From Individual Trauma to Frozen Currents: Conceptualising Digital Trauma Studies

An Essay by Anna Menyhért and Mykola Makhortykh

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Abstract: This essay presents digital trauma studies, a novel and interdisciplinary approach to trauma research. Digital trauma studies scrutinize the impact of technological innovation on the transmission and processing of individual and collective trauma by examining trauma-related texts and gestures produced through the digital environments. The awareness of the growing interrelations between digital media and trauma is important for acknowledging the changing role of key concepts of trauma research in the digitally mediated context and for developing a new theoretical framework for trauma studies. The conceptualization of digital mediation of trauma is also crucial for recognizing possibilities and dangers related to the deployment of big data in the area of trauma-centred research. The essay concludes with the discussion of the application of digital trauma studies framework to three areas of trauma research: the transmission of individual trauma, the pluralization of trauma discourse, and the enhancement of trauma communication by research and educational institutions.

Keywords: trauma, digital media, participatory culture, theory, big data, PTSD

In today's world users of digital media regularly engage in producing, consuming and sharing unsettling content related to individual and collective traumatic experiences. The examples are many: YouTube videos depicting scenes of school bullying (Gahagan, Vaterlaus, and Frost 2016); Facebook communities collecting stories of alienation shared by migrants and refugees (Baran 2018) and processing transgenerational Holocaust trauma (Menyhért 2017); Instagram feeds with selfies from concentration camps (Kansteiner 2017); and Wikipedia articles on mass atrocities and war crimes (Makhortykh 2017). The impact of the unprecedented visibility of trauma on contemporary society as yet is obscure, thus the assessment of the immediate and long-term consequences of the increasing saturation of digital environments with trauma-related content is an urgent, complex academic task. Does

the pervasiveness of pain and sorrow increase empathy and societal awareness about individual and collective suffering? Or does it lead to satiation with images of pain and sorrow and to subsequent indifference towards others' traumatic experiences?

We argue that in order to provide answers to these urgent questions, we need a novel and interdisciplinary approach, which was called *digital trauma studies* by Anna Menyhért[1]. The new field of digital trauma studies, located at the intersection of digital memory studies, cultural trauma studies and media studies, focuses on the transmission and processing of individual, collective and historical trauma through visual and verbal texts produced on digital platforms and through participatory acts and gestures characteristic of the digital environment. Digital trauma studies emphasise the importance of medium-specific technological design, affordances and communication practices for interactions surrounding personal and individual trauma; and call for the recognition of the complex role of technological innovation in the process of experiencing and dealing with distressing events.

We suggest that the assessment of rapidly changing relations between technology and trauma is particularly important for Central and Eastern Europe. The public sphere in these countries is often characterised by the limited capabilities of ordinary citizens for political and cultural self-expression, including the lack of possibilities and means to express and process their traumatic experiences belonging both to the present and the past. The recent turn towards populism in the region often involves instrumentalisation of past traumas for intense political mobilisation. Under these conditions, both past and present traumas turn into 'frozen currents' (Menyhert 2017: 358), the unresolved instances of traumatic experience which can lead to repeated re-enforcement of past traumas thus hindering the society's capability to deal with new sources of distress. That is why, on the other hand, comparative perspectives related to historical trauma are very important for digital trauma studies; thus, in order to facilitate further research and the exchange of insights we call for establishing a global interdisciplinary network engaging in investigations of historical trauma, transgenerational traumatic legacies, and the novel ways of processing the painful past in the global digital age.

From 9/11 to the Holocaust: the emergence of digital trauma studies

One of many consequences of the traumatic experience of 9/11 was the change in the perception of interrelations between digital technology and trauma in the global West (Lazar and Hirsch 2012). Digital media turned out to be a major information outlet through which the global audience was connected to the destruction of the World Trade Center (Kaplan 2005). Digital media platforms thus played an essential role in trauma dissemination; furthermore, their accessibility and global reach turned them into an important means of processing trauma through the establishment of online communities, digital memorials, and virtual archives (Haskins 2007; Hess 2007).

In the post-9/11 period, the complex interactions between digital media and trauma became increasingly recognised in different academic fields, varying from psychology to media studies. A large number of studies examined the use of digital platforms for transmitting recent traumatic experiences related to mediatised distressing events such as terrorist attacks (Pentzold 2009; Eriksson 2016) protest actions (Ferron and Massa 2011; Twyman, Keeganm and Shaw 2016), and military conflicts (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010).

The growing interest in the digitisation of trauma led to the formation of another fast-growing area of academic scholarship which examines interrelations between digital technology and historical trauma - i.e. traumatic experiences which are transmitted to subsequent generations (Sotero 2006). The digitisation of Holocaust memory (de Bruyn 2010; Pfanzelter 2015; Shandler 2017) is perhaps the most frequently discussed subject of academic inquiry in this field; yet, a number of works consider the transformations of other instances of historical trauma such as First World War (Menyhért 2016; Sear 2016) or the Stalinist repressions (Etkind 2009). Another example of the trauma-centered research which is closely aligned with digital trauma studies is the cumulative historical traumatisation of the Indigenous people and the possibilities of healing provided by digital storytelling (Beltrán and Begun 2014).

Digital trauma studies: theoretical framework

The recognition of the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a disease in the 1980s led to a significant rise in academic interest towards cultural and historically oriented trauma research, including the establishment of widely recognised concepts such as post-memory (Hirsh 2001), re-traumatisation (Rüsen 2004) and the transmission of trauma by reading (Felman and Laub 1992) during the 1990s. The boom in cultural trauma studies was followed by the growing scholarly interest in the impact of digital technology on the different spheres of human life, including processes of individual and collective remembrance in the 2000s. By the 2010s it could be recognised that the dissemination of digital technology has led to fundamental changes in trauma transmission and processing.

These changes in particular are related to the concept of traumatic silence. The classical scheme of recovery from PTSD (Herman 1992) consists of three stages: 1) reconstituting the survivor's feeling of security; 2) reconstructing the trauma narrative; 3) re-establishing the relationships of the survivor by (re)integrating him/her in the community. In the pre-digital era, trauma studies usually focused on the second phase – i.e. the interpretation of texts produced during trauma processing. The increasing use of digital media elevated the third phase into the public sphere by offering possibilities to receive instant response and engage in a dialogue in relation to trauma through online platforms, which also allow their users to stay anonymous or use alternative identities. The opportunity to share traumatic experiences online and to react to them eliminates the element of silence that used to be thought to be inherent in trauma: on the one hand as its basic feature, meaning the victim is unable to speak about it, on the other hand silencing as the cause of secondary traumatisation, when others do not or are not able to listen to the victim, or as an official oppressive practice by an authoritarian regime.

As silence used to be considered a crucial element in definitions of trauma, this change in focus has lead to the redefinition of trauma and to the reassessment of the field of trauma

studies in the digital context (Menyhért 2017). As a consequence, digitally mediated trauma processing is proving to be the way to clear (ideologically) blocked avenues of cultural memory by thawing 'frozen currents' of the traumatic past and induce social and cultural change, or at least to allow for the existence of parallel or multiple versions of traumatic history: official, rigid versions, determined by oppressive past and present-day ideologies, as opposed to other versions, created by communities, the arts and civil society, that are versatile and mobile, emotionally active and capable of activating trauma processing reactions.

At the same time, the digitisation of traumatic experiences not only facilitates, but can also impede the process of recovery from PTSD or even cause mental problems through the exposure to mediatised trauma (Pinchevski 2016). Similarly, the instrumentalisation of digital technology for the reinforcement of hegemonic interpretations of historical trauma in recent political contexts can add additional layers of ice to 'frozen currents' via isolating the alternative versions of the traumatic past and via enforcing censorship through platform- or community-based norms. The disruptive impact that mediation of trauma online can potentially have on trauma processing on the individual and collective levels is another aspect of trauma-related research, increasingly recognised in digital trauma studies.

Digital trauma studies: methodological innovations

In addition to changes to the conceptual framework of trauma dissemination and processing in the context of virtual environments, digital trauma studies call for the recognition of possibilities – and dangers – related to the methodological aspects of digital trauma research. The analysis of the unprecedented amount of data generated through the use of digital platforms by internet users allows new insights into the ways traumatic events are negotiated and coped with both on individual (Eriksson 2016) and collective (Pentzold 2009) levels. By scrutinising this radically novel context of trauma processing, digital trauma studies also facilitate the deployment of a wide range of comparative research perspectives, varying from cross-platform analyses to transnational inquiries.

The availability of large volumes of data also leads to the adoption of new quantitative methodologies for the study of trauma-related content. Varying from quantitative content analysis (Makhortykh 2018) to the cross-edge machine learning techniques (Augsburger and Elbert 2017), these methodologies not only allow researchers to cope with big data challenges, but also show the potential of identifying new data patterns which are not necessarily observable with more traditional qualitative practices. This is a (regrettably) rare instance of digital humanities and research on the digital aspects and contexts of cultural and social phenomena and practices actually interacting and enhancing each other.

The big data revolution raises a number of questions concerning the ethical aspects of studying trauma online to the table. Even more than other academic fields where big data are employed, digital trauma studies are susceptible to privacy concerns. In the case of trauma-related content breaching of privacy can not only lead to re-traumatisation, but also in some cases can attract unwanted attention of opposing groups, thus leading to public ostracism or even endangering the life of a survivor. The recognition of these ethical considerations together with the responsible use of sensitive data related to individual and collective trauma poses one of the major challenges for digital trauma studies. The experience of dealing with

such profound ethical concerns in highly delicate contexts constitutes a valuable asset, which will be of significant interest for other scholarly fields such as for example media ethics.

Digital trauma studies: current issue

In this special issue of *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*, we present a collection of papers representing the above discussed theoretical aspects and methodological framework of digital trauma studies. In particular, we explore three themes: 1) the individual transmission of trauma by the means of digital media; 2) the pluralisation of trauma discourse in the context of hegemonic memory regimes; and 3) the enhancement of trauma communication with the help of multimedia technology. The three thematic sections of the issue are organised according to the themes.

The first section of the issue, which includes papers by Anna Menyhért and Elizaveta Gaufman, looks into the use of digital media for the transmission of transcultural traumas by individuals. The causes of such traumatic experiences vary from forced migration to military conflicts; often, these traumas involve intrinsic (e.g. cultural shock) or extrinsic (e.g. politics of silencing) factors, which interfere with the traditional ways of trauma transmission. Under these circumstances, digital media can create possibilities for traumatised individuals to express and share their experiences with other victims and a wider audience (see Menyhért); at the same time, as Gaufman shows, digital technology can facilitate the resurgence of post-imperial trauma which contributes to the popular support of the regime's aggressive foreign politics.

The articles by Marielle Wijermars and Mykola Makhortykh in the second section of the issue look into the role of digital media in re-discovering collective traumas, which were – and sometimes still are – silenced by official memory regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. The frequent appropriation of traumatic memories for mobilising public support and de-legitimising political opponents makes the perspective of pluralisation traumatic experiences through the use of digital technology particularly urgent for the region. However, both papers in this section point out the importance of problematising the pluralising impact of digital media on cultural and historical trauma by showing how, instead of pluralising public remembrance, digital media can reinforce the traumatising hegemonic memory narratives.

The third section, which includes papers by Maria Zalewska, Aleksandra Szczepan, and Trevor Jockims, examines the use of digital technology by educational and research institutions for processing individual and collective trauma and communicating it to a wider audience. For museums, archives, memorial centres and truth commissions the advent of digital technology provides both an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, digital technology can be used for enhancing visitors' experience (e.g. by integrating multimedia techniques into existing memorial space – see Jockims), and for opening new research possibilities (e.g. by digitising collections and developing new tools for the processing - see Szczepan). At the same time, as the article by Zalewska demonstrates, digital technology can be a disruptive factor undermining the role of trauma-related institutions in their respective international online communities; and can also encourage offensive and disrespectful practices (e.g. of making selfies at sites of mass murder).

The argument of Zalewska reverberates in other contributions by focusing on a question central to digital trauma studies that needs further investigation: What is the impact of transnational trauma remediation on societies where the trauma originates from, and the cultural memories of which are mediated online? The issue does not offer a single answer, but the variety of individual and societal responses to trauma online mapped by the contributors urges the search for it through the novel theoretical and methodological approaches discussed in this introductory essay.

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