

TRACING INFRASTRUCTURE AND ITS EVOLUTION IN THE SEARCH FOR THE MISSING IN POLAND

Every day around the globe, people go missing for any number of reasons. Some disappearances are intentional, others are enforced by oppressive political regimes or the result of natural disasters. Whatever the reason, these disappearances produce family ruptures and anxieties, and require a search to establish, at the very least, whether the missing person is dead or alive. In Poland, the number of reported disappearances gradually rose to 20 000 by 2018. (For comparison, other countries' figures vary widely due to the diverse contexts and calculations used—for instance, Finland records 700–800 missing incidents annually, while in the UK there are over 300 000.) The increase in Poland's figures results from the sheer growth in disappearances given the ease of movement and rising socioeconomic pressures, bringing with them health issues, debt, and family conflicts. The increase in disappearance figures also results from an increased willingness among families to report missing persons and a willingness among the police to accept such reports. I associate the rising sociopolitical recognition of disappearances in Poland with the expansion of tracing infrastructure, which I define as the interlocking assembly of state and nonstate agents, institutions, and technologies engaged in the search for missing persons.

Appel et al. (2018) emphasise that infrastructures develop incrementally as they grow or are built based on older forms. However, this rarely reflects a linear development. Instead of progressing smoothly, evolving infrastructures

tend to create 'new gaps and zones of opacity, uncertainty, and incomprehensibility' (Harvey et al. 2016: 14). Similar incremental and nonlinear development characterises the tracing infrastructure in Poland. The Polish tracing infrastructure evolved ad hoc, from both 'below' and 'above', with no clear masterplan or unified oversight, against a backdrop of changing political and technological possibilities for action. While new actors, regulations, and technological tools made certain things possible, they also introduced new complications. In this article, I address the ambiguities and challenges this evolution produced. Here, I draw upon ethnographic fieldwork I conducted online and face-to-face with both members of Polish search groups and Polish officials in 2020–2022.

Larkin (2013: 327), in his overview of the anthropology of infrastructure, defines infrastructures as 'material forms that allow for the possibility of exchange over space. They are the physical networks through which goods, ideas, waste, power, people, and finance are trafficked.' Other scholars emphasise that infrastructures not only enable but also impede movement (Korpela 2016, Xiang and Lindquist 2014), where internal disruptions rather than smooth flows characterise their functioning (Harvey et al. 2016: 13). Nevertheless, traffic, circulation, and flow appear to represent conceptual keywords of infrastructure: infrastructure is a framework for movement. Tracing infrastructure partially inverts this logic. On the one hand, tracing infrastructure is built

upon circulation: information (about both the missing person and search regulations), people (search groups, the police, and the families of the missing) and objects (technological equipment, search dogs, and financial resources) need to circulate and interlock in order to find the missing person. On the other hand, the primary purpose of the tracing infrastructure is not so much to channel or impede but to trace—retrospectively and in the present—the movement and whereabouts of specific people—people who have gone missing. Tracing aims to ascertain that missing persons are safe or, if they are dead, to identify their bodies; and, in both cases, to provide families with that knowledge. The circulation of agents, information, and objects within the tracing infrastructure is auxiliary to this purpose.

The above approach echoes the notion of the ‘traceability system’ developed in governance studies. Muirhead and Porter (2019: 425) define this system as one that aims to detect and record the journey of objects through time and space. The traceability system is mediated by the ‘traceability infrastructure’, attuned to the ‘material properties of the object that is being traced and the infrastructure that carries it’ (Muirhead and Porter 2019: 424). Although Muirhead and Porter focus on the traceability of objects in transnational industries (e.g., banking or pharmaceutical), their insights can be feasibly expanded to analyse the movement of people. Accordingly, I consider tracing infrastructure as built upon and alert to other types of infrastructures (such as transportation) underpinning and framing the movement of those being traced.

Initially, tracing infrastructure in Poland primarily included governmental actors, reflecting the constraints on civic activism in the communist era. In the 1980s and early

1990s, the primary tracing agent was the police. However, regulations were imprecise, and the police often dismissed families’ needs to know what had happened to their loved ones. A seminal step emerged with the television programme ‘Has anybody seen, does anybody know (*Ktokolwiek widział, ktokolwiek wie*)’, which began broadcasting in 1996, seven years after Poland’s transition to a liberal democracy. It has remained on air since then. The programme aims to help families search for their missing loved ones. But, as its co-creator explained to me, the show also attempts to demonstrate that disappearances can happen to anybody and that the families are entitled to institutional support (for a more detailed account of the programme, see Matyska 2024). In 1999, journalists and a police consultant for the programme established the Itaka Foundation, the first and to-date largest Polish nongovernment organisation (NGO) providing emotional and practical support to the families of the missing. Itaka (Polish for Ithaca, Odysseus’ island home in Greek mythology) became the leading family advocate for the need to improve police regulations.

Under societal pressure, Polish police regulations gradually expanded, obliging them to search for everyone reported missing and to accept a family’s report of a disappearance without delay (Matyska 2023). In parallel, the police’s institutional resources grew. In 2013, the Missing Persons Centre was established at the police headquarters in Warsaw, tasked with providing technical support and know-how to local police units and at coordinating search and rescue actions across the country. These moves demonstrated that the Polish state was taking disappearances seriously. On the ground, the police’s search and rescue efforts were supported by search and rescue (SAR) teams acting mostly

under the auspices of the state emergency system's voluntary fire brigades.

Notwithstanding the above developments, the most prolific and visible infrastructural expansion has taken place in the last few years, particularly in the nonprofit and commercial sectors. I link this expansion to the development of social media and technological innovations that have facilitated new ways for civilians to participate in searches and new ways of tracing the missing. Firstly, there has been an explosion of search groups on social media. These groups primarily aim to disseminate information about a missing person across the various platforms, while they also support families emotionally and practically. The groups do what previously was the domain of Itaka and the television programme, whereby the activities of all these actors overlap extensively since they are usually searching for the same people. Secondly, the number of SAR groups has increased exponentially. While initially such groups were mostly affiliated with voluntary fire brigades, now many civilian groups also utilise social media to recruit members and remain visible. Finally, the commercial dimension of the infrastructure, comprising private detectives (and occasionally for-profit clairvoyants), has increased as social media has granted them a new platform for advertising their services directly to specific families.

From the perspective of the needs of the families of the missing, for whom disappearance is both an affective and a practical challenge, such expansion of the tracing infrastructure can be considered a positive development in many ways. There are more sources of support, which to some degree complement each other. Indeed, according to police statistics from recent years, over 90% of Polish missing persons are found in the first weeks following their disappearance, with the proportion of cold cases remaining

low. According to the police (Puzio-Broda 2021), those who remain unbound are primarily individuals who intentionally disappeared and do not want to be found (for instance, individuals fleeing debt or domestic violence). It is not easy to determine who contributes the most to these results. It is, however, safe to assume that the cumulative input of different infrastructural actors carries an effect.

Yet, the multitude of actors, technologies, and information circulating across the tracing infrastructure creates new opacities and ambivalences, which can detrimentally affect the families of the missing and the missing themselves. To begin with, the quality and ethics of the search can at times become questionable. In principle, all of the search groups with whom I talked and whom I observed have their own internal standards and codes of conduct, although there is little systemic oversight or transparency. For instance, while an SAR group claiming to have conducted a search in a specific quadrant without finding anyone can have life-or-death consequences for the missing person, it is not always easy to say whether the search was in fact thorough. Search groups on social media struggle with maintaining a balance between the need to make the missing person visible to the public and attract followers, and the need to control and shape information in a way that enables the person's potential return, especially if they are alive. I was often told that families are desperate to provide much sensitive information to the public via search groups, but this can have negative consequences when the person returns. In addition, multiple problems relate to the reliability of a private detective and clairvoyant services. Commercial agents often take advantage of families wanting to exhaust every possible means of finding their loved ones, regardless of the cost.

The individual quality of the search notwithstanding, a problematic issue emerges related to the tacit competition between different nongovernmental actors—for visibility, funding, volunteers, and contact with the families and the police. The police, lacking a solid overview of which civilian actors are reliable (or even available), tend to rely more on SAR groups from the voluntary fire brigades than on civilian groups, and on Itaka rather than social media groups, ultimately inhibiting overall cooperation. Finally, the multitude of nongovernmental actors engaged in a search, whether commercial or nonprofit, leaves citizens (both the missing and their families) with no clear place for making claims and complaints if something goes wrong. Thus, overall, there is a need for greater transparency and collaboration for the sake of a more ethical, and more effective, search.

To conclude, the utilisation of the infrastructural approach sheds light on the characteristics and evolution of the search for missing persons in Poland. Such an approach reveals the interconnection between different actors, institutions, and technologies, and their growing complexity as the infrastructure emerges and expands upon old forms, whilst also allowing us to see that the increased complexity of a search does not necessarily imply a straightforward improvement in outcomes. Rather, this suggests a nonlinear evolution. While the expansion of the tracing infrastructure increases the social and political recognisability of disappearance and provides families with further resources, it also complicates the search process, diffuses responsibility for its outcome, and creates a less-than-collaborative spirit. This is the result not of deliberate top-down politics but of the unplanned spontaneous development of the infrastructure at the grassroots level. This

also stems from the expansion of Poland's civic society and capitalist market and the *reactive* (rather than proactive) development of state policies and institutions, resulting from public pressure on the state to take greater ownership of searching for the missing.

Infrastructures emerge because they are supposed to 'make things happen' (Devine and Boudreault-Fournier 2021: 4). As I mentioned at the outset, while the tracing infrastructure is meant to locate the missing (rather than to enable or inhibit their movement), the movement of material and nonmaterial elements across infrastructure is necessary for it to be effective and efficient. If such circulation is not coordinated, and the actors are more concerned with the expansion of their own roles within the tracing infrastructure rather than with its expansion as a whole, the potential offered by such infrastructures remains underutilised. Yet, again, various studies underscore that infrastructures rarely, if ever, generate 'smooth flows' (Harvey et al. 2016: 3). While the future will likely offer solutions to some of the existing problems in the search for the missing in Poland, new opacities and challenges will also emerge (likely in relation to the development of other infrastructural systems), rendering the tracing infrastructure an always imperfect work-in-progress.

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