

The Technology of Memory

James Poulos

Some seventy years ago, in his essay “The Shape of Things and Men,” the poet and essayist Donald Davidson castigated H. G. Wells and his ilk in the newsrooms for “continually publishing little columns to remind us of what happened yesterday a year ago, or five years ago, or twenty-five years ago.” The pages and websites of today’s newspapers make plain that these ritual news reminders have lost little of their appeal. They seem to reacquaint us reliably with ourselves, drawing the milestones of our shared lives near with comforting predictability. Common memory, prompted publicly, puts the scope of everyday life in context.

Or so it should. But Davidson recognized regimented, mediated reminders as a symptom of something opposite: the alienation and systematization of memory. It had begun to seem that nothing was a fact and nothing real until first, as Davidson put it, “retrospected”—“preserved in the formaldehyde pickle of a card index,” and thus “made into a specimen.”

Threescore and ten years since, the randomly accessible data archive has progressed from card catalogue to Gmail account, with Google offering endlessly expansive storage space free to all. The twentieth-century mania that Davidson detected for converting history into data has progressed apace, fostering a commonplace spirit of information indulgence. We have learned very quickly how to both compile and sort data with increasing expertise and speed—so that volume and specificity, mass and niche, no longer work against each another. We may have our information cake and eat it too, piling up data in the sure knowledge that we may pluck from the heap whatever we can remember that we wish to recall. But to what extent does our remembrance atrophy as a result?

Through technology, the alienation and systematization of memory mutually reinforce one another, making our narratives flatter and our experiences sharper. Unless we learn how to retain fully narrative and relational memories, we will likely continue to enjoy more malleable identities in exchange for more managed behavior.

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Memory Alienated

Davidson claimed that the spread of the scientific method to the realm of memory would “destroy the virtue of historical study,” alienating us from our own pasts. The study of history would cease to count as a virtue if remembrance lost its attraction or became perceived as an investment not worth its while. Sure enough, the wealth of access to things remembered has the perverse effect of reducing the urgency of memory to neglectful levels. The cliché of the chronically videotaping parent, chasing offspring around the hallmarks of their lives with camcorder always in hand, accompanies the dust-covered boxes and shelves of forgotten moments as cause accompanies effect. And those tapes—never quite so worth reliving as they were living unmediated in the first place—are analogue memories, things you can pick up and hold, even if only in a VHS or DVD case. Able to translate ever-more-comprehensive reproductions of life into *digital* phantoms in the public Internet square, the MySpace individual drips with data as the despot once dripped with jewels. Yet this embarrassment of riches becomes, like gold hoarded in a vast cave, burdensome to savor piece by piece. Each piece of information, on balance, tends to become more dated and less relevant than the last, and we begin to lose sight of the difference between storing precious tokens of remembrance and throwing away old papers. Both can just as easily sit forever in our Gmail accounts.

Stony Brook University professor Robert Crease, in a 2007 column in *Physics World*, observed that our

new communications techniques are good for scientists, encouraging rapid communication and stripping out hierarchies. But for historians, they are a mixed blessing. It is not just that searching through a hard disk or database is less romantic than poring over a dusty box of old letters in an archive. Nor is it that the information in e-mails differs in kind from that in letters. Far more worrying is... whether e-mail and other electronic data will be preserved at all.

The technology of memory has the paradoxical effect of blurring the line between archiving and trashing. We are familiar with this as the junk-in-the-attic phenomenon: boxes of keepsakes stashed away at important moments find themselves on the curb one spring-cleaning morning. Stacks of receipts to be itemized for tax season disappear into drawers dumped into the garbage when full. The capture of memories as data with no real size, shape, or location heightens the illusion that what we sock away today will be just as vital this time next year. But instead of stocking

the warehouses in our minds, we export our memory into external hard drives, into cyberspace. We forget what needs remembering.

Casual Consciousness, Professional Recollection

The value of casual communication ushers us along. Both the effort of writing letter-like e-mails and the effort of memory, individual and collective, no longer reward as once they did. Why need any of us become experts at remembering for anything other than novelty? Memorization is no longer an efficient technology.

The decreasing relative efficiency of unaided memory augurs a failing grip, especially on memories that interconnect over time. We could lose the context that situates our pivotal moments and makes sense of them: not all memories are created equal. Yet, in a further paradox, amid the creeping purge of memorial technology, powerful memories take on the character of endangered species. Stripped of context, their import becomes at once more exaggerated and less comprehensible. Where once there had been stories, told person-to-person, which linked loved ones to one another and to events in the world, now we are more likely to share a fragmented residue of similar individual memories—"the high school crush," "the psycho ex," "the whole marriage thing," "the whole divorce thing." These cultural catchphrases, meant to encapsulate narratives supposedly so common as to render the details a waste of time, actually debilitate the practice of narrative itself. Lives play out as series of episodes. The necessity of articulating and rearticulating unbroken storylines about ourselves, rich in particular detail, fades. In consequence, our accountability through time as unique, particular selves tends to erode. While moral philosophers like Charles Taylor struggle to defend an integral self who can't really be a different person from one decade to the next, technologies of memory give us license to personal proteanism. That single, unbroken life can be archived, with the appropriate privacy guarantees, if one so chooses. If not, simply archive the greatest—or worst—hits. But this seemingly free choice traps us in a certain tension. Deconstructing unique, unified personal lives into all-too-conventional episodes pressures our casual consciousness in two contrary directions. On the one hand, we seek in our everyday lives to enact ever-more-unique events, personalizing everything and insisting on how special we are. Yet, on the other hand, we long for the "sense of togetherness" that unites us in the shared experience of episodic synergy—the mind-blowing concert as much as the bonding retreat, the deep love affair as much as the bad breakup. The duration of these experiences—and the

trajectory of our relationships in them—isn't what matters. The minting of memories that can stand alone in a scrambled sea of data is. To the extent that technologies of memory can help us through that process, we learn to depend on them, deleting what we wish to suppress and archiving what we wish to reliably outsource into virtual permanence. Permanent things in the real world—non-negotiable facts about who we are, derived directly from who we've been—take on the quality of obsolete impediments to the real-world contingency of modern life.

So instead of shedding the most painful memories, we retain only the most indelible experiences, so that irrecoverable joys glimmer beneath unforgettable pains. Happiness and unhappiness cease to be the titles of narratives filled with cumulative experiences, complete with lessons, becoming instead the names of isolated experiences themselves—emotional sensations to be sought out or avoided on their own terms. The encouragement is to live life *à la carte*, with no event linked to another for any duration except by choice. Even on those terms, we may be condemned to let sleeping memories lie.

The effect of alienation upon memories, as with many freedoms, is only as noticeable and woeful as it is cumulative. No single e-mail or media file will do memory in, but the power of information and communications technology is precisely its cumulativeness—the ease with which vast, functionally infinite amounts of information once stored in the brain can be digitally transcribed and kept ready for retrieval. Under such circumstances, the diminishing sharpness of our human recall seems a fair trade for the instantaneous search logarithms and economies of scale provided by the technological systematization of our memories. Absolute memory (that is, such-and-such a fact) becomes much less important than relative memory (that is, the path to a fact so it can be recalled when needed). What we do recall is dwarfed in value by what we have the potential, through technology, to recall. The absolute memory of our machines becomes paramount—running on technologies which cannot choose to remember for us unless so instructed.

Wikipedia is outstanding for stories told anonymously that keep pace with interest and whim. YouTube helps personalize the face of anonymous storytelling. But emotional narratives of self and soul require that we attend memories together, in person, constantly. Too often, the fixation on autobiography that results from a breakdown of those narratives decays into self-diagnostics competitions. The pop culture vernacular of romantic relationships dishearteningly consists of descriptive exchanges of “my baggage” or “my issues” or “my pattern.” Brokenness and detachment

nearly account for the only shared narrative, forming what the late sociologist Philip Rieff called “a communications system of loners.”

Detachment from our memories can be painful, but, at the same time, a therapeutic comfort. Systematization mitigates the pain of the alienation that makes it possible. As the importance of remembering things ourselves decreases, the guilt associated with forgetting them slides away, too. Archiving permits the reminder itself to become a commodity; memory, in a way, is outsourced. Hewlett Packard’s ideal-typical Little Miss America, real-life fifth grader and movie actress Abigail Breslin, said in a recent HP commercial, “I don’t think I would remember anything, at all, if I didn’t have pictures.” The responsibility of memory, with the moral discrimination it requires, may be comfortably subcontracted.

The New Life Science

A society made up of Abigail Breslins abdicates accountability for the memory of its own life story. Stripped of context, the meaning of events peels away from their significance. The sensibility of randomness is senseless—what begins as sensory overload ends in the dulling of the senses. How can the constituents of such a society speak meaningfully with one another? In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche traces the roots of forgiveness to men so overflowing with health that they instantly *forget* the injuries their enemies inflict. Our heroes of everyday life exist in a similarly fleeting present—only their survivorhood is characterized by neurotic weakness as much as absentminded strength. Without a coherent narrative of life and meaning, where does happiness come from, and how is unhappiness evaded? If we, the freely choosing authentic selves of the contemporary liberal imagination, still possess the right to write our own life stories and enact our own preferences, the technology of memory offers systematization as the template upon which to pattern our actions.

The first lesson of science is the scientific method, and, in that respect, science *is* method. In a society where choice of the method of one’s life is individual, the value of expert methodologies for living would seem to be very high. Indeed, our bookshelves are choked with “self-help guides,” oxymoronic manifestoes designed to persuade individuals having trouble effectively executing individualism that they can do it all by themselves—if only they follow the method of this or that lifestyle expert. Psychology, not biology, is the definitive “life science” of today.

But if you look closer into the “nature” of the new life science, you find that the methodology of psychology departs from the depersonalized

rigor of the scientific method. A science of people, it seems reasonable to say, must meet humanity on its own terms. It must engage the way people live and think, not as if they were objective facts but as beings who live over time in complex, shared social worlds composed of one another's subjective experiences. The classic distinction between facts and values does not neatly apply to the realm, so broad in contemporary society, in which values themselves must be studied and medically managed. Values adopted contingently by individuals freed from narrative memory must be systematized at a level general enough to encompass a protean diversity meant to be infinite over time.

Memory Systematized

Davidson shows us how the systematization of alienated memory works in his critique of Wells's futurist 1933 novel *The Shape of Things to Come*. He begins by asking why Wells, a devotee to the end of utopia by the means of science, makes his case for such progress by the very unscientific means of fiction, concluding that he does so because he

knows that fiction persuades where logic fails, since the human mind, though modern enough in some ways, has its old contrary habit of accepting the truths of art and rejecting the truths of science. This is an odd role in which to find the advocate of a scientifically controlled world-order.

To the contrary, it is in fact the *only* role in which to find that advocate. The requirement for a world controlled by scientific experts, as Wells admits, is "a comprehensive faith" in the desirability of social scientific control. This present faith reflects its future object—"socialistic, cosmopolitan, and creative" human order. Predicated on a social fact which cannot be proven true because it exists only in the future, the requisite faith in turning society over to expert scientific management turns out to be unscientific.

The justification of what Wells calls the "Lifetime Plan" for world social order mirrors the justification for psychological management of individual "life plans." "For the masses," as Davidson puts it in his brief against Wellsianism, "the old naïve wonder at the prodigies of science has dwindled to a passive expectation that anything can happen; and that, since it can, it probably will." With memory alienated and systematized, this passive expectation applies just as well to one's personal life. People change unpredictably; motives are impermanent and inscrutable; powerless to predict events, one can only refine one's attitudes of preparation for, experience of, and reaction to them.

The virtue of the predictable past yields to the value of expecting the unexpected. Future facts determine present values, and past pains become proof of the need to improve one's capacity to cope. Unmanaged memories—memories which cannot be systematically sorted—take on the character of obstacles to the enjoyment of inevitable change, guarantors of unnecessary pain. The new life sciences reject the circularity of memory in an effort to “get over” old narratives. In Rieff's terms, the “progressivist” conception of an evolution that never repeats replaces remembrance with a *telos* of scientific fatalism. Under well-managed progress, systematization and alienation are both the cost and standard of living. Practically speaking, that is, the benefit is never being painfully stuck in the past, while the cost is the lived memory of that past. Put in pop culture terms, consider the world of *The Simpsons*—a world in which only the most traumatic events (such as the death of Ned Flanders's wife Maude) can register in the timeless limbo that keeps every character the same age. The episodic character of *The Simpsons* belies its false historicity, in which, at the discretion of its revolving team of writers, sometimes characters have a past and sometimes they don't. Managing this repressive trick in real life, in accordance with our fleeting passions and interests, is a task poorly suited to the non-expert. Technologies of memory, optimized by the experts who are adequately compensated for their service, keep us open to change in the world no matter how dedicated we are to our private idiosyncrasies.

Thus the technology of memory has political implications. This evolutionism seems revolutionary. Under managed systematization, the purpose of the technology of memory is to maintain the potency of that seeming. Revolutionary feelings—those sudden changes in sensation that Nietzsche apotheosized as “a perpetual movement between high and low”—close the gap between experience and subject, intensifying and lengthening the present. The longer the present, and the more urgent the future, the lesser the need for memories. This limitation is made to seem liberating instead. Turning over memory to systematization promises the following return on alienation: despite the inevitability of all sorts of revolutionary innovations, we have the capacity to embrace them. We too will be painlessly—perhaps even joyfully—changed.

All Memory, No Remembrance?

Thus lodged in a present that no longer belongs to us, we find ourselves like Jorge Luis Borges's character Funes, who fell off a horse to discover he could remember perfectly everything he experienced thereafter. Rieff

noted that Funes is supremely memorious but holds no remembrance of things truly past—he remembers only what he has learned since becoming able to remember everything. Thus, in Borges’s tale, he develops a dark and haunted taste for learning ancient languages in ten minutes’ time and filling the interminable hours reciting tomes he had only glanced at. Funes is all knowledge and no wisdom, all events and no narrative. He knows more about an eyelash than he does about himself, for now, properly speaking, he has no self.

The technology of memory can tell us everything—or the most refined selection of things—but it cannot tell us *how* to refine or choose. There is nothing in accordance with which to choose. The task of supplying a rationale will be left to those who manage our memories for us. “To be memorious and yet not a remembrancer,” Rieff suggests, “heralds a technological super-successor” to the human intellect: “Imagine an idiot savant as forerunner of the computer data bank.” He refers us to the vaudevillian Mr. Memory in Alfred Hitchcock’s *39 Steps*, a freak capable of total recall, unable to judge what *not* to remember or even say. Like Rieff, Davidson recognized the question that follows the surrender of our memory to systematization—*Why not?* Mistaken as a powerful expression of confident openness, *Why not?* perhaps better captures the final passivity of he who cannot remember what, or how, to remember.

A very modern farce it is when our amateur technologists of memory seek to push the deconstruction of remembrance into aspiringly post-modern territory. Brave-New-Worlders like Microsoft computer engineer Gordon Bell have stepped through the looking glass of memorious technology. Like Aldous Huxley studying his own acid trips, Bell is both memory expert and memory subject. As a so-called “lifeblogger” or “life-logger,” he uses a program called MyLifeBits, along with a SenseCam (a small camera worn around his neck), to archive everything he does. All his documents, sent and seen, are scanned. Every sixty seconds the SenseCam goes off. In a telling admission, Bell has told *Fast Company* magazine that lifeblogging “gives you kind of a feeling of cleanliness. I can offload my memory. I feel much freer about remembering something now. I’ve got this machine, this slave, that does it.” Regrettably, notes *Ars Technica*’s Nate Anderson, “Bell’s data store has grown so large and difficult to search that he can often recall an event but has difficulty in pulling up the computer records of it.” Even the memory experts, it seems, need experts to adjudicate their memories.

When memories are purely instrumental, called up or suppressed as technology permits, the need for experts in memory management and

memory selection grows apace. The hijinks that memory technicians share with the rest of us have been lampooned in such books as *Apex Hides the Hurt* (where a nomenclature consultant must rename a whole town) and films like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (where the Lacuna Corporation zaps unwanted specimens from pickled life stories). Meanwhile, in real life, scientists continue working toward the drug that will block or even delete unwanted memories. Under pressure from those in pain, memories seem likely to continue being alienated when a properly accredited organization is able to do so systematically. As we fall more exclusively into the habit of casual communication and outsourced remembrance, our more informal arrangements of memorial technology will increase both the incentive and the need for more formal ones. Nonetheless, our power to keep possession of our memories, separately and together, remains our own.