Offloading Knowledge-Keeping to Digital Technology and the Attrition of Socio-Cultural Life

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Abstract : Common vexations concerning the impact of contemporary media technology on our daily lives tend to conjure mental representations of digital specters that surreptitiously invade the privacy of our most intimate spaces. While legitimacy assuredly sustains these concerns, examining them in isolation from other attributable phenomena to the problems created by our hyper-mediated conditions does not supply a complete account of the deleterious cost of integrating digital affordances into the banal cadence of our shared socio-cultural realities. As we continue to subconsciously delegate facets of our social and cognitive lives to digital technology, the very faculties that have enabled our species to thrive and invent technology in the first place are at risk of attrition – namely our capacity to sustain attention while synthesizing information in working memory to produce creative and inventive constructions for our shared social existence. Though the offloading of knowledge-keeping to fellow social agents belonging to our family and community circles is an enduring intuitive phenomenon across human societies – what social psychologists refer to as transactive memory – in offloading our various socio-cognitive faculties to digital technology, we may plausibly be supplanting the visceral social connections forged by transactive memory. This paper will present related research and literature produced across the disciplines of sociobiology, socio-cultural anthropology, social psychology, cognitive semiotics and communication and media studies that directly and indirectly address the social precarity cultivated by digital technologies. This body of scholarly work will then be situated within common areas of interest belonging to digital anthropology, including the groundbreaking work of Pavel Curtis, Christopher Kelty, Lynn Cherny, Vincent Duclos, Nick Seaver, and Sherry Turkle. It is anticipated that in harmonizing these overlapping areas of intradisciplinary interest, this paper can weave together the disparate connections across spheres of knowledge that help delineate the conditions of our contemporary digital existence.