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JOINT HISTORY LAB

Guides for a Critical Understanding of the Past and Present



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ANALYSIS OF THE SHARED PAST THROUGH A MULTIPERSPECTIVE APPROACH

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You have likely not encountered the concept of multiperspectivity before; instead, history has been presented to you in a unilateral and linear fashion, solely from the perspective of a single nation – your own. History textbooks tend to simplify historical events, typically offering one-sided interpretations and explanations. However, can a complex historical reality be truly understood if observed exclusively from a single perspective, without considering the viewpoints of others?

In the renowned film *Rashomon* (1950) by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, the problem we address in this text is artistically portrayed: an event (in this case, a crime) undeniably occurred, yet we are presented with four different versions from the witnesses' perspectives. We cannot fully trust any single account, as each appears equally convincing.

The situation is similar in history. While certain facts are indisputable – for example, that a war took place, that someone was killed, or that a treaty was signed – their meaning and causes may be interpreted in different ways,

not out of malice, but because they carry different consequences for our lives. Thus, the causes and significance of historical events are often understood differently depending on the vantage point from which they are examined. Moreover, each of us holds moral and value judgments that shape our perspective, along with distinct personal experiences and the social conditions in which we live – factors that inevitably influence and limit our understanding. When we use our nation or religion as the primary point of reference, our perspective often becomes narrower, as we are predisposed to interpret events through the lens of our community's perceived interests.

However, we know that history is far more complex than any unilateral interpretation can capture. History is a mosaic of diverse perspectives, and each must be accorded its own distinct voice. To step beyond this insular position, we must dismantle the mental landscapes of our own worlds – constructed within our minds – and engage openly with the perspectives of others.

Let us now consider what happens when

multiperspectivity is entirely excluded and the historical picture is deliberately distorted.

The Disintegration of the Past: How Neighbors Became Enemies

On the territory of Yugoslavia, once a common state, lived peoples who shared history, language, and culture for decades – until the early 1990s, when a process of redefining not only the present but also the past began. With the dissolution of the common state, not only did the political, economic, and social foundations collapse, but so too did the shared frameworks through which history and historical facts had been understood. Imagine a large house in which several families had lived for decades. They shared a common courtyard, worked together, created together, and celebrated common holidays. Then, one day, divisions began to emerge – some residents decided to unilaterally appropriate parts of the house without asking the others how they felt about it. Overnight, the house and courtyard were divided according to “historical borders.” Some forcibly seized certain rooms while driving others out. A third group did not wish to leave at all.

For such a transformation to be possible, propaganda – grounded in historical falsifications and fabricated narratives – had to recast yesterday’s compatriots as historical enemies.

History itself did not change; the way it was perceived did. The first step in rewriting history was to suppress the voices of others and strip them of legitimacy and significance. The consequence was the emergence of competing historical “truths” and the amplification of seemingly irreconcilable

differences among various peoples. One perspective – the perspective of one’s own nation, presumed always to be right – became the only correct and permissible one.

Thus, in the 1990s, “our” side was always portrayed as the victim, while the “other” was cast as the perpetrator. There was nothing in between; the world was reduced to a binary logic. This was not accidental, for only in this way – through an exclusivity that allowed no questioning – could the desired effect be achieved: the mobilization of people around the idea of hatred toward others.

When studying history, you will often observe that not only is the narrative of one nation presented as the only possible one, but differences within that same nation are also suppressed.

Consequently, calls for national unity (“all as one”) are glorified, as if everyone thought alike or pursued the exact same goal. There is no space for dissenting voices; on the contrary, dissent is framed as a problem, and those who question the dominant narrative are portrayed as outcasts because they disrupt the monolithic image of collective unanimity. But is it realistic, possible, or even necessary for everyone to think the same way? Always ask yourself this question when you feel that you are being pressured to accept a stance shaped by propaganda to create the illusion that no alternative exists.

Multiperspectivity in Action: Mobilization vs. Resistance

Let us now consider how multiperspectivity can be applied to a simple example: war. History lessons often glorify war and the call to defend

the homeland, while omitting individual destinies from the broader picture. Going to war is frequently presented as a self-evident duty rather than a personal choice. Narratives about those who refuse to participate are cast in a negative light, and such individuals are often branded as traitors.

However, why is it a problem if someone does not wish to go to war? For instance, what if one young man wishes to study, another already has a family and children and does not wish to perish in war, and a third has elderly parents for whom he must care, and who do not wish to lose their only son? Multiperspectivity in history means not only different national perspectives but also various legitimate differing views opposed to a single dominant (propagandistic) narrative that demands uniform and unison alignment.

To understand what this looks like, let us examine the following example. We will analyze diverse perspectives on various life choices and the manner in which history treats them.

Imagine there is no internet and no mobile phones. You have only the evening news on TV and stories from your immediate surroundings. You receive one-sided information about what is truly happening in the war. Propaganda prevails, claiming that "our people" are endangered and that we must defend our own "hearths" and the "weak and helpless." Social pressure to go to war mounts, and the situation is presented as if there were no choice. All men must go to war.

- If you have only a single source of information that defines "patriotism" and "masculinity" in a specific way,

how much space remains for a dissenting stance?

- Is going to war always a matter of choice, or can it also be a matter of inertia—"everyone is going, so I must go as well"?

Now, let us imagine someone who went to war, whether out of personal desire or a sense of duty. He soon realizes that he does not wish to participate in the war, the killing of civilians, and the destruction of cities, and decides to desert and return home.

- Is the decision not to shoot at your neighbors an act of treason, or an act of personal courage and moral integrity?

Now imagine someone who refuses to go to war from the very beginning, adopts a clear anti-war stance, and publicly advocates against the conflict, calling on others to refuse to wear a uniform or carry a rifle.

- How do the state and society perceive such individuals?
- Are they able to express these views publicly without hindrance or punishment?

Our goal, therefore, is to bring different perspectives into dialogue. We do not seek to determine who acted better, who was right, who is a "hero" and who a "traitor", these are propagandistic categories that obscure the complexity of ordinary lives and real human destinies.

Yet when history textbooks are written, a clear stance is often embedded within them: war is justified, and those who held a different view are erased from the

narrative. If we observe war exclusively, through the prism of those who fought one another, we obtain a distorted image in which violence appears to be the only legitimate response to social crises and political conflicts.

By applying multiperspectivity, however, we recognize that those who deserted or protested are also part of the historical landscape – the other side of the coin. Their choice may be understood as an active refusal to participate in the destruction of both their own society and that of others.

History teaches us what happened; multiperspectivity teaches us to understand why people made different decisions – and that these decisions, when grounded in moral agency and respect for human life, possess their own historical legitimacy. They are not directed against other people. Only in this way – through a comprehensive examination of complex historical reality – can we fully understand what happened and, more importantly, how to prevent similar events from recurring.

History Is Selected by the Victors

Why multiperspectivity? The previous example demonstrates just how layered history is and how difficult it is to draw simple conclusions, particularly in situations where we lack sufficient knowledge and evidence. Ask yourself: how often have you encountered stories and experiences in history textbooks of people who did not fit into dominant narratives? This does not apply only to wars, but to other historical episodes as well.

How often have you heard the voices of women, mothers, children, the elderly, as well as members of ethnic, religious, sexual, and other minority groups? At times, it seems as though entire groups of people did not exist in certain historical epochs. Yet the reality is not that they were absent, but that history failed to give them a voice.

One reason for the absence of multivocality in history lies in the scarcity of historical sources: it was often not considered important to record the experiences of individuals and groups who did not participate equally in public life and who held no political or economic power. In some cases, the voices of certain groups were deliberately and systematically erased in order to maintain a one-sided narrative. In short, history is selected memory. You have often heard the adage that history is written by the victors, but it would be more accurate to say that history is selected by the victors. They decide what will remain in official accounts. Yet for us as historians, abundant material still exists beyond those official versions – material that allows us to reconstruct silenced voices and restore complexity to the past.

This is especially true of the modern era, in which an abundance of historical sources exists, making it impossible to control one-sided narratives in the way that was possible in earlier epochs. Acknowledging different perspectives does not mean opening the door to the relativization of history – not everyone can claim the right to their own “truth.” Historical truth is grounded in verifiable facts; however, the consequences of different historical events may vary across different groups of people.

Historical facts must be respected—not only those we find agreeable, but all of them. If someone presents historical truth by relying on only a limited amount of evidence, this is a clear sign that they have engaged in the falsification of historical events in order to adapt them to their own interpretation of reality.

The Trap of Simplicity: Why “Too Clear” Can Be Dangerous

The most important thing you can take away after reading this guide is the habit of persistent questioning—especially in situations where things appear overly clear. If everything seems logical and self-evident at first glance, and you do not sense that there might be more to the story, this is usually a signal that the overly simplified version has been deliberately presented in order to conceal far more important questions.

If we return to the 1990s (and similar conflicts), the real question is never “Who is right?”, but rather:

- How do “the others” perceive this event?
- Why is that perspective important to them?
- How does the manipulation of the past shape my present reaction toward them?

Only by analyzing our shared past from multiple angles can we prevent it from once again becoming a weapon in the future. ■

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN HISTORY CLASSES

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Have you ever wondered why certain historical topics still provoke strong emotions, debates, and even divisions today? The legacy of the past and its impact on the present largely determine how historical events are perceived today. Because of this, many of these topics carry a strong emotional dimension and are often recognized as controversial in history education. These are issues that evoke intense feelings and open the door to different, often opposing interpretations within society.

An example of a topic that is still perceived as controversial today and has broader implications is the colonial past of many European countries. This topic remains a source of debate, most often centered on whether colonialism should be viewed as a period of accelerated economic and cultural development for the colonized areas, or as a time when these areas were subjected to violence and exploitation. Discussions about the removal of monuments to colonial figures, as well as changes in textbook content, show that colonialism is not just a topic of the past, but an issue that still

provokes strong emotions and deep disagreements today.

Although the concept of controversial topics can refer to a wide range of content, every society has certain historical issues that are particularly sensitive and clearly recognized as controversial.

Shaping Value Systems

There are many examples of controversial historical topics, as we live in a world where debates about the past are constantly present in the public sphere. History is not only studied to understand what once happened, but also to better understand the society we live in today. Precisely for this reason, the history classroom should be a space where such topics are discussed openly and thoughtfully, rather than a place where they are avoided.

Studies by researchers from Stanford University indicate that all countries have periods of so-called "difficult history," the echoes of which are strongly felt in the present and reveal deep disagreements

regarding collective identity and values. Young people who come into contact with these topics must be aware that different interpretations of past events do not indicate the flaws of a particular society, but merely illustrate its complexity.

One example that can help in understanding such disputes is the history of Northern Ireland, where decades of deeply rooted conflicts between different communities have shaped social relations, the perception of identity, and the political situation. Different memories of the same events have led to long-lasting divisions that are still visible today. This example shows how history can influence a society's value systems and why dealing with it is often sensitive, yet essential.

For the territory of the former Yugoslavia, an example of significantly greater relevance are the wars that took place in that region during the 1990s. This period strongly affects the lives of the generations growing up in this region today, as it is present through family stories, the media, public discourse, and everyday conversations. Therefore, it is considered one of the most controversial and sensitive topics in history education. Different interpretations of events from this period often cause disagreements, but at the same time, they open up space for a deeper understanding of the past and its impact on the present. Its complexity and sensitivity are further confirmed by the results of a 2017 study conducted among teachers from the Western Balkans, where history teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia clearly state that this is the most difficult topic for them to teach.

As you reflect on these examples,

it is useful to ask a few questions:

- Why are the same historical events interpreted differently?
- How do the media, family narratives, and your environment influence your understanding of the past?
- In what ways does history shape the values and attitudes we consider important today?
- Does avoiding "difficult" topics contribute to a better understanding of the past, or does it leave room for misunderstanding and prejudice?

Through this approach to controversial historical topics, you will enrich yourself with tools that will help you better understand the society you live in, as well as those around you, and thereby you will become aware of your role in a world that cries out for understanding and reconciliation.

Controversial Topics in Post-Conflict Societies

The 1990s conflicts in the territory of the former Yugoslavia still provoke strong controversies and different interpretations today, even though the wars ended a couple of decades ago. One of the reasons why this period is still strongly present in the public sphere is the fact that its consequences have not remained in the past, but are visible in everyday life, especially through the experiences of migration, displacement, and the loss of home.

Many of you reading this are growing up in environments directly shaped by these migrations. It is inevitable that you have, at least once in your life, encountered a story about leaving, becoming a refugee, or returning. It is precisely these

differences in experiences that influence how the 1990s wars are remembered, interpreted, and how they are spoken about.

The migrations that followed during the 1990s wars were among the largest in Europe since the Second World War. Millions of people were displaced, and their destinies became part of the broader picture of a post-conflict society. International institutions, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and its legal successor, the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), dealt specifically with this period, striving to establish the facts about war crimes, accountability, and civilian suffering. However, despite court verdicts and archives, different interpretations of the past still exist.

The fates of the people who migrated during this period were full of uncertainty. Their personal testimonies provide us with an insight into the complexity of the situation they found themselves in: "I have spent my whole life moving from one place to another... finally, we are living within our own four walls, not fearing that someone will come one day and tell us we have to leave. Now we can sleep in peace." In these few sentences, we can learn more about this period than in textbooks that address this topic in a highly inadequate manner.

You must always keep in mind that controversies do not arise solely from an ignorance of facts, but also from the way the past is connected to personal experiences, identity, and a sense of belonging. When reflecting on the 1990s wars in the context of migrations, it is useful to ask yourself a few questions:

- How do migrations and displacement affect the way people remember the war and speak about it?
- Why can the same court verdict or historical fact be experienced completely differently in different communities?
- How do family stories about leaving, loss, or return shape the attitudes of young people today?
- Can we draw a parallel between the migrations of the 1990s and contemporary migrations in the world today?

From Abstraction to Understanding

We live in a world that, unfortunately, is still marked by conflicts, forced migrations, and refugee crises. Understanding the 1990s wars through the prism of migration helps to view this topic not only as part of local or regional history but as part of a broader global experience. In this way, controversial topics cease to be distant and abstract, and become a key to understanding the contemporary world and one's own role in it.

Certainly, to have the opportunity to overcome the abstraction of controversial topics, you must be aware of the challenges, as well as the possibilities offered to you. First of all, it is very important that you have contact with primary sources. Working with primary sources is invaluable, as it gives you direct insight into events and people's experiences. The archival material provided by the ICTY and IRMCT offers a multitude of photographs, documents, and personal testimonies, which can be your starting point in this process. If you are able to get in touch with people

who can present their personal experiences to you, then you have an additional source of information that you can utilize. Of course, you absolutely should not, as mentioned in the previous chapter, forget about multiperspectivity, because we must view historical events from multiple angles.

Certainly, discussions and debates with peers, while respecting different viewpoints, can be another useful method to help ensure that controversial topics do not remain abstract and do not limit us. Of course, we cannot achieve this if we are not ready for self-reflection, because we all must recognize the prejudices we carry within ourselves in order to be able to understand others.

From the Classroom to Reality

Controversial topics are not reserved solely for classroom work. Young people, who are constantly under the influence of social networks and the media, are exposed on a daily basis to different interpretations of the past. Therefore, it is essential to develop in young people the ability to critically and responsibly confront controversies.

Thus, a proactive approach to dealing with historical controversies should not be an exception, but the rule. Young people should constantly question their own attitudes, as well as the attitudes of the people around them. Facts must be distinguished from interpretations, and emotions must be acknowledged. There is never just one perspective, so one-sided thinking gets us nowhere.

And finally, all of us together must nurture a culture of dialogue. We must be aware

that different opinions exist and that we must listen to them. This does not mean that we renounce our own attitudes and opinions; rather, it shows a readiness to learn and the maturity to accept that a complex past does not offer simple answers and that understanding requires openness and responsibility. In this way, controversial topics cease to be a source of division and discomfort, and become an opportunity for cooperation and mutual progress. ■

UNDERSTANDING COLLECTIVE TRAUMA



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Do you sometimes feel like we live in constant tension, that older people are often nervous, insecure, awkward, and that they frequently pass this state onto you? Has it ever happened to you that you attend a family slava (patron saint's day gathering), everyone knows each other, they are happy to see one another, various topics are brought up—talking about school, work, prices, sports, plans for the summer.

And then someone mentions politics, how things used to be, the war and sanctions, who is to blame for everything, and without whom everything would have been different. Suddenly, the atmosphere changes. The tone becomes sharper, the voices are louder, someone withdraws and stays silent, someone laughs nervously, and someone starts talking with great passion, as if it is all happening again. You may have noticed that the same topics keep coming back. The same events, the same names, the same divisions. Even the fact that you weren't born at that time does not diminish the feeling that this story touches you in

some strange and inexplicable way. In such moments, many young people feel discomfort, confusion, and a need to step away from the conversation, move away from the dinner table, and leave the room.

Some, on the other hand, feel pressured to have an opinion even though they are not exactly sure what they think. Why are such discussions full of emotions? Why do people get upset so quickly? Why is trust so deeply shaken, making it seem as if it could disappear at any moment?

If you feel like you are carrying a burden that you cannot exactly name, you are not alone. This guide aims to help you understand the phenomenon we call collective trauma—an experience that does not belong solely to an individual, but to entire societies and generations. Wars, the collapse of the state, refugee crises, losses, and prolonged insecurity have not remained in the past. They have moved into family conversations, the media, social networks, educational programs, and everyday situations.

The goal of this guide is not to tell you what to think, but to offer you tools that will help you question the stories you hear, understand what influences your opinions, and relate more consciously to the past, the present, and what is presented daily as "normal."

How Collective Trauma Arises

Collective trauma arises when something difficult and painful happens to a large number of people simultaneously—to an entire country or society. This can include wars and armed conflicts, mass violence and repression, major social injustices, and prolonged political and economic instability.

In such circumstances, people lose their sense of security and trust in others, in institutions, and even in the future. Even when these events formally end, their consequences often remain present for years.

How Is Trauma Transmitted to Subsequent Generations?

Collective trauma does not only affect those who directly experienced it. It is also transmitted to younger generations through family stories, the attitudes of adults, and even through silence—by leaving the obvious unspoken. There are topics that are not talked about because they are too painful and are considered unsuitable for children and young people. This void in explanations creates confusion and a feeling that something important remains hidden.

The way the past is presented in schools also affects the experience of collective trauma. When history is presented one-sidedly, without room for questions and

different perspectives, young people often get the impression that there are only "permitted" and socially desirable answers. Instead of fostering understanding, this creates tension and an expectation of conformity.

The media and social networks can further amplify the feeling of insecurity. Headlines that incite fear, anger, and division, as well as constant callbacks to conflicts, create the impression that the world is a constantly dangerous place. People get used to bad news.

How Is Collective Trauma Seen in Everyday Life?

Collective trauma is also recognized in everyday messages that are often repeated, for example: "Keep quiet, you have it better than we did," "Don't trust anyone," "Nothing will ever change here," "It can't be done that way, history teaches us that," "People are enemies to other people."

Have you ever heard all of this? These sentences shape the way young people think about themselves, others, and their own future.

Why Is It Important to Understand It?

When a society does not openly confront a difficult past, collective trauma remains present and changes forms. It affects relationships among people, the formation of attitudes, and the level of mutual trust. Understanding this process helps us realize that many fears and insecurities are not a personal flaw, but part of a broader social experience.

What Does Collective Trauma Look Like on Social Networks?

Phenomena related to collective traumas are something we have all seen on social networks at least once, but have we ever stopped to actually analyze such a thing? Let's face one collective trauma together.

On the anniversary of the NATO bombing in 2025, a TikTok video appeared featuring footage of sirens, destroyed buildings, and a message reading "26 years, 24.03." Within a few hours, there appeared more than 500 comments. One group of people wrote: "This is a crime that must not be forgotten," "The West did all this to us," "Justice has not yet been served." Another group wrote comments like: "Enough with going back to the past," "Do you wonder why this happened?", "This only spreads hate." Very quickly, the tone became sharp—insults, belittling, sarcasm, swearing, and ugly words. Many wrote in capital letters, used angry emojis, and harsh words. The conversation ceased to be a conversation and became a fight.

Let's analyze this together now:

1. What emotions do you see in the comments?

Look at what each side is saying. Do you notice anger, sadness, hurt, a sense of injustice, fear?

To make it easier for you—anger can most easily be recognized in aggressive comments; sadness in messages talking about losses (personal and social); fear in sentences warning that the same thing could happen again, and even that it is an inevitability because history repeats itself, as indicated by the turbulent history of

the Balkans.

2. Are people reacting to the post or to what it represents?

The video lasts only about 30 seconds, but the reactions last a long time and their effect is much stronger than the content of the video itself. It is clear that people are not reacting just to the video, but to everything it symbolizes—personal family memories, stories they heard from their parents, a sense of injustice toward their own people, and the collective experience of the country in which they live or have lived. In other words, the reaction is not just to the specific content, but to the meaning people attach to it.

3. Which words are constantly repeated?

Look at the comments on any similar post and pay attention to terms like "justice," "culprits," "victims," "history," "truth," "us," "them." These words show that the discussion quickly transforms into a story about identity and belonging to a group, rather than just about facts.

In this example, and in similar ones with a strong national charge, two sides form very quickly. Some see themselves as those who remember and defend the truth, advocating for justice, while others see themselves as those who believe that everything was deserved, that responsibility, or even guilt, must be accepted. This division is a typical sign of collective trauma—the world is viewed through conflict, rather than through other, more nuanced shades.

4. How would you react?

Have you ever come across a TikTok or nstagram post like this? How do you

behave in these situations? Would you like, comment, enter the debate, or would you simply skip such a video?

Answer these questions honestly to yourself:

- Does the topic affect you personally?
- Do you have the desire to "right the wrong"?
- Do you skip such content because you are a person who avoids conflict?

This example shows how social networks often become a place where collective trauma surfaces. The goal of this exercise is not to decide who is right, but to notice how emotions quickly overwhelm us, how a situation escalates rapidly, how easily people polarize, and how easily we can react automatically, without reflection or deeper analysis. When that recognize this, we take the first step toward a more conscious and responsible participation in public conversations.

What Lies Behind the Reactions?

When we observe reactions to news (or a post about a controversial event from the past), it is important to understand that people rarely react to the fact itself. Most emotions and attitudes stem from the symbols and meanings the event carries—a sense of injustice, inherited traumas, personal memories, or cultural narratives.

To understand and analyze these reactions, we can use the following tools:

1. Recognizing Psychological Mechanisms

- Projection – shifting responsibility or guilt onto "the others," instead of

facing our own feelings or the mistakes of our society.

- Denial – downplaying the significance of an event or ignoring the suffering of victims to preserve internal peace.
- Polarization – the rapid formation of "us vs. them" groups, which makes it harder to listen to and understand the opposing side.

Your task is to mark sentences in which you recognize these mechanisms while reading comments or discussions. Think about what each person writing on social media is actually feeling and what they are trying to protect.

2. Analysis of Language and Symbolism

Pay attention to words and phrases that are constantly repeated (justice, history, culprits, us, them, punishment, God). These words often reveal central themes, fears, and identities that are being defended or attacked.

The task is to record three key words or phrases from the discussion and try to interpret which emotion or historical experience they reflect.

3. Separating Emotions from Facts

Emotions can be powerful, but they are often not directly linked to the event itself. Anger, sadness, fear, and frustration can be inherited or transmitted through family stories, media, and social narratives. Task: Mark sentences that express strong feelings and consider whether they are reactions to the news itself or to the symbolism of the event.

4. Identifying Patterns of Polarization

Observe how the discussion splits into

"us" and "them." Pay attention, analyze carefully, and answer the question: who is taking which side and why? Is there an attempt at compromise or just an effort to prove who is right?

Task: Create a simple table with two columns: "Team Us" and "Team Them." Write down the comments and key phrases. This helps you see the patterns before you take a side.

5. Linking Reactions to Personal Perspective

Before joining a discussion, pause and recognize your own emotions. Think about why the other side might feel the same way. Try to view the situation from a distance, without an automatic reaction.

Task: Write a short journal entry or note answering the questions: which emotions arose in me and why, and which perspective was difficult for me to understand?

Social media and public dialogue often reflect collective patterns of traumatic experience. These tools allow us to:

- recognize emotional and symbolic patterns,
- react more consciously and thoughtfully,
- develop the skill to separate facts from emotions and interpretations.

By applying these techniques, you become active and conscious participants in conversations—ready to communicate with control, attention, and critical thinking.

How to Use This Knowledge?

Understanding collective trauma is key to building resilience against manipulation. Instead of reacting impulsively (liking or sharing), we learn to pause, "count to ten," and activate self-control. The goal is to develop empathy—the ability to understand the world from someone else's shoes—and a readiness for cooperation and open dialogue.

Mechanisms of Defense Against Manipulation

When faced with news or video content (Reels, TikTok), ask yourself these key questions:

- Is there a difference between the event itself and the way it is described?
- Is the story simplified just to provoke strong emotions?
- Who benefits from this narrative and what purpose does it actually serve?
- What emotions does this awaken in me (anger, fear, guilt) and why?
- Is someone intentionally provoking these feelings to mobilize me or win me over?
- Is it possible that there are multiple perspectives on the same event?

These tools allow you to recognize emotional manipulation and clearly separate facts from other people's interpretations. However, it is important to emphasize: this is not a tool for relativizing suffering or justifying injustice. The purpose is to achieve a more mature relationship with the past and a sense of responsibility toward the present. Developing critical thinking is a process that leads to personal and social freedom.

Use this guide as a daily exercise – every time you feel provoked, return to these questions. The skills for recognizing the truth are built exclusively through practice. ■

MR RADOJE CEROVIĆ

EMOTIONS, IDENTITY, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CONFLICT

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In a certain city, a group of beings appeared that no one had expected. They did not come as conquerors, nor did they seek conflict—they were weak, disoriented, and different. They were placed on the edge of the city, behind a fence, with the explanation that it was temporary, reasonable, and necessary. In documents, they were "subjects"; in administration, "cases"; and in common speech—"the problem."

Most people never had contact with them, yet almost everyone had an opinion. Not because of experience, but because of the narrative: they are different, potentially dangerous, and a threat to the order. In this story, there was no overt hatred, but rather appeals to security, procedures, and necessity. People did not feel they were doing something unjust; they felt they were acting responsibly.

The turning point does not arise through violence, but through a shift in perspective: when "they" stop being an abstract group and become individuals with a face, a voice, and fear, the narrative begins to crack.

Dehumanization rarely begins with extremes—more often, it is introduced by language, distance, and an unquestioned sense of being threatened. This story, borrowed from the movie *District 9*, is a metaphor for a process present in real-life societies, especially those marked by conflicts and divisions. The sense of being threatened—whether real or perceived—affects how people interpret information, whom they trust, and how they explain the actions of others. Reason does not disappear; rather, it often serves to justify already formed emotional stances. This guide, therefore, does not start from the question of who is right, but from the question of how emotional and identity-based reactions are formed and become the foundation for communication, divisions, and conflicts. The goal is not to negate emotions or relativize fear and injustice, but to understand the mechanisms that turn them into lasting narratives and lines of separation. Read this guide as a brief analytical text, paying attention to your own reactions—agreement, resistance, or discomfort—

explanation and justification. This is part because they, too, are part of the process we are discussing.

From Emotion to Division: How "Us" and "Them" are Created

In many situations, the reaction precedes conscious thought: information first triggers an emotion, and only afterward does explanation follow.

This is particularly pronounced when a sense of threat is activated. At that point, attention narrows, and the world is simplified into divisions: "us" and "them," "safe" and "dangerous." This way of thinking can act as a form of protection in uncertain circumstances, but it simultaneously shrinks the space for nuance and dialogue. It is important to note that these reactions are not necessarily a sign of bad intentions. The problem arises when automatic emotional assessments are accepted as "obvious truth." At that point, emotion becomes a filter for facts, and identity becomes the framework that determines who is to be trusted.

Consequently, divisions rarely begin with open conflict. They more often emerge through changes in language and the way others are spoken of, through distance, and the normalization of stereotypes. Reason remains present, but it becomes selective—serving to confirm an existing stance rather than to question it. Understanding this process is the first step toward more responsible communication and recognizing the moment when a conversation slides toward polarization.

Modern social and media spaces often amplify emotional reactions. Information

is rarely conveyed neutrally; instead, it is framed to trigger urgency, fear, or the confirmation of existing beliefs.

Emotions, therefore, become the primary filter through which people interpret events and other human beings.

A sense of threat does not have to be based on a real danger to be powerful—it is enough for it to seem plausible and to be constantly repeated. This leads to a narrowing of focus and an emphasis on differences, while commonalities are suppressed.

In post-conflict societies, these mechanisms are especially sensitive, as the traces of violence and injustice can be easily reactivated. Reactions to contemporary events often carry an emotional burden of the past, even when the actors and circumstances are different.

These processes are not merely individual; they are shaped by public narratives and discourse. The language used in this context often sounds neutral, yet it can contribute to distance, stereotypes, and dehumanization. Understanding this does not mean denying real problems, but rather recognizing when communication shifts from reflection to automatic polarization, which deepens divisions in the long run.

How Division is Produced

In this section of the manual, your task is not to find the "correct answer," nor to take a morally upright position. On the contrary, you are invited to consciously step into a mindset that, in real life, is often activated automatically and without conscious intent. The goal of this exercise is to recognize from the inside the mechanisms behind the emergence of division, conflict, and dehumanization.

Imagine a society in which there is no open conflict. People live relatively peacefully, but there are different lifestyles, values, and habits. Now, you take on the role of a cold, rational communication strategist. You are not interested in truth, justice, or long-term consequences. Your sole task is to amplify the sense of division, distrust, and emotional distance between two groups of people.

The groups can be fictional and neutral. The subtler the differences, the more demanding the task.

Step 1. Defining the Groups

In order to divide people into two groups between which you intend to build a wall to trigger a conflict? Think of a criterion for separation.

- What makes them different?
- Which difference is visible?
- Which difference can be made to seem important or dangerous?

Step 2. Activating a Sense of Threat

Now, imagine that you want one or both groups to begin feeling that something important to them is under threat.

- What would you claim is "at stake"?
- Which fear would be easiest to activate?
- What might people lose if "nothing is done"?

Step 3. Dehumanization Without Open Hatred

This step is crucial. Do not use overt insults or direct calls for violence. Instead, think about how you would

portray the other group as:

- Irresponsible
- Dangerous
- Morally inferior
- "Different" in a subtle way

You can use abstract terms, generalizations, metaphors, or statistics without context.

Step 4. Moral Justification

Finally, you need to "package" everything from the previous steps so that it appears reasonable, necessary, and responsible.

- How would you explain that this division is justified?
- What higher goal would you appeal to?
- How would you diminish the sense of guilt within "your" group?

Before moving on to the next part of the manual, pause and reflect:

- How did you feel while crafting these messages?
- Did anything feel uncomfortable? If so—why?
- Do you recognize patterns you have already seen in real life?

This exercise is neither a test nor a game. Its purpose is to enable you to recognize mechanisms from the inside while they are still unfolding in your own thinking. In the next section of the manual, we will return to this experience and break it down through psychological analytical tools to make it clear why this way of thinking is so effective—and how it can be recognized in time within everyday communication.

Key Psychological Mechanisms

Understanding emotional and identity-based reactions requires a focus on several basic psychological processes that regularly recur in situations of social polarization and conflict. These processes are not exceptions; they are part of the common way humans process information under conditions of uncertainty and perceived threat.

Emotion as the Starting Point

In a vast number of situations, the emotional reaction precedes rational assessment. Feelings such as fear, anger, or discomfort arise quickly and intuitively, while traditional explanations often appear afterward as an attempt to justify an already formed stance. This sequence creates a strong subjective sense of certainty in one's own judgment, even though it is not necessarily the result of deliberate analysis.

Identity and the "Us–Them" Division

When a sense of threat is activated, identity becomes the central framework for interpreting reality. People tend to perceive "their own" group as complex and justified, while the "other" group is viewed as homogeneous and problematic. This division simplifies social reality and makes emotional navigation easier, but it simultaneously reduces the space for understanding and dialogue.

Language and Dehumanization

A shift in how others are spoken of often precedes open conflict. Dehumanization rarely begins with extreme expressions; it more frequently manifests through

abstract, bureaucratic, or technical language that reduces people to categories, numbers, or "problems." Such language diminishes empathy and makes it easier to accept exclusionary , narratives, even when they appear rational and moderate.

Cognitive Selection of Information

Under conditions of emotional activation people process information selectively. Data that confirms an existing stance is given greater weight, while opposing information is ignored or relativized. This process contributes to the feeling that one's own conclusions are obvious and unquestionable, even though they are based on limited insight.

Moral Justification

When problematic reactions or attitudes are perceived as "necessary," "reasonable," or "in the interest of security," personal responsibility is diminished. Moral justification allows the exclusionary or harmful effects of communication to be perceived as acceptable because they are linked with a higher goal or external pressure.

From Unconscious Reaction to Conscious Communication

The purpose of this guide is not to offer recipes for "correct" attitudes, nor to neutralize the emotions that accompany identity-based issues. Emotions are an integral part of the human experience and cannot be removed from communication. What can be developed, however, is the ability to recognize emotions before they automatically become the basis for conclusions, labels, and behavior.

The key tool this guide offers is an awareness of the sequence: emotion → identity → perception → reaction. Recognizing this process allows for a brief but vital space between impulse and response. In that space, the emotion does not disappear, but the likelihood that it entirely dictates the communication is reduced.

In practical terms, this involves paying attention to several signals: a sense of urgency, the need to take a side, intolerance for nuances, and a tendency toward generalizations. These signals do not necessarily mean the reaction is wrong; they mean that the process of emotional activation is already underway. Recognizing them represents the first step toward a more responsible response.

Responsible communication in post-conflict and polarized societies does not mean avoiding difficult topics. It means being aware of how those topics are processed, through what language, and from which emotional positions. The difference between a reaction and a response is often small in time, but vast in its consequences.

The difference between a reaction and a response is often small in time, but significant in its consequences.

You cannot prevent instinct from arising. You cannot prevent the feeling of belonging from being activated. But you can learn not to surrender complete control to these mechanisms. If you take only one thing from this guide, let it be this: Before you ask, "Whose side are you on?", pause and ask yourself—what is happening within me right now?

In that question, more conscious communication begins. And in that question, responsibility begins. ■

RECOGNIZING MANIPULATION OF THE PAST IN THE MEDIA – A MOUTH FULL OF THE PAST



Vladan Mićunović is a prominent Montenegrin journalist with decades of experience in both print and electronic media. He began his journalistic career at Radio Montenegro, later working for the daily newspaper Pobjeda. He was also one of the founders and the first Editor-in-Chief of Television Vijesti. In 2017, he served as Director of Television of Montenegro (TVCG). He was dismissed before the end of his mandate due to political pressure from the government at the time. Following this, he worked as an advisor to the Director General of Television of Montenegro. He has been actively involved in media law reform and in the education of young journalists, serving for many years as a lecturer at the School of Journalism of the Media Institute.

Why is both the recent and more distant past constantly one of the main topics in the media of the countries in this region? Why is the past discussed so passionately, exhaustively, and, for the most part, pointlessly? No historical narrative can be brought to a rational conclusion, and the wars of the nineties and the breakup of the common state have created new traumas that will burden the region for a long time.

In societies that have passed through various state frameworks, wars, ideological shifts, and transitions, history serves as a weapon in media, political, academic, ecclesiastical, and other battles. The same events are often perceived and presented in completely opposite ways. The problem is not that different interpretations exist, but that there is no desire to establish the truth—as a rule, everyone claims that theirs is the only right one. Facts are often falsified, selectively used, or manipulated. The past is also resorted to when an important decision needs to be justified or when attention needs to be

diverted from a major issue.

The goal of this manual is to help you recognize how the past in contemporary media is used to shape attitudes in the present. It is not intended to offer the "correct" version of history, but to develop skills for critical reading and understanding of media narratives.

How Manipulation of the Past Works

Manipulation does not happen by accident; it occurs as a result of political, national, religious, and other interests. Understanding these patterns is key to distinguishing between being informed about the past and its instrumentalization. Instead of serving as a space for critical re-examination, the media often become intermediaries in transmitting conflicting and mutually exclusive narratives, tailored to the expectations of their own audiences.

In all conflict situations of recent decades, many media outlets have replaced their primary role—the search for truth—with the unworthy spreading of

lies for the purpose of manipulating public opinion.

How Historical Facts Are Transformed into Modern Narratives

In contemporary Montenegrin and regional public space, the question of how we relate to the past often serves not to understand history, but to shape political and identity-based narratives. One of the most striking examples of this practice is the initiative to erect a monument to Pavle Đurišić, a Chetnik commander from World War II. This case demonstrates how historical facts can be selectively interpreted, relativized, or suppressed in favor of modern ideological needs.

According to relevant historical sources and scientific literature, Pavle Đurišić was the commander of Chetnik units that, during 1942 and 1943, committed mass crimes against the Muslim civilian population in northern Montenegro, Sandžak, and eastern Bosnia. In documents signed by Chetnik commanders themselves, including Đurišić, the planned destruction of civilian populations and villages is explicitly stated. At the same time, Đurišić collaborated with Italian and German occupation forces, for which he was awarded the Nazi "Iron Cross." This data represents a part of established historiographical material and is available in numerous archives and research studies.

Despite this, in segments of contemporary political and religious discourse, Pavle Đurišić is presented as a "great hero of invincible character," a symbol of the "struggle for the people," and a "victim of communist terror." In such narratives, his wartime activities are

either silenced or interpreted as a necessary defense under wartime conditions, while collaboration with the occupier is relativized or completely denied. This interpretation of the past is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a part of a broader process of rehabilitating the Chetnik movement in certain countries of the region.

The media plays a special role in spreading such narratives. Even outlets perceived as professional and critical often transmit the statements of political and religious actors without additional verification, contextualization, or confrontation with historical facts. In this way, the public sphere is filled with conflicting claims presented as equal interpretations, even though they do not rest on the same level of evidence. This blurs the boundary between scientifically established history and ideologically motivated opinion.

This case clearly demonstrates how one of the key mechanisms of manipulating the past functions: the equalization of facts and interpretations. When documented crimes and the fate of victims are placed on the same level as emotional and identity-based narratives, the space for critical thinking narrows, and the past becomes a tool for political mobilization. Instead of facing responsibility, a sense of collective injustice and threat is produced, which further hinders social dialogue.

The consequences of such practices do not remain in the domain of history. They affect contemporary political relations, deepen ethnic and religious divisions, and make it impossible to build trust between communities. The heroization of figures associated with war crimes

simultaneously sends a message to victims and their descendants that their suffering is neither recognized nor important.

The case of Pavle Đurišić shows that manipulating the past does not necessarily require the open denial of facts. It is enough for them to be used selectively, for the context to be omitted, and for the media sphere to be filled with emotional messages that overpower rational analysis. For this very reason, the critical reading of media content and an understanding of the mechanisms of historical manipulation represent a fundamental prerequisite for a responsible relationship with the past.

Questions for the Reader:

- Does the aforementioned text provide a complete picture of Pavle Đurišić
- Who decides which historical facts will be emphasized and which will be silenced in the public sphere?
- Can crimes be justified by the "context of the times" or collective suffering?
- Where is the line between the right to interpretation and historical revisionism?
- What is the responsibility of the media when they transmit statements that contradict scientifically established facts?

Mechanisms of Manipulation in Media Narratives

The analyzed media text is an illustrative example of how history can be used as a means of manipulation through a series of recognizable techniques. These

techniques complement each other, creating a distorted image of the past tailored to contemporary political, ideological, and identity-based needs. This example shows that the manipulation of the past does not have to be based on the overt denial of facts. It is enough to selectively choose information, use emotional and symbolic language, omit context, and appeal to authorities that do not belong to the domain of scientific expertise.

Recognizing these mechanisms is a key step toward developing a critical stance toward media content and toward engaging with the past in a more responsible manner.

Selective Emphasis and Glorification

One of the fundamental mechanisms of manipulation in this case is the selective highlighting of certain aspects of the past while simultaneously omitting crucial historical context. Pavle Đurišić is presented in the text as a positive historical figure, without any reference to documented evidence of his responsibility for mass crimes or his collaboration with occupying forces. Nor are relevant sources, documents, photographs, or testimonies cited.

A similar approach is applied in the portrayal of Metropolitan Joanikije Lipovac, where information about his collaboration with fascist authorities in 1941 is omitted. Such selective narration does not represent a mere mistake or oversight; rather, it constitutes a deliberate shaping of the narrative that eliminates any information capable of challenging the idealized image of controversial figures and ideologies.

Emotionalization and Mythologization of the Past

Another powerful mechanism of manipulation lies in the use of emotionally and symbolically charged language. Expressions such as “the Golgotha path,” “a great hero of invincible character,” or emphases on collective suffering are intended to provoke a strong emotional response and to link the past with the identity of the community.

In this way, history shifts from the sphere of rational analysis into the realm of myth and emotion. Instead of facts, feelings of shared suffering and heroism are brought to the forefront, encouraging the reader to adopt an emotional rather than a critical stance toward the events and figures being presented.

Reinterpretation of the Past in Line with Contemporary Interests

Historical events and figures in the text are interpreted through the prism of present-day political and social divisions. The past is not examined within its historical context; rather, it is adapted to contemporary political, ideological, clerical, and identity-based interests. Such reinterpretation enables the legitimization of certain historical actors as symbols of current political goals, while the complexity of historical processes is reduced to simplified narratives of “us” versus “them.” In this way, history is instrumentalized as a tool of political mobilization.

The Use of Cultural and Historical Myths

The text also reveals a reliance on cultural-historical myths, in which historical figures are equated with epic heroes and symbols of collective

memory. Such mythologization blurs the boundary between history and legend, further complicating any critical examination of actual events and responsibility media content and toward a more responsible confrontation with the past.

Appeals to Authority Without Scholarly Grounding

A particular concern lies in the use of ecclesiastical authority as a source of historical interpretation. Religious authorities are presented in the text as legitimate interpreters of the past, without reliance on historiographical methodology, scholarly sources, or academic debate. Such an approach replaces scholarly authority with symbolic and institutional authority—one of the common techniques of manipulation in societies where religion plays a significant role in shaping collective identity.

Between Facts and Relativization: Tools for Source Analysis

A media outlet that, under the pretext of “hearing the other side,” “pluralism of opinion,” or alleged objectivity and “balance,” provides a platform to interlocutors who deny scientifically established and documented facts commits a serious professional and ethical violation. Such practice does not represent freedom of opinion; rather, it constitutes a deliberate manipulation of the public, a relativization of responsibility, and an attempt to retouch—or falsify—historical and scientific truths. Objectivity does not mean equating facts with falsehoods; it means responsibility toward truth and the public interest.

Historical narratives should be read critically, not passively. If you learn to recognize manipulation, you will not become a prisoner of the past. Therefore, whenever you encounter a text, video, or audio story about the past, you should ask several questions:

Which media outlet published the story?

- Particular caution is warranted if the story appears in a publication affiliated with a political party, a religious organization, or another interested actor.
- In what format was the story presented? Was it published as a commentary, a column, a historical essay, a serialized feature, or as a brief "incidental" news item?
- Is the story presented as promotional content?

Who is the author?

- Is the author a journalist, politician, historian, blogger, or another interested party?
- Does the author possess professional integrity?
- What might be the author's motive and objective?
- Does the text have a background—why is a certain controversial event or figure being discussed right now? Are historical sources used?

Does the author rely on credible and verifiable historical sources?

- Are the sources for the factual material cited?
- Are the sources used in their entirety or selectively?

- Are the sources from the time the historical event occurred, or are they of a more recent date?

Pay Attention to Emotions

- Does the content trigger anger, fear, hatred, love, satisfaction...?
- What kind of vocabulary is used: terms like "betrayal," "centuries-old enemies," "holy struggle"?
- The stronger the emotions—the weaker the facts.

Does the Story Have Context?

- Is it explained when, why, and under what circumstances something happened?
- Is the past being viewed through the lens of today's values?
- Without context, any story can sound convincing.

Is Something Missing from the Text?

- Are only "our" victims emphasized?
- Are the mistakes of "our side" being silenced?
- Have some important, uncomfortable facts been omitted?

Video Content and Photographs Should Be Examined Carefully:

- Are the video clips or documents directly related to the story, or are they illustrations pulled from a different time or place?
- Pay attention to the caption (legend) beneath the video material or photograph.
- An image can be just as false and manipulative as text. ■

CLICKING THE PAST: HOW HISTORY IS SHAPED FOR THE DIGITAL AGE



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Imagine that history is not a book, but an editing room. On the table are the same frames: photographs, quotes, dates, short video clips, monuments, and old articles. But someone is constantly cutting and pasting them. From the same pile of material, one can produce a documentary about freedom or a thriller about hatred. The difference lies not in what exists, but in what is chosen, what is erased, and in what order it is arranged.

One morning, the internet woke up full of evidence. An archival photograph appeared on the feed: the face of a young person, a brief biography, birth and death dates, and a sentence that hits you right in the gut – “Share so it isn't forgotten.” The comments were already at odds: some expressed gratitude, others were skeptical, while a third group argued as if it were a question of belonging rather than verification. No one asked where the photo came from, who the author was, or where the original was kept. Most reacted as we always do when offered a story that demands emotion

before questions. A change in perspective occurs the moment you pause and, instead of asking “Do I like this news,” you ask “is it verifiable,” and when instead of “who is right” you ask “who is the source.” This guide does not begin with a verdict, but with a method for recognizing when history is being “packaged” for a click, and how to regain control over your own reaction before you turn it into a share.

Anatomy of the Digital Sphere: From Click to Narrative

Digital media are not just the internet. They are environments in which content is created and published online, distributed by algorithms, easily copied, and instantly given an additional layer through comments, reactions, and memes.

Because of this, an interpretation of the past can spread faster than a verification, and a headline or a short clip often outlives the full text. Most often, this

happens on portals and social media through short forms and emotions, on YouTube and podcasts, as well as in closed groups (Viber/WhatsApp/Telegram). Today, there are also AI chat tools and search engines that are useful for searching but can invent or rearrange data, so they should be treated as assistants rather than evidence.

Mini note: Traditional media (TV, radio, print) have editorial procedures, but they too can be biased. The digital world is different because speed, algorithms, and engagement often reward content that is inflammatory rather than necessarily accurate.

In practice, manipulation is recognized when a complex event is simplified into a single message. This can involve equating incompatible concepts ("everyone is the same"), shifting focus from facts to identity ("if you don't believe it, you are against us"), selective history, moral inversion, or symbolic battles over plaques, monuments, and names.

AI and modern technologies usually do not invent manipulation; they accelerate it and make it more convincing. They enable mass production (content factories), the generation or enhancement of images that resemble archives, convincing audio/video deceptions (deepfakes), as well as the translation and localization of messages, allowing a narrative to cross borders faster and take on a local tone.

How to Recognize (AI) Manipulation in Practice

In this section, we work on a single example to make the method clear and

applicable. The point is not for you to guess the correct answer, but to practice the verification process: from emotion, through the source, to the conclusion. On social media, posts occasionally spread showing alleged victims of Nazi camps through photographs and short biographies. The number of shares grows hour by hour, and the reactions to the stories slowly win over the hearts of the audience.

Most people share them so that the victims are not forgotten, and so that it never happens again. The problem arises when the photographs are generated or significantly altered by artificial intelligence, without a verifiable source.

Step 1: Pause. Before sharing or reading the comments, notice the emotion the post activates. If the content pushes you toward urgency ("share immediately"), that is a sign you need to slow down. Emotion is often the engine of virality, and AI content is designed to hit the emotion before the facts.

Step 2: Isolate the claims. Write down three verifiable claims: who the person is, where/when the content supposedly originated, and where the photo came from. If there is no date, place, or source, you already have your first red flag.

Step 3: Check sources and provenance. Who is publishing this? Do they cite an archive, museum, catalog, or link? Does the same image appear earlier in a different context? Storytelling without a source is not documentation.

Step 4: Go beyond the post (lateral reading). Do not rely on the post itself. Search for keywords. Check if relevant institutions have warned about similar deceptions.

Step 5: Separate the photo from the story; verify them independently. Visual persuasiveness is not proof; the key factors are origin and independent confirmation.

Step 6: Conclude without taking extreme positions. Use three levels: confirmed (has sources and verification), unverifiable (no origin or confirmation), and deception (analysis exists showing it is AI/fabricated). If it is unverifiable, do not share it.

Note: In a workshop setting, this method is applied to a specific example through collective discussion. In the guide, it is sufficient to understand the sequence of verification and to be able to apply it to similar posts.

Decoding Manipulation

Even when some of the facts may be accurate, manipulation often hides in the packaging: what has been omitted, how the headline framed the story, and which emotions are activated. In the digital environment, the winner is often not what is most accurate, but what is most convincing and most effective for sharing.

Manipulation of the Past

In posts like these, an "evidentiary effect" is produced—the image appears archival, and the story sounds like a historical fact, even though it lacks a verifiable source. The problem is not just the inaccuracy, but the fact that memory is being turned into a viral format without verification. It is important to know that the point here is not to attack someone who shares the content, but to understand how the mechanism works: from generated

evidentiary material and emotional reactions to the simulation of authority and presenting content as educational.

Generated Material

Artificial Intelligence, increasingly advanced, provides a multitude of tools available to everyone. In this way, photographs easily become "archival," and we get stories that sound like historical facts, even though no verifiable source exists. AI photographs appear convincing at first glance, but they give themselves away through small details when you look closer.

These are often errors on the human body, deformed accessories, a lack of natural texture, while the background can be illogical—crooked lines, repeating patterns, and lights and shadows sometimes go in different directions. When in doubt, you can always perform a reverse image search to check if there is a publication history, an original author, or a credible source.

Emotional Reaction

Generated material is designed to trigger specific, rapid audience reactions in order to increase divisions, engagement, and reach; the ultimate goal is for emotion to overpower rational response. It triggers compassion, shock, anger, fear, guilt, or pride, while rational explanations come afterward, often as an attempt to justify an already formed experience.

Divisions and Partisanship

To avoid divisions and the "cheering" framework of interpreting who or what "they" are versus who or what "we" are, it is essential to separate three levels: facts, interpretations, and value judgments.

Facts relate to the questions of who, where, when, and from which source. Interpretations explain what that data "means." Value judgments assess moral acceptability. In practice, it is useful to distinguish verifiable claims from interpretations that draw conclusions like "this shows what they are really like." Manipulation often occurs in that transition from claim to conclusion, when an assumption is presented as a fact.

Red Flags

During verification, there are signals typical of memory falsification. Suspicion should increase when there is no link to an archive, museum, or catalog; when there is no photographer, publication date, or place of origin; and especially when it circulates as a screenshot without a source. An additional signal is a format that is short and emotional, often with a call to share. It is also suspicious when a profile presents itself as a history page but offers no methodology, sources, or bibliography.

Even when there is no overt denial of historical crimes, this type of content can produce a revisionist effect. By spreading "evidence" that isn't real, the audience loses trust, history becomes a field for relativization, and confusion opens the door for disinformation and denial. That is precisely why it is crucial to understand the mechanisms that turn memory into a viral format and to know how to recognize and verify them.

Digital Self-Defense – How to See Through a Well-"Packaged" Lie

You can use this section as a quick routine whenever you encounter a

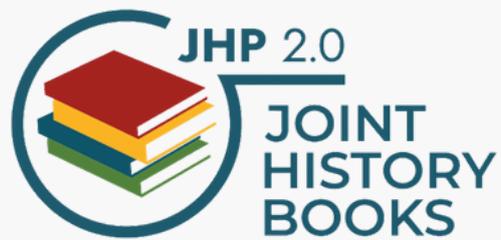
historical claim online. The goal is to create a small gap between the impulse and the act of sharing.

Mini Check-List

- Who is behind the post (author/media/page) and what is the goal of the content?
- What are the three verifiable claims and where is the evidence (documents, original footage, primary source)?
- What is missing: context, chronology, the other side, original quotes?
- Is the language inflammatory (always, never, labeling) and does it trigger strong emotions?
- Is the content spreading virally through screenshots and groups, without a source?

AI can help you formulate questions, suggest keywords, and provide summaries, but an AI answer is not proof. Proof is a verified source, an archive, original footage, or a credible institution.

Manipulation of the past in digital media rarely looks like an obvious lie. More often, it looks like a story that is beautifully packaged, with a headline and a narrative that triggers your emotions first, and only then the facts. Your power does not lie in knowing every date. Your power lies in knowing how to verify them. ■



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