Impact of Social Sciences Blog: Mobilising Historical Knowledge without Master Narratives: How historians are correcting the record in a complicated political moment

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Mobilising Historical Knowledge without Master Narratives: How historians are correcting the record in a complicated political moment

Across the world and particularly in the USA, historical evidence has become increasingly central to certain contemporary political and policy debates. Drawing on a survey of US media sources, **Dustin Hornbeck** *and* **Joel Malin***, discuss this trend and describe the ways in which historical evidence is used in the public sphere. Whilst debates around the use of historical evidence are often contentious, they suggest that they also reflect opportunities for better public engagement with historical research and an increasingly democratised public debate around historical narratives in society.*

Since the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election – when Donald Trump's campaign slogan to "Make America Great Again" signalled a particular view of the nation's past and present – debates over truth, facts, reality, and how to remember the past have escalated. Whether about the American origin story, statuary placement, or impeachment; how history and the past are interpreted has become a prominent partisan question in public life. These disputes reflect at least a shared understanding of the "power of the past" and hence, the drive to build *collective memories* about it. On several platforms, including traditional print journalism and new media (e.g., podcasts, Twitter, Facebook), academic historians, adjacent scholars, and others have been in a conspicuous war of sorts over historical interpretations, increasingly acting to challenge or correct outright false or misleading claims.

How is history being mobilised and who is mobilising it?

We noticed such trends surrounding what we termed *historical knowledge mobilisation* and decided to explore them further. In a [recent paper](#), we applied a framework developed by [Vicky Ward](#) to ask *what* and *whose historical* knowledge is being shared and *how* and *why* this is happening. We were drawn toward process-oriented frameworks like Ward's, given their capacities to surface often-unstated aims of knowledge mobilisation—in turn, we hoped, enabling us and others to 'get to grips' with these processes and how they could be augmented. Knowledge mobilisation is [an umbrella term](#) referring to various activities that serve to enhance the flow and uptake of research evidence—including, for instance, ways in which academically-derived historical knowledge serves to frame public and elite thinking around contemporary issues.

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Though our study focused on the US context, this phenomenon is evident in other contexts, albeit with nuances. Several features motivating and structuring historical knowledge mobilisation in the US are in keeping with global trends. Notably, there are global movements toward populist ideologies, and online misinformation and disinformation are presenting issues worldwide. More broadly, in recognition of the "power of the past", we assume in many contexts one will readily find active efforts by politicians and other elites to build [collective memories](#); we further assume such efforts will be particularly pronounced, and contested, in contexts that are needing to deal with legacies of injustice (i.e., slavery, colonialism, resource inequalities).

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For this study, we inventoried major news outlets and new media sources, seeking to understand historical knowledge mobilisation by historians and adjacent scholars during the Trump Presidency. Three main themes emerged around *why* such knowledge is being mobilised: (1) correcting or countering historical master narratives, (2) real-time correction of misleading historical claims and, (3) contextualising complicated political moments. We detail these themes below.

Correcting or countering historical master narratives

Historians or adjacent scholars sometimes presented work that sought to correct *master narratives,* which provided biased, simplistic and mythologised historical explanations. Such interpretations are often referred to as being triumphalist or exceptionalist, meaning they paint an unrealistically positive historical picture. *The [New York Times' 1619 Project](#)* provides a prominent example of intentionally corrective work. Journalist and academic Nikole Hannah-Jones solicited work from numerous scholars and journalists to describe how slavery played a central role in the foundations of United States history. She claimed, rather than look to 1776 as the U.S. founding, we should instead consider 1619 (the year when African slaves were first brought to Virginia) as the foundational year of the country. *The 1619 Project* sparked ferocious debate, with some right-wing politicians calling it ["racist" and "left-wing garbage"](#). Subsequently, several states passed laws to ban the work from being used in schools. More broadly, the past several months have seen escalating efforts from the political right to [restrict teaching and training about racism and bias](#) in schools.

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Yet, as social psychologist Jennifer Richeson noted in 2020, a rare and fleeting window appears open to take bold actions to address systemic inequalities, a fact which might lend special urgency to such efforts to reframe the past. As she wrote, against a backdrop of police violence and a global pandemic that exposed major systemic weaknesses, "The year 2020 has not been a good one for America's 'master narrative' in any of its traditional forms."

Real-time correction of misleading historical claims

Here, we focused particularly on historical arguments taking place on Twitter by prominent historians or "Twitterstorians." In a notable example, conservative media personality Dinesh D'Souza claimed that the modern Democratic Party was comparable to the Nazi party. In response, Princeton historian Kevin Kruse crafted several Tweets explaining how political party ideology shifted in the middle of the Twentieth century, making the Republican party the party of the right-wing. Kruse is a popular Twitterstorian largely because of his pithy comments, or "dunks", on right-wing personalities. He also uses primary sources, like pictures and documents, to provide supportive evidence.

> While such historians are not practicing traditional historiography, they often work to contextualise the moment

On a platform like Twitter, where false claims run rampant, our research shows that even when facing word limitations, historians are finding ways to correct inaccuracies, sometimes gaining widespread attention in so doing. Such factual corrections are particularly needed given major and asymmetrical changes to the media landscape: Currently, partisan *conservative* media are less constrained by journalistic norms, feature more hyperpartisan and fake sites, and even their mainstream outlets commonly amplify false/misleading content.

Contextualising complicated political moments

Finally, we observed that various sources turned to historians to provide historical context about complicated political moments occurring during the Trump presidency. For example, when academic historians contextualised ex-President Trump's impeachment trial or publicly weighed in on whether he should be impeached or removed. Another example was when a noted presidential historian, John Meachum, was invited to give remarks at the Democratic National Convention, where he provided historical context about the aberrant danger of the Trump Presidency.

Recognising historical engagement

Tracking these engagements provides a unique window into how and why historical knowledge is being mobilised during complicated times. Historians and adjacent scholars have used their expertise in a variety of ways to contribute to ongoing cultural conversations. While such historians are not practicing traditional historiography, they often work to contextualise the moment, producing explanations that are frequently time and word limited.

Although people have always debated historical interpretation, our work sheds light on the ways new media is altering historical knowledge mobilisation, especially within the present political context. What's more, venues like Twitter, for better or worse, democratise voices and opinions, making new media venues a vibrant space for further study. Cornell Historian Lawrence Glickman Tweeted that we are "living in a golden age for public facing history," despite the tumultuous political context. We hope this topic is studied further, and that understanding it better can reveal ways to promote a more just and democratic society.

This post draws on the authors' paper, Historical knowledge mobilisation in a post-factual era in the United States, published in Evidence and Policy.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our comments policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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