THE NEW ARCHIVISTS: SOCIAL MEDIA, MEMORY AND HISTORY

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OUR DIGITAL LIVES

In a time of growing populism around the world and here in Canada, many are wondering: if we forget our world history, are we doomed to repeat it? This provocative question may be increasingly relevant. In a recent Leger survey commissioned by the Association for Canadian Studies, seven out of 10 Canadians felt that "with the Internet and technology they don't need to remember as much as they used to" (Jedwab, 2018). And many also think "technology makes me smarter" since it helps them remember important historical dates, people and details of historical events. But what are the consequences of Canadians turning to dominant social platforms like Facebook, Google or Twitter for answers about history? This essay will consider the consequences of technologized history by looking at how algorithmic selection may play a role in a future historical archive.

Canadians love digital media. Ninety percent of Canadians use the Internet (CIRA, 2018), and most like to be connected on social networking sites. According to a recent report by the Social Media Lab, 84% of online Canadian adults are on Facebook, 59% are on YouTube, 46% are on LinkedIn and 42% are on Twitter (Gruzd et. al., 2017). StatCounter (2018) reports that profit-driven and advertiser-supported search engines made up 99.5% of search engine market share in Canada over the last year, with Google taking 93%, Bing, 3.79%, and Yahoo, 2.24%. This may be why the Leger survey found that Canadians like to turn to social media and Google searches when they have a question about history.

What might be the consequences of 'outsourcing' memory to digital tools? In this essay, I argue that by outsourcing our memories to social media, Canadians risk developing an archive guided more by a marketing logic than by historical consciousness.

I begin by adopting a media ecology perspective to consider the role that communication media play in how we relate to history. Then, I show how the political economy of social media platforms influences what gets archived. Finally, I make some recommendations for how historians could work to build digital literacy for those who turn to social platforms for help with historical remembering.

THE MEDIUM IS THE ARCHIVE

Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan famously wrote "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964). By this, he meant that the media that we use to communicate with one another (or to record our history) leave an indelible mark on the message. A dominant communication medium can impact how we interact with one another, which has the potential to create social and societal shifts. This is the central tenet of media ecology: the dominant media in an historical period set the tone for human social interaction.

History, as we know it, is possible mainly due to the written word. Walter Ong, author of *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), suggested that history in a pre-literature culture cannot be remembered in the same way and with the same detail as it can in a literate culture. History in an oral culture requires a living vessel in order for it to be transmitted, and in the telling and retelling of oral histories, stories are adapted and changed depending on the storyteller. In a literature culture, in contrast, the text can exist independent of the person who records it. This text can then be built on by others without those people having to be present. It persists through time and over distance.

This divorcing of time and space from communication is further accelerated by electronic media – this first occurred via the telegraph. The telegraph separated communication from space and time, since a message could be sent in one location and immediately received in another far distant one — a far cry from an oral type of communication where sender and receiver had to be close together to communicate (Carey, 1983). Thus the telegraph can be considered, in some ways, to be the great-great grandfather of Internet-mediated communication. It was the first medium to connect people despite geographic and temporal distance — a forebear of the networked society.

But something changes when communication becomes instant. And in some ways an instant communication hearkens back to oral culture. This is a phenomenon Ong termed "secondary orality". Due to the prevalence of electronic media, we live now in an age where we have some characteristics of a literate culture and other characteristics of an oral culture. For example, on social media we often use text to communicate; however, unlike the printed word, text is more ephemeral on social media. It's hard to keep your own record of social media posts, and many web pages or social media accounts are not reliably archived. Even if they were, it's difficult to wade through the large volumes of information to find and record meaningful history. There is so much information being published online, all the time, that we risk losing meaning, or outsourcing meaning-making to those who can filter the deluge of information.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE NEW ARCHIVISTS

The problem with social media as a tool for recording

history is that we require filtering of the information in order to make that history accessible (Shirky, 2008). Currently, social media platforms engage in frequent and efficient filtering; however, that filtering is serving a purpose of connecting advertisers with audiences. Since advertising is the main business model supporting social media platforms, the algorithms are optimized to keep and hold the attention of users. They do this by profiling users as data points, and then delivering filtered content that is novel, dramatic or emotional. These filters are optimized to be entertaining. They are not optimized for accuracy, fact or historical significance (Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

In a sense, content filtering algorithms, and those engineers who program them, are the archivists of the social media age. They make decisions about how to structure and make sense of information that will one day form part of the historical record. And they do so by making decisions based on advertising dollars. Content filtering algorithms on sites like Facebook, Google, YouTube and Twitter provide the user with novel and popular information, because doing so helps these platforms hold user attention. In addition, visibility on social networks is boosted for those who are willing or able to buy space. Advertisements on these platforms are more likely to be seen by many people because companies pay for the privilege.

History has always been chosen by gatekeepers. Unfortunately, in the case of algorithmic filtering, the processes are not transparent, they can be changed at any time by those who code and operate the site, and they always favour advertisers over all other users. This may not be the best way to create or manage a digital record of history, but it is a great way to support the business model of social media platforms. Thus, historians are presented with a challenge: How do we work to ensure that people have access to an accurate, complete, and diverse history in an age of algorithmic filtering? If people prefer to access key historical facts using social media, how can we ensure they are not simply accessing the information that was boosted by those who could afford to pay for it?

There are no easy answers, but one possible part of the solution lies in providing information literacy to young Canadians as we teach them about history. The discipline of history can teach people to critically evaluate sources to find the most accurate representations of historical reality. This skill is needed now more than ever. Since digital media makes it possible to outsource our memories, we don't have to spend as much time teaching specific names or dates as part of the practice of history. To take the place of these skills, an information literacy approach is necessary. Teaching people how to evaluate online sources, look beyond the most popular content, and look for historical data beyond social media platforms will be key skills for developing an historical consciousness among the connected generation. This could be the first step to the creation of new tools and techniques for finding and filtering history outside of the commercial algorithmic gatekeepers.

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