

EAJIS Conference Grant Program in Jewish Studies

Report

“Confronting Holocaust Distortion in the Digital Era”

POLIN Museum

Event Rationale

In the current digital landscape, historical truth is increasingly besieged by Holocaust distortion – a phenomenon more subtle and pervasive than outright denial. While denial is rare in Eastern Europe due to the physical proximity of evidence, distortion thrives through the minimization of Jewish victimhood, the whitewashing of local collaboration, and the instrumentalization of the Holocaust for contemporary political agendas.

The rationale for this conference was built on the premise that traditional fact-checking is insufficient; as social science research indicates, simple refutation often fails to change minds. Instead, experts must “reach people where they are” – i.e. online – by building and promoting robust, evidence-based narratives that utilize storytelling and digital literacy. POLIN Museum, as a leader in European Jewish history, served as a symbolic and practical hub to bridge the gap between hermetic scholarly discourse and the “ocean” of popular digital misunderstanding.

Achievement of Goals

The conference successfully met its primary objectives by:

- **Interdisciplinary Synergy:** Bringing together historians, sociologists, and museum practitioners with AI experts and journalists.
- **Concrete Action Formulation:** Transitioning from theoretical analysis of distortion to practical case studies of digital engagement (e.g., USHMM’s social media initiatives and AI-driven accessibility).
- **Geographic Heterogeneity:** Addressing “divided memories” by comparing and contrasting European and global (e.g., Chinese, Indian, and Argentinian) digital distortions.

Overview of the sections and papers presented during the event

The conference was structured into, six thematic panels, a keynote address and two public-facing roundtable discussions.

Panels and Roundtables

- Opening
- Polish Perspectives: Online and In-Person Antisemitism
 - This brief panel brought together activists and practitioners to show what is being done to assess and address antisemitism both online and in public spaces in Poland.
- Panel 1: Scientific Approaches
 - The first panel collected more theoretical approaches to the problem of online Holocaust distortion.
- PUBLIC EVENT: “Confronting the Truth: *Neighbors* and the Evolution of Polish Holocaust Discourse”
 - This discussion, held in Polish for the Polish-speaking public, was focused on how Jan Gross’s seminal work has changed the discourse over the Holocaust in the past 25 years.
- Keynote Address
 - The keynote focused on the tools that bad actors use to spread disinformation, why they do it and how they are succeeding.
- Panel 2: Manipulation & Education
 - Educational approaches were presented for the purpose of understanding strategies and exchanging best practices.
- Panel 3: Distortion & Politics
 - The political dimensions, in Israel, the United States and China, were presented during this panel, showing the broad uses of distortion for politicians.
- Panel 4: Artificial “Intelligence” & Ethics
 - The challenge of AI, as both opportunity and threat, continues to unfold every day. This panel showed how certain groups are reacting.
- PUBLIC EVENT: “Holocaust Distortion: Media’s New Challenge”
 - This public-facing event in Polish, brought together some key figures in today’s media landscape to understand how they are facing the issue of Holocaust distortion in public discourse and how they see it evolving in the next few years.
- Panel 5: The View from USHMM
 - The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has a wealth of tools and online programming meant to address educational gaps, and draw in interested people. With their broad reach, they’ve managed to influence millions of people across the globe. This panel gave participants a chance to hear what USHMM is doing today to evolve.
- Panel 6: Global Perspectives
 - The final panel compared the situation of Holocaust distortion in India, the United States and Israel. Presenters brought case studies to zoom in closer on the problems in these key areas.

Most significant and productive threads in the papers and discussions.

Three primary threads emerged as the most productive during the proceedings:

1. **The "AI Paradox":** Discussion centred on how Generative AI acts as both a tool for distortion (deepfakes, algorithmic shadows) and a tool for preservation. Presentations on the "Ethics of Anne Frank in AI" and USHMM's processing pipelines highlighted the urgent need for ethical frameworks in digital testimony.
2. **Narrative-Building over Fact-Checking:** Consistent with the rationale, participants debated how to move from "reactive" refutation to "proactive" storytelling. The consensus was that museums must act as "content creators" rather than just "archives", using social media platforms to foster empathy and historical nuance.
3. **National vs. Digital Memory:** The roundtable on *Neighbors* and Jedwabne illustrated how localized historical reckonings are now magnified by digital "culture wars". The discussion highlighted that distortion often arises when national identities feel threatened by specialist knowledge, necessitating a more integrated approach to public history.

Engagement with the public or Jewish communal impact.

Two major highlights were the public events.

"Confronting the Truth: Neighbors and the Evolution of Polish Holocaust Discourse" The session marked the 25th anniversary of the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's landmark book, *Neighbors*. The event, held in Polish with simultaneous English translation, served as a focal point of the conference, grounding the global digital debate in the specific historical context of Poland. Dr. Krzysztof Persak (POLIN Museum) provided insight into the institutional and archival impact of the Jedwabne revelations. Dr. Agnieszka Haska (Polish Academy of Sciences) analyzed the evolution of public memory and the shifting narratives of the past 25 years. Prof. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (Polish Academy of Sciences) discussed the social and anthropological dimensions of the "uncomfortable truths" uncovered by Gross's work.

The roundtable successfully demonstrated how specialized scholarship can "spark a national conversation." It served as a vital case study for the conference rationale, illustrating the tension between historical accountability and the political desire to control narratives—a struggle that has moved from the pages of academic books to the forefront of modern digital and cultural wars.

"Holocaust Distortion: Media's New Challenge," which featured prominent Polish journalists Tomasz Terlikowski and Roman Imielski, as well as a media studies professor, Tadeusz Kononiuk. This session bridged the gap between academia and the general public, addressing how mainstream media can responsibly report on sensitive historical topics without inadvertently amplifying distorted narratives. The event was held in Polish with simultaneous English translation.

Planned outcomes and outputs

The conference served as a catalyst for several high-impact outcomes designed to ensure the longevity of the research presented:

- **Peer-Reviewed Publication:** A primary output of the event will be a special issue featuring selected papers from the conference. The organizing committee is currently in the process of evaluating top-tier peer-reviewed journals to identify the most appropriate venue for this collection. By publishing as a thematic special issue rather than a standard edited volume, we aim to maximize the academic visibility and citation impact of the research.
- **Establishment of a Professional Research Network:** Perhaps the most significant outcome was the organic formation of a multidisciplinary network of scholars and practitioners. The conference provided a unique collaborative space that bridged existing gaps between historians, digital ethicists, and museum professionals.
- **Future Collaborations:** Several participants have already initiated plans for joint research projects and future workshops. This network is a major accomplishment of the event, ensuring that the momentum generated in Warsaw will continue to drive new methodologies in combating Holocaust distortion over the coming years.

Final programme of the event

Confronting Holocaust Distortion in the Digital Era

Day 1 (Nov 18)

14:30 -15:45 Conference Opening.

Polish perspectives: Online and in-person antisemitism

Chair: Zachary Mazur (POLIN Museum)

Piotr Kwapisiewicz (Czulent Foundation), "How much of the current rise in antisemitism includes Holocaust themes?"

Witold Wrzosiński (Jewish Community of Poland), "Vandalism in Jewish cemeteries and its connection to historical and current Events"

Julia Chimiak (POLIN Museum), "Responses to Educational programs at POLIN Museum"

15:45 – 16:00 Coffee Break

16:00-17:30 Panel 1: Scientific approaches to the problem

Chair: Rob Rozett (Yad Vashem)

Stefan Leicht (Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History), "Analysing and Mapping Holocaust Diaries to Confront (AI-generated) Holocaust Distortion"

Stefania Zezza (University of Rome Tor Vergata), "The Language of Distortion: Sociolinguistic Approaches to Holocaust Memory in Digital Discourse"

Oana Serban (University of Bucharest), "Biopolitics 2.0: Analyzing Holocaust Distortion and Denial in Romanian Digital Environments. A Case Study on Corrective Justice Mechanisms on Facebook: The Digital Heritage of "Viral" Cancel Culture"

17:30 -18:00 Coffee Break

18.00-19:30 Roundtable Discussion: "Confronting the Truth: *Neighbors* and the Evolution of Polish Holocaust Discourse"

Moderator: Piotr Forecki (Adam Mickiewicz University)

Agnieszka Haska (Center for Holocaust Research, Polish Academy of Sciences)

Krzysztof Persak (POLIN Museum)

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences)

19.30 – 21.00 Dinner

DAY 2 (Nov 19)

10:00 – 11:30 – Keynote Address

Lev Topor (College of Tel Aviv-Yaffo), "Digital Cloaks and Algorithmic Shadows: Online Holocaust Denial in the Age of AI"

11:30-12:00 Coffee Break

12:00-13.30 Panel 2: Manipulation & Education

Chair: Andrea Löw (Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History)

Stephanie Share (London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism), "From Denial to Distortion: Understanding and Combating Holocaust Manipulation in the Digital Age"

Borbala Klacsmann (Eötvös Loránd University), "Holokausztörténetek: Education, popular history, commemoration via social media"

Marina Bantiou (University of Thessaly), "Engaging Young Learners with Holocaust History in the Digital Age: Designing Educational Tools Based on the Jewish Community of Corfu"

13:30 -14.30 Lunch

14:30 – 16:00 Panel 3: Distortion & Politics

Chair: Marek Szajda (POLIN Museum)

Idit Gil (The Open University of Israel), "Weaponizing Holocaust Memory: Political Rhetoric and Historical Distortion in the Digital Era"

Gisela Fistein & Bruno Garbari (Holocaust Museum of Buenos Aires), "Confronting Holocaust myths and memory gaps in Argentina"

Yuang Marcus Liu (King's College London), "Online Chinese Holocaust Distortion Behind the Firewall"

16:00-16:30 Coffee break

16:30-18:00 Panel 4: Artificial "Intelligence" & Ethics

Chair: Hannah Randall (University of Huddersfield)

Katayoun Matloubi (University of Connecticut), "AI, Translation, and Holocaust Memory Distortion"

Stephanie Taylor (Gratz College), "Likes, Lies, and Lessons: Holocaust Testimony in the Age of Artificial Intelligence"

Kathryn Huether (University of California, Los Angeles), "Digital Preservation or Digital Erosion? The Ethics of Representing Anne Frank in AI"

18:00 – 18:30

18:30 – 19:30 Public Event: "Holocaust Distortion: Media's New Challenge"

Moderator: Michał Okóński (Tygodnik Powszechny)
Tadeusz Kononiuk (Warsaw University)
Tomasz Terlikowski (RMF FM)
Roman Imielski (Gazeta Wyborcza)

DAY 3 (Nov 20)

10:00 -11:30 Panel 5: The View from USHMM

Chair: Agnieszka Haska (Center for Holocaust Research, Polish Academy of Sciences)
Sarah Lumbard (USHMM), "Recognizing and Combating Holocaust Distortion in Generative AI: The Holocaust Encyclopedia"
Luke Ryder (USHMM), "Building Audience-Centered Digital Resources on the Holocaust: Experiencing History"
Andrea Bertrand (USHMM), "Initiative on Holocaust Denial and Antisemitism, Confronting Holocaust Distortion in Iran through Social Media: The Sardari Project"
William Mattingly (USHMM), "Using AI to Improve the Accessibility of Digital Collections: A Case Study for Processing Pipelines"

11:30 – 12:00 Coffee Break

12.00- 13.30 Panel 6: Global Perspectives

Chair: Andrzej Żbikowski (Jewish Historical Institute)
Cynthia Seton-Rogers (University of Texas, Dallas), "Digital Distortion: American Antisemitism, Holocaust Memory, and the Role of Social Media and AI."
Sharon Geva (Kibbutzim College), "Women's History and Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age: A Wikipedia Case Study"
Rajesh Prasad (University of Delhi), "Reframing Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age: An Indian–Global Comparative Intervention Against Subtle Distortion"