Book Review: Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory: Classification, Ranking and the Sorting of the Past by Ben Jacobsen and David Beer

In **Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory: Classification, Ranking and the Sorting of the Past**, **Ben Jacobsen** *and* **David Beer** *explore how social media platforms are reshaping our processes of memory-making, with algorithms increasingly determining what is memorable to us. This exciting new book offers valuable insight into the implications of putting the production of our memories into the hands of automated systems, finds* **Matt Bluemink**.

***Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory: Classification, Ranking and the Sorting of the Past*. Ben Jacobsen and David Beer. Bristol University Press. 2021.**

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In 1932, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin produced a short fragment on the way memory operates. Benjamin's piece looked at memories as a kind of *excavation*, an active unearthing of a past that has been buried in the depths of our minds. He wrote: '[Memory] is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.'

Benjamin understood that authentic memory is not a passive store of past events that we can access as and when we choose; it must be *actively* mined from the ever-growing debris of day-to-day life. But, if experiencing an authentic memory requires us to actively dive into the past, what happens when we put the production of our memories in the hands of automated systems? What happens when technology companies use algorithms to determine what should and shouldn't be memorable for us? These are the questions that this exciting new book from Ben Jacobsen and David Beer, Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory, attempts to answer.

In recent years, David Beer's research into data analytics and algorithms has been at the forefront of the field, and this short volume co-authored with PhD supervisee Ben Jacobsen is no different. The book starts with an important distinction. The authors claim that social media companies such as Facebook have long since moved beyond their initial role as communication and networking platforms. They are now extensive memory devices which capture snapshots of users' lives and recirculate them back to the user, freshly labelled as 'memory'. It is this recirculation of digital content that marks an important aspect of what the authors term 'the automatic production of memory'.

Following a concise but extremely thorough introductory chapter which summarises much of the underlying logic of social media throwback features, the authors dig into the conceptual frameworks which underpin their analyses. Throughout the next three chapters they trace a path which shows how particular data is partitioned and subsequently promoted to the status of 'memory' on sites such as Facebook, before bringing to light potential issues this raises for the users of these platforms and for society in general.

This path begins with an analysis of the classification processes that define and partition these social media 'memories'. Here the authors turn to Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1996) to show how social media archives, and the throwback processes within them, no longer *passively* record events, but *actively* produce them. As Derrida wrote: 'there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and interpretation.' Therefore, if we are to understand social media as archives which have an active impact on memory formation, it's important to scrutinise exactly how their classification systems emerge.

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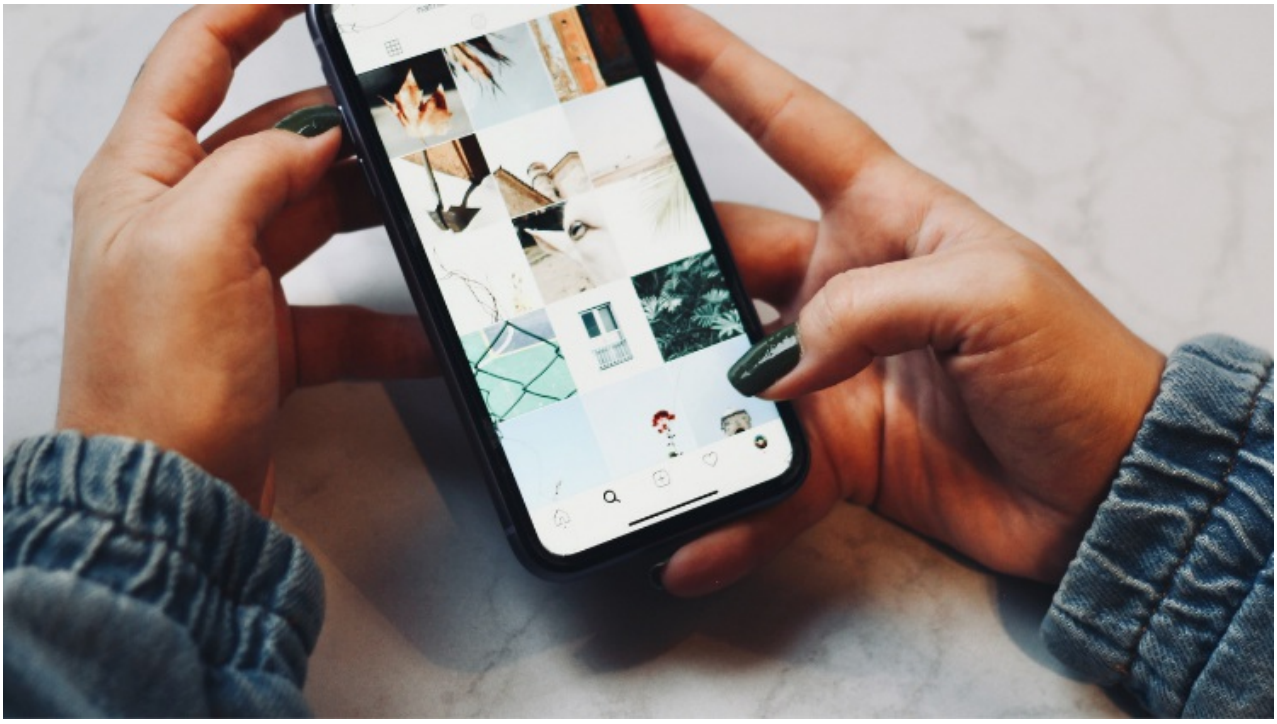

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To exemplify this point the authors turn to Facebook's own research which lays out precisely how the company developed the classificatory systems behind its 'memories' feature. Along with Derrida, they draw on Jacques Ranciere's notion of the 'partition of the sensible' from his 'Ten Theses on Politics' (2010) to analyse this research. Jacobsen and Beer state that: 'For Ranciere, when any given area is partitioned off, the frontiers of the sensible are re-formed and, crucially, the fundamental relationship between the sensible and non-sensible is reconfigured' (39). The important claim here is that the way in which our social media content is partitioned and classified has an inherent effect on the way we experience the world. In other words, Facebook Memories reconfigure's Ranciere's partition of the sensible as *the partition of the memorable*: it determines the nature of what should and shouldn't be memorable for us.

However, it is not only the partitioning of data that impacts the way we remember; it is also how that data is ranked and promoted in order to solidify its status as 'memory'. Analysing further research from Facebook through the lens of the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the authors argue that nostalgic content is being 'ontologically promoted' by algorithms in order to maximise engagement and participation with the platform. They suggest that the algorithms which determine what content is promoted to 'memory' status have a performative impact on how users interact with the site, and therefore how they remember the past.

This brings the authors to an important conclusion which emphasises the pressing dangers of a practice that Jacobsen argues has remained virtually unresearched: 'Through processes of classification and ranking, Facebook is extending its powerful reach backwards in time, drawing not only on real-time data but also real-time engagements with a resurfaced and targeted past in order to predict and shape the future' (55). Thus, we start to see how small changes in the availability of certain social media content, and the way that this content is promoted, could have a significant impact on the way our memories are created. It is this the authors term *the promotion of the memorable*.

As we come to the latter half of the book, the authors turn to the way these targeted memories are received and negotiated by users in everyday life. Indeed, one of the book's strong suits is that it draws together a wide variety of normative analyses, whilst also providing original empirical research to back these up. This is made evident through a series of interviews the authors conducted with social media users which highlighted the tensions that arose as a result of these 'memory' features. This friction between the promoted 'memory' and the real memory is demonstrated in a salient statement by one of the participants:

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> I know that Facebook does it. I see the notifications, like it says you have memories with this person! I just don't understand it […] There's no real memories associated with the memories that Facebook says I have […] it's trying to get me to use Facebook. That's the whole point of it is for me to use Facebook (76).

The results of the study therefore back up the authors' thesis that the memories feature serves as a tool to maximise engagement with a particular platform. Moreover, what is important here is that the *passive* 'memories' which are suggested by the algorithms lacked the authenticity that is implicit in the *active* excavation that Benjamin saw as so important. Indeed, as the authors write:

> when this digging and marking out are automated and targeted at users, the tensions of authenticity and value are likely to arise. Redefining what is a memory and where it comes from is always likely to be fraught with discomforts and disjunctures of different sorts […] we have tried to bring to the surface how these insights give glimpses into the very redefinition of memory as a concept (88-89).

In conclusion, *Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory* raises a number of questions that are likely to become increasingly important in the coming years. Although the utilisation of memory features on social media is a fairly new and perhaps under-researched topic for media theorists, it's symptomatic of a wider trend of automation through algorithmic systems that is prevalent across social media today. Jacobsen and Beer's book therefore provides a valuable insight into an issue that has drastic implications not only for how we come to understand our own memories, but also for how the individual is to act within a supposedly free society: 'The past is now being sorted and targeted by social media; this is not something that should be overlooked' (98).

- *This review first appeared at LSE Review of Books.*
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Matt Bluemink is a philosopher and writer from London. His research is focused around the philosophical implications of technology and education. He is also the founder and editor of online magazine bluelabyrinths.com. Twitter: @bluelabyrinths.

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