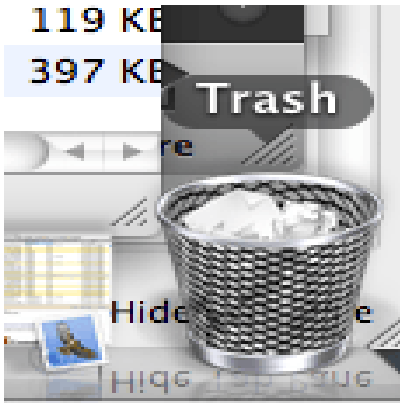


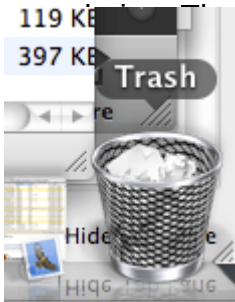


Amnesiac machines

Description

Digital devices help me to forget in several ways.

- If I store my bank details in my electronic note pad then I donâ??t need to commit them to memory. So I can forget such details.
- Thanks to the immediacy of web acces and tools such as Wikipedia I can forget the capital of The Isle of Man. Itâ??s easy enough to look up.
- Digital social media keep me in touch with a pool of friends, colleagues and experts who I can consult when I have a query. I can let certain facts drift from memory because Iâ??m a social groups of which Iâ??m a part know things that no individual on their own would know.



The intellectual skill in harvesting or dredging from this memory pool, is in knowing who to ask and where to look, though there are electronic aids for doing that as well. I donâ??t need to remember so much. I can afford to forget.

Then there are those painful, embarrassing, and redundant memories that constitute cognitive clutter ready for burial or extinction. Cathartic rituals such as deleting files, emails, links, todo items, browser histories and other memory prompts can help me forget.

As suggested in a [previous post](#), computer files are not memories, but cues, triggers and traces that prompt memories in social human beings.

Forgetting can be coerced. As philosopher Paul Ricoeur and historian Hayden White remind us, genocides and other atrocities are attempts to erase memories of whole nations and peoples, by removing names, records and artefacts, though determined communities may seek to revive and

reconstruct them.

We also need to forget in order to remember well. Forgetting is what it is to discriminate, to put things in order, to sift out the unnecessary and redundant. Memory has to be selective.

For memory theorist Maurice Halbwachs memories rely on socially constructed frameworks, eg the norms, practices and language games of family, friends, and belief systems. One way to forget is to remove these frameworks.

Forgetting is explained by the disappearance of these frameworks or of a part of them, either because our attention is no longer able to focus on them or because it is focussed somewhere else.â•• (p.172)

Moving to another city, circle of friends, set of possessions, culture, severs the social ties that sustain memories, turning recollections into disconnected reveries, that eventually fade.

To this range of environmental displacements I would add moving from one framework of cognitive and socio-technical support to another, abandoning oneâ••s library, cancelling online journal subscriptions, losing your laptop.

A *surplus* of triggers and traces can also invoke forgetting. Triggers and traces that are too many in number, arbitrarily arranged and disordered might confuse and thereby engender forgetting. Inheriting someone elseâ••s digital photo library might produce such an outcome.

In his book *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, Viktor Mayer-Schonberger argues that with computers itâ••s increasingly difficult to delete, and hence to forget.

But there are in fact no memories in computers. Social beings are the bearers of memory.

The cues, triggers, prompts and traces of computer databases may be difficult to delete, but forgetting is a distinctly human capability more complicated, profound and nuanced than erasing a file.

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Category

1. Society

Tags

1. amnesia
2. forgetting
3. memory

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