INFORMATION AND MEMORY POLICY

Interview with Sandra Braman

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Dra. Sandra Braman, who is familiar with the macro-level effects of digital technologies and their political implications, is Professor of Communication and Abbott of Liberal Arts at the Communication Department at the University of Texas. Her publications on information policy include books such as Change of State: information, politics and power; The Meta-technologies of information, Biotechnology and Communication; The Political Emergency of the Global Information System, dedicated to researchers and policymakers, in addition to about 90 scientific articles and book chapters. She is the editor of a series of books on information policy at MIT Press and a member of the International Communication Association. Braman is a former chair of the Division of Communication Law and Policy of the International Communication Association and the Law Section of the International Association for Communication and Media Research. She was a Visiting Professor of the Brazilian Institute of Science and Technology Information / Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in 2009. She was in João Pessoa, capital of the State of Paraíba, in 2015, to hold the closing conference of the XVI Meeting of the National Association of Research and Post-Graduation in Information Science - ENANCIB, under the theme Information and Memory Policy. She talked to students and professors of Information Science and several graduate programs, with interest in Information Policy, besides that she granted this interview. With a lot of knowledge and sympathy she has developed these themes, recognizing that they are imbricate in many aspects. Those themes are repeated in her books and articles, therefore also in her scientific formulations and productions.

Q: *"Information policy" covers a lot of different issues, including intellectual property rights, access to information, privacy, and many more. Given the breadth of the field, how do you see the connections between information policy and memory?*

A: Yes, "information policy" is a broad domain. The phrase is an umbrella term used to refer to all laws and regulations that apply to information creation, processing, flows, and/or use. Among the subsets of information policy are areas such as media policy, education policy, and cultural policy. Information policy thus involves any laws, regulations, fundamental legal principles, or implementation programs having to do with information, communication, and culture.

Defined in this way, information policy includes many laws and regulations that affect memory. They do this by constraining, and sometimes enabling, individual and communal creation, sustenance of, and ability to use memory in personally and politically effective ways. Some of the policy tools in use affect memory directly, such as positive mandates about records that must go into a national archive. Some are relatively direct but multi-step, as when rules of evidence for courts of law effectively refuse to accept individual memories when interpreting and applying the law. Other information policy tools that affect memory are more indirect; the use of metadata, in one example, is necessary for a variety of purposes but inevitably loses details of memories that may be of great historical importance from particular perspectives.

Q: *What kinds of interactions are there between a state and memory?*

A: States use memory in a variety of ways: to establish identity, to assert authority and hierarchical structure, to provide narratives that enable civic agency by individual citizens as well as narratives for the state as it engages in foreign relations, and to filter the information it will accept as inputs into decision-making in the courtroom and within government departments and agencies. The same state might use multiple approaches simultaneously, each

serving different functions for the state. States use diverse approaches to memory at distinct stages of state formation, survival, growth, and/or expansion.

Benedict Anderson's influential book *Imagined Communities* (1983) made visible the ways in which cultural forms and practices such as those of theater, music, and poetry can powerfully contribute to the creation of a sense of national identity that is necessary in order for bureaucratic structures to function with ease and effectiveness. When there are different cultural identities within a state, cultural policy dealing with things such as language, education, and religion can powerfully affect which identities are politically acknowledged, and how.

The state asserts an official memory. This typically includes both enormous documentation of detail ("official records") in what have historically been physically massive archival settings, and memorials of diverse types in public spaces such as statues and military cemeteries. The state asserts its memory via public diplomacy as well as in textbooks used in schools.

Q: *How has digitization affected relations between states and memory?*

A: Digitization and the development of an intelligent global network have affected relations between states and memory in multiple ways. We -- both "we" as citizens and "we" as the state -- have access to the memories of more individuals about more things, via social media such as Facebook and Twitter, than was ever the case historically, but more memory in the sense of more detail is not necessarily better memory. Both those who would encourage particular identities and the individuals who struggle to find or build one they can sustain for themselves can be overwhelmed with alternatives. In the United States we have become aware of how much of the information being put forward online is actually fake news, creating false memories. It is also possible to change data within digital databases relatively easily without necessarily leaving any record of the change, again making it possible to falsify memory. Interestingly, scholarly memory seems to be doing down in the digital environment –

there is more information available to cite, and it is easier to access a wide range of types of scholarly information in digital form, but levels of citation in scholarly works appear to be going down.

A: The growth of memory studies, and research attention to memory in such a diversity of contexts, is a good thing. It would seem a natural first step to do so by attempting to fully understand single cases. However, we now have a great deal of that kind of work and I think it is time for more theoretical and conceptual attention to what it is that can be learned by looking across cases, raising the level of abstraction, and developing analytical dimensions that will allow us to learn from these histories in ways that will help inform our decision-making now and in the future.

One of the striking features of the literature on memory, as one looks across it, is that we have memories at so many different levels of analysis. We have memories as individuals, of course, but we also have memories as dyads, households, neighborhoods, communities, ethnicities, polities, and on. Going forward, it would be valuable to see more work linking memories at different levels of analysis together.

Brian Havel offers distinguishes among types of politically important memory in an extremely useful way. There is *official memory* (state records, located primarily in national archives), *public memory* (government information available to citizens), and *individual memory* (personal memory of decisions, events, processes, and people deemed acceptable as legal evidence).

Q: *Can the body be said to be used as a tool of memory, a means of talking about history?*

A: There are several senses in which this could be said.

For those of us who teach, the most immediate sense in which the body is important to memory is in the impact on learning of actually writing notes about what one is reading rather than merely underlining or using a marker on text in a book. The act of writing, using one's body to process the information as you rephrase and perhaps reorganize it while extracting it from the text, significantly improves one's memory of what one is reading.

We know that people cognitively process information differently depending on the medium through which it is acquired. What do the psychologists and neuroscientists tell us about relations between memory and the media through which we acquire information?

On a longer timeline, the exercise of power in its structural and instrumental forms can shape material realities that affect the body. Students going to school in very poor neighborhoods that are food deserts and don't make up for that with food in the schools will not have the nutrition they need to study as well as students in wealthy neighborhoods where food is no issue.

On the longest timeline, there is DNA. Here concerns go in the other direction . . . in response to historically grounded fears of where fetishizing racial identification can go, some believe there are ethical reasons not to allow genetic identification of individuals to be recorded, and certainly not required if recorded when taken voluntarily.

Q: *Typically we encounter history in contexts that are curated, whether those are museums, libraries, or archives. It is often the government that chooses what will be put on museum walls, what information will be saved, and who can use it. How can people engage with the histories of their own communities and ensure that their own memories become a part of our shared public reality?*

A: There are several models out there by now for individual- and community-based curatorial efforts. These begin with a community-, rather than discipline-, based taxonomy for classifying information or materials, called a "folksonomy." Members of your own association have been successful working with communities as they built their own library collections from the bottom up. Virtual curatorial activities can reduce the cost for communities of doing such things although skills are needed on the programming and

website design side. Information scientists Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day offered the concept of an "information ecology" to refer to the curatorial choices each one of us makes out of those available within our own environments and accessible given existing resources.

In the digital environment it is also much easier to play what may be called intermediary curatorial roles than it was in the past, when functions such as critique and recommendations to purchase could be undertaken only by those within limited and quite specialized circles. Participating in the development of memes for twitter and then in transmitting them so they come to quickly dominate a conversation, throwing assertions out that present themselves as if they are facts, and other such online activities are actually curatorial in nature and affect community memory.

Q: *In today's "big data" world, information generated through all of our online social interactions (and, increasingly, those that are offline as well) potentially becomes part of the empirical memory used by some decision-maker whether or not any such contribution was intended and whether or not what that decision-maker decides was represented has any validity. Should knowing that affect what we say and do online? If so, how? What ethical principles would be in play here?*

A: Sociologist Sandra Gonzalez-Bailon is an expert on big data who makes the very important point that, actually, social science can never predict the future because the social world is simply too complex and always will be. All that big data can tell us is what happened in the past. This can suggest what various possibilities and probabilities are for the future, but many events and processes will intervene to shape what actually happens.

We have to be careful about big data in general because validity and reliability are often questionable and analyses are conducted on corpuses of data that are heterogeneous not only in kind but in levels of validity and reliability. In many ways, uses of big data actually are rhetorical – "we looked at a lot of numbers to come up with our assertions" – rather than genuinely analytical.

Q: *One of your definitions of information -- and one that you deem essential to all policy-making involving information -- is information as a constitutive force in society. What are the constitutive effects of policy that makes, uses, or shape memory as one type of information policy?*

A: All of the ways in which laws and regulations affect individual, community, and state memory have constitutive effects.

Q: *What kind of support do democratization of access to information and universal ability to use information receive in today's information policy regime as it applies to memory and to memory institutions?*

A: In most democratic countries, laws and regulations support the democratization of access to information and the ability to use it in at least three ways. First, there is support, whether through direct funding, tax breaks, or the training and accrediting of professionals for what an economist might think of as the "final cultural goods" of memory institutions such as libraries and museums. Second, there is support for the infrastructure needed to both develop and to access these memory institutions, including things like roads and the Internet. Third, there is training in the skills needed to access the information, evaluate it, and use it effectively; this takes place in the education system but also via popular culture and in work environments.

Whether or not these kinds of support are adequate is another question. A range of literacies is required for memory. In addition to print literacy, we now need to have technological literacy and information literacy – the ability to critically evaluate the quality of information – as well as just the ability to read and write. In most countries in the world, neither education nor cultural practices have caught up with what is needed to ensure that everyone has all of these types of literacy. Thus information might be available, but isn't always adequately or effectively used.

Q: *What strategies are available to democratize access to and the use of information that is opaque?*

A: That depends on why it is that the information is opaque or unavailable altogether. If it is difficult to understand, education and literacy help; the notion of civic literacy has come into play as we think about what it is that we know about how political decision-making actually works. If the information is hard to get because the process for accessing it is difficult or expensive, legal and regulatory interventions – and, sometimes, good will on the part of corporations – can make a difference. If information is unavailable for national security reasons, it is very important to keep an eye on those deciding when that should be allowed to come into play.

Today's open data movement is an effort to make sure that government information remains available to all. I have argued for a variety of "tactical memory" practices that include things like making sure important information is stored in multiple places across multiple jurisdictions as well as taking great care with how we embed memory in our narratives. Hacking, however, is turning out to be one of the greatest tools of all for ensuring access to information of various types, if we take WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden as examples.

Q: *What has been your recent work on the information policy regime?*

A: Right now I am thinking a lot about the information policy dimensions of interactions between democracy and science and technology. Causality runs in both directions; practices of concern begin with basic literacy and access to the information infrastructure and wind up at the bleeding edges of R&D.

This is very much a memory issue when policy-makers refuse to accept pertinent scientific information as inputs into decision-making, and/or prevent necessary information from being gathered or discussed at all, we are losing knowledge as well as memory of the species. Since the 2016 US presidential election, concerns about the loss of scientific knowledge driven by those who do not want to rely upon what we know empirically when they make policy

decisions have become much more extreme in that country. Trump will not be the first US president to try to change or make unavailable that doesn't support his policies, but the fear is that he will go much further than did George W. Bush. Because this danger arises as it affects decision-making about such matters as the environment, what happens in the US in this area will affect everyone.

As we are completing this interview, there is a lot of activity trying to back up governmental databases with information pertinent to climate change out of fear that the Trump administration will destroy it once in office. The Internet Archive is backing up its data on servers outside the United States.

Q: *Anything you would like to add?*

A: This interview took place long before the 2016 US presidential election, but we are completing the editing of the text after that election has taken place. Two additional points must be made. The first is that the fundamental premise of my 2006 book, *Change of State: Information, Policy, and Power*, still holds: The state is a complex adaptive system that can, in times of turbulence or chaos, quickly snap from one seemingly stable configuration to another that may become a new equilibrium, become one of two or more oscillating equilibria, or again dissolve into turbulence and chaos. When that happens, developments that have been unfolding slowly over many decades, if not longer, can appear to have taken place instantaneously. With US law that happened after 9/11, the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, and we should expect that that will happen again after the inauguration of the president elected in 2016.

The second is that the question of what constitutes memory in what *The Economist* succinctly labelled the "post-truth" era is fundamental. Trump's disregard for the facts that was so evident during the election campaigns has continued to be apparent as he prepares to enter office. The most fundamental issue of all for those interested in memory is whether or not we are continuing to insist upon fact-based assertions of memory as a standard and set of requirements.