

Shutter bugs

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In 2014, a stroll down memory lane involves more technology than ever before: increasingly, people's life stories are stored on Facebook's Timeline, their observations on Twitter and breakfasts on Instagram. Now there's growing evidence some of this new technology might not improve our memory of events, but make it worse.

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A United States study released in December found that people who photographed a visit to a museum had poorer memories of the exhibits than those who simply observed. Lead researcher Dr Linda Henkel also noted: "The sheer volume and lack of organisation of digital photos for personal memories discourages many people from accessing and reminiscing about them."

Other memory experts share similar concerns.

"People think 'taking photographs is free, it's easy to do, storage is free, so I'll just take as many as I can'," says Elise Van den Hoven, an associate professor at the University of Technology Sydney, who is leading a research project called Materialising Memories, studying the use of media in remembering. "But they take so many [photos], and they don't organise, and they don't archive so, in the end, it doesn't work at all."

Instead, Van den Hoven says, having multiple photos of the same event can make remembering harder, as "you can't find what [photo] you're looking for because you're looking through way too many of them .. it actually works against it; it inhibits memory."

Australian fashion blogger Nicole Warne doesn't feel her memory is affected by smartphone photography. Known as @garypeppergirl to her 700,000-plus followers on photo-based social media website Instagram, Warne estimates she Instagrams roughly "90 per cent of what I do", and believes it helps her memory.

"If I need to know where I was a year ago, I just flick through my Instagram and I can see exactly where I was," she says.

Some find recording their life on social media less rewarding.

After becoming frustrated by the "narcissistic aspect" of Instagram and other social media platforms, Rachael Borova, an art photography teacher from Sydney's inner west, took part in the month-long social media detox Social September.

The experience changed how she used Instagram.

"One of the deals that I made to myself when I went back on to Instagram was I was only allowed to have one photograph a day," she says.

By limiting the number of photos she posts to only "the most special", Borova believes she is granting herself "a little bit more access to memory".

Van den Hoven supports this limitation and encourages happy snappers to think more before - and after - they snap.

In her own life, Van den Hoven tries to delete photos on the go and keep just a few high-quality pictures she uses for her desktop background. Having these photos appear on her computer screen - rather than dumped on a hard drive - helps in "strengthening the memory", as she regularly sees them. When she is at work, colleagues notice and ask her about the photos, which leads to a discussion, again supporting the memory.

Macquarie University professor John Sutton, co-editor of the journal *Memory Studies*, believes the benefits of using technology will be far more subtle than a simple experiment such as Henkel's museum study can show.

"Because we take photos for all kinds of reasons that are not just about capturing the past in its full glory ... we take them because we want to share them with our families and friends afterwards, or to do some later work in reviewing what we've experienced."

He sees a recurring pattern from the past. "From the days of Plato and Socrates, people worried that writing was inevitably detrimental for human memory, that we'd lose the vividness of experience ... with every new technology there's a backlash."

Occasionally, though, it might be worth forgetting about snapping the next desktop background and just enjoying the moment.

"We have a new rule when my friends and I are out to dinner," says Borova. "We put all our phones on silent, face down in the middle of the table, and the first person to touch their phone before the end of the dinner pays for the whole bill."

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/digital-life/shutter-bugs-20140220-331ov.html>