

Who Edits the Average Encyclopedia? On Memory, Power, and Cultural Selection

A.I. generated abstract

This paper critiques Umberto Eco's concept of the Encyclopedia, a foundational element in his semiotic theory of interpretation. While Eco frames the Encyclopedia as a dynamic, open-ended cultural construct that enables interpretive pluralism, this paper argues that his model effaces the role of agency, intentionality, and power in shaping collective memory. Drawing on examples from the culture of Holocaust remembrance, the paper demonstrates how appeals to an average encyclopedia often obscure the contested and politically charged processes through which cultural knowledge is produced, disseminated, and forgotten. In emphasizing systemic coherence and interpretive regularity, Eco's framework privileges dominant epistemologies, effectively depoliticizing the interpretive process. By foregrounding the politics of memory and the asymmetries that structure cultural circulation, this paper calls for a repoliticization of semiotics—one that acknowledges not only *what* is remembered and interpreted, but *who* gets to remember and interpret in the first place.

Keywords

(Umberto Eco's) Encyclopedia, Interpretation, Memory, Agency

There is one aspect of Umberto Eco's definition of the Encyclopedia that I find problematic: the notion that the Encyclopedia—the semantic model by which Eco represents the cultural environment humans inhabit—is an acephalous, self-sufficient, self-correcting system in which individual human agency plays only a marginal role.

While the Global Encyclopedia—"the ensemble of all registered interpretations, conceivable in objective terms as the library of all libraries, where library is also an archive of all the non-verbal information that has somehow been recorded, from rock painting to film libraries" (Eco 1984: 109)—may be the best available description of a Cultural Memory that no single individual can ever fully control, Eco also explains how an Average Encyclopedia constitutes the common cultural ground enabling most of our social interactions. Being part of a specific community means sharing the knowledge of one or more local Encyclopedias, which, over the course of communicative exchanges, often remain unmentioned because they are taken for granted by the other participants. Local Encyclopedias can vary in size and scope, covering anything from specialized semantic fields (such as semiotics or biochemistry) to entire domains of popular culture (such as Star Trek fandom). By contrast, the Average Encyclopedia is a sort of cultural

median, a subset of beliefs and representations that result from countless communicative exchanges and are presumably shared by the majority of people within a broader linguistic community, regardless of their specific fields of expertise. It is a bundle of deeply ingrained interpretive habits that occupy the center of the Encyclopedia and come to mind immediately whenever a specific term is mentioned: e.g., “cat” — “meows”: everyone knows this (cfr. Violi 1992; Lorusso 2022). Indeed, to be recognized as a full member of a community, one must possess the beliefs, habits, and practical rules that make up its Average Encyclopedia.

In this sense, the “average” encyclopedia can be seen as a special kind of local encyclopedia—a “privileged” local encyclopedia, so to speak—that, while part of the Global Encyclopedia, nevertheless forms a relatively coherent and delimited sub-universe. For instance, it lets us determine which knowledge, beliefs, and skills might have been part of the worldview of a 14th-century peasant versus a French nobleman on the eve of the Revolution. In this respect, the encyclopedia can be compared to Foucault’s concept of the episteme, constituting a sort of “overall representation” of a given culture (Violi 1992: 104).

Referring specifically to a community’s collective representations of its past, we can assume that different individuals and local communities access distinct areas of the Encyclopedia, with varied levels of historical competence and different areas of expertise. Nevertheless, aside from these individual variations, one can still assume the existence of a shared, if somewhat fuzzy, historical competence. For instance, those who live in France are expected to know something about the French Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte, though they may know little or nothing about Thomas Jefferson or the unification of Italy. In this regard, the Average Encyclopedia is closely related to what is commonly called Collective Memory: the shared pool of stories, memories, knowledge, and information that significantly shapes a social group’s identity. What is the cultural common denominator that holds a national or linguistic community together? The formats of the Average Encyclopedia matter greatly in transmitting exemplary, value-laden narratives that shape the mindset of present and future generations. This explains why debates over school curricula and literary canons are a priority for any group seeking cultural hegemony.

But how are the formats of the Average Encyclopedia established? Eco (2007) addresses this question by describing the concept of an *ars oblivionalis* (the art of forgetting) and highlighting a key difference between individual memory and

culturally transmitted memory. It is impossible—he argues—to forget voluntarily what individual memory has recorded; no matter how much one tries to suppress an unpleasant or traumatic event, that memory does not fade except through psychic mechanisms beyond our conscious control. By contrast, Eco notes:

Cultures exist as devices that not only serve to conserve and pass on information useful for their survival as cultures, but also to cancel information that is considered to be excessive. Culture does not make individuals forget that which they know, but rather it keeps silent about that which they do not as yet know. (Eco 2007: 88)

To eliminate an event from the memory of future generations, one need only remove it from history books, stop talking about it, and delete it from the shared Encyclopedia. Eventually, no one—or almost no one—will remember it. The fact that collective memory can function as a canceling device is not always deleterious. Certainly, the art of oblivion infamously manifests in the work of the *commissariats aux archives*, who censor, retouch, or exclude events disapproved of by the regime in power. Yet oblivion is equally crucial for the survival of individuals and groups that might otherwise suffer information overload and lose fundamental cognitive faculties. Nietzsche famously wrote in *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, “There is a degree of insomnia, of rumination, of the historical sense, through which something living comes to harm and finally perishes, whether it is a person or a people or a culture.” Furthermore—Eco comments—pruning superfluous (or presumed superfluous) details from a culture’s Encyclopedia does not mean these details vanish entirely: they are relegated to a latent zone, buried in specialized archives, accessible to historians, and potentially revivable when new circumstances prompt their resurgence. In Eco’s words: “It could be said that excessive information is ‘frozen,’ waiting for the expert to retrieve it and put it in the microwave to revive it.” (Eco 2007: 90-91)

All of this is relatively uncontroversial. However, I find Eco’s subsequent remarks problematic. Who or what decides, among the information “unfrozen” by experts, which pieces should enter the collective memory—i.e., that portion of the Average Encyclopedia through which a community represents its past as the foundation of its current identity? Eco depicts the incessant restructuring of the Encyclopedia as almost spontaneous, basically disconnected from the agency of specific individuals entrusted with selecting certain pieces of information over others when constructing collective memory:

The erasure-filtering operation implemented by the Average Encyclopedia does not depend either on the will of an individual or on a conscious act of collective will: it is established through a form of inertia, at times even based on natural causes, as in the obliteration of all that related to Atlantis, if it ever existed. (Eco 2007: 89)

If we no longer remember what happened to Calpurnia after Caesar's death, or if we do not know the names of every participant in the Battle of Waterloo, these lapses in memory are not necessarily attributable to someone's willful act of erasure; indeed, "such things just happen." Eco thus outlines a collective memory and an Average Encyclopedia that are both impersonal and unplanned—autopoietic yet also vulnerable to natural cataclysms.

Yet one cannot help but wonder whether this resolutely anti-intentionalist model stems from Eco's choice of using caricatural examples to illustrate memory erasure and filtering. Had he opted for more ideologically charged examples—such as the postwar Italian amnesia concerning its racist record, or unified Germany's failure to remember the Red Army soldiers who died conquering Berlin (despite abundant memorial practices), or the so-called "culture wars" of contemporary political debate where self-proclaimed Guardians of Memory feel entitled to add or erase whole swaths of the Average Encyclopedia—the image of a memory adrift in depersonalized cultural tides might require revision. What Eco's 2007 Encyclopedic model lacks, in my view, is a reference to power and agency: namely, to the unevenly distributed capacity to shape commemorative processes—and, more generally, the formats and contents of the Average Encyclopedia.

Collective memory does not function like Wikipedia. It is not an open Encyclopedia that anyone can edit at will. It is much easier to access it as a reader than as an author, especially when it concerns historically charged events that continue to shape the present, such as those from the Second World War. Without invoking Spectre or Big Brother, it is evident that the Average Encyclopedia is subject to gatekeeping and agenda-setting mechanisms. These mechanisms arise from various agencies with differing motivations and levels of power, all competing to influence the management of cognitive resources. As Maurice Halbwachs (1950) explained, collective memory serves the sensibilities, agendas, and interests it represents. Cultural filters select memorable episodes based on a society's most pressing concerns and dominant ideologies. Consequently, an Encyclopedic model that posits a "blind" memory, lacking intention, agency, and direction, should be reassessed in light of the obvious fact that, within the vast

network of shared knowledge, some connections—especially those crucial for a group’s self-definition—are vigilantly protected, endlessly reiterated, and constantly attacked by alternative groups seeking control over them. Examining how cultural initiatives, historical politics, public memory structures, media debates, and related factors shape and reshape aspects of collective memory for present-day interests is the province of semiotics. After all, semiotics studies how human communities design, inhabit, rearrange, and contest the cultural niches fundamental to their survival, perpetuation, and self-affirmation.

Eco’s reluctance to reference intentionality, individual agency and power struggles in his Encyclopedic model is consistent, on one hand, with the structuralist foundation of his semiotic methodology (rooted in the dogma of linguistic immanence) and, on the other, with the ideological milieu out of which his theory arose. Let us concentrate on the latter. This is the tail end of a relatively—perhaps overly—optimistic outlook dominant in liberal democracies following the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the myth of a globalized, conflict-free world fueled narratives of inevitable progress and universal rationality. In Eco’s view, and against “the cancer of uncontrolled interpretation” (the hermetic semiosis of conspiracy theorists, the babble of New Age millennialists, and the propaganda of emerging despots), the pillars or Limits of Interpretation lay in Aristotelian logic and pragmatic commonsense: “Being moderate means being within the modus—that is, within limits and within measure” (Eco 1990: 146). The question of whose limits and whose measure was left unaddressed. Despite superficial differences, Eco suggested that reasonable sense-making procedures remained “the same wherever you go,” to borrow a phrase from McCartney and Wonder. Hence the idea of a general Theory of Semiotics whose ultimate subject is humanity as such, or in Peircean terms, the community of interpreters (or “community of philosophers”).

The community of interpreters is a fascinating concept insofar as it is unlimited in both time and space: an ongoing collective of scientifically inclined thinkers, stretching from the pre-Socratics to future scientists, bound by a “chain of interpretants” that spans centuries and continents. Their shared goal is an objective—or at least intersubjectively verifiable—understanding of reality. Despite their differences, they share the ability to discriminate between plausible and improbable hypotheses, to adjust to how things really are, to acknowledge their mistakes and biases, and to verify each other’s representations via an endless cycle of empirical testing, new hypotheses, and refutations. Over time, only those beliefs best able to adapt to the environment survive, while less effective beliefs are abandoned.

If semiotics is the scientific study of how humans make sense of the world by producing and interpreting signs and texts, then its primary focus is on the *modus operandi* of the community of interpreters. Deviations from such universal norms are examined primarily to reveal the rules they transgress. Thus, there is a set of acceptable procedures—those belonging within the framework of the scientific method—that allow us to logically connect the dots of otherwise messy experience. Other styles of thought are treated as exceptions. Eco is explicit about this: although his most intriguing analyses explore paralogical, slippery, obsessive, or paranoid patterns of thought, he does so with a tone of wry detachment, subtly suggesting these are eccentric digressions from the rational norm. Implicit here is the (Peircean) notion that, in the long run, the global interpretive community will achieve consensus on which beliefs and representations deserve to occupy the center of the Encyclopedia, with the rest relegated to a metaphorical attic of curiosities. We just need patience: eventually, the scientific method will triumph because it confers universally recognizable adaptive benefits on those who embrace it.

Stanley Fish (1980) had already challenged this broad universalism by arguing for a plurality of interpretive communities, each with its own cultural assumptions about how signs and texts should be read, each upholding its own criteria for distinguishing acceptable interpretations from those deemed excessive or flawed. This is especially evident when examining how various cultural communities filter the interpretation of narrative and/or fictional texts. An interpretive technique that one community finds acceptable—say, the midrashic tradition in which an obscure passage from the Bible can be expanded with a narrative supplement—may seem utterly absurd to another. Whether Fish’s controversial relativism applies equally to other forms of interpretation, where the real world is the dynamic reference point toward which interpretation gravitates—for example issues like climate change (Fiske 2016) or the conflict between quantum physics and the theory of relativity—goes well beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it highlights the possibility that the enlightened “community of interpreters” theorized by Peirce and Eco is an ideal we might strive for—and that I personally believe is worth pursuing—but one not necessarily grounded in our collective human nature as such.

Indeed, our contemporary cultural landscape provides ample counterevidence to the assumption that the scientific method inevitably triumphs over alternative ways of organizing experience. Consider the differing interpretive strategies used to understand the Nazi Holocaust, which post-World War II (and post-1989) liberal democracies regard as the defining trauma of the 20th century. Alongside

the documentary approach, in which the community of historians selects, filters, questions, and interprets vast amounts of eyewitness testimony, material traces, and official documents, other methods of meaning-making have reframed these events according to their own criteria. I am not referring solely to conspiracy theorists such as Holocaust deniers, whose principles invert the scientific method through reversed burdens of proof, circular reasoning, and perpetual “plot-weaving.” A far more influential set of interpretive criteria has emerged in recent decades to assimilate the trauma of deportation and extermination into standardized narrative frameworks readily integrated into the Average Encyclopedia.

According to this strategy, the factual accuracy of a witness’s testimony is never to be doubted when the witness was a victim. Only the subjective, lived experience of pain is seen as yielding true comprehension of the events, including the profound insight into what must be done, here and now, to prevent such events from recurring. The viewpoint of those who “were there” thus overrides the perspective of those who reconstruct historical events by examining documentary evidence. Moreover, because the trauma of victimhood is passed down across generations, the cultural and political status conferred by that victimhood (see Giglioli 2025) may similarly be inherited. Consequently, the only individuals considered able to prevent comparable future atrocities—or authorized to decide if an ongoing episode of mass violence is analogous to the Holocaust (or if such a comparison is impermissible, even blasphemous)—are the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of people who “were there.” Although this interpretive approach departs significantly from the scientific method, it has been extraordinarily successful in shaping representations of the Holocaust — and, by extension, other major traumas of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries — within the Average Encyclopedia. So much so, that the standard formats of Holocaust Remembrance have been drained of most of their historical content, and turned into an empty narrative in which anyone can take up residence and portray themselves in the role of victims, as such deserving of indemnities and special immunity.

How can we account for this paradigm’s remarkable ability to claim the center of the Encyclopedia? Was it due to the conspicuous investment made by the governing classes, aided by the culture industry, to promote it? If so, what drove its various sponsors—Western governments, international organizations, media outlets, each with their own agenda—to rally around the slogan “Never Again”? And why did the broader public embrace it as a central identitarian narrative, identifying with the figure of the victim, whose defining characteristic is a total

lack of agency? Could this be tied to a widely felt decline in the capacity to act as empowered political subjects? What rhetorical strategies enabled this vast ideological construct to take root so effectively?

One could argue that the drive to occupy the enunciative position of victims and their descendants reflects a power struggle over a symbolically and politically valuable resource. The desire to monopolize that resource (through “sacralizing” devices) and, conversely, to challenge that monopoly (sometimes through “trivializing” devices) is symptomatic of a deeper cultural phenomenon that may be at play across various domains of the Encyclopedia. A similar dynamic can be observed in contemporary struggles to redefine loaded terms such as “antisemitism” (Pisanty 2025), “Islamophobia,” or “fascism” (Marcon 2025), whose manipulated meanings carry significant real-world consequences. It may be that among those who initially advocated for a broader redefinition of the term “antisemitism”, some were genuinely concerned about the potential resurgence of antisemitism disguised as anti-Zionism. However, the shift in meaning has clearly been weaponized by others (in ways that need not be detailed here) to serve entirely different agendas. How does this align with Eco’s notion that the Average Encyclopedia’s formats depend neither on individual will nor on a collective conscious act of will? Are we not justified in believing that the central narratives, habits, and beliefs of a community constitute the stakes in an ongoing power contest among different agencies and interpretive communities—some of which may enlist experts from the scientific community, while others may rest their credibility on, for example, religious or political or even military authority? Perhaps the answer depends on our chosen temporal frame. In the very long run, the surviving beliefs may indeed be those that have proven most falsifiable, coherent, exhaustive, and economical, confirming that Peirce’s community of philosophers is indeed the ultimate filter of the Average Encyclopedia. Nevertheless, at present—when more forceful forms of cultural selection vie for dominance at the center of our Encyclopedia—Eco’s enlightened model does not suffice to describe the short- and medium-term processes at work. If we accept that semiotics is not only a general theory of meaning but also a critical tool for social analysis, then we must pay closer attention to how semiosis is strategically deployed by historically, culturally, and politically situated human subjects for rhetorical and manipulative ends.

To achieve this, one must adopt a hybrid methodological approach that combines textual analysis—examining the underlying interpretive and rhetorical strategies of competing narratives—with a precise historical reconstruction of the various motives, decisions, and actions of the subjects and parties involved in these sense-

making processes. Cultural phenomena must be deconstructed into the immensely complex chains of actions that lead to their often-unpredictable outcomes. Who did what, and why? How did individual actions interact with others—each driven by distinct agendas—to produce an overall effect likely unforeseen by any single actor? This process involves a network of individual subjects whose actions intersect, forming a broader mechanism that may appear cohesive from a distance but reveals a fragmented pattern upon closer inspection. Only through a back-and-forth shift in scale—from the “molecular” to the “molar” dimension, and vice versa—can one attempt to extrapolate a more general model capable of explaining how, beyond individual agency, the various configurations of the Average Encyclopedia are shaped by a systemic conflict of semiotic devices.

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