

History and democracy at the digital age
Denis Peschanski and Frédéric Kaplan
Digital studies seminar – October 21, 2014

Relying on Fred Turner's book, *From Counterculture to cyberculture. Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the rise of digital utopianism*, Dominique Cardon relates the genesis of the IT and the Web, in relationship to the American 1970's counterculture. He studied the reversal of the political form taken today by the network, reversal linked to the new relationships that the network maintains with the market, implying to question the possibility for algorithms and collective devices to produce common good. One needs to understand why the Internet, which used to appear as a possibility for expression and subversion, now seems to constitute a new form of control and rationalization.

Denis Peschanski questioned the conditions of production of social and collective memory and of memorial narrative setting, based on the notion of memoriality regime. He pointed out a new epistemological model for the study of memory grounded on the memory studies. This transdisciplinary project for analyzing memory aims at articulating individual and collective levels, by mingling neuro-scientific, sociological and philosophical approaches.

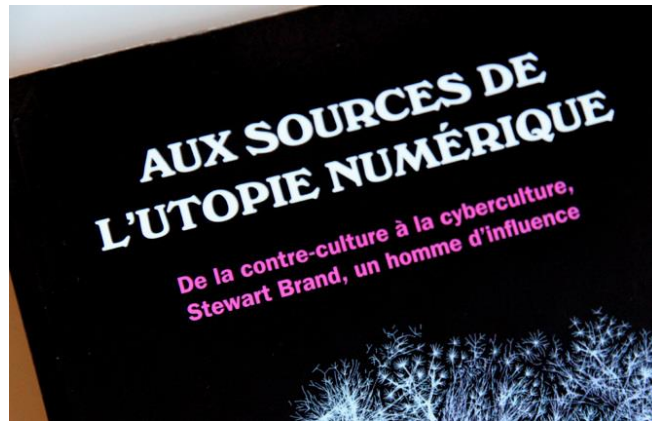
Bernard Stiegler revisited these questions, inscribing them into an organological perspective. He insisted on the necessity of a new criticism of political economy constituted today by the Web, and of a reflection on the transformation of the artificial supports of memory (from writing to the big data phenomenon) that are constitutive of history and temporality.

Dominique Cardon



Dominique Cardon is a sociologist at the Laboratoire des usages of [Orange Labs](#), and an associated Professor at the Université de Marne-la-Vallée. His work deal with the uses of the Internet and the transformations of the digital public space, the amateur auto-production and the analysis of the forms of cooperation and governance in the big online collectives. Today he is leading a sociological analysis of the algorithms which organize the information on the Web.

Today, the Internet does not appear anymore as a possibility for **expression** and **subversion**, but it seems to constitute a new form of control, rationalization, domestication: its vein has changed and this is linked to its relationship with the market. Without falling into a conservative and mystifying nostalgia of the pioneers' Internet, Dominique Cardon suggests as a first step to come back on the political form essential to the pioneers' Internet, before reflecting on the change in the sociology of digital practices, which accompanies the reversal of the political form taken by the network today. He relies on [Fred Turner's](#) work in [From Counterculture to Cyberculture. Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the rise of digital utopianism](#), and on works about the history of the network which are increasingly developing in the field of history of science.



1/ Political form of the pioneers' Internet: the model of virtual communities

- Ideas of decentralized network and bottom-up innovation

Dream of a **decentralized network** (although actually it never was purely horizontal), and idea that the user can produce innovations, innovations from the bottom, from fringes: numerous actors could bring innovations to the network, inventions such as Wikipedia or Google came from Californian students or counterculture activists.

Particular sociological properties of these actors: they are people who know the code and can make propositions (which can become successful, but very rarely).

- IT and counterculture in the 70s

The particular conjunction between the 70s counterculture and the invention of connected personal microcomputers also characterizes the pioneers' network: the first communities who connected computers without being engineers got there through counterculture. There is a tight articulation between searchers, engineers, DIY of the invention of connected computer and the counterculture of the time.

- Social criticism and communitarianism: the place of technology in counterculture

One can distinguish two types of [criticisms within American counterculture of the 70s](#):

- a **social criticism**, or "new left", which denounces public authorities (struggle against the Vietnam war, against racism, against sexism)

= traditional form of political action (political commitment) which attacks the center

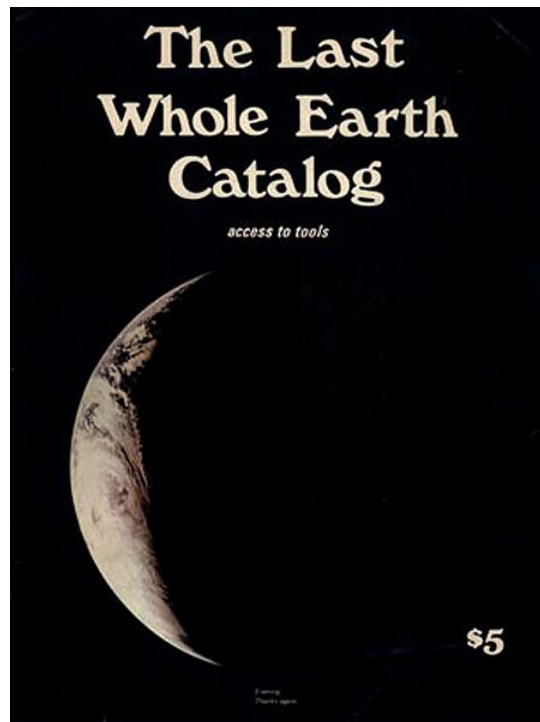
- a **communitarian criticism**, asserting there is nothing to do against Fordism, sexism or social inequalities and it is necessary to go out of society to make community (libertarian and anarchist themes).

= form of political action which commits to changing society without taking power. Change begins with local experimentation and work on oneself (there is no use of taking power if one is not able to take care of himself).

These two criticisms have distinct relationships to technology:

- The question of technology is absent from the first criticism, which is characterized by a hatred of technology. Social movements cannot approve technologies that are assimilated to techno-science and Fordist capitalism.

- In the hippie trend and the "artist" criticism, on the contrary, lies the idea that we need to return technology, that it is possible to size it upon to fight against the powers (beginning of "do it yourself" and fabrication of personal computers).



- The personal computer and the idea of augmenting the individual

At that time, there were computers only for companies and universities. The idea of a personal computer was meaningless: it is only thanks to a specific relationship to technology, perceived as augmenting the individual, that the first personal computer (PC) appeared within these communities. Computer as LSD are thought as prostheses allowing a chemical or technological augmentation of the individuals' mind, by developing their sensorial capacities, their abilities to connect themselves and to communicate.

At the Stanford Research Institute, [Douglas Engelbart](#) launches a research program on "Augmenting Human Intellect".

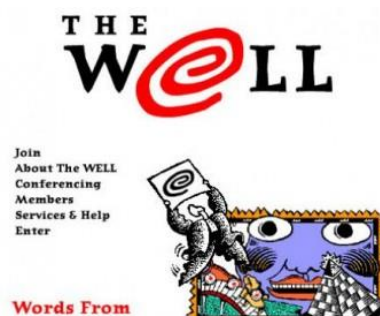
- Virtual communities: individualism and self-organization

In the years 1972-74, the communitarian way of life failed: life in community only reactivated what was denounced by communities. The communitarian project which failed in the real world is then reinvested into Internet communities.

The libertarian theorization of the web as political model holds together:

- the idea of individualism
- the idea of rules of self-organization.

The objective is to create some common between individuals whose mind has been augmented. The political culture of the Internet is thus libertarian and liberal: a political model which does not pass through the State.



- **Anonymity and meritocracy**

The ideas of openness to **diversity** and of **anonymity** are central in the conception of these virtual communities:

- in reality, the prestige, status and social level always ended up reappearing in physical exchanges and reproducing the inequalities attached to sexes or classes

- but on the Internet, thanks to anonymity, it is possible to forget social and statutory differences.

Then settles the idea that hierarchies, differences, statuses do not depend on the persons but on their avatars' accomplishments: it is our merit and what we have done for the community that give us an authority. The **meritocratic** form of [Free Softwares](#) is based on the model of equal opportunity.

- **The intrinsic motivations of individuals in the community**

The model plays a key role in the thought of an economy of contribution: in the community, the individuals are motivated to act by intrinsic motivations.

According to economic models, the individuals' actions are explained by incitements to act, which can be of two kinds:

- **Intrinsic incitation** = pleasure, interest, passion (what make me act is incorporated in the activity I am realizing)

- **Extrinsic incitation** = money, social status, reputation (what makes me act is outside the activity).

Internet users act according to intrinsic motivations. The community finds in itself the reasons the act: there is an expectation but not any calculation since the feedback is uncertain.

If some programmers continue to code all night, it is because they acquire a signal in the community, they are evaluated by others through gestures of appreciation which strengthen their esteem and reputation.

2/ Reversal of the political form of the web: the reintegration of the market to the network



- **End of the meritocratic, cooperative and procedural model of virtual community**

But this model is now in crisis: it cannot explain the contemporary digital practices.

1/ First because of the **morphology of publics**: before, the public of the Internet was very few and socially homogeneous (white, cultivated Americans), but today 41% of the world population uses the Internet. This demographic transformation modified the uses. In today's nostalgia of the pioneers, there is a kind of aristocratic despire against the new young public, who do not necessarily have the sense of rules and cooperation procedures.

2/ Inequalities reappeared everywhere, so that the idea of virtual community can no longer be seen as a space of erasure of social divisions and diploma inequalities. The virtual space is not independent from the world but constantly related to it.

3/ There has been an internal criticism of the collective forms developed in virtual communities:

- criticism of the **meritocratic** aspect

= some forms of charismatic authorities occur

- criticism of the **bureaucratic** aspect

= one no longer accepts the bureaucratic rules at the heart of the pioneers' practice.

- Internalization of the criticism by the capitalism

The hostility to market and [Fordist capitalist society](#) which was at the origin of these communities is no longer relevant. The Fordist capitalism has evolved and today internalized the artist criticism: one finds again the ideas of genuineness, individual transformation and intrinsic motivations in today's management). The pioneers of these communities are now ardent supports of market liberalization.

- The grabbing of collective devices and procedures by the market

At the beginning, these communities focus on the individual but also develop collective procedures and devices: there are procedures to exchange gratitude, giving a normative base to the community. Today, the GAFA grabbed these technics and therefore, one no longer believes in the pioneer's idea that through communitarian procedures and algorithms, something common emerges which exceeds the sum of individuals' single actions (miracle of aggregation) and is able to organize them. For example, originally, Google's PageRank, by producing a ranking, creates a very important service constituting a **common good**: it produces new information, which cannot be reduced to the sum of individual actions. Today one no longer believes that algorithms can produce some common.

- The reintegration of market logics into the network

We are now witnessing a reversal of the pioneers' web with the idea of **digital labor**, according to which the Internet users' contributions should be paid, whereas such a payment was rejected by the pioneers as an extrinsic motivation, contrary to the idea of community. Market logics are thus reintegrated into the network. Internet, today used by the majority of society, is no longer distinct from society: the web users are producers and consumers targeted through algorithms.

Denis Peschanski

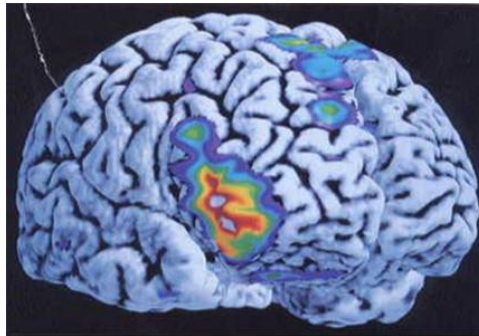


Denis Peschanski is an historian, a research director at the CNRS and a member of the "Centre d'Histoire Sociale du XXème siècle". His specialty field includes the history of communism and the Vichy regime. Since 2011, he is the scientific coordinator of the excellence equipment MATRICE – a technologic transdisciplinary platform to analyze memory. Since 2013, he is a member of the scientific council of the "[Observatoire B2V des mémoires](#)".

1) Introduction and questions

During his lecture on October 21, he began with highlighting some reflections on memory coming from **other disciplines** than history. He especially evoked a talk he had with **Boris Cyrulnik**, who said

that if one questions a person under MRI about what he did last Sunday and what he plans to do next Sunday, it appears that the zones of memory and anticipation are exactly the same.



This observation is problematic for the historian. It shows that we always are in the future perfect and when we give a testimonial, for example, we talk about the past only from our present. Based on a transdisciplinary discussion, the historian thus interrogates his **own methods**. Indeed, what kind of discourse a person can have about an event that happened ten, twenty, thirty or even sixty years before? To understand what a witness can say sixty years after landings, it must be understood that the starting point of his testimony is not the event itself, but the last memorial representation he had of this event.

More generally, it is worth asking: how does the historian face the **plasticity of social memory**? And how is this memory itself historicized? Denis Peschanski invites us to reflect on these questions through three reading grids: the regimes of memoriality, the conditions of creation of a memorial narrative (“mise en récit mémorielle”), and the distinction between strong memory and weak memory.

2) Regimes of memoriality

If memory is a selection of past events carried out by a given group to participate to the construction of its identity, then “regimes of memoriality” change in the time. Denis Peschanski illustrates this concept thanks to the example of the French memory of the Second World War, where two regimes of memoriality succeed each other.

- The first one is determined by the **structuring image of the hero**, reactivated by General de Gaulle’s political return in 1958, whose legitimacy was built on his Appeal of 18 June 1940. Such a regime puts forward the image of the hero and especially the **martyr hero**. But in addition to this strong memory which is the one of **Resistance**, there also were at this time a few weak memories: Jewish memory and persecutions memory, still present in the 1950s and 1960s but then weaker than the Resistant hero.



- Starting from the 1980s appeared a second regime of memoriality, this time focusing on the image of the **Jewish victim**. This importance of the image of victim brings about the withdrawal of the image of the resistant martyr, which then became a weak memory. This new regime coincides with a new interpretation of the Vichy regime, which “re-naturalizes” it and shows that it had a long history in the French far-right movements (cf: [Robert Paxton](#)). To access the memorial space, one thus needs to go through regimes of memoriality, which depend on the conditions of creation of a memorial narration.

3) Conditions of creation of a memorial narration

The idea of “conditions of creation of a memorial narration” came to Denis Peschanski during a talk he had with a psychoanalyst, who said the **trauma** does not belong to the “past” but to the present, since it is defined by the fact it overwhelms the individual’s present reflection space. To ensure that the trauma belongs to the past, it needs to be inhibited and to free a new space for memory. The very notion of “traumatic memory”, according to this psychoanalyst, is an oxymoron. The historian should then reflect on the modalities of creation of collective memorial narrations, here through three examples.

- The first example is the **Exodus**, in May-June 1940 during the German offensive. This phenomenon has affected between eight and ten million people who were on the roads to escape German attack. A whole country is curled up on itself, and the sum of fleeing people and hosting people represents the majority of population. But actually, the Exodus has never been a structuring element of collective memory. This is because, according to Denis Peschanski, we can do nothing with fleeing, fear and shame, it is impossible to rely on it to build a meaningful and socially useful narrative. If this event remains crucial for a majority of French people of the time, yet it cannot be integrated into a great story.

- The second example is about the speech François Hollande pronounced on June 6, 2014 in front of the **Caen memorial**. The French President of the Republic paid tribute to the Resistance and to the civil victims of the Normandy bombardments. In these fully destroyed cities such as Saint-Lô or Caen, there were more deaths during landings than during Occupation. But it is too difficult to create a narrative about bombs dropped on saviors and not on attackers. This reality remains in memories but it did not find any place into collective memory, since it does not have any social usefulness.

- Eventually, a third example is one of **Hiroshima** and **Nagasaki**. This time, one would not deny their crucial importance in this period: collective memory indeed talks about the victims, but it neglected the question of its actors and American people are not mentioned. A meaning then could have been given to this traumatic event: it is a **discourse about peace**.



4) Strong memory and weak memory

This distinction has already been approached in the study of regimes of memoriality, where we saw that two kinds of memorial images could co-exist at the same period, but at different levels of intensity. Denis Peschanski deepens this idea evoking the case of hidden children during the War: their story staid in the margin of social memory until the mid- or end-eighties, i.e. long time after the change of regime of memoriality that happened in the eighties. The starting point of their reintegration into memory was the first congress of hidden children in New York in the 1990s.

It is worth wondering about the explanations of this delay: why has their memory been so weak during such a long time? It is because it would have been very difficult, for these children, to claim a space in collective memory whereas they have been saved – contrarily to their parents in general, who died in a gas chamber. Now, these former hidden children start talking about it, and become the spokespersons of a bad-known story – the story of people who saved them, thanks to which they can enter social memory. These children, now adults, had to go through Resistance (the image of those who saved them) to have the right to speak. This example highlights the interdependency between strength of memory, regimes of memoriality and conditions of creation of a memorial narration.

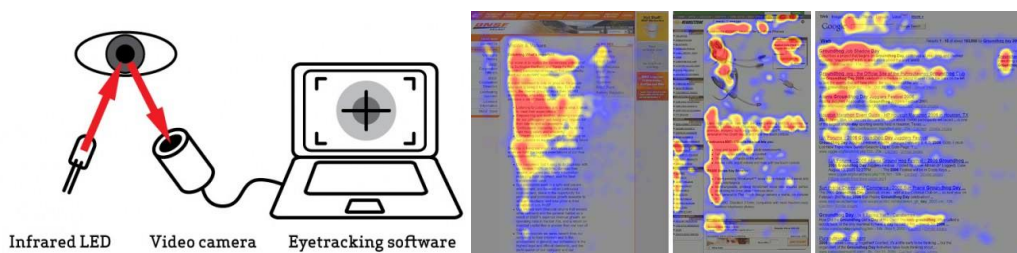
5) An epistemological model for the study of memory

At the end of these reflections, Denis Peschanski shows that today's historians and sociologists of memory seem to face a dead-end, an "**epistemological block**". Indeed, long after [Pierre Nora's Realms of memory](#) and [Henry Rousso's The Vichy Syndrome](#), the study of Second World War seems to stagnate and it would be needed, to fully understand what happens in social memory, to know what happens at the cerebral level in memory.

This is why, through [MATRICE project](#), the idea is to bring together historians, neuroscientists (to observe imageries of memory) and human sciences researchers. This approach is **transdisciplinary**, since it aims at building a new object (instead of gathering people around a pre-constituted object, as would do a pluridisciplinary approach).

The objective of MATRICE is to understand the interaction between individual memory and collective memory, with two topics: 9/11 attacks and World War Two; and around two great tracks:

- Creating a **parallelism** between the great narrations about these two events in France (TV or radio) and what the **witnesses'** narration, to compare discourses and see how they interact.



- Reflecting on the **visitors of memorials**. The objective is to understand how the visitors appropriate the path proposed to them, thanks to other tools than the questionnaire. The other used devices are for example **glasses** for volunteers ([eye-tracking](#)), which follow the movements of the visitor's eyes on the items, as well as **electronic sensors**, allowing to see what the visitor is looking at when visiting the memorial. These tools thus help the researchers to study how the visitors appropriate an image or a set of images.