

Collaborative Interpreting Practice in Developing a Conceptual Boundary Object: The Case of Social Memory Infrastructures

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the authors introduce the interpretation challenge of an ongoing research project where he and his collaborator are proposing the concept of social memory infrastructures (SMIs). SMIs are sociotechnical systems patched and adapted to serve the purposes of memory activism: symbolically redress victims by acknowledging their experiences, educating the public about past violence, and holding perpetrators accountable. The interpretation challenge in defining SMIs stem from the differences in the objects of study in social memory studies and infrastructure studies. Both fields are concerned with knowledge, but of a different nature. While infrastructure studies are concerned with knowledge produced by technoscience, memory studies are concerned with social memory, a kind of knowledge about the past that exists in connection with, but different from, history. While prior work has already explored how social memories shape people's experiences of physical infrastructures, this project is the first to articulate the opposite problem: how infrastructures shape social memory. This notion of SMIs expand upon an emerging set of research concerned with bridging the gaps between memory studies and infrastructure studies.

KEYWORDS

Social memory infrastructures, knowledge infrastructures, alternative sociotechnical infrastructures, conceptual boundary objects, collaborative interpretation

INTRODUCTION

In an ongoing interdisciplinary study, the two researchers involved have found themselves challenged to make sense of their data drawing from their respective disciplines: memory studies and infrastructure studies. Though both disciplines have strong interpretive traditions, scholarly interest to explore their intersection is recent (Hoskins, 2018; Van House & Churchill, 2008).

Interpretive research assumes that reality is not objective or singular. Instead, reality is shaped by human experiences in social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The fields of memory studies and infrastructure studies share a common concern for interpreting meaning making processes about the world but centered on different objects of study. Infrastructure studies focus on the meaning making surrounding the formation and evolution of inter-connected systems such as online universities, scientific journals, and creative commons practices (P. Edwards et al., 2009). Studies of social memory aim to understand meaning making about the past centered on social practices (e.g., annual commemorations), structures (e.g., monuments and memorials), and agents (e.g., truth and reconciliation commissions, human rights organizations) (Robbins & Olick, 1998). Knowledge production in the field of memory studies typically relies on interpretive research methods such as semi-structured interviews or analysis of archival sources (Roediger & Wertsch, 2008). Similarly, infrastructure studies rely on interpretive research methods such as ethnography or the historical method (P. N., Edwards et al., 2013).

Drawing from a series of semi-structured interviews and policy documents, the authors are aiming to expand the concept of an alternative sociotechnical infrastructure (ASI) to memory activism (Fridman, 2020; Gutman & Wustenberg, 2017) drawing from the case study of the civil war in El Salvador (1980-1992). The notion of ASIs was coined by the second author to refer to "autonomous overlapping social and technical systems that civil society organizations create when their local institutions are inadequate to help them engage in local political and economic life." (Espinoza Vasquez, 2021, p. 4)

The notion of infrastructures has been used in memory studies to highlight interconnected social systems shaped by intentional and sustained work to create and maintain social memories (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994). Examples of such social systems include coalitions of human rights organizations and victims' associations who advocated for the end of dictatorships in Latin America (Fried Amilivia, 2016; Villalón, 2017) and the conjunction of museums and historical sites devoted to memorializing the Rwanda genocide (A. E. Grzyb, 2019) and the Holocaust (A. Grzyb, 2019; Young, 1993). By contrast, in infrastructure studies, knowledge infrastructures are viewed as technological, interconnected systems shaped by sociotechnical factors (Borgman et al., 2020; P. N. Edwards, 2010), but the

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impact of these interconnected systems on memory activism is still poorly understood. To make sense of an ASI serving memory activism, the authors developed a conceptual boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989): social memory infrastructures (SMIs). SMIs expand ongoing efforts to bridge the gap between memory studies and infrastructure studies.

CONCEPTUAL BOUNDARY OBJECTS

A boundary object is an entity that is part of multiple social worlds, has a different identity in each, is malleable, and enables communication between them (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 409). Though boundary objects often take the shape of physical entities such as records (Yeo, 2008), boundary objects can also be conceptual. In fact, previous work has explored how the concept of resilience enables interdisciplinary research in multiple fields such as agroecology, sociology, and economy (Brand & Jax, 2007; Zimmerer, 2015). Brand and Jax (2007) noticed that the concept of resilience grew increasingly vague when used as a boundary object. While the authors called on researchers in ecological science to use a descriptive, well-defined, and clear definition, they also acknowledged that broader, less specific conceptions of resilience foster “communication across disciplines and between science and practice.” (Brand & Jax, 2007, p. 11) The authors drew inspiration from this case as they sought a conceptual bridge that would enable them to interpret infrastructures in the context of social memory.

Infrastructure is conceptualized differently in memory studies and infrastructure studies. The term has been used in memory studies as a metaphor to highlight the work required to maintain and create social memory, a work that leads to symbolic outputs in the form of media or memorialization rituals: “to secure a presence from the past demands work – ‘memory work’ -- whether it is writing a book, filming a documentary, or erecting a monument. Produced, in effect, is what I call here the ‘infrastructure’ of collective memory, all the different spaces, objects, ‘texts’ that make an engagement with the past possible.” (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994, p. 13) Examples of these “different spaces” are cultural heritage institutions such as museums, archives, and galleries. The orientation of memory work towards activism has been the subject of prior research (Fridman, 2020; Gutman & Wustenberg, 2017), but its ties to infrastructure have received less attention.

In infrastructure studies, an infrastructure refers not just to individual technological systems, but the assemblages that connect multiple systems through interfacing technologies, policies, and practices. Infrastructures face two stages of development. First, when specific systems are developed to solve problems, and second, when gateway technologies or social arrangements enable multiple systems to interoperate (P. Edwards et al., 2009). Relatedly, knowledge infrastructures are a specific kind of infrastructure that revolves around interfacing information systems, policies, and practices. They are defined as “robust networks of people, artifacts, and institutions that generate, share, and maintain specific knowledge about the human and natural worlds.” (P. N. Edwards, 2010, p. 17) Knowledge infrastructures emerged as a distinct object of study in information science since the early 2000s (Borgman et al., 2020; P. N., Edwards et al., 2013).

In their work, the authors bridge the metaphorical formulation of infrastructures in memory studies, and the descriptive, information-oriented conceptualization of infrastructure studies. Memory activism requires the interplay of work practices, information technologies, and policies. Paying attention to this conjunction means attending to the human and non-human factors of memory work. In the case study the authors focus on, memories about the armed conflict of El Salvador (1980-1992), examples of non-human factors includes policies related to memory work (e.g., the peace accord, the final report of the truth and reconciliation commission, rulings from international courts against the State, and a ruling of a domestic court annulling the amnesty law), the specific technologies used by memorial museums and sites to narrate the story of the conflict (e.g., debris from torn down helicopters, replicas of wireless radios used by the insurgency movement), and the institutions engaged in memory activism (e.g., commemoration committees, war veterans’ associations, and memorial museums). Examples of human factors of memory work are the strategies used by activists such as educating youth, promoting intergenerational dialogue, and being attentive to how the public reacts to narratives of the conflict.

SOCIAL MEMORY INFRASTRUCTURES

The interpretive challenge of this project stemmed precisely from the authors’ decision to bring into conversation literature about knowledge infrastructures with research about social memories shaped by information systems. As an object of study, memory is different from technoscience in important respects. Studies of social memory can be traced back to the early 20th century with Maurice Halbwachs’ monograph “the social frameworks of memory” (Halbwachs, 1992 [1925]). To Halbwachs, socially shared notions, such as traditions or shared beliefs, are memories because they depend upon a common recollection of ideas gradually accepted by others and passed down across generations.

Scholarly concern over social memory experienced a boom in the 1980s. Scholars from multiple disciplines became concerned about the ways societies dealt with the past from multiple angles, such as the role of tradition (Connerton, 1989), media technologies (Landsberg, 2004), archival records (Hedstrom, 2002, 2010) and intergenerational

processes of memory transmission (Hirsch, 2008; Palmberger, 2016; Schuman & Scott, 1989). More recently, the field has been concerned with decentering the role of the State in shaping national memories and more interested in local memories that emanate from the ground up (Fridman, 2020; Katriel & Shavit, 2011). Though the role of information systems such as digital archives (Brown, 2020; Ruiz Gómez & Maria Vallès, 2020; Voli & Virtù, 2023) has been explored in studies about memory activism for a while, concern about the interconnectedness of these information systems with social systems has remained underexplored.

Some works in memory studies have suggested that specific information systems play a role in how societies remember (Bjorkdahl et al., 2017; Butler, 2007; Radstone & Katharine, 2003), though the connection of such systems with overlapping technologies, a central concern in infrastructure studies, has received less attention. For instance, the idea of *memoriscapes* (Butler, 2007) deals with a specific system developed in the early 2000s to deliver audio-recorded portable guides of a trail running across the river Thames narrated by nearby residents. *Memoriscapes* were developed before the advent of smartphones and took inspiration from self-guided audio tours in art museums. The distinction between a *memoriscapes* and a traditional guided tour lied in substituting the expert voice of the curator or art critic with that of everyday individuals sharing their personal memories and delivering these voices through portable audio players. It is not clear how infrastructural factors shaped visitors' experiences in this case. For instance, how the *memoriscapes* operated with related social systems, such as the natural history museums in the area, or local historical societies, is not yet understood. Similarly, how *memoriscapes* are influenced by local policies related to cultural heritage is yet to be explored.

The concept of regimes of memory (Radstone & Katharine, 2003) also suggests a relationship between social systems and social memory, but the interconnection of these with information systems remains underexplored. Regimes of memory account for the complex relationship between individuals with power structures and temporalities, and the capacity of social memory to disrupt official narratives of what happened. Importantly, the idea of a regime of memory brings forth attention to the fact that social memories exist in conversation with contemporary notions about history, subjectivity, the mind, and the social, and situates all these ideas into historically situated systems of knowledge and power (Radstone & Katharine, 2003). Thus, by highlighting the role of systems of knowledge and power, regimes of memory imply that social memory is the result of interfacing assemblages of people, artifacts, and institutions coming together to produce and reproduce social memory. Yet, who are these groups of people, artifacts, and institutions, and what is their exact role in mediating social memory is not explicitly articulated.

Finally, the notion of mnemonic formations (Bjorkdahl et al., 2017) has also brought attention to how clusters of "sites, agents, narratives, and events shape memory politics about an issue or phenomenon." The researchers propose a framework to compare multiple mnemonic formations. These comparisons are intended to facilitate cross-case comparisons, which would help overcome that prevalent focus on single-case studies about social memory (Bjorkdahl et al., 2017). This comparative framework is suggestive of the interconnectedness of memory processes across cases, which suggest that social memory is linked to social infrastructures. Importantly, however, the framework does not consider information systems.

From a different angle of inquiry, a recent study looked at the role of social memory in shaping sociotechnical infrastructures (Haggerty et al., 2021). Focusing on Small Drinking Water Systems (SDWSs) in rural settings, the authors found that social memory allows to gauge the role of infrastructure's longevity in governance with respect to "the establishment of local values and beliefs that shape and constrain approaches to local governance of critical public infrastructure." (Haggerty et al., 2021, p. 14). Thus, while Haggerty and others sought to analyze the role of social memory in shaping an infrastructure, our interpretation challenge stemmed from the opposite problem: how to explain the role of infrastructures in shaping social memories. In addition, the authors were not concerned with social memories in general, also known as cultural memory (Assmann, 2011), but social memories of violence in particular; that is, the kind of memories that are the subject of concern in transitional justice (Barsalou & Baxter, 2007; Buckley-Zistel, 2022). Finally, the infrastructures that the authors are concerned about are meant to support the goals of memory activism rather than the provisions of a service such as SDWSs.

The proposal of social memory infrastructures is then the result of bringing into conversation scholarship from social memory studies and infrastructure studies. From social memory studies, the authors drew from the social memory technology framework (Worcman & Garde-Hansen, 2016). The proponents of this framework demonstrated that participatory, oral history archives should be considered as information and communication technologies serving the purpose of preserving the memories of underserved communities. Importantly, the framework is meant to encompass any socio-material assemblage that serves the goals of memory activism. Thus, the authors chose to extend this framework to consider cultural heritage institutions, such as memorial museums and sites, as social memory technologies. The goal was to highlight how such technologies, in dialogue with the practices of memory activism, shaped regimes of remembrance in El Salvador. In other words, the authors were

concerned simultaneously with how power structures enabled and constrained certain memory practices (Radstone & Katharine, 2003), the memory technologies that facilitated those practices (Worcmán & Garde-Hansen, 2016), and the memory practices themselves (Robbins & Olick, 1998). To account for this complexity, the authors turned to the notion of alternative sociotechnical infrastructures (Espinoza Vasquez, 2021) from infrastructure studies.

Sociotechnical infrastructures (ASIs) are the combination of physical infrastructures, social institutions, cultural norms, and economic systems that enable activists to reach their goals. Importantly, ASIs are not created from scratch, but are the product of patches and adaptations to existing infrastructure (Espinoza Vasquez, 2021). ASIs have been studied in the context of disaster relief efforts among activists in Puerto Rico (Espinoza Vasquez, 2021). The authors expanded upon this framework to consider patches and adaptations to ASIs in the service of memory activism as social memory infrastructures (SMIs).

In the present conceptualization, SMIs are segmented in three layers: 1) the macro-level, which refers to the socio-material and institutional conditions under which communities operate. This entails examining the policies and State institutions devoted to social memory. 2) The meso-level refers to the organizational networks and practices that enabled memory activists address the misalignment between their social needs and the provisions of official institutions. This is the level at which adaptation and patching occurs. 3) The micro-level refers to how social technologies of memory, such as museums and historical sites, were configured and repurposed to serve the goals of memory activism. At this level the authors are studying how memory activists understand their own work as well as the role of other stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS

As conceptual boundary objects, SMIs are permeable. SMIs are bound to be differently construed in the respective disciplines where the term originated. In infrastructure studies, the authors expect that future work will continue to focus on the technological systems that memory activists rely upon, adapt and patch, such as electronic databases of victims, or video recording solutions to document oral histories. In this line of research, future work in infrastructure studies could emphasize how these individual systems connect to others. For instance, how databases of victims may be used as the starting point to create oral history archives or how the affordances of victims' oral histories shape the ways transitional justice courts assess the evidentiary value of these records. By contrast, in memory studies, the emphasis is more likely to shift towards the politics of memory (Edensor, 1997; Olick, 2007; Selimovic, 2013). Thus, future works in that field may be more concerned with how the systems that conform an SMI are mobilized in favor of specific agendas, such as holding perpetrators accountable, or discrediting victims. For example, while current work has looked at the role of knowledge management systems (KM) in supporting peacebuilding in transitional justice contexts such as Colombia (Cano Mejía et al., 2020), future work could explore how the affordances of such systems influence the hearings of transitional justice courts or the ways the conflict is framed in annual commemorations of victims.

Part of our challenge in interpreting the SMI in our research stems from the differences in how infrastructures are conceptualized across disciplines. While social memory is a type of knowledge that relies on social infrastructures, social memory is distinct from knowledge infrastructures (Meadow, 2007). Communities of memory do experience their shared recollections as objective truth about the past and scholars do acknowledge that the relationship separating social memory and history is complex and far from antagonistic (Bornat, 2013; Cubitt, 2007; Palmberger, 2016). However, social memories are not the product of applying the scientific method to a research problem, unlike technoscience. The aim in research about knowledge infrastructures is deconstructing the aura of objectivity of technoscience, unearthing the hierarchies of knowledge production, and articulating the role of information systems in enabling and constraining specific ways of knowing. By contrast, the stakes of social memory infrastructures lie in supporting the goals of memory activism: unearthing victims' experiences (Kritz, 1995), holding perpetrators accountable, redressing victims, and inspiring a social commitment to "never again.". Despite these differences, the SMI concept remains a fruitful boundary object that can serve as a bridge between memory studies and infrastructure studies. The authors recognize that the concept may be differently articulated in each discipline and following the experience of Brand and Jax (2007), see this relative conceptual ambiguity as an opportunity to engender communication across social memory studies and infrastructure studies, as well as between the practice of and research about memory activism.

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