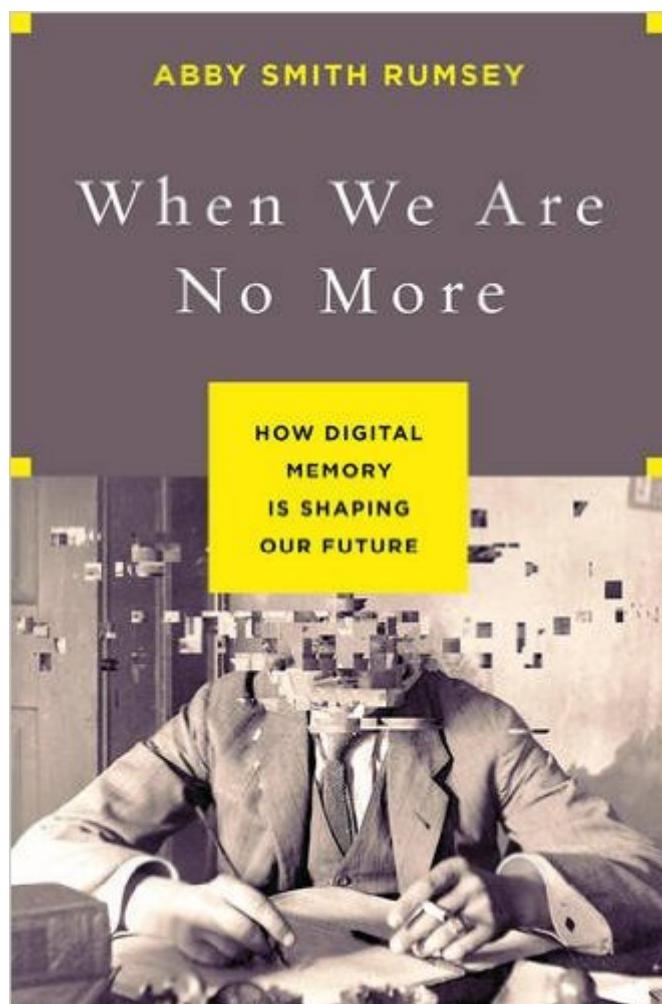


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# When We Are No More: How Digital Memory Is Shaping Our Future



## Synopsis

Our memory gives the human species a unique evolutionary advantage. Our stories, ideas, and innovations--in a word, our "culture"--can be recorded and passed on to future generations. Our enduring culture and restless curiosity have enabled us to invent powerful information technologies that give us invaluable perspective on our past and define our future. Today, we stand at the very edge of a vast, uncharted digital landscape, where our collective memory is stored in ephemeral bits and bytes and lives in air-conditioned server rooms. What sources will historians turn to in 100, let alone 1,000 years to understand our own time if all of our memory lives in digital codes that may no longer be decipherable? In *When We Are No More* Abby Smith Rumsey explores human memory from pre-history to the present to shed light on the grand challenge facing our world--the abundance of information and scarcity of human attention. Tracing the story from cuneiform tablets and papyrus scrolls, to movable type, books, and the birth of the Library of Congress, Rumsey weaves a compelling narrative that explores how humans have dealt with the problem of too much information throughout our history, and indeed how we might begin solve the same problem for our digital future. Serving as a call to consciousness, *When We Are No More* explains why data storage is not memory; why forgetting is the first step towards remembering; and above all, why memory is about the future, not the past."If we're thinking 1,000 years, 3,000 years ahead in the future, we have to ask ourselves, how do we preserve all the bits that we need in order to correctly interpret the digital objects we create? We are nonchalantly throwing all of our data into what could become an information black hole without realizing it." --Vint Cerf, Chief Evangelist at Google, at a press conference in February, 2015.

## Book Information

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"Today, we stand at the very edge of a vast, uncharted digital landscape, where our collective memory is stored in ephemeral bits and bytes and lives in air-conditioned server rooms. What sources will historians turn to in 100, let alone 1,000 years to understand our own time if all of our memory lives in digital codes that may longer be decipherable?" from the publisher's website

After seeing When We Are No More by Abbey Smith Rumsey on NetGalley I couldn't stop thinking about it--the topic was too fascinating. I was thrilled to be granted the book. Rumsey carefully builds her story, considering how humans have remembered since Adam and Eve, through the revolutionary development of writing cuneiform on clay tablets, to the proliferation of books via the printing press, the establishment of libraries, to the digitalization of knowledge. She shows how each advancement brought change and challenges as humanity coped with how to store, access, and control the ever growing data bank of human knowledge. Then she presents the challenges presented by the digitalization of knowledge and the precariousness of a digital cultural memory. Humanity must find the thin line between the distraction of novelty and amnesia and loss of past wisdom which we may need when facing future challenges. Issues of privacy and copyright law vs. the ideal of an open Internet, and the commercialization of data are also issues needing to be addressed. With the overwhelming amount of digital data, deciding what we can 'afford' to lose, and what must be preserved, becomes a major concern.

The book is written in three parts. Part One: Where We Come From looks at human memory, the development of writing, the printing press, and the library.

There are some fine insights throughout When We Are No More. Materialism sets us apart from all other beings. No one else can look back at their ancestors, examine long dead civilizations or evaluate fossils. We think we're the only beings who evaluate a sight with our knowledge of the past and our expectations for the future. Only humans collect artifacts to stimulate memories. Without our memories, we are nothing. Rumsey says we get "information inflation" • every time we invent a new process. Starting with the Sumerians 5000 years ago, data storage has been problematic. The invention of photography in 1838 changed everything in the memory field. So did digitization. So did the democratization of authorship. We face a disaster of scale. Until recently, no one preserved much of anything for the future. Yet museums and libraries are bulging with the "few" artifacts we have collected. Now that we actively collect data (and nothing seems

insignificant), and we are suddenly seven billion, the data situation becomes untenable. We are reluctant to ditch any data, because we never know when it might prove useful. Rumsey gives a number of examples, like 70 year old glass plate negatives from an astronomic observatory being used to prove theories that came about more recently. Or old ships' logs reconstructing weather patterns and biodiversity reduction. Data storage is not memory any more than data is knowledge; it's what you make of them. And if you don't have any to begin with. Rumsey spends a lot of time telling us that digital data is fragile. By that she means it will be unreadable very shortly, as new platforms, protocols, and software make them useless. But she missed the real fragility of digital data – magnetism.

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