

Capturing Collective Memories of the Disappeared with Artificial Intelligence

Tomas Lorenzo^[0000-0002-3482-8389]

University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder CO 80309, USA
tomas@laurenzo.net

Abstract. This paper presents a project that aims to prototype a system that utilizes LLM-based conversational interactions to capture and store elements of Uruguayans’ collective memory of the disappeared during its latest dictatorship. Memories that would otherwise be inaccessible, forgotten, or that would leave out the oft-untold personal narratives that form a significant part of collective memories.

Keywords: Machine Learning, Conversational Interfaces, Collective Memory.

1 Introduction

While South America is far from constituting a univocal block, its countries, among their many similarities, share similarly painful periods in their recent history which is marked by a series of military dictatorships that took control of many South American countries during the 1960s – 1980s.

In the Southern Cone, military dictatorships took control in Brazil (1964), Chile (1973), Uruguay (1973), Argentina (1976), establishing regimes marked by ruthless repression of all opposition, and the capture and execution of an unprecedented number of people.

With a stated objective of cleansing their society of what they considered subversive elements polluted by socialist and communist ideas, these regimes also deepened their countries’ geopolitical roles, solidifying their peripheral (‘third world’) status [Achugar, 2008].

2 Collective Memory

Collective memory, a concept pertaining to the social sciences, differs notably from the typical memory categories studied in neuroscience; instead, it encompasses the aggregation of individual brains, minds, and memories that are part of a specific social group, thereby constituting a crucial element of its cultural identity.

Although much of collective memory is housed in the human brain, its creation and maintenance are regarded as distinctive aspects of a social group's collective behavior and cultural outputs, becoming foundational to the group's own identity.

Collective memories are propagated through cultural, rather than genetic, mechanisms throughout the lives of the group's members [Kvasnička and Pospíchal, 2015].

In this context, social regulations and cultural artefacts play a determining role, affecting which memories prevail, and how they are stored, transformed, and communicated within and across social groups and sub-groups.

Post-dictatorship (i.e. democratic) governments across the Southern Cone have systematically established 'politics of oblivion', effectively working against the construction and dissemination of collective memories pertaining to the dictatorships.

These politics, always executed under a pretense of "moving forward" and "leaving behind" a painful-yet-shared period –about which, in reality, there is no consensus– has precipitated a social "eternal returning" to these issues [Montaño, 2008].

These eternal returns have grown in frequency, size, and effectiveness, with organizations, individuals, and sometimes governmental agencies, working towards the identification of remains, the prosecution of criminals, and the uncovering of the truth about individuals who have been forcibly disappeared.

Artists, especially filmmakers, have contributed greatly to the creation of new collective memories through the representation of specific personal histories [Sipprelle, 2014].

This is particularly important for artworks (among other cultural artefacts) often act as "places of memory", i.e. places where "memory crystallizes and secretes itself"; the places where the exhausted capital of collective memory condenses and is expressed [Montaño, 2008].

3 Uruguay

Uruguay's most recent military dictatorship (1973 – 1985) exhibited serious violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including more than 15.000 political prisoners, systematic torture in detention centers, summary executions, and enforced disappearance of persons.

Forced disappearance is a permanent and continuous violation of multiple rights, such as the right to personal liberty, to humane treatment, to life, and to recognition as a person before the law, which subsist so long as the disappeared person's whereabouts have not been established or their remains identified. It is a continuous crime against the missing persons, their families, and humanity.

Within Latin America historical heterogeneities, Uruguay offers a favorable context to investigate (and to act) in topics related to its recent past, due to the following factors:

- A small population of ~3.5 million.
- A highly articulated society that has struggled to find ways to cope and reconcile with its recent past.
- An effective implementation of the 'politics of oblivion', during 1985-2000, signed by its Law 15.848, which granted amnesty to military responsible for crimes committed during the dictatorship.

- An effective process of “memory waves”, that is, social moments working towards the establishing of new, alternative collective memories, marked by the establishing of institutions (mostly NGOs) working towards this. In particular, two NGOs, SERPAJ and HIJOS, have been instrumental in the prosecution of ‘crimes against humanity’, as well as in the clarification of the outcome of forced disappearances (for example, in the identification of children of disappeared who have been appropriated by military families).

4 LLMs and Conversational Interfaces

Machine Learning (ML) is a field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) that investigate how algorithms can learn from observations and data, as opposed to having explicitly programmed behavior.

Over the past two decades ML has become one of the most important techniques in information technology, providing solutions to problems that seemed unsolvable, and outperforming humans in areas until now considered impossible to approach computationally [LeCun et al., 2015].

Large Language Models (LLM) such as OpenAI’s ChatGPT, are ML models trained on extremely large corpora of natural language (i.e. ‘the web’), utilizing techniques such as tokenization and embedding, infer semantic relationships from statistical correlations in the training data. This statistical inference allows LLMs to capture multiple-level semantic information present in the training data, and to apply it in the processing of new information.

Among many outstanding results (such as automatic musical composition, writing, and software coding), LLMs are extraordinarily effective in supporting conversational interfaces. These interfaces often succeed in allowing users of channel all their interaction needs through natural language (such as English or Spanish).

These interaction designs have been shown to be extremely effective in making users feel that they are interacting with an intelligent system, and in leveraging users’ existing conversational capabilities [Wang et al., 2023].

Even more, conversational interfaces are also effective when used by persons that would otherwise struggle, such as elderly or disabled users. They are also effective in enabling interaction to persons who would normally struggle due to lack of education (from computational literacy to analphabetism), or trust in automated systems.

5 Project Objectives

The project has two main goals, 1) to prototype a system that utilizes a custom LLM to aid in capturing and storing elements of Uruguayans’ collective memory of the disappeared, that would otherwise be inaccessible, storing the oft-untold personal narratives that form a significant part of collective memories; and 2) to develop an on-line, interactive data-visualization system and artwork that permits to explore and navigate the collected information.

The project hopes to contribute to the understanding of the significance and importance of forced disappearances. In addition to the software, its documentation, and the properly anonymized data collected—all of which will be accessible online as open-source nature—we expect the project to be appropriated by organizations and persons, and so, it will create new spaces of political reflection and artistic collaboration worldwide.

6 Art as Research

Rhetorics conceived in geopolitically powerful contexts very often ignore the different relationships between art and politics that systematically appear in the geopolitical periphery, very specially in Latin America. Consequently, there is a need for a richer artistic and sociopolitical vocabulary that not only explores these practices, but that also avoids the false dichotomy inherent to the modernizing discourse, always focusing on the arduous task of developing yet another replacement of the stories surrounding "the other". In this context, explicitly political art is able to contest prevalent forms of political and disciplinary subjectivities, allowing for original forms of activist art and, more importantly significantly collaborating towards disarticulation of some of the processes which systematically normalize conditions of structural oppression, via a militant reclamation of the sensible.

Research that incorporates artistic creation as a core component has proven successful in creating design and technological alternatives, with artists not only contributing culturally relevant artefacts, but also generating novel approaches that expand the scope of existing analysis. This project intends to continue this trajectory, specifically focusing on potential synergies between artists, machine learning, and the corpora the project hopes to produce.

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