Digital Memory Studies

Media Pasts in Transition

Edited by
Andrew Hoskins

DIGITAL MEMORY STUDIES

Digital media, networks and archives reimagine and revitalize individual, social and cultural memory but they also ensnare it, bringing it under new forms of control. Understanding these paradoxical conditions of remembering and forgetting through today's technologies needs bold interdisciplinary interventions.

Digital Memory Studies seizes this challenge and pioneers an agenda that interrogates concepts, theories and histories of media and memory studies, to map a holistic vision for the study of the digital remaking of memory.

Through the lenses of connectivity, archaeology, economy, and archive, contributors illuminate the uses and abuses of the digital past via an array of media and topics, including television, videogames and social media, and memory institutions, network politics and the digital afterlife.

Andrew Hoskins is Interdisciplinary Research Professor in the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow. He is founding Editor-in-Chief of the Sage journal of *Memory Studies*, founding Co-Editor of the Palgrave Macmillan book series Memory Studies and founding Co-Editor of the Routledge book series Media, War & Security. He is also founding Editor of the forthcoming Routledge Focus on Digital Culture series. @andrewhoskins. http://brokenmedia.net.

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1

THE RESTLESS PAST

An introduction to digital memory and media

Andrew Hoskins

For pre-internet generation kids like me, the crash was deafening. That was the sound of the past landing. All its strangely familiar inhabitants suddenly amongst us taking tentative steps from its long-lost time spaceship, like a scene from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* crossed with *Pleasantville*. But this was no sci-fi fantasy. Overnight, digital media resurrected the faded and decaying past of old school friends, former lovers, and all that could and should have been forgotten. By the mid-2000s human pasts fragmented, scattered, decayed or simply lost through modernity's radical mobility, had been unearthed. There was something quasi-religious about this massive redeliverance, a return of biblical proportions making the twentieth century's memory booms (Huyssen 2003; Winter 2006; Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010) look minuscule. And digital omnipresence afforded a view seemingly liberated from the confines of experts who thrived on scarcity of information (no-one uses the phrase 'I need a second opinion' anymore, when there are millions to compare with online).

The 'connective turn' (Hoskins 2011a, b)—the sudden abundance, pervasiveness, and immediacy of digital media, communication networks and archives—forces a view unprecedented in history. This turn drives an ontological shift in what memory is and what memory does, paradoxically both arresting and unmooring the past. It has re-engineered memory, liberating it from the traditional bounds of the spatial archive, the organization, the institution, and distributed it on a continuous basis via a connectivity between brains, bodies, and personal and public lives. This opening up of new ways of finding, sorting, sifting, using, seeing, losing and abusing the past, both imprisons and liberates active human remembering and forgetting.

It is not easy to grasp the digital's transformation of memory. For in our oddly called 'participatory' digital media culture, the dominant form of sociality

is something I call a 'sharing without sharing'. This is to signal that individuals and groups feel *active* in an array of connective practices such as posting, linking, liking, recording, swiping, scrolling, forwarding, etc., digital media content, and yet do so compulsively, constituting a new coercive multitude that does not debate but rather digitally emotes (as in via emoticons) (see for example Dayan 2013, and Hoskins and Tulloch 2016, 289). 'Sharing' in this way is nothing like an act underpinned by the values of equity and unselfishness, but rather is more a matter of an obligation to participate and to reciprocate, underpinned by a set of digitally fostered values (see below).

And sharing without sharing is indicative of a shift in media consciousness after the connective turn, that is both consciousness *of* and *in* media. This is the seemingly diminished capacity of a given user to be responsive to, in Jonathan Crary's words: 'how the rhythms, speeds, and formats of accelerated and intensified consumption are reshaping experience and perception' (2013, 39). In these circumstances, it is difficult to comprehend, let alone to arrest, the digital reconfiguration of remembering and forgetting underway.

And given the compulsion of connectivity and the distribution and entanglement of all of our digital traces, attempts to try and imagine or return to an earlier, less risky, media age, will not succeed in this one. This is obvious in the foolery known as 'digital detox', whereby any period of abstinence from social media is always underpinned by the reassuring knowledge that disconnection is only ever a temporary estrangement. We are already all addicts.

At the same time the connective turn fundamentally reconstitutes and redistributes the past, it also compresses more of the present into each moment and potential moment to shape a deep or extended now (see Pogačar, this volume). Thus the networked self and society foster a view that collapses past and present into an orgy of hyperconnectivity: an impossible fantasy of prior generations with their now forgotten closed and contained media imaginaries. As Kevin Kelly (2005) says: 'Only small children would have dreamed such a magic window could be real'. But this new memory is not the panacea it may have once appeared if glimpsed from when information about anything and everything was more scarce and more scattered. And yet it is difficult to place ourselves in the media imaginary of inhabitants of earlier media ecologies with, for example, a sense of individual privacy and memory that today's 'network ego' seems to lack, or has forgotten (Kroker 2014, 106). This 'incapacity to conceive that bygone people lived by other principles and viewpoints' (Lowenthal 2012, 3) is not in itself new, but the connective turn in its unprecedented uncovering and regenerating of the past, has undermined that scarce thing once called heritage, now stripped of its nostalgia seen in awkwardly naked clarity through the 'magic window'.

Moreover, the connective turn's archaeological triumph has in fact delivered the ultimate reminder of the limits of human capacity to arrest what has been unearthed. And I will just develop this point: If we consider recent centuries'

pursuit of the accumulation and the preservation of the past, we find this manifested in collections, museums, exhibitions, archives, with perhaps its high point in the late twentieth century second memory boom. And this shift in an orientation from the future to the past was also driven by the transformations in recording and archival technologies that were publicly regenerative of the mass of individual memories of the nodal events of the last century.

However, today, the historical process of collection and encapsulation and archiving has not reached completion and success but, rather, its own failure. For the internet is the technology that makes visible our inability to encompass everything, because it is the first medium that's actually bigger than us. For instance, Jussi Parikka (this volume) cites Peter Weibel who asks: 'do we even have time to produce so much so as to fill that possible memory space' (2013, 188). The triumph of the networked archive to deliver an apparently anytime, everywhere view, paradoxically illuminates the infinity of media after the connective turn, and thus the limits of our capacity to hold or to store (a classical problem of memory), as well as to know.

But post-scarcity culture is also oppressive in other ways. Too much information always potentially available at a touch, a tap, a flick, a swipe, or a spoken command, has moral consequences for ignoring the world out there, as Luciano Floridi argues: 'The more any bit of information is just an easy click away, the less we shall be forgiven for not checking it. ICTs are making humanity increasingly responsible, morally speaking, for the way the world is, will be, and should be' (2014, 42–3). But this sense of connective responsibility is a corollary of what is a transformational difference between last and this century's media. That is, whereas media audiences once had collective anonymity in their consumption in the golden age of broadcast that defined the twentieth century, in today's media ecology, it is users that are made personally accountable (Hoskins, 2017a). The already mundane digital comments, consumption and acts, routinely recorded, posted, tagged, tweeted and liked, make this the most accountable generation in history.

The post-scarcity past weighs heavily on the present and future; digital memory has become an awesome new risk in its entanglement in the unimaginable scale and complexity of hybrid personal/public networks and archives, and therein digital traces' immeasurable capacity to haunt, including after death (see Lagerkvist, this volume). And yet, despite this forever restless and risky past that compromises the human capacity to move on and to forget, at the same time there has emerged an unassuageable faith in the affordances of digital discovery in post-scarcity culture and in the harnessing of big data, a view encouraged through being participant in this media ecology. Thus, there is a new cultural and political force of **digitally fostered values** of unbridled commentary, open access, freedom of information, the 'right to know', the immediacy of instant search, and confessional culture, which all feed on and provoke the restless past.

These have profound consequences on all actors in our new memory ecology (see below) including institutions whose business is memory. For example, the

National Archives (TNA) in the UK, as Debra Ramsay shows (this volume) has to negotiate tensions between users' everyday digital experiences and expectations of the smooth aesthetics of popular search engine and social media interfaces, and the organisation's archival principles, history and identity. This is not a battle the latter can win. For instance, as a former member of staff at TNA told me recently, the Archives are hemorrhaging visitors as people believe they can access everything online. And the reliance in the capacity of digital search can mean paradoxically that less is found, for example, in the loss of the interpretive complexity embedded in the material and in the 'contextual marsh' (Baker 2002, 41) of paper records, as I have argued in relation to the digital risks to the future history of warfare (Hoskins 2015a).

Meanwhile, the UK Cabinet Office working with the National Archives are embracing 'search and data analytic tools' to save government 'digital legacy' collections, which is a massive investment of faith in tools still in development.[1] Furthermore, this strategy exposes the profound uncertainty in the future of sensitive digital records and in their ever seeing the public light of day, given that the Cabinet Office/TNA cannot calibrate their own/government risk appetite at a given time with the sensitivity review of records.[2]

Relatedly, Michael Moss (this volume) writes of the worldwide archival community's slow adjustment to 'the shock of the digital paradigm', and also of another threat to the stability and continuity of archives in terms of prohibitive costs. Although in terms of some aspects of storage, these costs continue to fall significantly, which is why the UK Cabinet Office/TNA's aversion to serious consideration of any kind of 'keep everything' strategy is surprising.[3]

Elsewhere, the third memory boom[4] (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010), with its more immediate, visceral and effervescent digital modes of representation, circulation and connectivity, both sits alongside but also clashes with those modes of representation consolidated by memory institutions and organizations in the preceding memory boom, and particularly of the Holocaust, as Wulf Kansteiner (this volume) effectively demonstrates.

And the third memory boom's belief in the knowable archive and in digital search drives an approach to the past that, if we look hard enough and wide enough and long enough, the truth will surely (and must) be found. For example, in recent years, the British establishment's past was itself said to be 'on trial', including with the UK's 'Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA)',[5] which has been floundering since its establishment in 2014 given its impossibly broad remit (Hoskins 2015b). And even the fourth chairperson of IICSA, Alexis Jay, following the premature departure of the previous three, on her appointment still reaffirmed the inquiry's unlimited scope.

More broadly, what I am speaking of here is not only some acceleration of the twentieth century's generalized turn *to* the past, but rather a fundamental turn *on* the past: an emergent, indiscriminate and irreverent memory that haunts.

As I outlined above, the past always looks alien from the perspective of the present: it is transformed through decay, discarding, forgetting, misremembering, reappraisal, and through all the various needs identified via the lens of today. For instance, as William Gibson puts it: 'The one constant . . . in looking at how we look at the past, how we have looked at the past before, is that we never see the inhabitants of the past as they saw themselves'.[6] But this continuity of estrangement through distance is today subverted.

The digital does reveal alien and unpalatable memories, but it also transcends the time of now and then, reconnecting, reimagining and reconstituting the past as network, as archive, as present: as Laurence Scott (2015, xv) argues, 'it contorts the old dimensions'. He continues, 'And so it is with digitization, which is no longer a space in and out of which we clamber, via the phone lines. The old world itself has taken on, in its essence, a four-dimensionality. Every moment, every object has been imbued with the capacity for this extra aspect' (ibid.).

Digital media have transformed the parameters of the past and have ushered in a new imaginary, that amazes in the very recognition of the scale of this post-scarcity culture, but that also, to repeat, makes visible our inability to encompass everything; the digital simultaneously affords a synchronic and dia-chronic unlimited depth of vision that at the same time makes us aware of the limits of the human capacity to arrest and to hold and to keep the archive. And thus the very idea of the future from this perspective is suffocated (Pogačar, this volume).

Of course, much has been said of the initially disorienting experience of the introduction of a new technology, overwhelming all in a McLuhanist recalibrat-ing sensorium. But today's digital fusion of network and archive ushers in a hyperconnectivity, namely 'a new shaper of patterns of experience both synchronic and diachronic, forging and reforging new assemblages of remembering and forgetting' (Hoskins and Tulloch 2016, 9). Kelly's magic window (above) in this way makes a node out of all of us; no longer merely external, the media of memory are brought within.

To comprehend the consequences of this shift and our emergent everywhere view, it is useful to think of ourselves made omnipresent, rather than the devices and the platforms we use. Despite the thrill and opportunities of the 'magic' of this new everywhere media consciousness, it also exposes the user and wider culture and society to a whole new set of threats, to privacy, security and memory. There was no time for reflection on the cost-benefit ratio of living in a digital society before we were irretrievably connected, before the past had attached itself as our omnipresent shadow.

Memory has been lost to the hyperconnective illusion of an open access world of the availability, accessibility, and reproduceability of the past. I say 'illusion' as our submergence in post-scarcity culture has also elided what is really at stake here: the loss of the security of vision that the past once afforded (a clear sense of the why of the difference) *and* a slippage of the grasp of what effect all our

current entanglements with media will have on remembering and forgetting. The past has been stripped of its once retrospective coherence and stability, entangled in today's melee of uncertainty.

This is not some kind of negotiation in the present with the traditionally estranged past, but rather its arresting, its digital hi-jacking. This is the hyperconnectivity of the digital present that has an insatiable appetite: there is no containment; little is invulnerable to the relentless trawl of digitization and its partners-in-crime, with uploading and downloading making the archive restless, and even speculative in its 'permanently *archiving presence*' (Wolfgang Ernst, this volume).

What follows in *Digital Memory Studies* is an agenda for mapping these transformations, their consequences, and of potential ways forward through the interrelated lenses of connectivity, archaeology, economy, and archive. But firstly, below, I set out a recent media history of the shift in 'ways of seeing' the world and others as part of that world, that has moved from a somewhat steady co-evolution of media and memory through to today's revolution of media consciousness. In this way I offer something of a pre-history of digital memory, to aid the remembering of those who claim that the digital does not rupture and utterly reimagine and replace the twentieth century's imaginings, aspirations and technologies of memory.

Situating media and memory

To even speak of a relationship between media *and* memory already presumes media as some kind of external shaper, carrier, or manager of memory. And society has long seen itself and its past through the external media of its day, including the media envisioning of a past that serves the needs of the present.

Media have long been instrumental in the settling of history: the selective restorative process through which societies generate their history: rediscovery plus translation (and remediation) through the representational, archival and circulatory technologies, discourses and witnesses of the day. The past has long been inexorably and securely put to bed with the aid of media, offering certainty through memory: media history has long been steady and benign.

And this reliance on media for shaping a useable past was acutely felt in the late twentieth century turn to memory. For example, advances in 1970s electronic audio/visual technologies of representation, broadcast and archiving enabled a taking stock, a public facing up to the man-made catastrophes of only a few decades earlier, in other words a form of remembering so that a defining history of conflict and its complexities and complicities could become settled, put to rest, enabling a moving on. Memory seemed everywhere—museums, television, video—yet this was nonetheless a contained past, literally walled by the memory institutions of the day, when the government of archival space—to use Ernst's distinction (this volume)—was the pre-eminent means of bringing this emergent past into a settled present.

This past was newly available to be reconsidered, as memory of the cata-strophic emerged into the light. It is also marked for many by the premiere screening of the *Holocaust* television miniseries on NBC in 1978 (Shandler 1999) and the 1980 publication of the English translation of the Godfather of collective memory: Maurice Halbwachs' *The Collective Memory*. Since then: boom, boom, boom! By whatever measure, both celebrated and derided, the turn to and on the past has been relentless. The contemporary memory booms have been propelled by the anchoring and atomizing debate around the nature, form and status of the memorializing of conflict, the 'globalizing of Holocaust dis-courses' (Huyssen 2003), the trauma of everything, the 'right to remember', and the rise of confessional discourses. We quickly moved from a culture that afforded rights to multiple voices of difficult histories to an almost requisition-ary approach to the telling of stories: responsibility has become obligation in the inexorable cycles of a persisting mainstream news that demands its fill of commemorative events.

In this chapter I contextualize today's unsettled past against media and memory studies' perspectives on the contemporary period by advocating a way of seeing digital memory as a condition that evades inspection through the traditional binaries and inflexibilities of these fields. To this end it is critical to recognize that a new ontology for memory studies is needed that is cognizant of media, and not as some partial or occasional or temporary shaper of memory, but as fundamentally altering what it is and what is possible to remember and to forget. It is much easier to be timid and to tinker around the edges of representational and archival discourses and technologies, to add 'trans' to the cultural, to re-extend or re-distribute the cognitive, and to reduce the technologies of memory to the 'prosthetic'. Instead the new memory ecology hosts the shifts from rep-resentation to enfolding, from space to time, from distribution to hyperconnec-tivity, from the collective to the multitude, from certainty to uncertainty, from privacy to emergence, from white into grey.

Yet, to wrest some kind of sense from these complexities is hampered by their very transformation of our capacity to be conscious of their altering of our perception in and of the world, not to mention the prospects of our disen-tanglement from them. Is it possible then to forge an active media consciousness that can sufficiently illuminate the difference the digital makes to remembering and forgetting? As the American writer Leon Wieseltier observes: 'We live in a society inebriated by technology, and happily, even giddily, governed by the values of utility, speed, efficiency and convenience. The technological mentality that has become the American worldview instructs us to prefer practical ques-tions to questions of meaning—to ask of things not if they are true or false, or good or evil, but how they work. Our reason has become an instrumental reason.'[7] This has resonance with Jonathan Crary's view of the individual as an 'application. . . of various services and interconnections that quickly become the dominant or exclusive ontological template of one's social reality' (2013, 43).

The more media churn and entangle our everyday, the more compliant we appear to be, as though we are vaguely aware out of the corner of our eye of the mediatization of almost all aspects of our lives, and the creep of the archive in enveloping all of the most personal. The what we do with media, rather than what media does, is the critical shift here, namely a story of transition from reliance to dependency on the media of the day. We are entering a stage of 'deep mediatisation' in which 'digitalisation and related datafication interweaves our social world even more deeply with this entanglement of media and practices' (Andreas Hepp 2016, 919). The prospects for an active mode of remembering in these circumstances then appears increasingly beyond reach.

An everyday continuous compulsive connectivity—the lively and everyday digital forging of connections, which also provide a comfort of immediacy, a feeling of control—disguises the almighty convergence of communication and archive, and makes opaque our memory's digital dependency and accumulations. And it is this diminished media consciousness that also haunts its study. A great deal of memory studies' assumptions as to the relationship between the durability, continuity, and stability of external media and mechanisms, and that of memory itself, are being turned on their head. What is needed is a clearer vision of both how media and assumptions about media have come to shape ways of seeing the world and others as part of that world—to begin to chart the new memory ecology.

Given then the accelerating slippage in media consciousness results in a loss of self-perception and a loss of vision about how memory is made, a clearer lexicon of media is needed in order to bring memory into plain sight. To this end, I give a short history of media and memory to set out how connectivity is actually also a feature of a pre-broadcast age, and that the dominant media of the twentieth century—and the second memory boom—can be seen as a kind of institutionalized blockage of the past, even at the time it appeared as newly emergent and as liberating. Today, by contrast, the digital has unsettled the past: embedded in connectivity it has new unpredictable life and memory's future has been destabilized by its escape from the once relatively reliable finitude of media.

The new memory ecology

A useful definition of 'media' is the multitude of techniques, technologies and practices through which discourse and interaction is mediated. This is the entire 'semiotic environment' in which memory is understood and made relevant to a person, given community or group (Brown and Hoskins 2010). The key words here are 'entire' and 'environment' in the need for a holistic understanding of media and memory when digital connectivity has become the driving force of contemporary experience. The new memory ecology is an environment in which hyperconnectivity makes it difficult to reduce media and memory to a single or separate medium or individual, respectively. Instead, the mediation of memory