

## As technologies change, how do we change?

Social networking practices such as blogging, we are told, are “native to the web.” From this supposed radical novelty, various commentators assert a litany of psychological and social effects follow (e.g., upon our conceptions of public/private space, personal identity, memory formation, the nature of community, the value and ownership of information, etc.). But whether rooted in an optimistic assessment of the egalitarian, democratizing potential of the Internet or a pessimistic appraisal which sees such technology to diminish the rich contextual involvements necessitated by the analogue, such pronouncements seem to rely on two basic assumptions which are at least open to question:

- **Questionable assumption 1:** That there is an *essential* difference between digital materiality—bits and bytes, and all the supportive equipment necessary to render them readable—and the analogue materials (e.g., paper) which have historically carried information.
- **Questionable assumption 2:** That the adoption and use of certain technologies inevitably leads to determinable psychological and social consequences (i.e., *technological determinism*).

Contemporary philosophy of technology has seen an “empirical turn” away from abstract and ‘essentialist’ theorising, towards more nuanced critiques which pay appropriate attention to the empirical study of individual technologies and their contextual use (Achterhuis, 2001). This PhD investigation follows this empirical turn, seeking to critically examine the materiality of digital and analogue technologies and their impact upon the practice and products of writing and picture-making. Borrowing from a wide range of theory, particularly the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Don Ihde and the actor-network-theory of Bruno Latour, this work involves a comparative study of a corpus of historical analogue materials (the illustrated letter-diaries of the Hardens of Brathay Hall, written c. 1801-1811) with that of similar materials from the modern “blogosphere”.

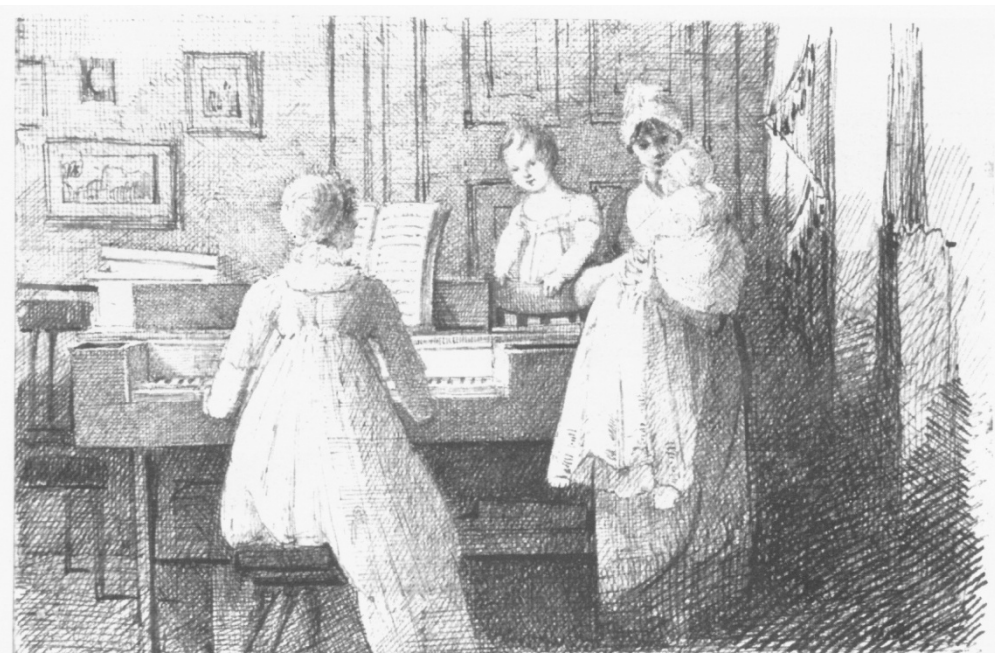
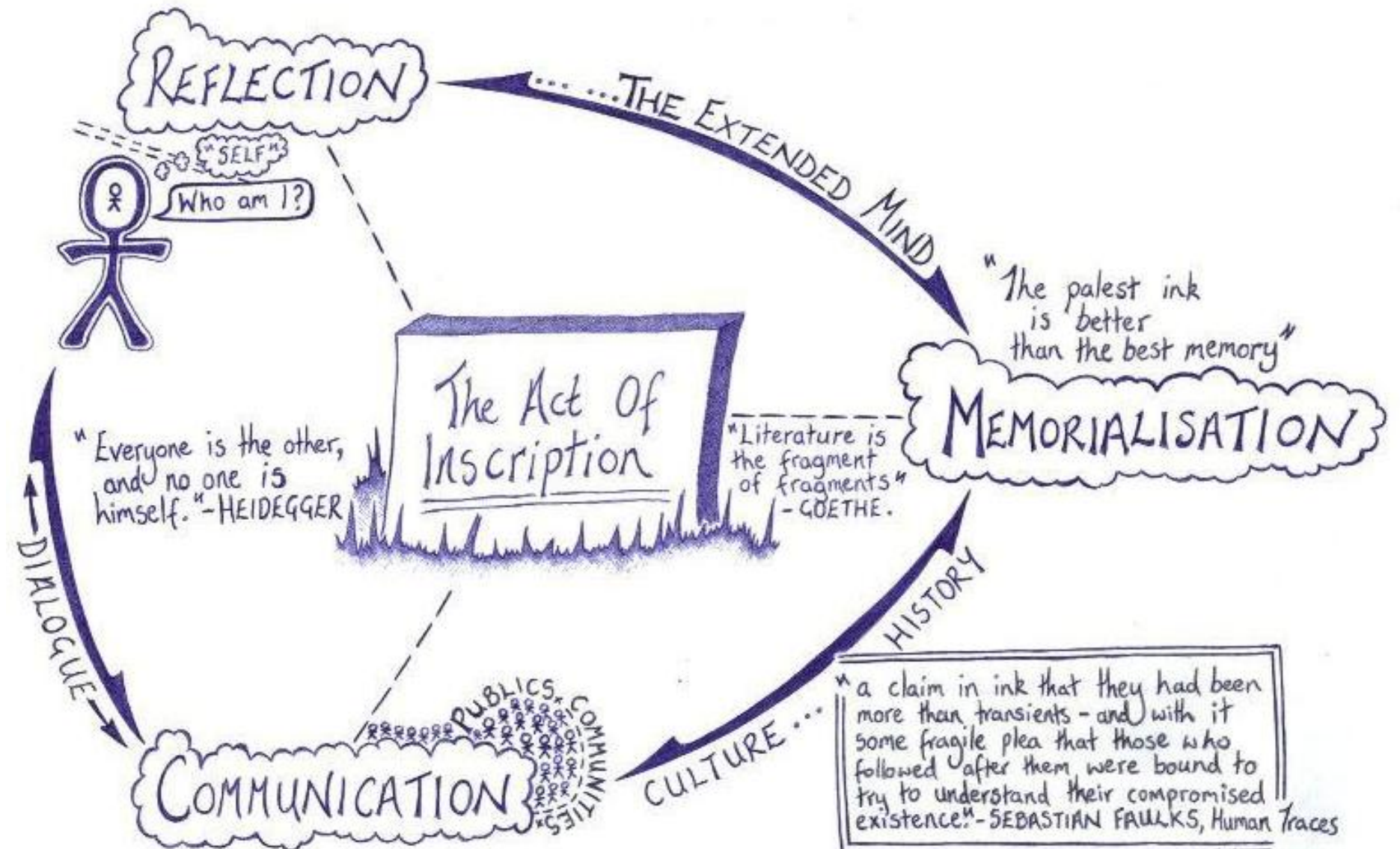


Figure 1: Sketch by John Harden, 1805, © National Library of Scotland

In 1801, Edinburgh socialite Jessie Allan began a 10 year correspondence with her sister Agnes in India. Jessie’s letter-diaries colourfully record family events and everyday life within a close social network of artists, musicians and poets. Often illustrated with small sketches—almost “photographic” in nature (Brown, 1995: 26)—by Jessie’s husband, John Harden, these historical documents combine image and text to record and communicate family events, social networking and personal reflections. As such they prefigure much of what we see in the digital. *Scottish Natterings, Edinburgh Happenings* <<http://www.scottishdiary.com/>>, for example, is a blog maintained by a mother and daughter (known as “Lady Muck” and “1st Lady” respectively) which promises “Scottish goings on, tourism, funny comments, and some ulterior motives,” a description which might aptly describe the content of Jessie’s journal.

Longitudinal studies have established that personal journal blogs are highly representative of the blogging genre as a whole. Contra hyperbolic assertions of radical novelty, the majority of blogs are, in the words of Papacharissi (2007: 36), “primarily low-tech affairs of a self-referential nature.” Herring et al. (2005) similarly find that “the blog is neither fundamentally new nor unique” and that can be seen to have been “reproduced from the centuries-old genre of handwritten diaries”. While new digital technologies undoubtedly facilitate increased tractability and dissemination of human communication, neither life-writing nor social-networking are new phenomena. This PhD research, then, starts by supposing that the adoption of technologies which support such practices depends in large part on their utility for the fulfilment of deep-seated, underlying *human* needs, namely *self-reflection, communication, and memorialisation*.



## Bibliography

- Achterhuis, Hans (Ed.), 2001, *American Philosophy of Technology: The Empirical Turn*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press  
 Brown, Iain G., 1995, *Elegance and Entertainment in the New Town of Edinburgh*, Edinburgh: The Rutland Press  
 Herring, Susan C., et al. (2005), 'Weblogs as a Bridging Genre', *Information Technology & People*, 18 (2), 142-71  
 Papacharissi, Zizi (2007), 'Audiences as Media Producers: Content Analysis of 260 Blogs', in Mark Temayne (ed.), *Blogging, Citizenship, and the Future of Media* (New York, NY: Routledge), 21-38

Research sponsored by:

