



Memories of the Future

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“Memories of the Future” was an international conference on the meaning of memory in the present and the future. Six international speakers were invited to reflect on the conference’s theme by examining the role and notion of memory within a digital culture. This report summarises the speakers’ contributions.

In the first session, labelled *“Memory and Forgetting in the Digital Age”*, **Geoffrey Bowker** (University of Pittsburgh iSchool) looked at ways of *analysing* within digital archives and cultural heritage, ways of *exploring* and ways of *knowing*. While cyberinfrastructure might lead us to see the current era foremost as one of discontinuity and change, this is not necessarily correct. We need to recognise that the memory epoch we are dealing with essentially remains the same as it has been for the last 200 years. But while vast amounts of rapidly accessible information are at our disposal, we are still asking the same questions. Bowker suggests that the intellectual challenge is to think of new kinds of questions to ask given the technology available to us today. *Metadata friction* might be a potential stumbling block: people tend to find it hard to give up control over their own metadata, their own ways of cataloguing and analysing. But a fortress mentality is not the way forward, and Bowker stresses we need to think about *“genuinely new forms of memory, genuinely new ways of thinking”*. Within the memory realm, it is now also possible to keep track of the context of events or artefacts, which is an important point of attention. However, the digital age poses a danger: the dataset that is being created might be so overwhelming that it will hinder the emergence of new ways of thinking. How we deal with this in the present is vital for the future of memory. As a result, alongside of thinking of ways of preserving culture for the future, we also need to think about new ways of (re)presenting and visualising knowledge and about what knowledge should be. In sum, Bowker repeats: *“we need to create new ways of analysing, new ways of exploring and new ways of knowing”*.

Next, **Viktor Mayer-Schönberger** (National University of Singapore) talked about remembering and forgetting. Disclosing information about ourselves online is not without risk; moreover, companies such as Google have the capacity and infrastructure to remember everything about us. Remembering has always taken effort, and people have been trying to hold on to memories through oral tradition, painting and script. Today, however, remembering has become the default, forgetting the exception. This evolution was made possible by digitisation, advances in storage technology and full-text indexing, and the development of a global access infrastructure. What is at stake because of this revolution centres both on power and time. It is not only about power over information and hence over people in the present; in the digital age, what we do is available to be observed for years to come. The factor time is also important as we find it difficult to handle old information while keeping its diminished relevance in mind. Forgetting has always been part of human beings: it is a way of distinguishing between important and trivial information, a way of protecting ourselves. This is at risk when remembering becomes the default. Moreover, without forgetting, we find it hard to forgive. After outlining some of the dangers of the shifting default, Mayer-Schönberger focused on possible ways to address them: (1) *digital privacy rights*; (2) *information ecology*, a regulatory decision to deliberately store less rather than more; (3) *digital abstinence*; (4) *full contextualisation*, to capture and store enough to accurately relive events; (5) *hope for cognitive adjustment*, to enable us to

deal with a world of omnipresent past; (6) introduce a form of DRM for information. All of these strategies help, but also have drawbacks. Mayer-Schönberger advocates for establishing mechanisms that facilitate forgetting: *expiration dates for information, gradual ways of digital forgetting ('rusting'), making older information harder or slower to retrieve*. Whatever the solution, it will have to change the default back from remembering to forgetting.

In the second session, "*Memory Institutions in a Knowledge Society*", **Peter Kaufman** (Intelligent Television) talked about *memory and media, public and memory, and technology and memory*. We are constantly surrounded by media and screens, the web is now mainly a video medium, and young people are hyperconnected, i.e. simultaneously using multiple devices. Our memory institutions have not contributed significantly to this revolution: large amounts of media are not distributed, not accessible. Kaufman recommends cultural institutions to *recognise the power of media and video, engage in producing video and get legacy video out there*. He states that "*acts to digitise our audiovisual heritage may be more political than others today*", as audiovisual resources can and have been used for political activism. The amount of time and energy people dedicate to peer-to-peer sharing of video is enormous. Perhaps we need to mobilise the public in order to get our audiovisual heritage out there. Kaufman urges institutions to put their materials online to engage with their audience; he also urges producers to consider working with institutions. Audience annotation e.g. could be utilised to document the richness of memory as well as alternative counter-memories. Kaufman also wonders how we can encourage memory institutions to get involved in technological evolutions of the future. He recommends solutions for rights clearing: as rights issues are highly complicated and stakeholders manifold, he recommends to support open licences and technology. He also recommends to support collaboration and for institutions to be more proactive in seeking public-private partnerships. To conclude, he refers to Habermas and states that we are more able than ever to impact the public sphere's power structures. A drive for a better world should always be at the core of what we do.

Andrew Payne (National Archives UK) entitled his talk "*Memories of the Future... or Storage of the Past*". Digital is not at the forefront of many heritage institutions' minds or strategies, but Payne says digital can be about the things memory institutions want their users to do. He quotes Daniel Willingham, a professor of cognitive psychology, who found that "*memory is the residue of thought*". Thinking, actively engaging with something, is what creates memory. This has importance for memory institutions: "*if memory is the residue of thought, memory institutions must be about thinking*". Do we support our audience in the process of thinking? Payne states that memory institutions sometimes seem to miss this point and confuse storage with memory. The National Archives certainly occupy themselves with storage, analogue as well as digital. But is the public task just storage, or is it actually memory? Payne thinks the National Archives should be involved in memory, but while he hopes they are, he sometimes worries. Access does not equal thinking. The National Archives have tried to develop a *mediated approach* to their collection: the Education Department has selected approaches to the content that they think might work. They hope to enable thinking among students, teachers and trainee teachers. By showing some initiatives, Payne leaves it up to the audience to decide if the National Archives' educational website is about storage or memory. One of these examples is the user "ukwarcabinet" at Twitter, which is not only proving popular, but also creates engagement: debates emerge, people respond. "*Lots of thinking, and hopefully therefore lots of memory.*" Digital is about enabling thought, but digital storage does not equal memory: it is effectively still just storage. Putting materials online is not enough; thought is required to create memory.

In the third session, "*Imagining the Past, Remembering the Future*", **Richard Rinehart** (UC Berkeley Art Museum / Pacific Film Archive) mainly focused on memories that are born

digital. A lot is known about preserving “pre-digital” physical artefacts, he states, and knowledge on digitised versions of physical artefacts is being developed, but Rinehart finds that there is less available on how to preserve born digital culture. Museums are used to describing physical objects *in terms of their physicality*, but Rinehart argues that the essence of a digital artefact is *how it behaves*. As it will manifest itself in different physical forms across time, the essence is not any specific manifestation. We should describe an object in a way that enables its recreation and variability over time, but also safeguards its integrity. Rinehart was involved in developing a language to describe works, the *Media Art Notation System*, and likens it to “*creating recipes for recreation*”. Pre-digital objects also change over time, but at a very slow rate, e.g. rusting metals; for digitised objects, there is always the original to refer to. But as born digital artefacts change faster, new cultural institutions will perhaps exhibit living and evolving artworks, rather than static ones. “*The future will not care for bones of dead artworks, but for these artworks’ evolutionary children.*” Moreover, we should entrust copies of our memory institution’s entire digital collections onto other institutions. Databases with metadata and descriptions should also be more openly available. By opening up memory archives, we make them more robust. With digital artefacts, primary evidence and resource materials become more accessible. Parallel to older traditions of institutional critique through art, Rinehart concludes with a *call for memory critique*, which raises similar questions as well as new ones, such as “*what happens when memories are born digital*”.

Geert Lovink (Institute of Network Cultures) closed off the last session by inviting **Geoffrey Bowker** onto the stage again for a dialogue of reflections. Lovink has reservations when it comes to the large amounts of money spent on digitisation, while “*leaving out what the living culture of today should do with this*”. Bowker agrees that we talk so much about preservation and think surprisingly little about what we should do with the data. *New kinds of scholarship and presentation of knowledge* can enable us to ask new questions. Lovink situates Bowker among other scholars who are looking at *politics and aesthetics of information visualisation*. Bowker adds that we are still not good at thinking visually; this should be addressed in education. There are no good visualisations of databases. Moreover, there are many things we are not recording, as they don’t fit into our categories. The notion of *potential memory* links into this: we don’t think enough about all the connections we can make, the potential that lies in data. *Open and flexible archives* should enable us to reconfigure the past. We must recognise that knowledge is tied to agreed understandings in order to grasp that we can always only (re)present something that is “*local and specific to ourselves*”. Databases are formed in parallel to our structures of thought, which determines the types of knowledge that can be captured in them. Lovink mentions the huge challenge of financing and administrating digital archives. But we really need, he states, “*more places for experimentation, to make alliances with open source and free software developers, to include artists and designers, to create prototypes*”. Bowker acknowledges archives and experimentation mostly exist in parallel, but states there are some fantastic examples of how the two worlds can meet. When asked if he thinks memory institutions are up to the task at hand, Bowker concludes that now is an excellent time to change our institutions, and that cultural institutions have a huge role to play in inventing new roles, new technology, in thinking outside of the box.

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