

Terras, M. (2011). Review of "Mediated Memories in the Digital Age", J. van Dijck, Stanford University Press. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*. 36:1. p90-96.

Mediated Memories in the Digital Age

José van Dijck

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2007.

From birth, my toddler has been bombarded by images and videos of himself. Digital photo frames constantly, and automatically, rotate highlights of our past year. The television has, as screen-saver, a random slide show of the last shots imported from the variety of digital cameras we own (and we are guilty of taking hundreds of photos to capture one good shot). The digital video has recorded many day trips, and trips caused by new Wellington boots. Often we sit and look at photos, or watch the same clips over and over again – at his suggestion – as he delights in seeing himself at the beach, in the snow, or chasing the cat. He engages and responds to this barrage, reacting and interacting to images of himself taken a few minutes, days, or weeks ago.

The child of today is the most photographed and documented of any generation. This differs completely from my own personal experience: although my parents made the effort, most photos of my childhood can be found in a few carefully filled photo albums. There are large temporal gaps between photographed events, which have one photograph each. Given there was no immediate feedback with analogue technology, there was no chance to fix any blurring, grimacing, or poor-framing. My childhood memories are allied with fading 1970s Technicolor and the flickering of cine-films: the physical aspects of the media bound up with my own recollections and understanding of who I am, and where I came from.

The development of an understanding of autobiographical self is based on a complex interplay between our own memories of facts, emotions, and experiences, and our changing memories of these mental and physical memories. As we grow and change, our perceptions of who we are are subject to constant remodelling, depending on current wants, desires, ambitions, and projections. Dijk's book, "Mediated Memories in the Digital Age" aims to highlight the transformation that recent changes in the information environment is exercising on our development of personal cultural

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memory, or “the acts and products of remembering in which individuals engage to make sense of their lives in relation to the lives of others and to their surroundings, situating themselves in time and place” (p. 6).

Dijck is careful to demonstrate that different media plays – and has played for a long time in human society – an important role in shaping both our personal and our collective cultural memory, changing and focussing our interpretation of past events, and intertwining with our remembrances:

“Media and memories... are not separate entities- the first enhancing, corrupting, extending, replacing the second – but media invariably and inherently shape our personal memories, warranting the term “mediation””. (p.16).

Dijck’s text focuses on this idea of “Mediated memories” as objects of cultural analysis:

“Mediated memories are the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, present, and future of ourselves in relation to others” (p.21).

In particular, Dijck is interested in how the ubiquity and pervasive nature of digital technology is reshaping our view of our past, and therefore our identity.

It is necessary, when covering such a broad subject area, to bring together a number of diverging disciplinary perspectives such as those in psychology, neurobiology, cognitive philosophy, computer science, and anthropology. The premise is ambitious, and is often wrapped up with metaphors and allusions to popular culture to contextualise the point the author is making: the organisation of analogue photographs in the shoe-box under the bed, the plot to the Michael Gondry and Charlie Kaufman film “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind”. In doing so, Dijk provides an introduction to cultural memory, and what it means in an age of technological, social, and cultural transformation, rooting the discussion in the types of behaviour we are familiar with, and the cultural environment in which the book was written.

Dijk begins by introducing the concept of cultural memory, and the important role of media in its formation, explaining discussions undertaken by social scientists and cultural theorists regarding the importance of this “mediation of memory”. Mediated Memory is a multidisciplinary matter. But what is memory itself made of?

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In the second chapter Dijck addresses what we currently understand by the concept of "memory", bringing together discussions from neurobiology and the cognitive sciences, and juxtaposing them with cultural theory and socio-cultural practices.

The following four chapters address specific types of media that we rely on to populate our understanding of ourselves: Words, sounds, still images, and moving images are each given a chapter in which to explore particular aspects of how the transition to digital format is changing notions of privacy and openness, and the relation between personal memory and shared experience. Diaries and blogs are concentrated on in the chapter on text, demonstrating how a reflective and private analogue genre now has a communicative and public function. The role of popular music in the formation of individual remembering and collective heritage is investigated. The changing role of imagery, and the transformation of photography from its analogue attempt to record moments in time, to the digital encouraging shared experiences whilst communicating in the language of photography, is explored. The role of film in shaping and manipulating memory is used to demonstrate how malleable our memories can be, a fact that is exacerbated by the ubiquity of digital video technologies.

In a final chapter, Dijk sketches out how digitization, multimedia, and online search mechanisms may redefine what we understand as memory, as instead of relying on our own interpretations of events, we evolve to integrate the machine into habits, thinking, and expected modes of operation, using the computer as an extension of our own memory processes.

Dijk describes this text as "a modest proposal to rearticulate the changing meaning of cultural memory at a time of transition" (p. xvi). Since the writing and publication of this book in 2007, Internet technologies, social networking platforms, and the technologies which allow the creation of user generated content have all changed rapidly. The sharing of video online, for example, is much more common, whilst one of the most commonly used micro-blogging platforms, Twitter.com, was only founded in 2006, and only permeated culture and news reporting since 2009: the book does not mention it. However, by grounding this book in both Cultural and psychological theory, entwining perspectives of the biological and cognitive sciences, and not putting too much focus onto the specific details of the websites, file formats, and creation technologies which make up our changing information environment, this

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book manages to raise important questions about the evolving relationship between technology and memories, and documenting and forgetting, without appearing too dated.

Less successful are some of the case studies around which each chapter is constructed. The chapter on music, for example, centres around comments made by radio listeners about their favourite songs on a yearly countdown in a Dutch Radio show, and the memories that become attached to particular popular music. The online database which accompanies this yearly program hosts a variety of comments and stories. Dijk uses this to analyse how individuals invest emotion and affect in recorded music, and whether the act of undertaking this listing of best songs, and the discussion thereafter, shape their collective memories of the past. Whilst this is an interesting approach, it would have been more interesting to look at how internet technologies are changing the way that music itself can be shared through streaming and peer to peer technologies, and the control the music industry has (or wishes it has) on access to digital music. Does the changing information environment, in which a multiplicity of music tracks can now be accessed, instead of the "top ten" on rotation on music channels, change collective memory? How is personal memory affected if there is not a centralised communal music source, such as a radio station? The book has no mention on Napster, iTunes, eMusic, or other online music stores. The book does not address the online communities which build up around specific musicians, and how the detailing of live tracklistings, the documentation of recording sessions and appearances, and even continual reference and logging of what a particular artist wears can contribute to both group and individual memory (and obsession). What is lost and what is gained by such digital online documentation? How are our memories of going to see a performance at a specific time and date affected, if we can look up recordings of this on YouTube, discuss the track listing at SongKick, share the photos that we took at Flickr, and download illegal MP3 bootlegs from an online forum? Many of the case studies would have been improved by investing more time in the digital world that the book attempts to inhabit. The discussions which frame aspects of memory in the different digital media would have had more resonance as a result.

Nevertheless, the strength of this book in the attempt to span a wide academic area, and to point out to the reader useful sources in the passing. There is a large bibliography, and the book is peppered with extensive footnotes which define and

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clarify terms that those not familiar with the latest psycho-social or neurobiology literature will appreciate. There is no doubt that the text raises important questions regarding how our memories, and our very sense of autobiographical self, is changing and will continue to change as user generated digital content becomes more pervasive, and the changing information environment allows us to extend our thought processes – including personal recall – through the browser search box.

Whilst reading this book, I could not help seeing in amongst the theorizing, an image of a small boy endlessly engaging with moving and still images of himself and his family, constructing his own identity, and understanding how the world –which has always been digital, for him – works. Alongside other normal parental concerns and paranoias, we should add a realisation and concern that we are shaping the memories, and the development of sense of self, of the most recent generation through recording, picturing, and re-broadcasting every moment of their lives. The affect this will have on shared, and personal, cultural memory remains to be seen. “Mediated Memories in the Digital Age” is a novel, yet necessary, investigation into our current understanding of how memory and machine interact, and a forewarning of an issue which will probably change the machinations of shared cultural memory, and therefore society.

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