Technology and Culture: Integration or Disintegration?

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Abstract

This paper deals with the problems of weakening of human memory due to the increasing use of machine memories in many ways. It enumerates the advantages of machine memory as stated by computer people as opposed to human memory. The paper then briefly discusses the reliance on human memory in such activities as oral history and oral archive, enumerates some institutions working on Iranian history based on oral history or archive, and then presents some suggestions.

Keywords: human memory; machine memory; oral history; oral archive

Introduction

Man has progressively integrated with his machine memories as a symbol of technology and disintegrated with his human memory that holds all his culture. The problem seems to be, however, an increasing reliance to machine memories in all aspects of human life, that is, culture. The following are some of the definitions given by Encarta Dictionary Tools for the word “culture”: art, music, literature, and related intellectual activities; the beliefs, customs, practices, and social behavior of a particular nation or people; and a particular set of attitudes that characterizes a group of people.

Recent developments in information technology allows us to save art, music, literature and some other intellectual activities to machine memory. The question is, however, can we save all the other aspects covered by the word “culture” to machine memory. Can we save for instance, the beliefs, customs, practices, and social behavior of a particular nation or people; and a particular set of attitudes that characterizes a group of people to machine memories? Aren’t there some parts of our culture that must be left to our human memories collectively? And if the answer is positive, haven’t we sacrificed or at least weakened our human memories so that they cannot save those parts anymore?

The Advantages of Machine Memory over Human Memory

Computer scientists usually enumerate the following reasons as the advantages of machine memory over human memory:

1. Human being is negligent, but machine never forgets;
2. Human being is hardly able to deal with the minutes of the issues, while machine can go down to every undividable piece of information;
3. Human being is slow and sometimes, wrong in calculations while machine is fast and accurate;
4. The amount of information saved in human memory is limited. The machine stores much more information and thus, decides based on almost every aspect of the matter;
5. It is quite possible for the human being to make mistakes when referring to information in his/her mind. The machine is quite accurate in that;
6. Human being becomes tired after some amount of calculations, while the machine never becomes tired.

The Advantages of Human Memory over Machine Memory

There are however, some advantages of human memory over machine memory:

1. Human memory is dependent on human itself. Human beings are usually considered more valuable than machines, thus protection of human beings can also protect human memory;
2. Human memory does not need the requirements for maintaining and handling the machine memory;
3. Human memory does not require any location or space; it is located in the human skull. The space problems the large (or even small) libraries confront due to rapid increase of information do not exist in the human memory case;

4. What is saved in human memory can be transmitted mind to mind while human being exists, although this transmission can be affected by elements such neglect, bias, etc.;

5. From the security point of view, human memory is sometimes less likely to damages;

6. Human memory acts directly while saving information; machine memory usually acts indirectly, that is, a human being called operator inputs information into machine. This can affect the thorough storage of information;

7. Human memory can receive and store information via different members such as eye, ear, tongue, etc. It is impossible to store information in machine memory in such ways simultaneously. In the former case it is more possible to control the correctness of information received and stored;

8. The documents called ephemera in libraries are an example of the media that might contain useful information discarded while discarding the media themselves. Such information if kept in the human memory can stay longer in use;

9. In archives, some documents are discarded after some certain periods. The same might happen at the primary stages of evaluation of documents received from a family or a government institution when deciding to keep them. Misevaluation or misjudgment has discarded so much invaluable information so far. Nobody can ever predict the future research value of a document that is discarded today. Employing human memory to memorize what is being discarded today will definitely lessen the sorrows of losing the information tomorrow;

10. Libraries themselves are likely to suffer many kinds of physical damages. What happened to the National Library of Iraq during the invasion of this country is an example of the damages. Human memory can be saved by the human being and can thus be saved, at least because of human mobility.

The reliance on human memory is not new. However, human memory has kept so much invaluable folklore, folk literature, traditions, and other things that machine memories of the time could not. The terms like oral history or oral archive, also indicate an understanding of the need to at least partly rely on human memory in spite of recent fantastic developments in machine memory.

Some of the organizations that work on the oral history of Iran, either in Iran or abroad, will be discussed in some length in the poster. The following are but some of the suggestions offered to use more human memory:

1. People with powerful memories must be recognized, employed, and paid well in libraries;

2. These people must feel safe from every point of view. Care must be taken to let them feel relax to do the job of memorizing sufficiently;

3. They must be educated to learn how to memorize, what to memorize, and how to retrieve the information they have stored without any restraint.