

Part III

Digital Memory Practices

As has been argued throughout the previous sections, developments in digital media have stretched out, integrated and re-mediated memory-making and the digital practices have been redirected away from the corporation, the broadcaster and the institution. History from below is now a commonplace and such personal and collective histories grounded in the production of memories by individuals and communities intermingle almost seamlessly with official discourses and forms. Democratised digital practices of prosumer (the combination of producer and consumer) memories are active, collaborative and self-branding. To a certain extent, digital memory practices challenge a notion of memory as totally mediated, as audiences become users and producers of memory not essentially passively and cognitively realigned along media pathways. This is not to privilege practice as a get-out-of-jail-free card for escaping the structuring of contemporary memory within digital media discourses and forms. Rather, in concluding this book with a section devoted to how individuals and communities actively remember and forget using digital media, it is a reminder of the human desire to sustain and maintain memory. It provides one more vital dimension to our integrated understanding of how digital media produce memory by interlaying structural (forms), semantic (discourses) and pragmatic (practices) arenas.

The chapters in the final section of this collection, concern the use of the Internet by users for generating memories and histories: personal digital archives, wikis, blogs, web pages, online museums, digital stories, digitised oral histories and social network sites (SNSs). Such practices require access to digitised archives, increased data storage, the convergence of digital technologies and the creation of 'new' archives. The convergence of cameras and videorecorders, with wireless technologies, computers and data

archives means that time and narrative are no longer limited to the single image witnessed during the reign of cinema in the twentieth century. The current demand for a multifaceted, interactive and instantaneous visual interface for representing the complexity of human interaction has meant that digital media function as an escape from the sequential structuring of daily life. Culminating in a significant shift in human culture as well as computer culture, online practices of memory and history replace the Fordist approach (after Henry Ford's system of mass production and consumption in 1940s USA) with 'the object-oriented approach': the latter used 'to program the original Macintosh GUI that substituted the "one command at a time" logic of DOS with the logic of simultaneity of multiple windows and icons' (Manovich, 2001, p. 326). As Bolter and Grusin have argued '[m]any web sites are riots of diverse media forms – graphics, digitised photographs, animation, and video – all set up in pages whose graphic design principles recall the psychedelic 1960s or dada in the 1910s and 1920s' (Bolter and Grusin, 2001, p. 6). Therefore, in terms of digital practices, users are remediating memory. They now have at their disposal a digital toolkit that allows them to refashion memories and histories in multiple ways in order to tell multiple versions of events.

As this section is concerned with computers and networked online practices it is worth putting the technology into a media context before thinking about memory. It goes without saying that computers are interactive. They are built and function on this premise such that 'the Web experience is that consumption and reception rival qualities that are closer to production' and the Web user is 'drawn to produce their Web experience' (Marshall, 2004, p. 50) in ways they were not able to with radio, television and film. However, all media are interactive to an extent and one does not have to press a button or click a link to interact with media. So we cannot simply state that digital media externalise mental life and provide a new approach to memory practices because users experience them interactively. Nineteenth-century scrapbooks (collage) and early twentieth-century avant-garde film (montage) also achieved a level of interactivity. They too imagined human experience as spatialised and navigable and it is these two features that have reasserted themselves so strongly in the early twenty-first century and raise important challenges to thinking about memory and history.

Clearly, there is currently a digital archive fever at work, fuelled by memory-hungry technologies, increased memory capacities of databases and faster, more reliable networked connections. The proliferation of digital media tools in the average household has meant that consumers are now having really to think about how they organise their files, how

those files can be archived and how those archives can be shared with others: as password-protected 'digital vaults', as personal websites, as blogs or on social network sites (SNSs). Joanne Garde-Hansen's chapter *MyMemories: Personal Digital Archive Fever and Facebook* focuses upon the SNS www.facebook.com and theorises the site in terms of Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1996). While myths of interactivity, freedom, heterogeneity, personal control and individuality pervade the promotion of SNSs, Garde-Hansen highlights that Facebook is an archive of archives that performs archiving in ways that reveal the corporate memory of the controlling principle. 'There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation' (Derrida, 1996, p. 4). How much Facebook users genuinely participate and interpret the Facebook interface is of crucial importance for thinking about the production of personal memories and histories on an SNS.

Active participation and sharing is key to thinking about digital memory practices. When considering practices, we should be aware of a significant shift in political and ideological thinking regarding issues of access, education, affordability, skills and demographics of digital media usage. We have moved away from the 1990s debate over technological haves and have-nots. Digital media technology delivery systems: satellite television, laptops, Macs, PCs, digital cameras, camera phones and digital radios proliferate and the issue is not whether you have such a device but whether you are skilled enough to use it in deeper and more innovative ways. As Henry Jenkins has argued: 'As long as the focus remains on access, reform remains focused on technologies; as soon as we begin to talk about participation, the emphasis shifts to cultural protocols and practices' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 23). Jenkins states that those with the greatest access to new media technologies in the West, are 'disproportionately white, middle class, and college educated' and they 'have mastered the skills needed to fully participate in these new knowledge cultures'. In fact, 'these elite consumers exert a disproportionate influence on digital media culture in part because advertisers and media producers are so eager to attract and hold their attention' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 23).

But what about a media producer that shifts its focus to the unrepresented majority, who may not even have access and if they do have access certainly do not have the skills to participate in their culture through the use of digital media? When the BBC started its CaptureWales digital

storytelling project in 2001 it did so with the concept of a 'participation gap' firmly in mind. Jenny Kidd's chapter *Digital Storytelling and the Performance of Memory* challenges the perception of the Internet as a commercially driven space by exploring what happens when public service broadcasting meets user-generated content in terms of memory. While it may seem that 'the internet has become commercialised and has succumbed to the patterns of revenue and profit generation that are endemic to our contemporary media, it has also permitted new forms of contestation that have been foundational to understanding new media cultures' (Marshall, 2004, p. 59). Such contestation can be found in the hundreds of digital stories produced during 2001–2007 at www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales/ by members of the public of all different ages and capabilities, some elderly with no experience of using a computer. At stake here are the issues of truth, faithfulness, authenticity and community that also underpinned the first chapter on social network sites. Unlike the commercialisation of Facebook, the personal digital memories produced by CaptureWales may be performances of memory but they are legitimated by the authority of the BBC as enabler and website host.

The often cathartic narratives demonstrate digital memory practices as global narrative witnessing, allowing participants to share a story told internally over time with an unseen audience able to connect with that story personally (again internally) and publicly (by posting a response to the story on the website). The will and desire to produce something meaningful drives digital storytelling and fits neatly with the modus operandi of the World Wide Web more generally. 'Each day new websites are produced and existing ones are transformed. [...] it is evident that the web has catered to a desire in the populace to produce and to make something, and ensure that whatever is produced has the possibility of being seen'. This is unique to the web because it 'is simultaneously a place for production, distribution and exhibition in a way that no previous media form has ever permitted' (Marshall, 2004, p. 51).

Margaret Clarke's chapter *The Online Brazilian Museu da Pessoa* continues the theme of recovering the voices of the historically unrepresented, but significantly from a non-Western perspective. Unlike Facebook, which appeals to the masses and is user-produced, and digital storytelling that is as much about enabling audiences in the use of technology as it is about telling stories, the Museu da Pessoa (Museum of the Person) has curators of memory. The museum manages the life stories of those excluded, those unlikely to ever have a Facebook page. The recovery of voices here comes in the form of episodic memories, stories

and narratives that are designed to engender pluralism, democracy and social change. Drawing out the history and development of the Museum of the Person, Clarke makes clear the importance of the technological advances and practices for generating a history from below. Citizenship, national identity and personal testimony produce a digital archive with quite a different relationship to memory and biography to that found in Facebook or CaptureWales. These are digital memory practices with deeply politicised and historically specific motivations that provoke conversations about digital division, participation and the homogenous whitening and westernising of memory practices in online worlds.

The need to remember and recover memories using digital media intrinsic to the first three chapters in this section is squarely and rightly pitched against the final chapter *Remixing Memory in Digital Media* by Shaun Wilson. Theorising remixing, versioning and simulation of the past, Wilson weaves together digital practices of blogs, wikis and the production of 'user histories' by web pages and search engines with the archival instruments of DVDs, MP3s, PDAs and mobile phones. Together, these technologies ensure that nothing is forgotten. Despite the lamentations from archivists and librarians all over the world about information loss though the fast-paced development of digital technologies, Wilson taps in on an argument that the problem might not be memory at all. It will not necessarily be digital amnesia that we suffer from but quite the opposite, a surplus of memory. As Gleick has suggested:

Anyone wandering through the Internet might begin to feel that memoryloss isn't the problem. Archivists are everywhere, in fact – official and self-made. The leading online bridge service has recorded every detail of the bidding and card play in each of the millions of hands played since the 1990s. (Gleick, 1999, p. 251)

If, as Gleick argues, the network distributes memory (Gleick, 1999, p. 252), such that Derrida's archive is no longer centralised and authoritative, then what are we to do with digital memory practices that no longer seem to have forgetting as their binary opposite? While the other chapters in this section might celebrate digital culture as a place where memories are infinitely recordable, storable and retrievable, the final chapter proposes the concept of the over-versioned artefact. In remixing versions of the past it becomes increasingly difficult to determine reliability, which challenges the artifactuality of the artifact. Potentially, there is no 'trustworthy' domicile (like Facebook, the BBC or the museum) for consigning memories, histories and narratives.

More fundamentally, the final chapter of this book poses forgetting as a necessary function of digital media in order to make memory practices meaningful and productive.

Each of the chapters in this section focus upon practices that challenge media and cultural institutions that have for decades determined how personal and collective histories are produced and consumed (the broadcaster, the museum or the publisher for example). Not all of the chapters take on the Herculean task of revealing how users individually and personally participate in digital memory production from the user's point of view. In a fairly new area of research it pays to map out the theoretical terrain and issues at stake initially, before embarking on detailed and nuanced research paths. This crucial area of audience/prosumer research needs to be addressed in future projects on digital memory practice. In order to practise digital memories, one must be fast enough and skilled enough to deal with the proliferating range of hardware, software and applications that were once ringfenced by professional media organisations but which are now fair game.

References

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