

As social media classify and rank our 'memories', what will this mean for the way we remember?

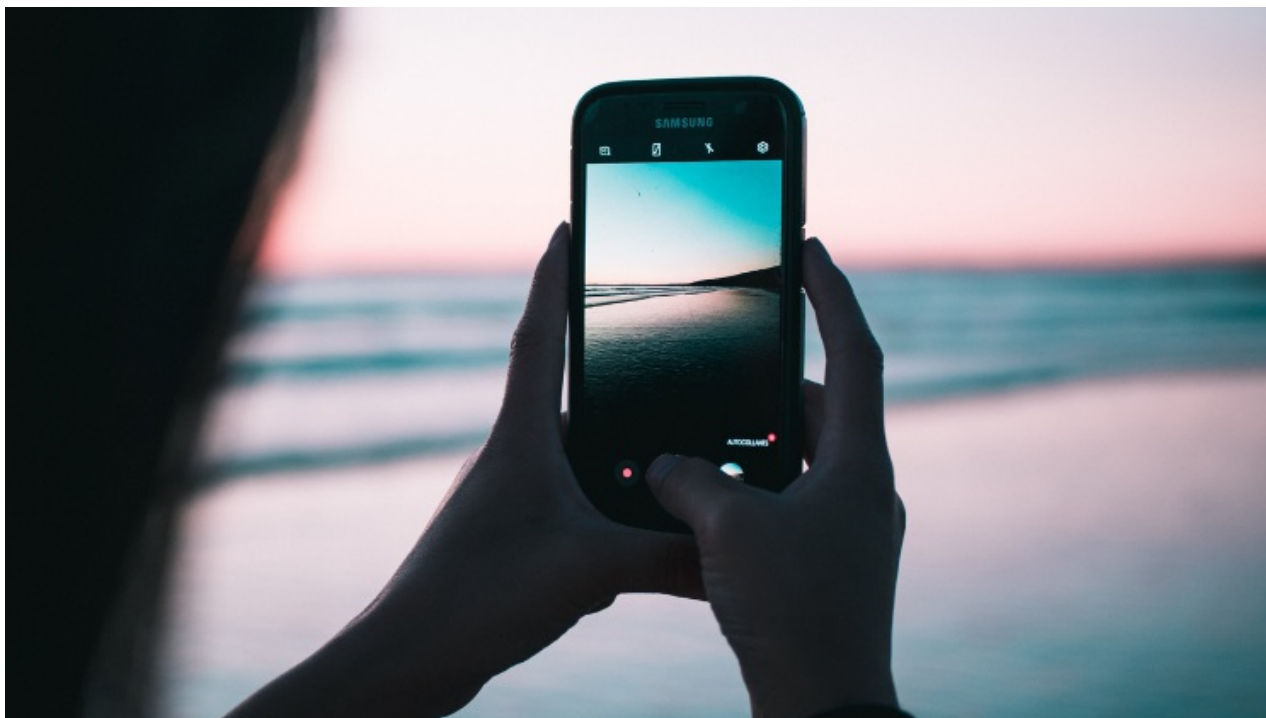
*There are few things more intimately personal than our memories. However, as more of human experience becomes mediated through social media, memories have become a significant resource for social media companies to exploit. Drawing on their new book [Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory](#), **David Beer** and **Ben Jacobsen** explore how a social media logic has intertwined itself into our memories and the implications this has for how we remember individually and collectively.*

You have a new memory. We've probably all seen some variation of this message popping up on our phones. These messages can feel more like instructions than queries. Usually accompanied by an image, they show us what we were doing at some anniversary point in the past. What is amazing is how this type of *automatic production of memory*, as we call it in our [new book](#), feels so familiar and routine. These messages might seem unimportant in the constant flow of social media feeds, yet these algorithmically filtered memories have profound implications for what we remember and how. Automated memories shape our very notions of the past, which will inevitably shape aspects of identity, belonging, social relations in the future. The question then, is how to understand these automated memories and their wider consequences?

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Social media are not simply about momentary interactions, they also archive those moments and circulate our past for us to consume. Biographical traces left through years of social media usage have become rich sources from which to draw and mine 'memorable' content. We might think of memory as being very individual and personal, yet memories have been long been mediated by technologies, the printed word, photographs, digital storage on devices and in clouds being only the latest development. We would suggest that the key change that we have seen in recent years, is in how algorithmic systems are intervening in the forms and rhythms of memory-making. The shift is toward environments in which memories are seemingly made for us. We are no longer solely setting the agenda for remembering. The consequence is an active and automated retelling of our individual and collective pasts. Social media can draw upon this vast archive of past content to deliver to us these pre-packaged memories. Of course, this past content is also a useful resource for keeping people engaged within social media platforms. In other words, memories can be sticky, keeping us attached to and active on the platform for longer.

The creation of these memories is thus by no means neutral. Processes of classification and ranking are used by social media to sort our pasts on our behalf. In our book we have looked at how past content comes to be labelled as a memory, exploring how different types of memory categories are demarcated by social media platforms. We found that the logic of social media – based upon attempting to keep people on the platform and engaged with sharing and interaction – finds its way directly into how memories are partitioned into certain types. This narrows what memories are included and excludes those that are not considered to be the 'right type' of memory. Once classified, these memories are ranked in terms of value, allowing certain bits of content to be selected and made visible.



In these processes we see how something as intimate and personal as a memory cannot escape the wider logic of ranking and league tables. The application of metrics and ranking to memory in this instance is illustrative of a now deeply embedded logic that is crucial to grasp if we are to understand the transformation of social relations more broadly. Of course, the notion of value here is also closely aligned with the logic of social media – with the question of what is likely to keep people engaged and interacting with the platform being paramount. A taxonomy of memories is in place that pigeon-holes the right type of memories, which are what are referred to by Artie Konrad, a user experience researcher, as memories that are ‘fun, interesting and important’ and those that are ‘most likely to be shared’. We looked at how these processes work and also at how social media users respond to them. It was interesting to note that the automatic production of memory is not something that is quite as smoothly received as it might often appear. Trying to classify and rank people’s biographical moments inevitably brings about tensions. What social media platforms consider to be a memory might not necessarily match perfectly with a social media user’s conception of memory.

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This all creates questions around what a memory actually is. Just because content is labelled as a ‘memory’ on social media does not mean that the recipient would see it as such. This was actually something that we found when analysing the interviews with social media users. Tensions arise where people are presented with memories, especially where the classification processes in this automated memory making does not align with their own understanding of that past. As well as finding some of this memory making uncomfortable or creepy, or that there was something that didn’t quite feel right with the sleek, smooth and clean packaging of these moment, others noted how memories they considered insignificant would often resurface. The values of social media can clash with the values of its users. Others suggested that they did not use the social media platform enough for it to know what a good memory was for them. Our book looks in detail at some of the tensions that arise as people experience these automated memory processes.

Walter Benjamin once wondered if what gives memories authenticity and meaning is how we go about digging them up and marking out their position. The question that algorithmic social media memories create is where the authenticity and meaning of memories might come from when they are dug up and marked out on our behalf. What this will all mean for the way we collectively and individually remember? Even more importantly, by looking at these automated processes we are pushed to think further about how even seemingly benign algorithms shape our day to day lives; an issue that is likely to become ever more urgent for almost all fields of social research.

[Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory](#), by [David Beer Ben Jacobsen](#) was recently published by Bristol University Press.

Note: This review gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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