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COMMENTARIES

Alphabetical Diaries and Autobiographical Memory in the Digital Age

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R: … Remember how you want not to have to be special or to prove your specialness or to get your worth from any of that? Remember reading the Brecht diaries? Remember that each chapter must deliver some narrative or suspense satisfactions, so that things change from beginning to end, leading the reader forward so that they will want to finish the book. Remember that there was so much I could never have felt with him, any real intellectual or emotional depth, and how exhausting it could be, and I just want to remind my future self of this—that any fantasies about Lars have nothing to do with him, but reflect a desire to be out of whatever situation I'm in, and the inability to deal with the intensity of being with just one guy. Remember the winters of your childhood, all that snow? Remember there's nowhere else to go.

–Sheila Heti, 2024, *Alphabetical Diaries*

In her autobiographical book *Alphabetical Diaries*, author Sheila Heti recorded a decade's worth of her personal diaries using a word processor, imported these diary entries into a spreadsheet, and sorted the sentences from A to Z. She then spent another decade editing—cutting 500,000 words down to 60,000 words—which were published in a short and critically-acclaimed book earlier this year. Heti's *Alphabetical Diaries* is an experiment in using technology to make meaning of one's autobiographical memories. Specifically, she uses "external resources to store information and to (re-)construct autobiographical memories" (p. 12), just as Hutmacher et al. (this issue) propose in their AMEDIA-Model. In this way, Heti is the author of a new kind of autobiographical remembering enabled by a mind working in concert with digital technology. The *New York Times* wrote in its review that reading *Alphabetical Diaries* is "riveting" and "a profound experience" (Garner, 2024).

In this commentary, I use Heti's *Alphabetical Diaries* as a case study to illustrate a kind of autobiographical remembering that is possible in the digital age. I first analyze this case using the AMEDIA-Model to reveal the model's utility and its limitations, specifically the lack of an explanatory and predictive theory of digitally-mediated autobiographical remembering. I then explore how people have ceded a great deal of autonomy in the domain of autobiographical memory. Unlike Heti, most people accept the digital features that have been chosen for them for one of life's most intimate and human tasks—remembering where we have been to make sense of where we are going.

An Analysis of *Alphabetical Diaries* Using the AMEDIA-Model, and Its Limitations

Table 1 presents an analysis of *Alphabetical Diaries* using the AMEDIA-Model and reveals several of the model's strengths. The analysis provides a rich description of how Heti used technology to encode, curate, and retrieve autobiographical memories. Importantly, this analysis is comprehensive and legible, even to those who have not read Heti's book. It also makes clear how the use of technology shaped Heti's autobiographical account and is flexible enough to accommodate even an unusual use of technology for autobiographical remembering. However, even as this case highlights the utility of the AMEDIA-Model, it also reveals some of the model's core limitations.

First, it is not entirely apparent what one is meant to do, practically speaking, with the AMEDIA-Model. Even after ambitiously spending several hours using the model to qualitatively analyze Heti's autobiographical memory, I am not sure what to make of my analysis. I am left wondering whether and how this analysis could contribute to the psychological literature on autobiographical remembering in the digital age more broadly, and what next steps in the research process might allow for such a contribution. The authors discuss several interesting avenues for future empirical research in the social, developmental, and clinical sciences. Still, their discussion would have benefited from an overview of the exact research questions the model can and cannot answer and the exact hypotheses the model does and does not generate. This overview would be particularly beneficial if it specified how the research questions or hypotheses generated from the model are different from those generated without the model.

Another limitation of the AMEDIA-Model is that its primary function seems to be descriptive (as the authors acknowledge, p. 45) rather than *explanatory* or *predictive*. It provides a descriptive taxonomy that organizes how digitally-mediated autobiographical remembering can occur more so than an explanatory theory that makes clear predictions about the phenomenon of interest. Rich description—using the ecologically valid methods that the authors propose (i.e., qualitative interviews, experience sampling, mobile sensing)—is a valid and important goal in itself and should be a cornerstone of rigorous science (Gerring, 2012; Rozin, 2001). At the same time, the model's reliance on description

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may limit the extent to which it can be used to generate testable research questions and hypotheses, leaving many questions about autobiographical memory in the digital age unanswered.

For instance, focusing on description over explanation does not allow researchers to understand *why* an individual engages in a particular form of autobiographical remembering. Theories on person-environment transactions, if applied to the digital environment, could help provide such explanations. For example, such theories could explain how a person's identity influences which digital environments they *select* (or avoid) for autobiographical remembering, how their identity may inform the degree to which they actively *manipulate* the content and features of their digital environment to facilitate autobiographical remembering, and how their identity might unintentionally *evoke* certain autobiographical memories from their digital environment to the exclusion of others (Soh et al., 2024). Although some of these ideas are alluded to in Hutmacher et al.'s (this issue) discussion, these ideas are not formally incorporated into the model, as can be seen from their absence in Table 1.

If theories on person-environment transactions had been incorporated into the model, one might begin to understand why Sheila Heti—who strongly identifies as a writer, values experimentation over conformity, is skeptical of pat and linear narratives, and has carefully and methodically used autobiographical material in her prior published work—would engage in the kind of autobiographical remembering found in *Alphabetical Diaries*. Heti's identity would help explain why (1) during *encoding*, she selected text as her medium and ensured that the text was safely and externally stored; (2) during *curation*, she spent ten years editing this externally stored text, using digital tools unconventionally to construct a book-length autobiographical memoir; and (3) during *retrieval*, she made her autobiographical memories available to public audiences in a non-linear format. Given Heti's identity, it would be very surprising if, instead, her primary mode of autobiographical remembering involved sporadically perusing her Instagram or Facebook photos in private or creating ephemeral videos montages for a small group of friends.

Focusing on description over prediction may also prevent researchers from understanding the specific consequences of different forms of autobiographical remembering, both for the person engaged in remembering as well as for close or distal others. Hutmacher et al. (this issue) rightly introduce the idea early in the paper that digital technology has the potential to both help and harm autobiographical remembering. However, the model itself provides little guidance for predicting which forms of digitally-mediated encoding, curation, and retrieval will be helpful or harmful for a given individual. Table 1 does not provide any predictions as to whether Heti was successful in making meaning from her life or learning from her past. Nor does it indicate whether Heti's technology-enabled autobiographical account will help her friends or readers to make meaning of their own lives. The largely positive public reception of *Alphabetical Diaries* suggests there is something about Heti's particular form of autobiographical remembering that resonated with readers, but the model does not help researchers predict what this might be.

Ceding Autonomy of Autobiographical Remembering in the Digital Age

Hutmacher et al. (this issue) ask whether we should be optimistic or pessimistic about the consequences of technological advancements for autobiographical remembering, not just for any given individual (like Heti and her followers) but for society as a whole. To begin answering this question, it is important to consider what features and affordances are prevalent in the digital environments that most people occupy and the degree to which people accept or reject these features for the purpose of autobiographical remembering. Such an exercise would reveal that most of us are not Sheila Heti. Most of us are not artists engaged in a non-linear, experimental autobiographical writing for a cultivated and dedicated audience. Most of us do not come up with completely new ways of using digital technology to encode, curate, and retrieve our autobiographical memories. (If we did, we might also be published and acclaimed memoirists). Heti's case shows the kind of remembering that is possible in the digital age, not the kind that is common. The truth is that most of us readily accept standard digital features designed and offered up by private corporations for one of the most intimate and profoundly human tasks of our lives—remembering where we have been to make sense of where we are going.

I raise these points *not* to suggest an outright rejection of readily available digital features in favor of avant-gardist forms of autobiographical remembering. Rather, I am suggesting that we consider what forms of autobiographical remembering we have unquestioningly accepted from our digital environments and what alternative forms of autobiographical remembering we may have unknowingly given up, ceding our autonomy in the process.

Hutmacher et al. (this issue) and others have described several important ways in which using digital technology for autobiographical remembering may undermine autonomy. For instance, increasing the density and objectivity of recorded memories could restrict the freedom with which people can interpret and narrativize their lives, thereby impairing the adaptive forgetting of disturbing events (Talaifar & Lowery, 2023). Concerns about privacy and surveillance may limit the extent to which people feel free to digitally record or share their autobiographical memories (Valenzuela et al., 2024). Offloading autobiographical memory to the digital environment may make people cognitively reliant on a technological infrastructure over which they have little control (Hutmacher et al., this issue). Here, I am proposing that there is yet an additional loss of autonomy when we accept dominant or normative forms of digitally-mediated encoding, curation, and retrieval of memories without imagining alternatives. Heti selected and controlled her curation algorithm. How many of us can say the same?

Many features of the digital environment are so seamlessly integrated into our day-to-day lives, and have been for

so long, that it is hard to imagine what alternative forms of digitally-mediated autobiographical remembering might look like. For instance, iPhone photos are usually organized via reverse-chronology (with options to organize photos by place, event, or person). Social media profiles also tend to be organized via reverse-chronology (with options to "pin" important tweets, photos, or stories). This reverse-chronology implicitly places a higher value on, and easier access to, recent as opposed to distal events. It also implies that the best way to remember the past is temporally and linearly. None of this need be the case.

Certainly, relying on reverse-chronological is one viable way to remember. But *Alphabetical Diaries* demonstrates how engaging in non-chronological forms of remembering can reveal surprisingly meaningful insights into the self. For instance, ordering sentences alphabetically rather than chronologically revealed both Heti's consistencies and inconsistencies by juxtaposing sentences expressing either similar or dissimilar sentiments close together (e.g., "Claire is a great artist … Claire is an entertainer and a politician, but she is not actually an artist"; Heti, p. 25) (Rothfeld, 2024). It also exposed the ruminative and obsessive nature of Heti's concerns in throngs of sentences that all start with the same subject (e.g., more than two pages of sentences beginning with "Lars … "). Ordering sentences alphabetically underscored Heti's characteristic verbal patterns and turns of phrase (e.g., a series of sentences beginning with "Of course … " (Kirkus Reviews, 2024). In some instances, the artificial alphabetization of sentences mimicked the naturally associative quality of memory. The opening epigraph reminds us how, rather than being experienced as a linear sequence, memories can evoke the banal alongside the profound, the inner child alongside the romantic interest, and the past alongside the future.

Returning to the question of whether we should be optimistic or pessimistic about autobiographical remembering in the digital age, I admit that my own perspective is more pessimistic than Hutmacher et al. (this issue). This pessimism is driven not by an inherent distrust of technology nor by an ignorance of technology's important role in autobiographical remembering. Rather, I believe that most of us can use technology in more interesting, thoughtful and meaningful ways to make sense of our memories and our lives. I hope for and imagine a future wherein each person's autobiographical remembering is determined less by the default design features of their digital environments and more by their identity, values, and goals. Such a future would be one in which technology supports, rather than undermines, individual autonomy in autobiographical remembering. If every person is like all other persons, like some other persons, and like no other person (Kluckhohn & Murray, 1953), it is perhaps

our autobiographical narrative that most distinguishes us from all other persons (McAdams & Pals, 2006). In the digital age, losing autonomy over our autobiography means losing control over the most singular parts of ourselves.

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Table 1. An analysis of autobiographical memory in the digital age: *Alphabetical Diaries* by Sheila Heti.

Externally recorded information		
Encoding		
Type of resource	Digital substitute ✓ Innovative tool ✓	Heti used a word processor as her personal diary. The word processor could be considered a digital substitute for a physical journal but not its digital equivalent, since word processors offer some features (e.g., copy/paste) that are not available in physical journals. Heti pasted the personal diaries recorded by the word processor into a spreadsheet, which she then used to organize and alphabetize the sentences from her diary. The spreadsheet could be considered a digital innovation since it is unfeasible to manually organize and alphabetize so much text.
Type of data	Qualitative ✓ Quantitative ✗	Heti relied exclusively on qualitative data in the form of written text. Her prior works included other forms of qualitative data (e.g., photos, audio recordings), but this work did not. She did not record any quantitative data.
Individual's role	Active ✓ Passive ✗	Heti recorded everyday thoughts, feelings, interactions, and occurrences actively. In this way, she ascribed meaning to her memories by choosing to record some things but not others. Memories were recorded exclusively by herself, not by others. No data was recorded passively.
Purpose of encoding	Intentional ✓ Incidental ✗	Heti intentionally kept a personal diary, an effortful process that required considerable cognitive resources. This intentional encoding may have been simply habitual and/or driven by a desire to record certain important events in her life. No data was recorded incidentally.
Intended audience	Private ✓ Public ✓	Heti's intended audience was probably initially private during encoding, eventually turning public during curation and retrieval. It is important to recognize that even though Heti eventually published her diaries for a public audience, she was careful about what she revealed. For instance, she included intimate moments from her life, but most memories were left out; she used pseudonyms to protect individuals' identities; and she obscured the details of memories by alphabetizing her sentences, thus removing them from their original context.
Curation		
Degree of curation	Active ✓ None ✗	Heti engaged in a high degree of curation. She started with 500,000 words of text, which she then edited down to 60,000. This means she only kept about 12% of her original text in the final book.
Type of curation	Human ✓ Algorithmic ✓	Heti used a mixture of human and algorithmic curation. She used a combinatorial rule to automatically arrange all sentences from A to Z and then used her own judgment to select which sentences to remove and which to include. Heti's curation decisions were likely driven by a number of factors, such as the desire to emphasize core themes and characters through repetition while removing peripheral themes and characters.
Retrieval		
Mode of remembering	Intentional ✓ Incidental ✗ Triggered ✗	Heti engaged in intentional remembering during the curation process, which took place over a ten-year period. Intentional remembering likely served a number of functions in her life (e.g., reify her identity and vocation as a writer; make sense of a tumultuous time in her life). It is possible that she incidentally stumbled upon memories she had forgotten during this remembering process. It is unclear to what degree this process triggered undesirable memories at inopportune times.
Memory processes	Recollection/Reminiscing ✓ Reflection/Narration ✓ Rumination/Forgetting ✓	Heti may have engaged in recollection (remembering past events in detail), reminiscing (remembering past events for sentimental reasons), and rumination (circling repetitively around negative events) when writing her personal diaries and eventually her book. Critically, Heti engaged in reflection and (arguably) a form of narration, using her book as a way to process and create a unique perspective on her personal past. She does not take all encoded information at face value, instead using the curation process to recontextualize prior events.
Internal autobiographical memory		
Life story		Up for interpretation. Perhaps the non-linear coming of age story of a young woman and writer in Toronto.
Life themes		Art, freedom, friendship, desire, everyday life, self, etc.
Lifetime period		Ten years over the course of her 20s and early 30s
General events		Reading and publishing books, spending time with and talking to friends, having sex and fighting with lovers, traveling to big cities, getting older, worrying about money and professional success, questioning and analyzing the self and others, etc.
Individual memories		H: "Had a dream the night before I bought this new bed that the reason I was short and had stayed short was that I was still sleeping in my childhood bed. Had a little coffee in a small place with a soft chair and started reading her copy of the Javier Marías, enjoying her notes. Had a shower, got dressed, went to buy toilet paper, had tea, sat down at the computer. Had always known that he hoped to kill himself when his body started failing, but I always thought he would choose a different method, not something like jumping from a bridge. Had an intimate conversation with Lemons today. Had sex with Fiona …" (Heti, p. 42).

Note. This analysis uses the Autobiographical Memory in the Digital Age Model (AMEDIA-Model) to describe how Sheila Heti used technology to encode, curate, and retrieve autobiographical memories in her book *Alphabetical Diaries*. Heti combines information stored in the digital environment with information stored in her mind to create an autobiographical narrative that is shaped by technology. Much of this analysis is speculative and based on my own interpretation of Heti's work. A true accounting of the process of autobiographical remembering would need involve input from Heti herself.