

CLAL on Culture

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Will the Real Elianna Please Come Forward?

By Robert Rabinowitz

Three months ago, my wife and I were blessed with our first child, a beautiful little girl named Elianna. Because our families live far away, in the UK and Israel, we bought ourselves a very basic digital camera so that we could send photos via e-mail within five minutes of taking a picture. This allows our families to feel much more in touch with Elianna as she grows and develops week by week. Between the ease of taking pictures and the excitement of parenthood, we have taken between four and five hundred digital photos in the few weeks since Elianna was born.

This growing cache of digital images of my new daughter that I've been making and circulating has led me to think about the changing technologies of memory. Though digital photos might strike us as merely a minor variation on the paper photo medium, some of the seemingly trivial differences between them will surely have profound implications for our experiences of memory, and our ideas about what constitutes a true and reliable record of reality.

With so many photos on our hard drive, for instance, I have been thinking about where and how we are going to store them. There is a certain safe, concrete durability about a photo album which can stay in a cupboard or on a shelf for years within easy reach. There is no computer medium which matches that durability. And there is a good chance that today's file formats will not be accessible to the technology of 20-30 years' time.

In addition to being physically more ephemeral than film-based photographs, digital photos are also more mutable. The computer program that comes with the camera has a range of editing capabilities: changing the brightness, shifting the color to sepia, adding some special effects, editing out inconvenient details. It might be argued that there is something fraudulent about altering a photo so that it does not accurately reflect reality. But often I feel that a photo does not reflect the reality that I wanted to capture while the digital camera allows me to get closer to what I actually wanted. Why insist that the aim of a photograph is to obtain an "objective" picture of reality? That certainly was not the purpose of portraiture throughout most of

the history of painting. I am actually quite happy for my memories to be tinged with the fuzzy, cloud effect that the computer allows me to put round the edge of a photo. I want my photos of Elianna to reflect – to borrow a phrase from F. Scott Fitzgerald – my “irresistible prejudice” in her favor.

The ephemerality and mutability of digital photos when compared to paper photos brought to mind the historical process by which oral cultures, which relied on the storage and transmission of information through the ephemeral and highly mutable medium of memory, were supplanted by cultures that relied on writing and more durable records. As digital information technology spreads, perhaps we are entering a new phase in which the “hard copy” is now being supplanted by a continuous, dynamic, ever-changing flow of ones and zeroes. The shift in how we make and store photographs raises some of the same fundamental issues raised by the previous transition. What are the best ways to preserve and transmit information over time? What gets created or lost in different modes of transmission?

Evidence that these questions are not merely theoretical but have profound cultural implications connected to issues of power and authority can be found in both classical Jewish and Greek thought. The *Babylonian Talmud*, for example, makes a distinction between those teachings that were written, like the Torah, and those that traditionally were to be committed to memory and transmitted orally, such as the Talmud itself. It cites the opinion of rabbis who state: “Those who write the traditional teachings [are punished] like those who burn the Torah, and he who learns from them [the writings] receives no reward...matters received as oral traditions you are not permitted to recite from writing and written things [Biblical passages] you are not permitted to recite from memory” (*Temurah* 14b). The passage is particularly ironic, of course, for having been preserved in the very same written work it condemns.

Plato, in *The Phaedrus*, may help us to understand the vehemence of this objection to making a “hard copy” of oral teachings. Socrates cites approvingly an Egyptian tradition that writing creates “forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. [Writing] is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence.” (*Phaedrus* 275a-b [Jowett]). Socrates does not seem to object to the use of notes that are written in order to help one memorize something, but to the replacement of memorization with information storage via “hard copy.” For Socrates, over-reliance on written texts as carriers of information rather than one’s own memory represents not just a shift in mode of storage, but actually an erosion of character. He claims that people who rely on writing will “be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.” (I could almost see Socrates giving me a knowing look when I read a report in the *Atlantic Monthly* of February 2001 that while “some 80 percent of seniors at elite colleges and universities had scored the equivalent of a D or an F on a rudimentary survey of American history...99 percent correctly identified Beavis and Butthead.”)

Socrates also believes that “writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet, if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker gives one

unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not" (*Phaedrus* 275d-e [Jowett]). Writings lose the "live" element of oral communication in which the words exchanged are tailored to the particular characters of the participants and their context. A written document, from this perspective, is like a speech uttered by no one to nobody and thus ignores the very particularities that give communication its purpose. Perhaps this is why the Baal Shem Tov, the legendary founder of Hasidism, objected so strongly to a written record taken of his stories, advice and teachings (Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters*, p. 66).

Socrates, the Talmudic rabbis and the Baal Shem Tov all understood that something more was at stake in the shift from reliance on memory to written documents than merely the adoption of a better technology to carry out an otherwise neutral task. The increased longevity and pervasiveness of documentation has led to a changed understanding of the relative balance between memory and "writing," so that, as Socrates forecast, writing (and printing) no longer serves as an aid to memory but has become the standard of objectivity itself.

A series of passages in the *Philosophical Investigations*, one of the two master-works of Wittgenstein, a twentieth century Austrian philosopher of Jewish ancestry, exemplifies this shift in the standard of objectivity. The passages argue against the theory that the true meaning of any word is to be found in the private intentions of the person using it and hence that meaning is, strictly speaking, incommunicable. Wittgenstein claims that meaningful language use depends on objective, sharable standards of correctness. To illustrate his point, he contrasts a person's *recollections* of a train timetable with the physical document by which we are able to judge the correctness of those recollections (*Philosophical Investigations*, §265). In these passages, Wittgenstein characterizes memory as subjective, fuzzy and unreliable, while he sees physical documents as objective and immutable. The shift in information storage technology from memory to documentation has actually transformed what counts as objective and real.

This change in the standard of what counts as objective and real undermines the foundation of oral cultures, and hence the authority of oral teachers, as Socrates, the Talmudic rabbis and the Baal Shem Tov well understood. Donald Tuzin, an American anthropologist who specializes in the study of the Ilahe people of Papua New Guinea, illustrates the way written culture can undermine oral culture. The Ilahe's origin myth tells the tale of a First Man who kidnapped and seduced Nambweapa'w, a beautiful woman who usually took the form of a cassowary. Historical research suggests that key elements of this myth, which the tellers believe goes back to the very origin of the human race, actually brought to Papua New Guinea by Malay traders in the mid-nineteenth century (Donald Tuzin, *The Cassowary's Revenge*, pp. 68-95).

Tuzin's research demonstrates that one of the ironic features of memory is that while it is both more ephemeral and more mutable than documentation, the very process of memorizing oral communication creates a very conservative sense of fidelity to the original. The paradoxical combination of apparent fidelity and actual mutability allows for relatively new components to be incorporated into an oral tradition without any noticeable discontinuity. Of course, this mutability of memory cannot be demonstrated without reference to more immutable forms of data storage, such as writing. The historical studies of the evolution of the cassowary myth could not be

undertaken without written records and other artifacts that can verifiably be dated. Such historical and anthropological evidence also throws into question the traditional rabbinic claim of an unbroken and inerrant oral tradition from the time of Moses to the time of the Talmud, and hence the authority of the rabbis who make that claim. The undermining of oral cultures is a powerful feature of the Enlightenment and Modernity to this day. Haym Soloveitchik, in his article "Rupture and Reconstruction" (in *Jews in America*, edited by Rosenberg & Waxman) discusses how books codifying standard Orthodox Jewish practice continue to displace the varieties of traditional practice that people have inherited through their families.

Today, however, we may be seeing the beginning of a reversal in this process, which will have equally profound effects. The very mutability and ephemerality of all digital documents, like my photos of Elianna, mean that they cannot serve as the standard of objectivity in the way that physical artifacts do. To borrow Socrates' distinction, digital photos are less like aids to reminiscence – artifacts that serve as surrogate memories – than aids to memory – artifacts that only serve to prompt the memory to recall what actually happened. Perhaps this will force us to pay more attention to being in the present moment rather than relying on the camera to catch it for us so we can relive it later. And maybe it will result in a new period of de-codification and de-standardization in many areas of life, including religion, as people endlessly modify the ideas and information they receive and transmit through their computers. Shifts in information technology have played a key role in major intellectual and social revolutions in the past. Perhaps the increasing power and diffusion of information technology will lead to a culture in which deaf, unresponsive physical artifacts and documents will lose their authority – just like the oral teachers before them – and be supplanted by the mutable and ephemeral power of the high-tech equivalent of oral communication to create a world in which direct, live human communication is prized as the true standard of objectivity and reality.

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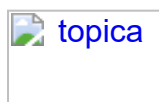


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