

Remembering the need to forget

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We are built to forget – it is a psychological necessity. But in a social media world that captures – and, more importantly, remembers – everything we say and do, forgetting is becoming a thing of the past. If we lose the ability to forget our past, we lose the ability to construct our own stories – a part of what it means to be human, warned one Western

researcher.

"We need to gloss, forget, emphasise. We need to be allowed to forget," said Jacquelyn Burkell, Assistant Dean and Research Associate Professor in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies.

In "Remembering Me: Big Data, Individual Identity, and the Psychological Necessity of Forgetting," an article she recently published in Ethics and Information Technology, Burkell argues our [social media](#) posts, photos, updates and 'check-ins' are creating a permanent digital biography. This biography doesn't allow us to forget and move on from our past, and subsequently, it interferes with our own concept of the self.

"Anyone who ventures onto the Internet leaves behind an almost incomprehensibly detailed biographical archive, consisting of personal information individuals willingly and knowingly provide about themselves," she said, adding information collected online without our consent and knowledge also adds to our digital biography.

When we share our day-to-day events, musings, photos and the like, we allow our past to be permanently documented online. This abundance of shared memories that can never be lost may seem like the perfect archive, allowing us to remember everything. But for Burkell, a perfect [memory](#) has a downside. It gets in the way of us knowing who we are and shaping our own sense of self.

Self and memory are undoubtedly linked, Burkell said. Consider Alzheimer's disease; those who suffer from it are said to lose themselves due to a loss of memory. On the flip side, individuals who have a perfect autobiographical memory, a condition called 'hyperthymesia,' also indicate there is a link between self and memory as they report not having a clear sense of self – particularly because they can't forget anything.

Think of it this way: You're on Facebook. You log in and see an "On This Day" alert. It shows you what you were doing, on this day, only a few years ago. While the alert might serve as a welcome memento, it may also disrupt your current sense of self, leaving you thinking, 'I did that? That's not me. I'd never do that today.'

For Burkell, that which is forgotten is as necessary as what is remembered when constructing the self. The key issue is what she calls the "digital shadow" or the "perfect snapshot" of our lives which we share through our online activities. In an age of social media, we are able to preserve our every memory in perfect detail through various multimedia. The web is even capable of unknowingly tracking and documenting our movements online, providing a detailed archive of things we've said, sites we've visited, links we click and what we "like."

"The point is," Burkell said, "forgetting some aspects of individual history is necessary to identity – and the continued existence of a perfect and complete history could pose a challenge to this psychologically necessary function, if every detail I forget is retained in a digital archive, ready to remind me again of that which is no longer relevant to my identity."

Burkell is not arguing every instance of 'perfect' memory is a problem. She distinguishes between historical information and what she calls "lifelogging," or the active recording of a personal digital record, which does come with a risk of identity theft.

She suggests we find ways of regulating our own social media, monitoring our accounts in the style of "reputation management." However, Burkell calls this the tip of the iceberg.

She considers solutions such as an "expiry date" on information, and even algorithmic changes modeled after biological memory. In short, we

must find ways to re-establish balance in what is remembered and what it forgotten, in order to allow for an integrated life story and a whole human identity.

More information: Jacquelyn Ann Burkell. Remembering me: big data, individual identity, and the psychological necessity of forgetting, *Ethics and Information Technology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s10676-016-9393-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-016-9393-1)

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