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Memory and Remembering in the Digital Age

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Keynote 1:
Memory and Remembering in the Digital Age

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President of the International Oral History Association, Dr Sue Anderson, and members of the Association. Welcome to the 21st Conference of the Association which my colleagues and I at the National Archives of Singapore are honored to host. I am honored my colleagues have recalled me from the past to address this conference. I thank them for remembering me. I believe they remember my discussing with them on various occasions the nature of the memories we are eliciting from our interviewees and thought I should share some of these views with this conference. I am delighted to share my current reflections on the nature of the memories of our interviewees we are recording, and how these memories are being shaped, perhaps fundamentally, by the social media and internet.

COLLECTING WHAT WE REMEMBER AS MEMORY BYTES

I want to start with the observation, which all of us who have conducted oral history interviews would have encountered, that our interviewee responds to some of our questions with alacrity, giving us well-articulated and what appear to be rehearsed answers. But to other questions there are pauses and then a series of "umm" and "ahs" before a hesitant answer emerges. Many, if not most of us would attribute this to lapses in the memory of our interviewee, that the hesitation is their trying to retrieve from their memories the answers to our questions.

This understanding draws from our understanding of common sense psychology that we may not remember what we had for dinner yesterday, but can remember what we had for our birthday dinner ten or more years ago, and if we can't quite remember, then it is because we naturally forget some of our memories as we age. The neural networks to recall what we should have remembered has deteriorated with age or disuse. Current cognitive psychological research into our minds confirms this common sense psychology of our memories.[1]

In that psychological modeling of memory, we have a sensory memory to immediately process information that our five senses – especially our visual and auditory senses – are receiving into our short term or active memory to enable us to make sense of and respond to what is happening around us. Some of our short-term memories are then committed to our long-term memories where they can be retrieved, hours or perhaps decades later. The working of our mind is analogous to that of a computer. Incoming thoughts are stored as neural symbols in the mind, not dissimilar to data stored as bytes in the hard drive of a computer. Just as the bytes in our computer memory can be grouped into files and linked to each other, so too the neural symbols in our minds can be grouped into memories and connected to be recalled.[2]

Oral history interviewing assumes that our interviewee's long-term memories remain stable and unchanged over time, as mainstream psychological modeling of memory assures us. It is like learning to ride a bicycle. That motor skill can be retrieved any time in the future once it is encoded into our long-term memory. If our interviewee forgets and cannot recall what we are asking him, it is then because the memory we are asking him about never crossed from his short term to his long-term memory, or if it did, became confused with other long-term memories. So, the "um" and "ahs" are our interviewees trying to sort out competing long term memories. The answers we eventually record may be imperfect but are frank and candid.

We therefore assume that the memories we are eliciting from our interviewees are reliable testimony of events they witnessed or were participants in. This was and still is the primary mission of the Oral History Unit we established 43 years ago, to capture the memories of those who were witness to, or participants in our historical development as reliable historical records of our past. As mentored by our UNESCO consultant, David Lance from the Imperial War Museum, we adopted an *archiva*l approach to oral history interviewing.[3] The oral history interviews were archival records to complement gaps and lacuna in the textual records about our political developments and social history, about which there are few textual records.[4] We assumed that what our interviewees told us about the Japanese Occupation they lived through some 40 years ago, or their role in Singapore's anti-colonial struggle for independence in the 1950s is an objective retrieval of their memories, and "ums" and "ahs" are their attempts to unlock the storehouse of their memories.

We assumed that the individual memories we were collecting could be checked to form a verified account of our past, as Thucydides said he did in writing his great History of the Peloponnesian War some 2,500 years ago. He apparently checked everything he was told or answers he got to his questions before writing it into his *History*. So, we collated and checked what our interviewees told us, and based on what they told us, we were able to reconstruct a social history of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, and curate a series of museum exhibitions on the Occupation.[5] The interviews from our project on "Pioneers of Singapore" provided the material for two sociologists to do a study of Chinese entrepreneurship, while our interviews on political developments in Singapore enabled the reconstruction of the undocumented underground struggle between the People's Action Party and the Malayan Communist Party. [6]

FROM MEMORY BYTES TO CONNECTED MEMORIES

Our primary concern as an institution specifically dedicated to oral history has and continues to be how to make the most of the memories we collect. We strove to demonstrate that the memories we were collecting are reliable testimony of what happened in the past, as we were aware that some of our colleagues teaching history in our institutions of higher learning were skeptical of what we were doing, preferring the documents in our archives as more reliable evidence of the past.

We were aware of Ronald Grele's critique of oral history's theoretical naivety.[7] He discussed his methodological and theoretical concerns with us when he accepted our invitation to speak at an "ASEAN Oral History Colloquium" that we convened for our ASEAN colleagues. Unfortunately, much of what not only Grele, but also Michael Frisch and Alessandro Portelli among others were discussing in the 1980s about the deeper conceptual issues of memory, orality and narrative form in oral history floated past most of my colleagues. We continued confident that we were on an empirically grounded venture to collect archival records.

I was however stimulated by Ron Grele's ideas to recall what I should have remembered, but had forgotten, about my 1960s undergraduate Philosophy classes on the Philosophy of Mind. My fellow-students and I were led to critique ideas of mind and memory from Aristotle to Freud. Within that evolving understanding of our mind and memory, our practice of oral history interviewing stuck close to Aristotle's understanding of memory as traces or imprints inscribed into slabs of wax that constitute our memory which can be recalled. Today the analogy for this understanding of memory is the hard drive of our computers, in which our memories are like bytes grouped into files and linked to each other on the hard drive or our computer which we can call up anytime. On this concept of the mind, oral history interviewing is inviting our interviewee to key into his memory to retrieve his memories in response to our questions.

But are our memories static data banks, or more like billiard balls knocking into each other, and pushing them into the pockets in the corners of the billiard table, where they are then out of the game, and forgotten? The 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes thought so, and argued our minds are more malleable. According to Descartes, our thought world is unextended, occupying no assignable space and cannot be measured (*res cogitans*), unlike our physical world which has length, breadth, depth and weight and can be measured (*res extensa*). For Descartes, our mind is some kind of porous entity through which visceral, "animal spirits" flow, animating our persona. These "animal spirits" drive our thoughts and memories through the networks of our mind, blending with other memories in a shifting mixture, creating new pathways for our "spirits" to flow.

Today we recognize that Descartes may be right, that our memories are not so much static memory bytes in our minds, but more about the connections driving and linking our memories.[8] Our memory is about the neural networks that connect and interact to store memories by modifying the strength of the connections between neural units. So, what we remember is more dependent upon the strength of the connection between neural units, and less on what we have encoded from the short term into the long-term memory. The fundamental idea is that what is stored as memories are the connections the neural units are making and remaking in response to

new inputs. New inputs from the short-term memory stimulates the creation of new connections. Remembering is not so much "retrieving" bytes of memory but reconstructing and reconfiguring the connections between the neural units of our minds. [9]

The implications of these connectionist models of our memory for oral history interviewing is that our interviewees may not be providing us a straightforward retrieval of their memory bytes, however imperfect it may be, but more a reconstruction of what their neural networks are connecting between their neural units. And these networks of our memories will change every time our memories of that event are recalled.

Some of us may be aware of these shifting memories of our interviewees. We are aware that many of our interviewees do refer to their old diaries, if they wrote one, or search for old photographs and check with family and friends on what they are about to be interviewed about. What they narrate in their interviews is what they have managed to refresh of their memories. But we are also aware that our interviewee, if we were to again refer to that event or incident in another interview, may provide us a rather different narrative of that incident or event, sometimes quite at variance with the earlier account. Is that variance because our interviewee has gathered new ideas or insights about the event or incident, or because our interviewee has reviewed and reconfigured the connections between the neural units of his mind to form new connections?

CONNECTING OUR MEMORIES TO THE SOCIAL MEDIA

I suggest that the imperative to review and reconfigure the connections between the neural units of our mind are greater today than in the past. Today our interviewees have a new and wider range of media to record their memories. Not so long ago our interviewees had to bring out a camera to photograph themselves on Kodak film. Today, our interviewees can, via the camera in their handphone, post pictures of themselves doing anything at any time of the day on Instagram, Snapchat or Pinterest and Facebook. On Twitter or Tumblr they can immediately record and receive responses to what they are doing or thinking about at that point of time. On Facebook or YouTube they can do more, connecting and sharing with friends videos of themselves and exchanging views on issues of the day.

All these digital records our interviewees may post on social media can be retrieved at any time in the future. The issue is not that our interviewees will therefore have a paltry diary, or a few Kodak photographs, or friends and family they are in personal contact with to jolt their memories in preparation to be interviewed. They may have a huge databank about themselves on social media to draw upon for any oral history interview. But these social media memories are transactive memories,[10] developed as we interact with others on the internet and stored in external servers, or the Cloud today. They may have gone from our short-term memory direct to the social media servers or the Cloud, and never entered our long-term memory, where they can be connected to other memories to become integral parts of our self-identity. Are the memories we elicit in our interviews therefore drawn from deep in the long term memory of our interviewees, or short-term memories drawn from social media memories?

Another issue with our social media memories, I suggest, is how it is transforming our self-expression and self-identity. The diary or Kodak photograph is private until we share it with others. It may have been in the bottom of the drawer of our desk for years until it is retrieved and reviewed for an oral history interview, and at that point of time, our minds will reconfigure the connections of our memories of that diary to our today. But the photos of our birthday party last night on Instagram are in the public domain for our friends to view and comment on. Our memories of our birthday party are reviewed and elaborated upon in response to comments and queries from our friends.

How will our mind reconfigure the connections of our memories of our birthday dinner to the number of "Likes" or "Dislikes" posted about our Instagram photos of that dinner? Will we become anxious and depressed about what we thought was a great dinner if the number of "Dislikes" of those photos outnumbers the "Likes"? Which memory of that dinner will prevail when we are interviewed about it?

What will be the nature of our memory of that dinner, or stay at a beach resort, if we had spent much time planning how to photograph that dinner for posting on Instagram? Will we become so distracted with photographing the event that we failed to experience and absorb the moment and encode that moment in our long-term memory?

I want to further suggest that the internet and social media are shaping our memories of our self-identity in yet other ways. The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs argued in 1925 that our personal memories of who we are are shaped by the collective or social memories of the social groups – immediate and extended family, friends, clan and religious group – we are born into and members of. We internalize these tacit collective memories, which define the groups we are members of, and our identity as a member of these groups.

What our interviewees relate about how they remember celebrating the Lunar New Year or Vesak Day are more the collective memory of how his family and community remembered and celebrated these festivals.

Our personal memories of who we are as Singaporeans has in large part been shaped by the evolving social memories of our historical development from a colonial port city to a city-state. The Oral History Centre has played a small part in shaping these social memories in its various recording projects, especially its project on political developments in Singapore helped detail what has become "*The Singapore Story.*" The internet has provided new channels for critics of *"The Singapore Story"* to air their counter narratives. In addition to publishing their critiques,[11] they also run blog sites and Facebook accounts which reach out to a far wider audience than their publications, creating an "Echo Chamber" for those who access their social media sites.

The implications for our oral history interviewee seeking to locate his personal experiences and memories within a larger social memory of Singapore is that he, or she, can position himself within, or somewhere between the "Singapore Story" of the management of success and the echo chamber about the authoritarian governance of Singapore as a developmental state.

The infinite amount of data available via the internet is profoundly shaping our collective memory.[12] On the one hand it facilitates a better understanding of the world around us. Via Wikipedia we are just a click away from information on the world around us that we can appropriate and internalize as part of our memories. On the other hand, we have to struggle to make sense of this infinite amount of data, much of it of dubious veracity. The Wikipedia references we search for are often different versions of the same truth open to revision and rewriting every now and then.

CONCLUSION

Allow me in conclusion to suggest that we may in the near future encounter interviewees who may be more fluent and articulate in their answers because they have checked their online memory in Facebook or Instagram for what they should have remembered. This keynote address has attempted to raise the question of what is the nature of these online memories we then elicit in our interviews? Are they recollections of what our interviewees witnessed or experienced ten or whatever years ago? Or are they more about the actuality of that past as the interviewee reconnects them with other neural units to form new memories for his oral history interview?

Oral history as we have practiced it has been about the past as such, reconstructing it, as von Ranke infamously declared, “to show what actually happened” in the past. I have tried to suggest that social media and the internet may be transforming our memories. We can recall and retrieve more about what we did or thought from our social media posts but may remember less about the significance of what we did or thought for our sense of ourselves. What we remember may well be the latest reconfiguration our mind is making to the connections between the neural units of our memory. What we may have encoded into our long-term memory of an event has been overlaid by the Facebook entry we made, and how we remember that Facebook entry will have been revised in response to comments from friends and reconnected with other neural symbols. What we recount is the past as we first constructed it, then reconstructed and reconnected to other memories every time we are asked to remember that past. Oral history in this sense may be more about how our past haunts our present.

Endnotes

[1] Summarized in E. Camina and F. Guell, “The neuroanatomical, Neurophysiological and Psychological Basis of Memory; Current Models and their Origins,” *Frontiers in Pharmacology* 8.438 (Jun 2017) https://doi.org/10.3389/fphar.2017.00438

[2] The philosopher Jerry A Fodor (1935-2017) in his *The language of Thought* (Boston: Harvard Univ Press, 1975) and *The Modularity of Mind; An Essay on Faculty Psychology* (Cambr:: MIT Press, 1983) is probably the most complex advocate of this view of memory.

[3] David Lance, *An archive approach to oral history* (London: Imperial War Museum in association with International Association of Sound Archives, 1978) https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/7.1.93 ; Lance, “Oral history

archives: Perceptions and practices," *Oral History* vol. 8, no. 2 (1980), 59-63, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40178654 refers to his work with our National Archives as an example of oral history as archives. We noted and were encouraged by a UNESCO General Information Programme study prepared under its "Records and Archives Management Programme" (RAMP) by William W. Moss and Peter C. Mazikana, *Archives, Oral History and Oral Tradition; A RAMP Study,* PGI-86/WS/2 (Paris: UNESCO, 1986). The study was prepared under contract with the International Council on Archives "to make available information on the nature of oral tradition/history; its role, once recorded, as documentation in the absence of or in supplementing written records; problems in recording and administering such materials; and basic considerations involved in their use."

[4] Cheong Suk-Wai, *The sound of memories; Recordings from the Oral History Centre, Singapore* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore/World Scientific Publishing Ltd, 2019) provides vignettes of oral history contributions to documenting Singapore's history. The earlier *Reflections and Interpretations; Oral History Centre 25th Anniversary Publication,* ed. D. Chew & Fiona Hu (Singapore: Oral History Centre, 2005) compiles six "Reflections" on the practice and significance of oral history and ten case studies of the uses and application of oral histories.

[5] Kwa Chong Guan, "Remembering, Recording, and Representing: The Japanese Occupation of Singapore in Retrospect," in *Exhibiting the Fall of Singapore; Close Readings of a Global Event,* ed. D. Schumacher and S. Yeo (Singapore: National Museum, 2018) on how these collected oral history recordings of the Japanese Occupation became the basis of how the Occupation has been represented in exhibitions, marking of sites of memory of the Occupation and shaped the social memories of Singaporeans about the Occupation.

[6] Chan Kwok Bun and Claire Chiang, *Stepping Out; The Making of Chinese Entrepreneurs* NY: PrenticeHall; Singapore: Centre for Advance Studies, National University of Singapore , 1994). Bloodworth, Drysdale.

[7] R. Grele, *The Envelopes of Sound, The Art of Oral History,* 2nd edn (N.Y.: Praeger, 1991), Grele, *Oral History: Some Methodological and Theoretical Considerations*, Unpublished paper for ASEAN Oral History Colloquium, Recording our ASEAN Heritage, 25-28 May 1992. The end product of this ASEAN-Committee on Culture and Information Oral History Colloquium was a oral history project recording the memories of the Associations senior statesmen. The project, coordinated by the National Archives of Singapore, interviewed 46 ASEAN Ministers and their senior officials for 92 hours of interviews. Oral History Centre, *Senior ASEAN Statesmen. A Catalogue of Oral History Interviews* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore/National Heritage Board, 1998).

[8] John Sutton, *Philosophy and Memory Traces: Descartes to Connectionism* (Cambr.: University Press, 1998) for an elaboration of how Descartes construction of animal spirits flowing through the pores of our mind foreruns current connectionist models of the mind discussed here.

[9] James L. McClelland, "Memory as a Constructivist Process; The Parallel Distributed Processing Approach," in: *The Memory Process; Neuroscientific and Humanist Perspectives*, ed. S. Nalbantian, P. M. Matthews, J. L McClelland (Cambr.: MIT Press, 2010), pp. 129-156. Jerry Fodor's defence of the modularity of our minds (fn above) and challenge to connectionist models of our minds is in his much cited 1988 essay coauthored with Zenon W. Pylyshyun, "Connectionism and Cognitive Architecture: A Critical Analysis," *Cognition* 28/1-2 (1988), 3-71, doi: 10.1016/0010-0277(88)90031-5. See also Fodor, *The Mind Doesn't Work That Way: The Scope and Limits of Computational Psychology*, (Cambr.: MIT Press, 2000).

[10] The concept of a transactive memory was proposed by social psychologist D. Wegner (1948-2013) to describe how memories are generatred and encoded in work teams and groups to form a "group think." The concept has been extended to how the internet can engage in similar transactive processes as they would with other individuals. B. Sparrow, J. Liu, D. Wegner. "Google Effects on Memory: Cognitive Consequences of Having Information at Our Fingertips". *Science*. **333**/6043 (14 Jun 2011): 776- 778. doi:10.1126/science.1207745. suggests that when we are assured of future access to information, we then have lower rates of recall of the information, but higher rates of recall of the sources of the information. We are

developing a transactive memory system with the Internet, relying on it for information instead of internalizing it within their own memories.

[11] See for example *Raffles Renounced; Towards a Merdeka History,* ed. Alfian Sa'at, Faris Joraimi, Sai Siew Min (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2021). Sai is a founder member of the *s/pores* collective. Also New Naratif founded by Thum Ping Tjin and Kirsten Han.

[12] J. Firth, & others, "The 'Online Brain": How the Internet may be changing our cognition," *World Psychiatry* 18 (2019), 119-29. doi: 10.1002/wps.20617.