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MEMORY PRACTICES IN THE MATRIX: INVESTIGATING THE USE OF CHATGPT TO ANALYZE AND PRODUCE SPECULATIVE SNS CONVERSATIONS ON LITHUANIAN CONTESTED HERITAGE

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The role of generative Artificial intelligence (AI) in social science research is one of the current topics of debate in scholarly and public sphere discussions. This role is multifaceted, continually evolving, and consequential in both epistemological and ethical-political terms. AI technologies are expected to significantly impact various aspects of social sciences, including research, data analysis, modeling, and decision-making processes. Generative conversational AI-based tools based on large-scale language models, such as ChatGPT, as powerful tools of information management, bear the promise of allowing social scientists to simulate complex social systems and study the effects of various variables and interventions, while, in tandem, they blur the lines separating researcher from research instrument, and evidence from simulation.

Drawing from semiosphere theory and cultural-historical activity theory, we created and tested a formal conceptual model (also known as “an ontology”) suitable for understanding and modeling how communicative practices on Social Network Sites (SNS), mediated by contested heritage, enable the production of overlapping cultural identities in contemporary Lithuania. Using one important episode in the evolving story of the Eastern European “memory wars”, grassroots communication on SNS discussing the removal of Petras Cvirka’s monument by Vilnius City Council, we experimented combining the results of our evidence-based inquiry with the capabilities of ChatGPT to simulate the generation of a speculative SNS conversation focusing on the Cvirka monument removal. The simulation scenario, speculative semiotic actors, their profiles and roles, are based on the formal conceptual model and the empirical results of our investigation on Facebook interactions on contested memory in Lithuania, conducted within the ‘Connective digital memory in borderlands: a mixed-methods study of cultural identity, heritage communication and digital curation on social networks’ research project.

The research was carried out in the following stages:

1. A ChatGPT analysis of an empirically-attested Facebook conversation (<https://www.delfi.lt/kultura/naujienos/cvirkos-paminklas-bus-nukeliamas-penktadieni-88710865#Echobox=1637240743>) based on user comments to a Delfi news story (<https://www.facebook.com/DelfiLietuva/posts/5581889748506709>), seeking to identify rhetorical and pragmatic properties of messages exchanged in the conversation, as well as to define and categorize the identities and group affiliations of participants.
2. A ChatGPT-based simulation of a speculative Facebook conversation, initiated by the very same Delfi news post, produced by feeding into ChatGPT information on

our conceptual model and results on the genres, topics and rhetorics of similar SNS conversations from our empirical corpus analysis, seeking to better understand how narratives and discourses are constructed in this conversation.

3. Qualitative comparative analysis between speculative and empirically-attested conversations on the removal of Cvirka's monument, seeking to assess the potential of ChatGPT to generate simulated SNS communication data, the discursive, rhetorical and pragmatic properties of such simulated data vis-a-vis empirically attested conversations, and the relational identities and group affiliations of simulated SNS conversation participants vis-a-vis actual Facebook users.

This conference paper will present the methodology and preliminary results of this investigation, and will discuss broader epistemological and ethical implications on the use of conversational generative AI in communication research.

Biographies of the presenters

COSTIS DALLAS is a Professor at the Faculty of Communication of Vilnius University, and a founding Research Fellow of the Digital Curation Unit (DCU), IMIS-Athena Research Centre in Athens, Greece. He is also an Emeritus Associate Professor at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, where he taught since 2008 serving as Director of its Museum Studies program and as Coordinator of its Collaborative Specializations. His research focuses on non-institutional digital curation "in the wild", on scholarly research, communication and curation methods and digital infrastructures, and on heritage, memory and identity practices of global communities on social media. He co-edited *Cultural Heritage Infrastructures in Digital Humanities* (Routledge, 2017), and has over 50 peer reviewed publications in scholarly journals and conference proceedings. Costis holds a BA in History from the University of Ioannina, Greece, as well as MPhil and DPhil degrees in Classical Archaeology from the University of Oxford. He is the principal investigator of "Connective Digital Memory in the Borderlands: A mixed-methods study of cultural identity, heritage communication and digital curation on social networks", and of "E-CURATORS: Pervasive Digital Curation Activities, Objects and Infrastructures in Archaeological Research and Communication".

RIMVYDAS LAUŽIKAS is a digital heritage research and communication professor at the Faculty of Communication at Vilnius University. His education is in the interdisciplinary fields of educational sciences, history, archaeology, communication, and information sciences. Rimvydas' research interests cover the communication of cultural heritage and museology, history and heritage-based identities, and the history of gastronomy. He has written four monographs (with co-authors) and more than 50 scholarly articles in the fields of his interests. He participates in international expert groups (such as the Evaluation Body of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage), projects (such as CARARE), and COST Actions (Saving European Archaeology from the Digital Dark Age (SEADDA)) and Archaeological practices and knowledge work in the digital environment (ARKWORK). Rimvydas Laužikas taught a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate academic courses in history, cultural and digital heritage, heritage communication, digital culture, and museum studies. He served as the primary supervisor of eight PhD dissertations.