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Digital Archives of the Personal

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Nishant Batsha tries to remember exactly he did exactly one year ago and finds that digital records don't add up to a complete memory.



Walking, eating, sleeping: the quotidian. These I know were the banalities that formed the skeleton of my life one year ago today. But what was I *really* doing? Blame it on nostalgia, curiosity, or too much Proust, but I wanted to figure it out. My search for a moment-by-moment *Remembrance of Things Past* — of a point one year prior — began with this desire.

I first tried to answer this by scrounging through the nooks of my neural connections, but found — unsurprisingly — nothing. I don't file my memories by date; I can't really tell the difference between the 5th,

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6th, 7th, and so on. I kind of remember turning in a grant application. I do know that it was my first full week in a year-long jaunt to England. It was probably cold and grey. I might have gone to a pub. *Kind of, maybe, probably* — capricious words. I can't speak with certainty on any of this.

In a time before personal technology, I would have probably left it at that. I've never been very good at journaling, and there's nothing to indicate that I would have written something about a lackluster day. In this not-too-distant past, my thought experiment would have quickly come to a halt.

But, we don't live in that time anymore.

Rebecca Armendariz's article in *Good* (<http://www.good.is/post/chat-history/>) reconstructed parts of her relationship with her late boyfriend through bits and pieces of old Gchat conversations. Love, cancer, hope, despair, and echoing quiet finality were all chronicled in a date-stamped, time-stamped, and searchable inbox. Like hers, my inbox too caches parts of me: I can recall, relish, and recede into memories without having to go through the trouble of actively remembering them. Technology has bestowed upon us an archive of the personal.

After reading Armendariz's article, I decided that my first step in this reconstruction would be an email search. Gmail lets you search your archive by date; simply use the advanced options to search within one day of your choosing. Eight or nine results immediately appeared. Three people friended me on Facebook. I chatted with a friend upon waking, I chatted with my then partner later in the day. Reading these chats, I seemed to have woken up around eleven with a hangover. I had gone out to a few pubs the night prior and met some people "who seemed cool" (this is where the Facebook friending came in, I think). I excused myself around noon to take a shower. Nothing in the archive until another Gchat record around five: I had gotten groceries from the co-op and made lunch: fuseli with red onions, peas, and olive oil. It all ends with my partner saying she had to go.

The fact that I bought groceries made me wonder if I bought anything else. Gmail was a dead-end on this

question, but I realized that I could check my bank website to see if I did. £20 at the co-op around 2:30, £30 in cash from an ATM around 6:00. No other purchases for that day.

£30 at 6:00 — did I go out for dinner that night? I check my cell phone provider's website to rummage through my account. No calls. Ten text messages: a back and forth around 6:30. I guess I may have gone out. On second thought, I may have simply gotten the cash to buy some take-out Indian food — the text messages could have been a red herring.

Frustrated with the lack of information regarding my night-time choices, I turn to a literary desire: I want to know what I was reading. *The New York Times* allows one to search by date and section. 270 articles were published that day, with six on the front page. Browsing those six, I remember reading the one on the bees — scientists had finally figured out what was killing them. Whether I read the other articles on the front-page of the *Times*, I can't say. Silence, once again.

I'll concede that I've only scratched the surface of my personalized databank. But, absent a subpoena for all the videos of all the CCTVs following my every move, I can only access so much. But even if I could suddenly have access to more information, it would be more pieces, more numbers, all of which would somehow add up to a day in my life from a year prior. Is this it? The archive of the personal: bits of information about my personhood, neatly catalogued in databases, searchable by date?

In computing, according to the *OED*, a *bit* — short for binary digit — represents “a unit of information derived from a choice between two equally probable alternatives or ‘events.’” A 0 or 1, up or down, on or off. Gather enough of these bits together in the archive of the personal and you can move from two equally probable events to one actualized event. And gather enough of these events into another series and perhaps you can move from one actualized event to one full day.

Not quite.

Although these zeroes and ones constitute computational wonders, they do little to answer my question. In my searches, I found anything but a concrete image. In its place was the fragment: illusory, transient, incomplete. Technology has allowed me to amass these fragments in incredible sums: a conversation here, a record of purchases there, text messages in-between. As disparate parts, they languish amongst seemingly random data, ostensibly about me. One could say that the sheer amount of data about us represents the death of memory. Why should I care to remember what I did a year ago today if I know that all this information is being meticulously recorded?

But, the archive of the personal is no different from the physical archive — that building filled with memory wherein historians try to recreate the past — in that it leaves only unconnected dots. My ability to recognize those dots and weave together lines of narrative is my only recourse in answering the question I put forth: I

wanted to know *exactly* what I did a year ago today. But maybe the moment-by-moment I craved is bound to my imagination.

This is all to say that the actions of my day (walking, talking, thinking) and the materiality of these actions (where to? who with? what about?) were relegated to gaps and silences between highlighted ATM records and emails. The archive of the personal leaves pieces of this narrative written, but the rest remains unknown — even to me. To know myself from a year prior, I have to write a history and tell a story: I must become a character in a narrative. What did his headache feel like when he woke up? How green were the peas in his lunch? What feelings stirred as he talked to his partner via chat? How foreign did England's money feel in his hand? These mundane feelings are too part of the everyday, and yet, I struggle to find their record in my archive.

Do I know what I did a year ago? Almost. A story, buttressed by bits and bytes of my day, may have to suffice. This isn't a comfortable way of accessing my past; digital data is neither literary nor clear. It doesn't gently lounge with nostalgia and tea-dipped madeleines; instead, it's organized in search engines, records, and bullet points. And yet, I remain. Here to write. My sterile, my fragmentary, my memory.

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