

***Alphabetical Diaries and Autobiographical Memory in the Digital Age***

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### ***Alphabetical Diaries and Autobiographical Memory in the Digital Age***

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, Appel, & Schwan (2024) 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).

Table 1 presents an analysis of *Alphabetical Diaries* using the AMEDIA-Model. 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 her book. It 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 encoding, curation, and retrieval. However, even as the example 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 remembering, 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 would be different from those generated without the model.

Arguably, 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 more so than an explanatory theory. Rich description—using the kinds of ecologically valid methods that the authors propose (i.e., qualitative, ecological momentary assessment, 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 may limit the kinds of testable research questions that it can generate, leaving many questions about autobiographical remembering in the digital age unanswered.

For instance, focusing on description over explanation does not allow one to answer *why* an individual engages in a particular form of autobiographical remembering. Theories on person-environment transactions 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 forms of autobiographical remembering from their digital

environment to the exclusion of others (Soh, Talaifar, & Harari, 2024). Although some of these ideas are alluded to in Hutmacher et al. (2024)'s discussion, these ideas are not formally incorporated into the model, as can be seen from their absence in Table 1. If they had been incorporated into the model, one might begin to understand why Sheila Heti—who strongly identifies as a writer, values experimentation over conformity, and has carefully and methodically used autobiographical material in her prior published work—would 1) during *encoding*, select text as her medium and ensure that the text is safely and externally stored, 2) during *curation*, spend ten years editing this text and use digital tools unconventionally to write her autobiographical narrative, and 3) during *retrieval*, make her autobiographical memories publicly available to audiences in a non-linear narrative 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 profiles in private.

By focusing on description over prediction, one also does not learn 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. (2024) 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 tech-enabled autobiographical account will help readers make meaning of their own lives or learn from Heti's shortcomings. The largely positive public reception of *Alphabetical Diaries*

suggests there is something about Heti's particular form of autobiographical remembering that resonated with people, but the model does not tell us what that might be.

Hutmacher et al. (2024) also ask whether we should be optimistic or pessimistic about the consequences of technological advancements for autobiographical remembering more broadly, not just for any given individual 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 non-linear, experimental autobiographical narrativizing for a cultivated and dedicated audience. Most of us do not come up with new and completely idiosyncratic ways of using digital technology to encode, curate, and retrieve our autobiographical memories. 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 in the process. Hutmacher et al. (2024) and others have described several important ways in which autobiographical in the digital age 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, and may impair 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 their autobiographical memories (Valenzuela et al., 2024). 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 autobiographical memories without considering and 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. Certainly, reverse-chronological encoding, curation, and retrieval is one viable mode of remembering. 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). 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...").

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. (2024)'s. 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 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 autobiographical narrative means losing control over the most singular parts of ourselves.

## An Analysis Using the AMEDIA-Model: *Alphabetical Diaries* by Sheila Heti

### EXTERNALLY RECORDED INFORMATION

#### Encoding

<i>Type of resource</i>	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 in a word processor into a spreadsheet, which she then used to organize and alphabetize the sentences from her diary. The spreadsheet could be considered digital innovation since it is probably unfeasible to manually organize and alphabetize so much text.
<i>Type of data</i>	Qualitative <del>Quantitative</del>	Heti relied exclusively on qualitative data in the form of written text from her personal diaries. Her prior works included other forms of qualitative data (e.g., photos, audio recordings), but this work did not. Nor did she record any quantitative data.
<i>Individual's role</i>	Active <del>Passive</del>	Heti recorded her everyday thoughts, feelings, interactions, and occurrences actively. In this way, she ascribed meaning to her memories by choosing to record some things and not others. Her diary was written only by her and not by others. No data was recorded passively.
<i>Purpose of encoding</i>	Intentional <del>Incidental</del>	Heti intentionally kept a personal diary, an effortful process that likely 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.
<i>Intended audience</i>	Private Public	Heti's intended audience was likely initially private, eventually turning public. It is important to note that even though Heti turned her private diaries into a book for public audiences, she was careful about what she revealed. For instance, although she includes intimate moments from her life, clearly many memories were left out. She also used pseudonyms to protect the personal identities of many people in her life, and she obscured the exact details of memories by alphabetizing the sentences and thus removing the memories from their original context.

#### Curation

<i>Degree of curation</i>	Active <del>None</del>	Heti engaged in a high degree of curation. She started with 500,000 words of text, which she then edited down to 60,000, meaning she only kept about 12% of her original text in the final book.
<i>Type of curation</i>	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 and by removing peripheral themes and characters. Her curation decisions showed how these themes can emerge even more clearly and organically when relying on a random/arbitrary organizing rule than on a chronological organizing rule. Her curation decisions also underscored the inconsistency



of the self by arranging paradoxical sentences (e.g., opposing thoughts, feelings) next to each other.

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### Retrieval

<i>Mode of remembering</i>	Intentional <del>Incidental</del> <del>Triggered</del>	Heti engaged in intentional remembering during the curation process, which took place over a ten-year period. 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. She likely engaged in intentional remembering because of the functions that it serves in her life (e.g., to express her thoughts, feelings, and emotions; reify her identity and vocation as a writer; and make sense of a tumultuous time in her life).
<i>Memory processes</i>	Recollection/ Reminiscing Reflection/ Narration Rumination/ Forgetting	Heti likely engaged in recollection (remembering past events in detail) and reminiscing (remembering past events for sentimental reasons). It is also possible that she engaged in rumination (circling repetitively around negative events), though we would need her subjective account of the retrieval process to verify the extent to which engaged in recollection, reminiscing, and rumination. Most critically, Heti engaged in reflection and 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 create a narrative that recontextualizes prior events.

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### INTERNAL AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

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<i>Life Story</i>	Up for interpretation. Perhaps the non-linear coming of age story of a young woman and writer in Toronto.
<i>Life Themes</i>	Art, Freedom, Friendship, Desire, Everyday Life, Self, etc.
<i>Lifetime Period</i>	Ten years over the course of her 20s and early 30s
<i>General Events</i>	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.
<i>Individual Memories</i>	<p>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 Marias, 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).</p> <p>S: “Stop doing the column. Stop doing university gigs. Stop going onstage, traveling, all of it. Stop googling yourself. Stop reading the reviews. Stop spending money. Stop talking to anyone, everyone, about your new projects — just be quiet and think.” (Heti, p. 126)</p>

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*Note.* This analysis uses the 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 in many ways shaped by technology.

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