How would you assess the conflicting claims that the digital age will mean the 'end of forgetting' (as we move towards the 'total archive') or that it will mean the 'end of remembering' (as we outsource our memories to technological prosthetics)?

The examination of memory in the digital age is conflicting in terms of the roles that digitized archives play in human experiences. On the one hand, arguments emphasize the ‘end of forgetting and remembering’ in relation to the features of digital archives. On the other hand, attention should be paid to the socioeconomic and political environment within which people and technology interact. In this essay, firstly, distinctions of traditional and digital archive, the issues of trust in digital archive and cultural practices derived from the changing relationship of human and technology will be discussed. Second, different forgetting and remembering will be discussed in relation to individual and collective identity. My argument is that current technology and global environment of digitization influences archiving and the cultural practices in crucial ways when compared to traditional methods of archiving, based on which individual and collective identity negotiate their places through the importance of forgetting and the right to memory.

The expanding practice of digital media changes the relationship between people and technology within a broad social, economic and political context. Digital media is argued as new ways of inscriptions that only machines can read (Gitelman). The ‘archive fever’ of the impulse to gather and preserve, explained by Jacques Derrida, becomes easier with digital capacities of database compound (Manoff, 2010, P386). ‘Media are more properly the results of social and economic forces, so that any technological logic they possess is only apparently intrinsic (Gitelman).’ The features of digital archives are inseparable from the traditional archives and technology development. Firstly, McLuhan’s statement expresses that ‘the content of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium (McLuhan, 1964, P9 cited in Gitelman) as well as that the effects of technology change our ‘patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance (McLuhan cited in Carr, P12).’ Gitelman has argued that it is impossible to ignore the protocols derived from the invention and development of technological artefacts (P14). Furthermore, ‘the definition of new media depends intricately on the whole social context within which production and consumption get defined – and defined as distinct – rather than merely on producers and consumers themselves (Gitelman 2006, P15).’ Therefore, it is important to assess
on the features, the protocols and social context that digital archive developed from and beyond.

Digital archives transformed traditional archives in terms of connectivity and materiality. Archives involve institutions, practices and technologies (Hartley 2012, P156). Traditionally, ‘archive’ institutions refer to cultural and research institutions, museums, galleries, publications, and personal collections (Hartley 2012, P156). Moreover, communication technologies are namely oral social networks, media networks, public and academic institutions and privately held knowledge (Hartley 2012, P156). On the contrary, the long tradition of knowledge being produced and archived externally now becomes available online in a global scale within which the distinction between producer and user is blurred and the order of authority and trust shift away from institutions (Hartley, 2012). On the one hand, according to Hoskins, individuals become producers and users instead of consumers of media. And traditional media suggests ‘a permanency in their storage potential as available to future times’ whilst the digital brings forth the temporal and spatial connectivity of the past and present (Hoskins, P92). Moreover, the sociotechnical practices of posting and messaging through websites and social media change the archive to a ‘living archival memory’ (P91). On the other hand, the digital environment is considered “pervasive deceit” because of the immateriality of the digital environment comparing to the ‘physical world of information-bearing artefacts’ (Lynch, 2010). Hartley asserts that the digitized archive is structured as a ‘probability archive’ because of the ‘unstable mutability [being] the unpredictable nature’ of its universal content and the transitional role that employs factors of both traditional and digitized archives (2012, P160). The immateriality and unstable features have raised issues on the validation of digital information.

Lynch argues that trust and identity are central to the authenticity and integrity of archival information in the digital environment (P317). At first, ‘we verify the source of claims about digital objects or, more generally, claims about sets of digital objects and other claims, and, on the basis of that source, assign a level of belief or trust to the claim.’ (Lynch, P325) In addition, ‘trust is not necessarily an absolute, but often a subjective probability that we assign case by case (Lynch, P326).’ Moreover, Lynch states that identity in the digital sphere is when an individual trusts a linkage between
a claim and a digital object (P325). This identity can be ‘mechanically transferred or shared’ by the owner of the digital object (P326). For example, the trustworthiness of a YouTube video can be evaluated by the owner of the video, the comments it receives, and the number of the subscribers to the channel. Moreover, the sharing of a piece of information by a Twitter account can direct followers’ attention to certain issues. In other words, ‘we have to trust not only the identity but also the behaviour of the owner of that identity (Lynch, P326).’ On the whole, these cases can be relative to the traditional archive, however, increasing interactions between technology and human are involved in the digital age.

The relationship between memory and its mnemonic tool is altered by the interactions between human internal memory and the external digital archive (Karaiste, 2010, P501). Firstly, Schwarz explains that the way to classify memory objects has been changed from a ‘hierarchical tree classification method of physical objects to tag-based computer inspired technique’ (P2014, P13). Moreover, it is stated that the externalisation and objectification of human memory have long been in existence; however, the setting of algorithms creates affinity afresh with every search query (Schwarz, 2014, P10). Therefore, Schwarz argues that due to ‘the plurality of spatial affinities’ feature of the database, ‘people have neighbourly relations with the memory objects that populate their digital environment’ (2014, P7). For example, the search of one term in the algorithms structure of a personal archive can cause displays of many results that were tagged in the same term. The search of the term is initiated by people’s active process of internal memory; however, the shown results engage people in a passive process of digitalised memory (Bloch, 2007; Ricoeur, 2004 cited in Schwarz, 2014, P15). People’s engagement with the complex functions and characteristics of algorithms creates new cultural practices.

The democracy of knowledge, the emergence of cultural phenomenon and the politics of algorithms suggest different possibilities in cultural practices. It is argued that the people’s experience of culture of both past and present is ‘filtered through the human-computer interface’ (Manovich cited in Manoff, 2010, P386). Firstly, ‘digital culture refashions and refocuses the past’ and the multiplication of this effect inspires new historical contexts (Manoff, 2010, P388). For example, historical artefacts and books with limited access made available to broader audiences through digitization would
transform people’s knowledge of the past and the renewed past would result in a new understanding of history. Secondly, the consumption of abundantly ‘hyperconnected’ personal and cultural pasts supports the emergence of a nostalgic culture in today’s globalized digital environment (Manoff, 2010, P389; Schwarz, 2009 cited in Schwarz, 2014, P11). For example, the globally popular British period drama TV series ‘Downton Abbey’ stimulated the Chinese market for butler positions in the wealthy households (Willgress, 2015) Thirdly, ‘algorithms have power’ (Beer, 2009 cited in Schwarz, P10) and the rapidly accumulating digital archive affects ‘the shape and potential of future memories’ (Hoskins, P54). Research suggests that the digital information structure may increase inequalities in information access due to the inequalities of digitized facilities available (Burt, 1992 cited in Schwarz, 2014, P18). The spread changes to the procedure of archives and the cultural practices of digitization further influence memory in terms of the application of forgetting and remembering in relation to human identity.

Identity management in the age of abundant digitization of personal archive is essential to human identity. People form social identity through the filtration and management of information they give off. Controls over personal information facilitate different parts of the self in response to the reflection upon the audience and context (Goffman, 1959 cited in Korenhof and Koops, P105). Moreover, it is argued that ‘forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity shows that forgetting in order to remember (Connerton 2008, P62).’ Furthermore, the right to privacy gives people ‘the freedom from unreasonable constraints on the construction of one’s own identity’ (Agre cited in Westin, 1966, P7 cited in Korenhof and Koops, P105).’ Therefore, ‘What is allowed to be forgotten provides living space for present projects (Connerton 2008, P63).’ However, J.D.Lasica argues that ‘our pasts are becoming etched like a tattoo into our digital skins.’ (Mayer-Schonberger, p14). In addition, the easy accessibility and sharing of digitized information in a global scale is termed as ‘shared societal memory’ (Mayer-Schonberger, 2011, P61). Moreover, ‘memory crisis’ and ‘the forcible act of not forgetting’ are concerns of late modernity’s nostalgic cultural movement and an obsession with preservation (Harrison, P581). As a result, ‘once we have perfect memory, Borges suggests, we are no longer able to generalize and abstract, and so remain lost in the details of our past.’
(Mayer-Schonberger, p12). In short, the practice of forgetting to remember may also be necessary in the digital age.

Besides individual identity management, the issues in digital heritage preservation concern the management of collective memory more. To begin with, Levy states that ‘the future of symbolic life must pass through a phase of universal memory that becomes our common cultural resource (P108).’ Nevertheless, Mayer-Schonberger suggests imposing expiration dates for information to enable forgetting in the digital age (2011). Similarly, Harrison argues that sustainability in heritage management is needed in the age of total archive. Moreover, actively assessing the validation and preservation of heritage overshadows the negativity in the mnemonic function of digital memory (2013). In this case, ‘the distinction between the value of the information content and the value of the evidence embedded in the artefact is at the heart of a decision-making process that is itself central to the effective management of both traditional and digital library materials (Conway, P368). In a like manner, Barr stated a concept of responsible custody in the information management sector (Bar 1946 cited in Conway, P376). Furthermore, Conway emphasises that the importance of digitization of original artefacts lies in the protection of the order of the collection, the comprehensiveness and completion of the content and the enhancement of damaged sources (P369). However, the commercialization and fragmentation of digitized archives in the contemporary market do not accord to the concept of ‘responsible custody’. For example, ‘digitization of the historical record for commercial reasons distorts it by selecting what is preserved, what is searchable, and how on the basis of profit rather than scholarly value and need (Mandell, cited in Manoff, 2010, P390).’

On the other hand, the association of remembering and identity takes a turn in prescriptive forgetting and repressive erasure. As Milan Kundra said, “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.’ ‘The living archive is in response to a growing obsession with potential forgetfulness, which emerges from the temporal and spatial fracturing of globalisation processes and the emergence of the Holocaust as a cipher for the failure of the Enlightenment project and the violence of the twentieth century as a whole (Hyssen, 2003, cited in Harrison) It is also argued that how we communicate has always been prosthetized, since
Archivable events are constructed through writing in the most productive sense of the word (Derrida, cited in Barnet, P221). Moreover, ‘our world is hypermnesic in many of its cultural manifestations, and post-mnemonemic in the structures of the political economy. The cultural symptoms of hypermnesia are caused by a political-economic system, which systematically generates a post-mnemonic culture – a modernity which forgets (Connerton 2009, P 146-147, cited in Harrision 2013, P588). Such kinds of forgetting include the ‘prescriptive forgetting’ in terms of the manipulation of collective memory. According to Connerton, ‘whether at the resolution of civil conflict or after international conflict, the formulation of peace terms has frequently contained an explicit expression of the wish that past actions should not be just forgiven but forgotten (Connerton, 2008, P62). Repressive erasure results in disconnections between people and history. In addition, it can take place in concealed and non-violent forms (Connerton 2008, P60) In facing these issues, Reading emphasises attention upon ‘the right to memory.’ Certain memories may be more important to certain groups and group identity can be sustained by remembering (Reading 2011, P384).

Equally important, Reading looks at the right to memory and fluidity of identity in the global environment. Firstly, ‘for Benjamin, the promise of new media technologies was not that of linking the world into supposedly seamless networks or systems of information and communication that would give the illusion of global efficiency but, rather, of politicizing and artistically shattering the ideological goal of the illusion of a positive global totality (Benjamin cited in Day, P92).’ Moreover, ‘Globital memory field’ refers to ‘the struggle by memory agent over the assemblage, mobilization, and securitization of memory capital in the social and political dynamic of globalization with digitization’ (Reading, P242). Secondly, the concepts of identity and memory have come to terms as ‘fluid, multidimensional, changeable and fragmentary’ (Reading 2011, P384). It is also argued that human beings constitute a memory agent that travels across ‘established boundaries between the human and machine, the organic and inorganic’ (Poster, 2006, cited in Reading, P245) In this sense, the territorializing process of memory involves ‘the witnessing practices and discursive formations of prosumers’ as memory assemblage and this assemblage will then be deterritorialized globally and ‘becomes insecure and open to change (Pinchevski, 2009 cited in Reading, P247) To exemplify, Reading refers to the diasporic culture
that demonstrates the fluidity and conflict in terms of ethnic and national identities (Reading 2002 cited in Reading 2011). Moreover, scholars suggest that minority rights and resistance are empowered through the practice of ‘globital memory’ (Reading 2011, P384).

In conclusion, the archive fever has become digital and people live with living archival memory, which is hyperconnective and global. Moreover, the relationship of digital archive and human are transforming due to elements of algorithms that are the key to the complexity of the interaction of people and technology. Furthermore, changing cultural practices of democracy of knowledge, emergence of nostalgic culture and politics of algorithms lead to a complex relationship of memory and technology. Lastly, the concerns of forgetting include identity management in terms of individual selfhood and collective memory through heritage preservation. Remembering relates to the right to memory in repressive and prescriptive forgetting and the fluidity of identity in a globalized digital environment.
Works Cited


