Open Forum

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Open Forum: Possibilities and Risks of Artificial Intelligence for Holocaust Memory

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The adoption of technological innovations has long had a profound impact on Holocaust memory and education. The development of mass media after the Second World War enabled the beginning of the "memory boom" (Hoskins 2014) in the 1970s, which contributed to the growing awareness about the Holocaust in the Global North. With the rise of Web 2.0 and the establishment of digital platforms, both institutional (Manca 2019) and non-institutional actors (Gibson and Jones 2012) adopted a new set of practices and tools for representing and engaging with Holocaust memory. Some of these tools, however, were also adopted by Holocaust deniers and adherents of anti-semitic ideologies that contributed to the active spread of content denying historical facts and propagating hate speech in online environments (Guhl and Davey 2020).

Today, we are facing what could become a new disruptive shift in the field of Holocaust remembrance, which is attributed to the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). Defined as the ability of human-made artifacts to engage in intellectual behavior (Nilsson 1998), AI is increasingly adopted by heritage institutions and commercial companies to organize, retrieve, and generate information regarding the Holocaust. From search engines crawling billions of web pages to rank online information sources about the Holocaust (Pfanzelter 2015) to hologram-like interfaces allowing visitors to converse with virtual embodiments of survivors (Shur-Ofry and Pessach 2019) to chatbots used by heritage institutions to help users find relevant sources (Walden 2023), AI transforms how individuals inform themselves about the Holocaust and how institutions implement their educational and commemorative programs. It also creates a new range of risks: from enabling new possibilities for Holocaust denial and distortion to undermining the concept of historical authenticity by generating fake historical content to posing new privacy risks related to the disclosure of sensitive information about victims (Makhortykh et al. 2023a).

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In this forum, we invited contributions from several research groups investigating the possibilities and risks associated with the use of AI in the context of Holocaust remembrance in Eastern Europe. The foci of the contributions range from the potential of AI-powered tools to contribute to the preservation of digital Holocaust heritage under the risk of disappearance due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine (Zucker et al. 2023) to the threats of generative AI models facilitating the distortion and instrumentalization of Holocaust memory by the Kremlin (Makhortykh, Vziatysheva, and Sydorova 2023) to the impact of non-generative AI and their understanding of the concept of historical relevance on the visual representation of the Holocaust (Urman et al. 2023). However, despite this thematic diversity, there is a single thread uniting all the contributions: the urgency of recognizing the changes AI brings to the field of Holocaust memory and education and conceptualizing what the AI-shaped future of the field is to be.

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