Book Review: Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory: Classification, Ranking, and Sorting of the Past

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How is social media archiving, filtering, and sorting the digital artifacts of our pasts? What do these algorithmic processes mean for our human conception of memory and memory practices in everyday life? *Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory* offers an expansive series of provocations in a compact volume, one of Bristol University Press's "Shorts" Research publications. Ben Jacobsen and David Beer are well-placed to pose these questions as sociologists at the University of York, whose work on memory, metrics and techno-social transformations moors empirical research to critical theory and emerging theories of data and the self. The book interweaves a comprehensive literature review with a short overview of empirical findings from a larger qualitative research project exploring people's experiences and perceptions of algorithmic systems in their remembrance of the past. Highlighting the algorithmic interaction of classification and ranking that work together to *define* and *resurface* "memories" on digital devices and platforms, the book introduces a useful vocabulary for making sense of our abounding, algorithmically mediated personal repositories of remembering stored in social media archives.

The introduction sets out the core preoccupation of the authors – namely, the titular *automatic* production of memory. It is this automation, in which memories are identified, ascribed certain meanings and values, and then targeted at users *through technological processes* that render the social media archive worthy of specific scholarly attention. The authors contrast these processes with the kind of memory work Walter Benjamin described as an act of "digging," the active excavation of one's past. They ask: "What happens when we are not digging, arranging or marking out the memory spaces for ourselves, and instead it occurs as a result of algorithmic systems" (p. 3)?

It is clear from the outset that the authors are not indifferently curious about the answer to this question; they are troubled by the implications such a loss of agency in our human experiences of remembering. In Chapter Four, this concern is articulated more concretely, when the authors, quoting one of their interviewees, reframe the central theme of the book

by asking "what is the potential 'collateral damage' of targeted memories on how people perceive and understand the past" (p. 84). They wonder aloud on the pages of the following chapters about ontological ramifications that reach far beyond the technical mechanisms of sorting and ranking into "the notion of what a memory is and how the concept of memories might be defined" (p. 6). As entry points for these reflections, the book mentions some exemplary algorithmic memory features on popular social media platforms, including Facebook Memories, Instagram Throwbacks, Snapchat Memories, and an application called Timehop, which collates content from across different social media platforms.

Chapter Two uses a case study of Facebook's memory features to explore the algorithmic classification of "memories." Citing Facebook's own published research on the evolution of its memory features, the chapter explains how the platform developed what it called a "taxonomy of memory themes." Through both user participation in categorization experiments on the platform and computer-aided analysis of user content, "the taxonomization of people's content into different *types* of memories helped render these knowable and actionable to the feature's ranking algorithm" (p. 33). This research on and for the platform informed how Facebook came to identify and label what a memory is or might be. This sorting prioritized happy memories, for instance, because of underlying assumptions that what makes a memory (within the logic of the platform) is its sharability. Jacobsen and Beer go on to draw on Jacques Rancière's concept of "partitioning the sensible" to argue that these classificatory processes shape "what *can* and *should* be remembered, celebrated and shared," and "seek to make the past make sense in selective ways" (p. 40). In choosing to borrow Rancière's notion of partitioning, the authors reinforce their more ambitious and pointed concern that what may seem on the surface to be a technological classification process actually has potentially far-reaching effects on sense-making in our social lives.

Chapter Three turns the focus to how these classificatory processes then serve the algorithmic *ranking* of memories, causing them to "resurface" for users. It is "not only the partitioning of the memorable but also the *promotion* of the memorable" that underpin the automatic production of memory (p. 51). Through ranking algorithms, like Facebook EdgeRank, discussed in this chapter, users are *targeted* with "what was considered to be the 'right type' of memories," based on the algorithmic assumptions that selected happy

memories and memories most likely to result in high levels of user engagement on the platform. Like Chapter Two, this chapter draws on research published by Facebook about how the platform delivers "memories" to users. As Jacobsen and Beer observe, driven by "social media's aims for continuous user activity" (p. 46), targeted memories have the "capacity and potential to shape the conditions by which people encounter and remember the past" (p. 52).

Having explored Facebook's algorithmic operationalization of sorting and ranking "memories," Chapter Four then introduces empirical data on how people perceive these algorithmic processes – but not on Facebook, specifically. The aim is to provide "jumping-off points" (p. 61) for future research, and the authors present findings from qualitative interviews with users of a different platform, Timehop, which aggregates posts across different social media platforms and delivers them to users as memories. They also include focus group comments from users of various platforms. Several themes emerge from these qualitative data, including (1) the technicity of attention; (2) reductive algorithms; (3) algorithmic misconceptions; and (4) invasive algorithms.

Notably, all these themes circle a critical stance toward the automated processes encountered on these platforms. Although Jacobsen and Beer mention that the algorithmic sorting of the past was "often seen as a useful feature" (p. 62), in detailing the themes they go on to focus respectively on how platforms (1) orchestrate and demand user attention; (2) often smooth over the complexity and contradictions of users' datafied pasts; (3) result in mismatches between users' expectations and algorithmic interpretations; and (4) even appear "creepy" in their unearthing of forgotten content. This chapter features a range of illustrative quotes from participants, which add personal texture to these themes.

By the end of this final substantive chapter, there can be no mistaking that the authors are presenting a particular argument on the automatic production of memory: there is reason to be concerned about its impact on human remembering. However, the empirical data offer few answers to what all this means for memory making and the definition of what a memory *is*. The interviews provide an intriguing insight into people's awareness and opinion of algorithmic surfacing of memories more than they reveal how these technical processes affect people's conception of memory itself. It seems this elusive ontological question, which

motivates the book from the beginning, remains to be explored. And as though to acknowledge this unresolved provocation, the brief conclusion reminds us that the automatic production of memory "is likely to be reshaping individual and collective memory in as yet unknown ways" (p. 95).

As a digital anthropologist who regularly meanders through digital "archives" in my construction of both field sites and subjects, I approached this book quite ready to accept that there is something new to be observed and critiqued about the algorithmically processed archive. And I would say that the book is indeed targeted at me – a media studies reader predisposed to accept the premise that our everyday reality is somehow shaping and shaped by pervasive datafication. But although the authors nod to the undeniable influence of critical archival studies (Derrida, 1996; Bowker, 2008; Bowker & Star, 2000; Featherstone, 2000) in their understanding of the relationship between archive and memory, they do not take up much space in the book's concise 116 pages articulating clearly and compellingly what differentiates the algorithmic construction of memory from the selective processes at work in the analogue archives of the pre-digital past. We know from this critique that archives have always obscured curatorial processes of inclusion and exclusion, even for sorting and surfacing material documents; archives and archivists have a vested interest in maintaining this illusion of objectivity in ascribing meaning and value to their collections, whether personal (physical photo albums, for instance) or institutional (national archives) (Schwartz & Cook, 2002).

Such an argument – more fully developed – about what is truly "new" about the algorithmic archive and what "politics of the archive are just as pronounced here as in any archive" (p. 95) would perhaps have lent more power to the authors' critical suggestion that social media are reshaping what memories *are*. Instead, the provocative claim that "people's view of themselves, of others, and the world is shaped by the predetermined computational criteria established by the platform" (p. 54) seems to conflict in unresolved ways with the authors' simultaneous suggestion that such algorithmic processes "should therefore not be understood as technologically deterministic. Instead, they engender a space where remembering can be co-instantiated […] by the platform and users" (p. 64-65). Overall, the

book stops short of reconciling these claims, and – as discussed above – the empirical chapter leaves the gulf between determinism and co-creation relatively unaddressed.

One important gap left by *not* fully addressing this question is in unpacking the complex commercial relationship between social media "memories" and the durability of social media platforms as multifunctional spaces. These platforms perform diverse roles beyond *archive* – as messaging services, storefronts, news sources, and more. What does this definitional imprecision mean for our understanding of social media-as-archive? What social role do archives play, and how do social media archives adopt, emulate, or deviate from those expected roles? Does it matter if an archive is constructed as an archive from the outset or comes to occupy that role, *de facto,* later on?

Jacobsen and Beer do point to the influence of the commercial impetus of platforms on memory classification and ranking. "The notion of meaningfulness that emerges within the system," they write, "is one that is based on a particular type of memory making and memory prioritization that is informed by the underlying logic and agenda of the social media platform" (p. 46-47). And the targeting of memories to harness attention "is part of the infrastructural logic of the platform" so as to "instantiate modes of participation amenable to the 'like' economy" (p. 63). But the understated acknowledgment of platforms' commercial imperative keeps some important questions associated with algorithmically mediated memory-making and -keeping flickering on the horizon, just out of focus. It is a question prompted by the theme of this special issue, and it lingers between the lines of *Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory*. How much does the memory work of platforms contribute to their longevity? To what extent are platforms-as-archives keeping platforms-as-everything-else alive by creating deeply personal, affective ties to the companies that own them? In the constellation of values perceived, created, and traded on platforms, how much is owed to the automatic processes of sense-making and how much to our own estimation of meaningfulness? How is the entanglement of social media in the preservation and interpretation of personal pasts part of their enduring power – their resistance to redundancy?

Jacobsen and Beer's dense little book, though, does offer an impressively broad – if necessarily brief – insight into algorithmic processes that are subtly and pervasively intervening in the construction of our personal pasts, presents, and futures. It is host to a truly thought-provoking conversation within an abundant bibliography of essential readings on memory, archives, and datafication, and the book's theoretical and empirical contributions to the discussion are undeniably apt. As the authors promise throughout, *Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory* takes important steps toward understanding the unique implications of algorithmically mediated memory and opens up many inviting avenues for further enquiry.

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