review of recent studies tackling the link between collective memory and media, news media and journalism in particular. It is also based on a reflection on the reports and presentations carried out within the context of the [Jean Monnet Network on Memory Politics](#), which delved into different forms of memory politics in various European countries and Canada.

Key findings

Mass communication is a fundamental instrument in the construction of social cohesiveness through the consumption of media stories about the shared societal past, present, and future (Neiger, 2020, p. 4). Talking about the media entails considering a multiplicity of venues, storytelling strategies, and modes of operation that characterize the field, including the form of print, television, film, photography, radio and the Internet. The multitude of existing media channels and outlets offers a variety of genres that engage with the idea of constructing collective memory from multiple, complementary, overlapping and/or contrasting angles that might also generate a blurred picture.

In many ways, collective memories and media products share interesting similarities. They are both activities that involve (overt and/or covert) decision-making dynamics determining the salience of certain events and the dismissal of others, which, in turn, entail specific consequences for meaning-making. Similarly, both collective memories and media products are the result of larger cultural and political contexts that shape and inform their interpretive work of narrative construction, including present perspectives and the ideological filters used to form them (Neiger et al, 2011).

News media and journalism have traditionally had a prominent role in this picture, with some scholars arguing that “the very notion of collective memory could not exist without journalism” (Zelizer, 2014 p. 32). While journalists frequently engage with the past in a deliberate and strategic way (Trümper and Broer, 2021), the documentary style of journalism and the claim to offer a faithful account of the facts provide journalists with a unique authority in telling the story of the past (Edy, 1999, p. 73).

In this context, legacy media is also generally considered as having a strong influence on public policy and in setting the agenda for national journalism on matters of major importance, including issues related to collective memory (Li and Lee, 2013). Over the last decades, however, legacy media’s status has been challenged by a rapidly changing industry that sees the emergence of new digital venues for creating news. Journalists have gradually lost their role as ‘first drafters of history’

to various social media users. The rise of accelerated communication and ephemeral digital media is also reflected in the difficulty in continuing to produce and maintain collective memory. This is also why asserting authority over collective memory has become a way to resist this trend and affirm the established legacies of news media institutions (Lincoln, 2023).

Despite challenges, journalists still maintain their importance in selecting, gathering and editing the material they will use to feed the repository of collective memories to be injected into the public domain (Lindgren and Gail Phillips, 2016). If the story of the past remains the story as the media choose to retell it, the media's memory of the event becomes the country's collective memory (Li and Lee, 2013). Moreover, in a globalized era, collective memory tends to exist not only at a national level but also in a transnational context.

In this sense, it is important to determine the direction that the news media should take in asserting its authority over collective memory. News media can become an agent for "collective prospective memory" (Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013), where past memories could be harnessed to raise awareness and could encourage future remedial action. While research shows that journalism's memory work in developed economies is increasingly more careful in incorporating discourses focused on human rights as much as civil and political rights (Yunya Song and Chin-Chuan Lee, 2019), there is still the need to better connect journalistic work to stories that "had been repressed, forgotten, marginalized, erased or traumatized" (Healy and Tumarkin, 2011, p. 5). To have a more complete, just and, inclusive collective memory for present and future generations it is essential to give space to competing narratives, making sure that different perspectives find broader representation in the news media.

Recommendations

This policy memo advances the following recommendations.

To journalists and the news media:

- Being aware and reflexive of their own function in providing public visibility to certain narratives over others, especially if in a privileged position to assert authority over collective memory.
- News media should be more receptive to the stories of different people and groups (including political activists, local communities and more) conveying their versions with dignity and complexity.
- News media should find ways to better engage with and incorporate scholarly work in their publications dealing with collective memory. This would give them the possibility to reduce their research efforts and learn about personal stories and interpretations of past events that have already gone through rigorous analytical work.
- Engaging with contemporary scholarly work would also give them the possibility to explore new perspectives and approaches to issues that might seem carved in stone.
- To increase awareness on how collective memories are narrated in different contexts at a global level, news media should also collaborate with media outlets at the transnational level, in a relationship of mutual learning and dialogue. This could be done in the form of networks and consortiums where articles are translated into different languages and presented to different audiences.

To governments:

- Commit to support and learn from journalistic initiatives promoting narratives of the past that give voice to the stories of different people and groups (political activists, local communities and academics and more), including those that have been repressed, forgotten, marginalized, erased or traumatized.
- Support and prioritize projects that would give publicly funded media a more inclusive way of narrating and referring to past events.
- Support local outlets that might have a better grasp of community needs and perspectives.
- Support initiatives and projects that can help create synergies between scholarly work on collective memory and the media. This would also help high-level research that receives government or institutional funding to have a greater audience and impact.
- Support transnational level initiatives, by supporting media outlets and projects devoted to offering a different way of approaching past events of common relevance.
- Complement the above commitments at the institutional level by giving the rightful space and voice to a variety of perspectives in view of creating a more democratic and pluralist society.

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The Jean Monnet Network has established a transnational team of scholars and collaborators addressing the politics of memory, its use in the mobilizing efforts of populist-nationalist parties across the continent and the tension to an emerging transnational memory culture in the EU.

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