

World Knowledge Forum 2013

Viktor Mayer-Schonberger, Pervasive Digital Memory: The Perils of the Digital Panopticon

The Digital Age has opened the door to more information than ever, but is this era forcing us to remember too much? Viktor Mayer-Schonberger, author of *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think*, joined the 2013 World Knowledge Forum to discuss the human need to forget and what can be done to reverse the demise of forgetting.

According to Mr. Mayer-Schonberger, "What is put on the web is no longer forgotten," citing Google as a prime example. He said, "Since its humble beginnings more than ten years ago, Google has stored every search query and search result a user ever clicked on... It can even predict the spread of the flu using these search queries. It can do all of this even for events years back because Google does not forget."

On the other hand, Mr. Mayer-Schonberger stated that forgetting is a part of human beings and how we function. "Biologically, we forget most of what we experience every day, our feelings, our thoughts. Remembering, in contrast, is hard," he said. Since the beginning of time, he suggested, humans have tried to overcome forgetting. "Script, originally developed by accountants searching for a precise method of remembering, remained humanity's preferred external memory," he stated. "Language, painting, [and] script provided us humans with the capacity to remember through generations and across time."

Today, this is different. Mr. Mayer-Schonberger stated we have moved "from biological forgetting to comprehensible remembering." He attributes this shift to four elements: digitization, advances in storage technology, affordable full text indexing, and the Internet. Together, he said, these elements have led to "remembering becoming the default, [and] forgetting becoming the exception."

"Undoing forgetting has consequences... power and time are at stake," argued Mr. Mayer-Schonberger. He alluded to the panopticon, the idea of a prison that creates "behavior compliance through the permanent threat of invisible surveillance."

"The Internet," he argued, "is the global panopticon." As for the realm of time, he said, humans are "tethered to an evermore detailed past, rather than living in an active present." Because of this, he claimed that we may turn into an unforgiving society.

To deter these consequences, Mr. Mayer-Schonberger said there are many potential solutions. First, he argued, we can implement more privacy rights. However, he claimed, "Most of us don't care [about those

rights]." Thus, he offered information ecology as another approach, stating, "As we cannot foresee the future, it may be better to store less than more."

Beyond these political approaches is an option that instead requires the individual: digital abstinence. But Mr. Mayer-Schonberger also gave a technological solution with the opposite effect. "Full contextualization – if we capture everything of an event, then it can be relived. This helps us regain our ability to think in time," he suggested. A second technological solution lies in digital rights management (DRM), embedding privacy protection in the technology itself.

However, Mr. Mayer-Schonberger's ultimate solution is to "reintroduce forgetting... to make remembering a bit more strenuous." He believes this can be done by either applying an expiration date to information, or by reintroducing ephemerality to our communication. Thus, he said, "We could develop even more advanced ways of digital forgetting." This "digital rustic" would make older, less relevant information harder to retrieve, comparing it to "the digital shoebox in the attic."

"Today," Mr. Mayer-Schonberger concluded, "digital remembering is the default, and it is forgetting that is often forgotten." He urged, "Give back to forgetting the role it deserves - let us remember to forget."