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Social Media as Archive: Ephemerality, Preservation, and Power

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ABSTRACT

This study examines social media as a dual entity, both artifact and archive emphasizing the tensions between ephemerality, preservation, and power in digital environments. It argues that social media content, while often perceived as transient due to platform design, algorithmic governance, and user practices, simultaneously constitutes a significant repository of cultural memory and historical evidence. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from archival studies, memory studies, and digital governance, the paper explores how social media content is produced, circulated, and selectively preserved across institutional and non-institutional actors. It highlights the infrastructural and political constraints that shape archival practices, including platform policies, data access restrictions, and interoperability challenges, which collectively influence what is remembered or lost. Through reference to key case studies of collective digital events, the study illustrates the uneven nature of preservation and the resulting gaps in historical records. It further interrogates the role of archives as instruments of power that actively shape public discourse, memory construction, and historical interpretation. Ultimately, the paper contends that social media archives are not neutral repositories but dynamic sites of governance, contestation, and cultural negotiation, with profound implications for knowledge production and collective remembrance in the digital age.

Keywords: Social media archive; ephemerality; digital preservation; collective memory; and platform governance.

INTRODUCTION

Social media plays a unique role in contemporary culture: it is simultaneously artifact and archive [1]. Researchers and practitioners examine the oscillation between the two roles and its implications, focusing on ephemerality and preservation [2]. Ephemerality refers to how content is lost over time through platform design, user behavior, and adjacent technological factors. Preservation, by contrast, considers the potential for recovery, access, and sustained engagement [1]. Content that remains temporarily available during lively, fast-moving conversations not only discussions of contemporary events or fluid situations, but also dedicated interaction and cultural commemoration becomes the object of study after discussions fade. Such activity may occur across a range of temporal scales, from fleeting commentary to long-term attachments [2]. At the same time, social media content remains valuable to study, equipping actors to observe, reconsider, and participate in memory work around, for instance, a historical protest or worldwide pandemic [1]. Broader questions emerge concerning the organizations and actors involved in social media archiving, public or private, large or small, domestic or international and their power vis-à-vis the social media platforms in question, the publics who use these platforms, and the contents themselves. Activities that preserve access to publicly available materials risk transgressing policy frameworks established for these platforms [2]. Further, persistent interest remains in diverse and marginalized voices, who often occupy underrepresented positions in the still-nascent archiving field [3].

The Ephemeral Nature of Social Media

In the past two decades new paradigms for communication, participation, and sharing have emerged, with attendant changes in how memory is constituted and practices of memory ascribed. Record creation has become This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited

enmeshed in life itself, and data entangled in formations of the now [3]. In this activist reconfiguration, social media plays a central role; it is used to monitor other social media, attend action, organize and document. The configuration of social media makes material both what is seen and said and how [4]. It delivers information to its user, but that information does not remain static, is in constant transformation, and then often is removed entirely [1]. Within social media platforms there are algorithms, auto-delete policies, and corporate decisions that individual users cannot control. In practice, it means that countless hours of activity are lost, totality of action. Social media platforms where 75% of protest planning was once orchestrated allowed posting or sharing only 22 hours after sign up. Nevertheless remarkable amounts still remain [4].

Methods and Challenges of Preservation

Research initiatives targeting social media content draw from a range of archival models. Educational institutions such as universities form an essential part of the archiving ecosystem, and practitioners have initiated projects to capture social media related to public events and processes [3]. Libraries, often operating on behalf of non-profits, have extended social media archiving to remediated material. Interoperability challenges can arise when initiatives separate descriptive metadata and context from captured data sets, obstructing the reconstruction of user-generated information, behaviours and community connections. Initiatives also differ in ambitions and constraints, and the complexity of archiving individual platforms can constitute a significant barrier to implementation [4]. Even where archiving has occurred, presentiments of the process introduce further limits on documentation and dissemination of social media data. An instruction on digital archives notes that collecting ‘ephemeral content is a challenge for many archives’ owing to ‘obsolescence, fragility, and the difficulty of collection carriage in complex and probabilistic media’ [2]. Active social media archives exist but remain comparatively rare. Numerous obstacles encumber the documentation of public communications on individual user platforms: restrictions on data download, differing approaches to open data and sharing by platform providers, and varying degrees of porosity in data formats and ownership. These channels operate under multiple temporalities and memory conventions, yet collectively they form the bulk of the contemporary public record. Capturing these data forms offers the prospect of mitigation against loss and exclusion of public-debate contributions where they depend on singular communication platforms [3]. Archives serve as tools of expression, governance and control, not merely as sites of preservation. The term ‘archive’ can refer both to a political apparatus and to a collection of materials, and archives can affect ‘the fate and circulation of what has been said’. Shifts in principles underlying the governance of records inevitably involve consequent transformations in the conceptualisation of publics and explicitly ‘political regimes’ of these capacities. Archives extend beyond object permanence: they participate in the legislative constitution of the production of subjectivity [3]. Archives are far from neutral sites: they can be structured to facilitate and enable wholly distinct processes, events, and transmissions. ‘Ephemeral’ refers to a condition ascribed to a matter capable of yielding a consequence or state that endures [4]. Emergent definitions might usefully consider the duration of existence-expectancy, typically quite separate from an object’s actual longevity for recorded documentation elements [3].

Institutions, Actors, and Power Dynamics in Archiving

Archiving of social media cuts across a complex system of actors and power relations that govern access to records [2]. The platforms themselves play a central role, as they impose restrictions on the data they will make available through application programming interfaces (APIs) or data export mechanisms. At the same time, the data available through these mechanisms is often limited in scope and rarely coincides with the material that is ultimately of historical interest [5]. Libraries, research institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including, on occasion, social-media platforms frequently assume archiving responsibilities [1]. Content and discussions around policy decisions, including licensing, archiving under the Public Good, public-private partnerships, and geo-tagging can influence preservation of these records [3]. Such decisions implicate a range of cultural, geopolitical, and ethical considerations [1]. The actions of social-media platforms themselves, either through policy or design features that promote deletions, selective content curation, and chasing ‘likes’ influences these preservation agendas [1]. Commercial archives often face direct institutional and financial pressures, and guidelines issued in response to geopolitical tensions show how corporate strategy and international security considerations can produce both enabling and constraining effects on preservation [1].

Case Studies in Digital Archiving of Social Media

Social media can serve as a crucial source of documentation for collective events such as protests, crises, and cultural movements [1]. Several examples illustrate the opportunities, challenges, and consequences of the digital archiving of user-generated content posted to Twitter, blogs, and other platforms [2]. This section describes three contrasting case studies: the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, the 2014–2015 Ebola crisis, and the 2015–2017 Pokémon Go cultural phenomenon. All three events were widely discussed in social media but differed markedly in how thoroughly and durably data were archived [3]. Importantly, these examples reveal significant

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barriers that continue to restrict access to historical born-digital records and constrain research on the contemporary information environment [6]. In terms of methodological attention, resource allocation, and information equity, the activities surrounding each event illustrate the varying degrees of success and failure characterizing current attempts to preserve and provide scholarly access to social-media-related content [1].

Legal, Ethical, and Cultural Considerations

As the Internet grew in importance through the mid-1990s, the birth of digital history as a scholarly enterprise led historians to engage with the Internet as a means of recording the past, as a significant subject for historical analysis, and as a powerful tool for scholarly engagement with various public audiences[1]. Today, with social media playing an increasing role in the conduct of public life, digital historians are confronted by a new challenge: how to think about social media through the conceptual lens of archival urbanism [2]. There is widespread agreement that current social media venues, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, are significant to understanding contemporary life in cities large and small. Yet yielding to the impulse not to analyze these venues until a future date when their value can be gauged runs the risk of ceding social media in the digital economy space permanently to others who frame their scholarly questions differently [7]. Hence, social media archivists seek to answer pressing contemporary questions by intervening in social media archives that, arguably, provide a preliminary yet indispensable glimpse into the present and a portend of how to deal with memory space yet to come[3]. Archiving social media is complex. Although an understanding of social media as archive facilitates the exploration of ephemerality, preservation, and power, narrowing the focus to a city, such as Ottawa (Canada), and to cities in the networks of the World Social Forum offers a manageable scope [4]. In February 2019, an academic social media archive award of the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council was obtained to explore the archive of the World Social Forum (WSF) in thirty-five cities since its inception in 2001. The thirty-five cities in the WSF network have the potential to open up a broader focus on cities, social media, and archival urbanism. Four angles of approach to the WSF and its thirty-five cities address a wide range of archive-related questions; these angles build on an extensive literature of the WSF since its origination [1]. The WSF priority of another world is possible asks how a social media archive focused on these thirty-five cities can contribute to the definition, redefinition, understanding, or misunderstanding of alternative or pluriverse worlds. The WSF range of social, environmental, and cultural justice three words, with many different meanings, that foster wide-ranging debates and struggles forms a second entry point [2]. The WSF emphasis on global connection provides a third angle. The WSF commitment to construct a counter-hegemonic space constitutes the final point of entry another world needed once the hegemony of a neoliberal global capitalism deemed worldwide is reached [2, 4].

Technical Approaches and Standards for Long-Term Access

Archival institutions face substantial obstacles in documenting, preserving, and providing access to social media content [2]. As aspects of social, economic, and political life are increasingly conducted online, preserving evidence of digital information and communication systems used in social and political activism becomes critically important [4]. Factors such as rapid obsolescence of hardware and software, dependence on private-sector vendors and services, complexness of documenting digital media, and expansion of commercial platforms contribute to user-generated content disappearing from historical records far too soon. Even prior to the emergence of social media, archivists noted that the analogue and digital information infrastructure of many governments and organizations was disappearing faster than new technology could record it [3]. Archiving practices must develop to consider the information ecosystems in which user-generated content exists; processes of mediation, selection, and representation; and concerns regarding privacy, consent, and human rights in this context [8]. The three major challenges facing documentary practice are configuring the appropriate infrastructures to automate and embed collection processes into the existing platforms and technology landscapes, developing new documentary styles that place user-generated content in relays of information rather than creating single-user archives and, therefore, creating a clear distinction between public and private user-generated communications; identifying specific documents that show the mapping of public and private; and tracing the orientations of the user-generated content during crises and the notions of periodization of a phenomenon[2]. Archiving can intervene with a variety of capabilities and objectives according to the needs of public interest [3].

Implications for Memory, History, and Public Discourse

The social media archive carries far-reaching implications for collective memory, understandings of history, and the public discourse through which societies shape and sustain them. Archive actors, users, platforms, institutions, and civil society have the capacity to favour particular frames and narratives [1]. They influence who and what is remembered or forgotten, the inclusivity of collective memory, and the potential for a multiplicity of competing perspectives. Archives also shape historical knowledge, framing dominant narratives through the selection and arrangement of records. Since social media constitutes a vital medium for public engagement, including ongoing

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debates about pressing issues, the archive influences not only the nature of memory and history but also the quality of contemporary public discourse [2]. Social media archives inherit the imperatives of archival science, particularly the influences of traceability, context, and context control on memory construction and historical understanding [4]. The archive and its contents must be reliable and trustworthy in order to serve as credible sources of evidence. Confidence in the archive, meanwhile, hinges on users' ability to ascertain where the archive stops and any departures from the original event or record occur [1]. These interactions between social media archive, memory, history, and discourse underscore the significance of social media's dual role as archive and artifact [3].

Policy Implications and Governance

Social media reflects cultural, scientific, and political events through content shared by diverse individuals and groups; yet, the format's intrinsic ephemerality impedes the preservation and accessibility of such collective memory [1]. Ephemerality refers not only to material decay but also to the vanishing of meaning due to changes in software, formats, and workflows [9]. Platforms increasingly solicit and often require users to erase older contributions deemed irrelevant to current activity. User-driven architecture is susceptible to ephemeral data loss, obscuring the original context, basis, and significance [3]. At the institutional level, archival authorities vary in their approach to memory and cultural heritage, with different missions, expertise, and policymaking. The tensions associated with social media as archive therefore resonate widely, encountering diverse responses that enrich and complicate the discourse surrounding both preservation and accessibility in a perishable environment [10].

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that social media occupies a paradoxical position as both a fleeting communication medium and a durable archive of contemporary life. While platform architectures often prioritize immediacy and rapid content turnover, the cumulative effect of user-generated data constitutes an extensive, albeit unstable, historical record. The analysis shows that ephemerality is not merely a natural feature of digital communication but is actively produced through algorithmic design, corporate policy, and infrastructural limitations. Conversely, preservation efforts undertaken by libraries, research institutions, and archival initiatives reveal both the possibilities and constraints of sustaining digital memory. Importantly, the research underscores that social media archives are deeply embedded within systems of power. Decisions regarding what are preserved, accessible, or erased are shaped by institutional interests, technological capacity, and geopolitical considerations. As such, archives do not simply reflect reality; they actively construct it by determining which voices, events, and narratives endure in public memory. The case studies further illustrate the unevenness of archival success across different social and political contexts, reinforcing concerns about historical gaps and representational bias. In conclusion, social media archiving is not a neutral technical task but a politically and ethically charged process that shapes collective memory, historical knowledge, and public discourse. Addressing these challenges requires more transparent governance frameworks, improved interoperability standards, and a stronger commitment to inclusivity and long-term digital preservation.

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