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Abstract

This work is a piece of explorative research about how people engage with memory through the means of Facebook. The project is motivated by 4 research questions. 1. What difference do users think it makes to have a memory on Facebook? 2. What are the main memory-related practices people enact on the platform in order to store and manage remembrances? 3. What are users' reactions when Facebook autonomously prompts memories? 4. When do users decide to 'forget' things on Facebook and how do they actualise this decision? To address these questions, a pure qualitative approach was employed: twelve in depth, to

1 INTRODUCTION

The origin of this work is a comparative research project I conducted one

et al., 2011; Mayer Schönberger, 2011), are to a large extent still needed. This work seeks therefore to better explore and examine these last issues by focusing on the specific case of Facebook and on users' memento and deletion practices. Accordingly, the main research question on which I shall concentrate is: 'how do people remember and forget things via Facebook?'. To delimit my area of interest, I have segmented this query into four sub research questions: 1. What difference do users think it makes to have a memory on Facebook? 2. What are the main memory related practices people enact on the platform in order to store and manage remembrances? 3. What are users' reactions when Facebook autonomously prompts memories? 4. When do users decide to 'forget' things on Facebook and how do they actualise this decision?

In trying to answer these questions, the work is structured as follows. I shall open the theoretical section (Chapter 2) with a brief overview on the classics on social memory (Halbwachs, 1992[1952]; Connerton, 1989; Nora, 1984,1992), followed by the re introduction of three elements I believe the classics omitted, namely the individual, the media supports and digital memory practices (van Dijck, 2007; Ashuri, 2011; Pinchevski, 2011). I will conclude the literature review with a critical illustration of the main issues regarding digital forgetting (Mayer Schönberger, 2011; Bartoletti, 2011). Drawing on Bartoletti (2011), the main points and the implications thus far noted will be subsequently reorganised on three planes (ontology, extension and control) and my research questions restated. My theoretical framework, centred on non linear approaches, will follow, introducing 'media as practice' (Couldry, 2012) and the concept of mediatization, specifying the understanding I will embrace (Krotz, 2007; Hepp, 2013; Couldry and Hepp, 2017). Given the explorative aim of my research and its focus on users' stories, perceptions and practices, I have opted for a qualitative approach. Specifically, my method is constituted by in depth, semi structure interviews — Chapter 3 will thus focus on methodology, research design and ethical

2 LITTERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 THE CLASSICS ON SOCIAL MEMORY

To set the stage, this work starts with a very concise illustration of 1

it, we start to conserve it in media (like museums, remembrance parks and anniversaries) (ibid.: 12). 1
Through a vicious circle, what we are really losing, according to Nora, 1

This 1

strength and relevance to reflections about the active role of Social Networking Sites[4] (SNS) and about how this relates to users' acts of memory.

Not only do digital media make memory a topological skill[5], but they also require us to understand their structures and functioning to take the right decisions. Although Van Dijck (2007) partially focuses on these issues, and I agree with the non linearity of her approach (i.e.: mediated memories), I believe her understanding of digital social media is far too anchored to the idea of 'digitisation'; neglecting the structures and

memory supported by digital social media are not lacking in the literature. Among these, in addition to van Dijck (2007), Ashuri (2011) is a notable contribution.

Digital social media allow the convergence of usually distinct memory features and actors, consequently leading to the constitution of a new form of memory that Ashuri (2011) labels 'joint memory'. This is an advanced form of memory combining in itself two distinct forms of recollection: 'common memory' and 'shared memory' (ibid.: 105). The former is the aggregation of units of memory gathered by enough people, referring to a happening that all of them experienced; the latter refers instead to a process of standardisation achieved through communication, allowing those who were not there at the moment of the happening to be plugged into that experience by means of memory institutions like archives, monuments, street names and the like. Ashuri (2011) proposes that digital social media allow the two to be catalysed into the form of joint memory, where the public and the private meet, as well as the institutional and the communal. Joint memories are therefore 'public recompilations of personal and re

Forgetting does not exhaust itself in a negative act, but, strange as it may sound, coincides with a generative moment. It is not a vacuum, but a form of knowledge production, is 'an effect which is produced through the gaps, silences, and omissions in the stories we tell, [...] an integral part of the very structure of knowledge' (Norquay, 1999:2). Connerton (2008:63) states this openly when introducing a kind of forgetting he callsof

work of coherence does not seem to disappear from Facebook, rather, it might take new forms and
involve additional actors (human and not human). Once again, to consider just one variable, which
in the case of Mayer Schönberger (2011) is the medium, is not enough; once again, to consider instead
a lattice of individual, socio cultural and technological elements is likely to be a better option.

2.3 FINAL POINTS: ONTOLOGY, EXTENSION AND CONTROL OF DIGITAL MEMORY

To conclude this theoretical background, I want to report three

RQ1: What difference do users think it makes to have a memory on Facebook?11

RQ2: What are the main

If the term 'mediation' regards the process of communication in general, 'mediatization' 1

4

material substance of data, was met

remembrances; Y2 1— mentions of similar concrete objects of memory (both offline and online). 1 Regarding the actual coding, codes' sub types were operationalised in the most classic way, that is 1 by going through the transcripts and signalling their detection. To identify patterns, I drew upon 1 Saldana's criteria of similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence and causation (2009:1 6). 1

 1

4.4 ETHICAL CONCERNS

My broad 1

4.4.1   LIMITATIONS AND REFLEXIVITY

As Couldry (2000:196) writes, 'every piece of research involves choices and there is no point in pretending they 1

5   EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

5.1   OVERVIEW

In what follows, I shall present a selection of the main findings of my research. Deeply interrelated, they make a presentation strictly abiding by the sequence and partitioning of my research questions somewhat impractical as well as ineffective. I will therefore proceed thematically: after introducing a central theme to

This kind of quote, recurring in all my interviews, shows how my informants decide what to post [1] (thus what to store) based on both what they feel is positive and what they feel others will perceive [1] as such. Still, over simplification would be wrong, for the 'positive' lingering in these passages clearly [1] takes different forms. It regards emotions, self presentation, social engagement and, sometimes, also [1] the avoidance of heated arguments by not answering or by deleting comments. To exemplify this [1] latter case, I will use Mark's words, a 26 year old from the States.[1] [1]

> Quite often I post things [1]
> [1]

Before, I was used to post daily. You know, I was 1

To summarise, what is worth noticing is that the way we live on the platform, the way in which we 1 use and experience it inform the kind

capable of making memories possible for the user, who

5.4 FACEBOOK DOES NOT KNOW ¶

In the previous two sections I have shown how vast and complex the corpus of memories stored on Facebook can be. The web of elements involved in the production of these archives comprises technological affordances, the outcome of collective dynamics around Facebook posts, and individual attitudes to the platforms varying with the passage of time. As introduced in the theoretical chapter, it is worth asking: what are users' reactions when these contents are automatically exhumed by

These

I have privatised them and not deleted because I wanted to keep those pictures, but not 1
wanting to share them with the world anymore. (Jennifer) 1

I did not want other people to see myself in that status [...] I locked them [the pictures] first 1
and later I deleted them. Usually, I do it in this way. I think I 1

look for my name on Facebook and see all my shitty posts from 2008'. Notably, James even turned this operation into a deeply structured practice, repeated every few months: 'I go through every single picture, and either delete the entire album or very particular photos [1…] In certain ways I self sensitise my own Facebook'. In these examples, memories are not just memories anymore, they are also publicly available versions of oneself. Yet informants' concern does not seem to be publicity, but rather what version of themselves is viable and how it might spoil the self presentation they want to

6 CONCLUSION

This work began by retracing key theoretical reflections on social memory and highlighting their lack 1 of attention to aspects like the specificity of the medium, the individual realm and online memory 1 practices. Moving to the scrutiny of existent analysis of memory in the digital age, it 1   1

has just scratched the surface of a highly ramified matter that, as often happens, from the fields of media and communications studies overlaps with domains like ethics, Internet privacy, users experience, social psychology and cultural studies. I maintain that ethical and socio psychological concerns are among the most pressing issues here. Regarding the former, we must insist on asking questions like 'to what extent can we consider an algorithm guilty?' and 'who/what has the right to decide what we should or should not remember?'. Regarding the latter, Facebook, by supporting the 'presencing' and the 'archiving' of the self, 'help[s] you tell the story of your life', as Mark Zuckerberg stated when introducing the Timeline feature in September 2011 (cited in Lee, 2014:41). Yet, as shown in this work, the Facebook 'positive norm' and practices like privatisation and deletion should seriously make us ask ourselves: what are the main socia31>Tj /TT7 11 Tf .2091 0 TD .0039 Tc [(Sep)6rious

To my brother, Leonardo.

A great human being, who I admire

and with whom I share the weight of an

imposing and wonderful memory.

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Schatzki,

[1. What difference do users think it makes to have a memory on Facebook?]

• Would you say that Facebook is an important part of how you remember things?

     How/in what ways?

• Is there a particular reason why you would preserve something on Facebook rather than somewhere else offline?

     Do you feel there are any differences for you between remembering things online (through posts, Facebook pictures, comments and so on) and offline (through concrete objects of any kind, or going to places, meeting people and so on)?

• Has it ever happened to you, as far as you can remember, to see the same content on Facebook (a picture, a post, a comment…) and react to it differently in different moments of your life?

     For example, have you ever gone backwards on your timeline to see what you were posting in the past? If you have, how did it feel like?

     What do you do after having seen your past, do you just keep on scrolling or do you sometimes modify those past items?

• Have you ever put or done something on Facebook just for the sake of remembering it rather than to share it with others?

[2. What are the main practices peo renact

1   [if they show to have a deep experience of something like that]: 1

     How did it feel like? 1

     Do you have some additional thoughts you would like to share? 1

- Is it possible that contents and memories you post are spoilt 1

Once you delete something/someone, do you think you feel differently (better/worst, freer/more distant/more or less worried…) towards

CODE TYPE	1. Quality