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BRINGING THE LIVING BACK TO LIFE

What happens when we reenact the recent past?

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We live in an age of reenactments of the recent past. In recent years, three types of reenactment have grown in importance. Historical reenactment television has flourished since the early 2000s, lately turning its attention to histories well within the memory of many viewers. Meanwhile, as portable digital video recording equipment and access to high-speed internet has become widespread, many thousands of people have committed their own reenactments, recreations, and rediscoveries to web platforms like YouTube. Some of these emerge from the efforts of individuals to record their own memories or preserve equipment: a new form of ‘history from below’. Others are imitations of historical reenactment or enquiry, confected to draw an audience and to raise advertising revenue. Together, these forms of reenactment – produced without formal research methodology, with entertainment their primary concern, and always adopting a hands on approach to their interactions with technology – create the cultural backdrop against which scholarly and investigative reenactments now take place. The importance for contemporary scholars of public engagement leads to an inevitable blending of the two, for video recordings of investigative reenactments must jostle for space alongside the characteristic media forms of the digital era: clickbait and viral video.

Digital video platforms – with YouTube in the vanguard – provide an outlet for historical reenactments of every type. Elderly machinery has been dusted off and restarted for the cameras; children are introduced to obsolete computer technologies little older than themselves; hipsters tour ‘the last’ video rental store. No longer is the historical reenactment limited to geographically specific locations. The muddy field of a Civil War reenactment and the rigging of a restored tall ship are joined by the everywhere of the internet. Historical reenactments on television and in digital media blur the lines between reenactment, simulation, and performed memory, and they draw the ‘past’ that is available for memory work closer to the present. In turn, these popular entertainment reenactments alter

the conditions under which investigative reenactments and simulations take place. It is this conjunction that I am interested in exploring: between a culture now immersed in immediate, online, user-generated reenactments of the past, and the more sober and systematic efforts of media historians. As other chapters in this volume indicate, these two approaches to the past are not in contention: they nourish and inspire one another. What they hold most importantly in common is that they are not concerned with raising dead ancestors – in other words, they do not want to bring the distant past back to life. Instead, they seek to bring the *living* back to life. Inspired and informed by practices of experimental media archaeology, they find neglected, forgotten, failed, obsolete or dead practices and technologies and resuscitate them for education or entertainment.

In this chapter, I trace the development of this new form of reenactment, which has emerged out of the conjunction of historical reenactment television and online digital video. I examine two examples of online reenactment: revisitations of holdout Blockbuster franchises in the USA, and the viral video format “Kids React. . .”. I consider the ways in which the unspoken and unselfconscious methodologies behind these viral videos tessellate with approaches taken by recent historical reenactors, taking as my principal example hands on research into historical technological processes in television production. At the centre of this discussion is the problem of the reenactment of the recent past, in which individuals replay everyday behaviours that previously typified their working lives. This is a form of reenactment unlike any other that has been routinely performed. It offers unique opportunities to obtain valuable and richly detailed memories about past working practices and obsolete technologies. However, this approach challenges traditional ways of thinking about historical evidence and oral testimony. It privileges emotion and affect over historical rigour. The emotional reunion with a long-discarded technology is intrinsic to any reenactment of the recent past, but this emotional evidence can be challenging to interpret and introduce to the historical record. Alongside this methodological challenge is a practical one. Online reenactments tend to place vital historical testimony onto the precarious spaces of online video platforms. There, videos which do not immediately attract a mass audience risk sinking into the algorithmic sediment: the thick layer of digital content that is rarely watched and hard to find, because it lacks metadata or because nobody links to it. Thus, in addition to its primary methodological provocations, hands on historical reenactments also make a further case for the necessity of secure, non-corporatized digital public space into which the digital products of online hands on history may be deposited.

Reenacting the recent past on television

Television’s preoccupation with the recent past can be traced to the fly-on-the-wall documentary boom of the late 1990s. *The 1900s House*, produced in 1999 for Channel 4, was one of the first television series to immerse ‘ordinary people’ in a confected past. The series stripped the Bowler family – mother, father, and three

teenaged children – of their modern clothing and comforts and sent them, dressed as Victorians, to live in a Victorian terraced house. The series' solemn commitment to authenticity set the tone for historical reenactment television. The opening episode documented the family's three-day preparatory visit to the Museum of Domestic Culture at Shugborough Hall, while the marketing material surrounding the programme insisted that the family would "abide by a strict set of rules in an effort to live exactly as Victorians would have done" ("Programme highlights: 1999 week 38 page 46" 1999). *The 1900 House* thus established the parameters for the genre, enumerated by Michelle Liu Carriger as "a reality TV/documentary format, painstaking facsimile replicas of historical environments, and the casting of regular contemporary people as the main subjects of the programs, relying on the dynamic of reenactment for their content" (Carriger 2010, 135). The series was followed by sequels covering more recent history, including *The Edwardian Country House* (Channel 4, 2002), *The 1940s House* (Channel 4, 2001), *Coal House* (BBC Wales, 2007) and *Coal House at War* (BBC Wales, 2008).

Over the past decade, television has become bored with the distant past, and has turned its attention to reviving more recent technologies and lifestyles. "Technological time travel" documentary series *Electric Dreams* (BBC Four, 2009), ostensibly educational and produced in partnership with the Open University, remodelled a family home and watched as its inhabitants struggled with resurrected and restored domestic technologies from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The parents recalled each of the technologies with fondness or exasperation, while their four children experienced them afresh. More recently, and without any veneer of educational purpose, Channel 4 aired *That's So Last Century* (2015), a compilation of celebrities showing their children the technologies of their past. That same year *Back In Time For Dinner* (BBC, 2015) transported a family to each decade from the 1950s to the 1990s, but – having run out of historical road – the sequel series *Further Back In Time For Dinner* (BBC, 2017) turned the historical tide to cover the first half of the century, in its first episode returning viewers to an historical milieu first glimpsed 17 years earlier in *The 1900s House*.

Throughout television's circular tour around the fads and fashions of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, certain constants remained. While historical foci shifted, television's experimental methodology remained fairly fixed. A "typical" family – always a husband and wife, always more than two children (a mixture of boys and girls, teenagers and younger) – was recruited, their house transformed, their clothes replaced. In each of these series, children act as surrogates for the broader television audience. Their innocent commentary on the differences between 'then' and 'now' incites explanatory narration which might otherwise seem too overtly didactic for entertainment television. Above all, historical reenactment television was hands on, challenging its participants to make bread in coal ovens, and wash clothes with dolly and mangle, feeling the awkwardness and unfamiliarity of their labour at the very tips of their fingers. No matter how remote or recent the reenactment, the family was always put to hardship, so that the novelty enjoyed as they first encountered their new surroundings was certain to wear off

before the end of the first episode. Historical reenactment television never went without an early emotional breakdown: witness Joyce Bowler, driven to tears of rage by an accumulation of frustrating Victorian kitchen technologies in the second half-hour of *The 1900 House*, or Rochelle Robshaw's profound annoyance at her husband's disappointment in her dish of 1950s liver in *Back In Time For Dinner*. These episodic crises fit into a larger narrative pattern: as Vanessa Agnew puts it,

we find that each of the *House* series traces a similar arc—estrangement from familiar surroundings, depravation [*sic*] in the historical setting, the precipitation of a crisis, followed by resolution (or expulsion from the group), and finally reintegration into the present.

(Agnew 2007, 303–304)

It was these emotional facets of historical reenactment television, among other factors, which prompted Agnew to worry about the genre's tendency to privilege affect over rigorous historical analysis (Agnew 2007). Recent developments in the genre have shown her anxiety to be well founded. Television's ruthless pursuit of the marketable format has seen historical reenactment further boiled down to its most dramatic and energizing affective moments, then repeated – with minor variations – ad nauseam across the world. Family relationships and childish reactions come to the fore, just as they do in other reality genres. *Gordon Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* and *Supremanny* – superbly entertaining examples of reality TV – are more than close cousins of the crudest forms of historical reenactment; they are siblings, jostling for space in the same crowded television schedules and replay apps. In the light of shows like *That's So Last Century*, the solemn dedication of *The 1900 House* to historical fidelity (however partial, however problematic) seems almost as antiquated as its subject matter.

Reenactment, clickbait, and 'procrastitainment'

So much for historical reenactment television; moving image media has moved on, and taken reenactment with it. Now we have a new historical reenactment format to contend with: a broad, decentralized, disorganized movement of amateur historians and video producers who populate YouTube with boutique reenactments and "procrastitainment" videos. To understand this new genre, the definition of reenactment must be broadened almost beyond recognition. Online, hardly anybody feels the need to dress up in period clothing in order to sample the primitive user interface of Photoshop 1.0. Nobody receives training in the language and social mores of the 1970s before 'retro unboxing' a Polaroid camera. Such videos are casually, almost thoughtlessly, made: there are no 'consultants' credited to vouch for the reenactment's authenticity. Nevertheless, these videos represent a decisive, almost obsessive, effort to thoroughly document the technologies of the recent past. With hundreds of millions of views between them, their influence should not be underestimated. The viral success of the web series *Kids React*

undoubtedly inspired television's *That's So Last Century*. What historical reenactment television started in the late 1990s, the web continued in the mid-2010s, albeit in almost unrecognizable form.

Online historical reenactment videos reflect a particular attraction to the recent past. This attraction has a number of sources. Online video is often cheaply produced, with relatively little planning. Although YouTube is an increasingly professionalized space, serendipitously or casually captured footage remains its mainstay. It is far more likely that a YouTube creator finds an old phone in a desk drawer, or purchases a cheap obsolete model from eBay, than arranges to access the same equipment within a museum. As a result, mass-produced quotidian technologies are lavished with attention by YouTube's reenactors, while less widespread equipment is more neglected. Aside from this production constraint, the audience for such videos is relatively young, especially when compared to a typical television audience. Nostalgia, for YouTube's core audience, means technologies that developed, flourished, and fell into disuse within the last few decades: DVD players, the original Sony PlayStation, and the first-generation iPhone are all candidates for the instant nostalgia treatment of the online video historical reenactment. Fortunately, it does not matter that the target audience is so narrow, and their nostalgia so alienating for a general audience. These would be significant problems for a television documentary: indeed, after the broadcast of the first episode of *That's So Last Century*, one newspaper review complained that the show's nostalgia had missed its target.

Amusing as it was to see Vic Reeves's daughter call a cassette tape a record, and Dom Joly's son try and take a selfie with an archaic Nikon, most of us do remember when chemists doctored customers in for their naughty snaps and people re-recorded TV shows over old episodes of *Top of the Pops* on VHS.

(Wyatt 2015)

In the ultra-narrowcast space of YouTube, such criticisms carry no weight and are rarely made. Audiences can select their own precise historical interests, and those who wish to indulge their own nostalgia can select precisely the era and exactly the technology that they wish to revisit. YouTube's bottomless archive of dead technologies allows for fine distinctions: former owners of the Nokia 3310 can indulge themselves with videos of that phone, but there are countless entirely different video records of the (almost identical) Nokia 3330 as well. Videos that are annoying, patronizing, or mistargeted can simply be stopped and an alternative selected. The viewer must select the historical account that suits them, rather than (as on broadcast television) the producer needing to cater to the audience. The best – those that most capture the spirit of nostalgia for each generation and technology – might, algorithms permitting, rise to the top of trending lists. Here, online reenactment is a first draft of history, and the aspiration is not to historical rigour but to attracting views and viral circulation.

The majority of online reenactment is generated by individual users, who create highly personal videos which impart their own memories, experiences, and contexts of use upon the reenactment accounts that they produce. “I remember this,” is the characteristic refrain of producers and narrators as they stumble upon a game, ringtone, or design quirk which triggers a particular nostalgic response. Like historical reenactment television, the emphasis is on hands on interactions with old technologies: equipment is handled and manipulated, buttons pressed and functions tested. Often, the camera tightly frames the hands of the user as they perform these actions. Reenactments of the use of old technologies – “retro unboxings”, “living with the iPhone 2G for a week”, “how to go online on a 1970s era computer” – represent a form of historical narrative that is largely controlled by the individual user of the technology, rather than by academic historians or by technology companies (Ross 2014; The 8-Bit Guy 2014). They may be seen, in this way, as a peculiar form of ‘history from below’. Though this history has no explicit ideological project, and is largely shared with the world from within the corporate context of commercial platforms like YouTube, it nevertheless emancipates stories of technological innovation and use from their corporate frame and places them firmly in the hands of end-users. This is only possible because the technologies under scrutiny are recently obsolete, and have fallen into disuse well before the death of their original users.

The apparent democracy of YouTube’s platform is, of course, illusory and unstable. The platform has followed a familiar path: at first a chaotic and disorganized space, as its user base has grown its sorting, suggestion, and trending algorithms have become more sophisticated. Tight integration with Google’s advertising sales platform has led to the emergence of professional content creators – traditional media firms alongside the new phenomenon of creative media entrepreneurs known as YouTubers – who compete for the small income attracted by individual views. Inevitably, this professionalization and commercialization has led to the development of a range of loose genres. Regular visitors to YouTube will easily recognize the vlog, the unboxing video, the tutorial, the review, and the computer game playthrough. Within these genres, we also find formats akin to those found in broadcast television, of which *Kids React* is a primary example.

In its hyperactive emotional interactions with ‘old technology’ and other historical artefacts, the web series *Kids React* takes to its furthest extent Agnew’s criticism of historical reenactment television’s “historical representation that both takes affect as its object and attempts to elicit affect” (quoted in Carriger 2010, 136). The series is all performance and affect and scarcely any historical substance. *Kids React* is a sprawling format, conceived in 2010 by Benny and Rafi Fine, who trade as Fine Brothers Entertainment. The format is simple and repetitious: children are shown things – television programmes, viral videos, politicians making speeches, and so forth – and their reactions are filmed. There are various thematic sub-series within the broad format, including *Kids React! Technology*, in which old technology is placed in the hands of children and teenagers and their reactions

FIGURE 2.1 A child attempts to switch on an Apple II personal computer in *Kids React To Old Computers*.

recorded. In this series, the most-watched video is *Kids React To Old Computers* (FBE 2014). Produced as a promotional tie-in with the American cable series *Halt And Catch Fire*, *Kids React To Old Computers* features rapidly edited, intercut footage of children and teenagers of different ages ‘reacting to’, then operating and asking questions about an Apple II computer. An unseen adult answers their questions and prompts them to carry out tasks: they switch the computer on, load a floppy disk, and use the command line interface to perform a simple mathematical operation.

Though glossily and expensively produced, the kids of *Kids React* almost pass for genuine. However, as the technology writer Drew Gardner has pointed out, there is nothing ‘real’ about the reactions in *Kids React*:

The Fine Brothers found all the children in *Kids React* from notices the brothers placed on LACasting.com. The show would be more accurately titled *Child Actors React*. The children are the subjects of the show, but they are also actors playing video bloggers, cast in that role by an agency. There is a viral element at work here, but the viruses have been manufactured in a laboratory.

(Gardner 2014)

As Gardner remarks, the series represents a long tradition of “capitalizing on the affective labour of children”, which reaches back to the radio origins of *Kids Say The Darnedest Things* and extends into contemporary clip shows like *America’s Funniest Home Videos* and *You’ve Been Framed*. The focus of *Kids React* is always on cuteness and precocity, on creating viral, shareable moments that can be enjoyed in a moment of spare or squandered time; hence, *procrastitainment*. The *Kids React To . . . Old Technology* series stands out from other strands in the *React* format, because rather than having child actors react to other viral videos, they are invited

to react to tangible historical technological artefacts: the Sony Walkman cassette player, VHS VCR, rotary phones, Game Boy, typewriters, “90s internet”, and so on. Just as in so many historical reenactment television series, here children once again stand in for an audience that is working through the passing of technologies from present to past.

Indeed, the repeated attempt to capture history at the very moment of its passing from past to present is what is most striking about historical reenactment videos on YouTube. A disconnected series of amateur videos documenting the decline of the Blockbuster video rental store chain is a case in point. In the late 2010s, under pressure from online streaming services, the video rental chain Blockbuster began to collapse. The company’s demise was gradual. Stores closed in waves during a series of bankruptcies and restructuring plans. By 2013 only a few hundred stores remained in the United States and by 2017, seven years after Blockbuster filed for bankruptcy, all but a handful of the firm’s 9,000 stores had closed. Blockbuster’s slow withering created a zombie brand. When Blockbuster stores were a fixture of malls and shopping streets across the developed world, they could be overlooked as a too-familiar feature of the retail landscape. Now, the bright blue-and-yellow signage on the surviving outlets could not be ignored. No longer ubiquitous and mundane, hold-out Blockbuster franchises located in unremarkable shopping malls were a rarity and spoke of decline. Only a few years earlier, to step into a Blockbuster outlet had been to glimpse the cutting-edge of home entertainment technology. Now, with the brand in freefall and rent-by-mail services on the rise, the doors to a Blockbuster were a portal to a very recent past.

The same technological advance that ultimately killed Blockbuster – the ability to stream high definition video across the internet – created a new opportunity to record the company’s demise. Armed with digital camcorders or smartphones, YouTube content creators visited Blockbuster outlets ironically, attending the stores not to borrow a DVD but to document the absurd nostalgia of the zombie video rental store. K. Ryan Jones’s *Touring the Last Surviving Blockbuster Video* is one of the earliest examples, uploaded to YouTube in March 2013 (Ryan Jones 2013). If *Kids React* follows the producing principles of Hollywood television, then videos documenting the decline of Blockbuster embody the spirit of Dogme 95. Ryan’s video starts with a *Blair Witch Project* style title: “On a normal Thursday, at the beginning of a normal trip between Dallas, TX, and Wichita, KS, something extraordinary and heretofore thought lost was unearthed”. This gives way to a short video seemingly shot on a smartphone: “We have made an amazing discovery, like a rare animal, an endangered species, some might even say extinct: a Blockbuster Video”. Jones then leads the camera operator around the video store, delivering a satirical commentary on the store which is perfectly ‘preserved’ “just as we remembered it”. The camera orbits Jones as he holds his head in his hands and smiles in delight, aping the behaviour of the arriving family in *1900 House* and the reactions of reenactment participants reunited with old but familiar equipment. But the video is not entirely a comedy performance: Jones briefly interviews two apparently genuine customers of the shop who make a seemingly unscripted

FIGURES 2.2 AND 2.3 Applying for a new Blockbuster Video membership card and rediscovering the DVD case in ‘Touring The Last Surviving Blockbuster Video’.

contribution to the video. Jones’ mockery of Blockbuster is contrasted with the sincerity of the customers, middle-aged Midwestern women who declare “we love doing that” (going to a video rental store). At the end of the video Jones opens a new Blockbuster account and receives a membership card, which he will likely never use; for him, the transaction is satirical, but for the employee it is a matter of daily working life in a video franchise which – he must know – is likely soon to close with the loss of his job.

Jones’s tour of the ‘last surviving Blockbuster’ is not the only video of its kind to be found on YouTube. Three years later Blockbuster Video was the subject of a video in Chris Stuckmann’s “Retro Rewind” series. With the characteristic hyperbole of viral video Stuckmann explains

my wife and I actually drove out of state to Indiana to one of the few remaining Blockbusters that are still in existence. We thought they were all gone

but there are still a handful of people who have been able to hold on to their franchises, and we walked around an actual Blockbuster and, oh my gosh, it was *insane*.

(Stuckmann 2016)

As Blockbuster outlets became rarer, media organizations including the BBC, Vice, and Bloomberg News made their own media-historical pilgrimages. In July 2018, CBS Morning News dispatched a reporter to one of the last existing Blockbuster stores in the United States, in Bend, Oregon. The journalist, Jamie Yuccas, performed similar rituals to those of Jones and Stuckmann, admiring the alphabetically arranged shelves of DVDs, highlighting the antiquated point-of-sale computer equipment at the store's desk, and interviewing young adults for whom the retail experience was akin to a museum visit.

These examples of 'reenactment' on YouTube and in mainstream news media are highly specific and rather extreme. *Kids React* represents the most commercial, most formatted, and arguably least historiographically viable form of online video reenactment. Comic videos of moribund Blockbuster stores represent another form of reenactment that professional historians might struggle to identify as historical work. They share more with improvised comedy than with the practice of historical documentation. Yet it should be no surprise that the forms of historical record found on YouTube are unrecognizable to us, because YouTube – and the concept of an online video platform in general – is almost brand new. Moreover, YouTube, with its millions of hours of video content and almost global availability, is a symptom of a new technological reality: it has never been so easy to document the present in video and share and preserve the results. Taking advantage of this ease, most online videos document the present accidentally, without much thought for posterity. The examples here point towards a more specifically historical, but not much more self-conscious, use. Here, digital video records and dramatizes the present *in the process of becoming the past*. Taking advantage of the developing forms of a brand new media, they present a form of reenactment that is naturally unrecognizable from what has gone before. Yet there can be little doubt that the videographer or journalist who opens a new Blockbuster video account for no reason other than to demonstrate the process, and display the charmingly obsolete paper membership card, is staging a form of reenactment. Likewise the children, struggling to understand what a 5¼-inch floppy disk is and how it might be loaded into an Apple II personal computer are reenacting the past every bit as much as the Civil War reenactor in full battle dress. And this activity is not confined to the viral giants of the procrastitainment genre. As *Kids React* and its ilk goes viral at the surface, thousands of hours of video footage of old technologies are uploaded to YouTube. Much of this material slips without trace into the platform's unseen depths, where obscure titles and incomplete metadata condemn video material to just a handful of hundred views per year. Despite this obscurity these videos are accumulating to form a vast library of everyday experiences with, and memories of, newly obsolete media technologies. Future generations may be bequeathed an

unparalleled source of evidence of their twenty-first century ancestors' interactions with technology, if the video material we uploaded can be properly catalogued and preserved.

Bringing the living back to life

Wherever new media trends and new technological opportunities appear, academic research projects follow. And so it is with historical reenactments of the recent past, of various forms. As other chapters in this collection demonstrate, media archaeology labs, filled with ancient and obsolete computer and audiovisual equipment, have flourished within universities and museums across the world. In the United Kingdom, diverse academic projects have embraced new opportunities offered by digital video. Roger Kneebone and Abigail Wilson have recreated historical surgical practices through simulation, recording the reenacted procedures "in high definition using multiple static and roving videocams with sound" (Kneebone and Woods 2012, 33). Media historian Andrew Ireland researched the history of British television drama production by remaking a contemporary episode of *Doctor Who* using the practices and technologies of 1960s studio television production (Ireland 2012). Beyond the academy, in 2006 members of the Test Card Circle – a British organization for television history enthusiasts – marked the 70th anniversary of regular television transmissions by mounting a live outside broadcast using a 1960s television truck once operated by Southern Television. The output of the broadcast, *TV70*, was recorded and distributed on DVD but eventually withdrawn due to copyright restrictions. As the costs of creating digital video fall, and video content creation skills become more widespread, projects like these are becoming more common.

ADAPT, a research project that investigated the history of British television production technologies by way of a series of video recorded historical reenactments, provided an opportunity not only to research the history of British television, but also to closely observe the working dynamics of reenactments which feature living participants.¹ Elsewhere in this volume, Amanda Murphy describes the practical considerations involved in mounting the simulations carried out for this project. Here, I shall confine myself to noting some of the features of recent-past historical reenactments which differentiate them from more traditional reenactments, and which tie them more closely to the informal and amateur reenactments described above. In particular, it can be noted that reenactments carried out with living participants intensify the collapse of temporal boundaries. This was further intensified, in the case of the ADAPT reenactments, by the absence of costumes for participants and by the porous boundaries between the reenactment space and the world surrounding it. In short, having participants wear their own clothes, and not fencing them in to a 'reenactment space', tends to make the past seem closer and more familiar. Beyond these practical concerns, we can note a marked difference in the type of memory work being conducted. In a traditional reenactment, 'modern' participants learn

historical skills which are new to them. In ADAPT's reenactments, as in any carried out with survivor-participants, old skills are not learned afresh but revived and remembered.

Historical reenactments of any sort collapse temporal boundaries. Carrying out reenactments with living participants brings this collapse to the fore. The boundary between past and present, porous in any reenactment, melts away almost entirely when the recent past is simulated. ADAPT carried out historical reenactment experiments with people who had, in the past, worked in technical production roles in British television. When recruited, many participants were found either in retirement or in second careers. When participants were still working in the industrial role which was to be reenacted they were often working with a radically changed set of technologies. (Were the technologies not radically changed, there would be little point in carrying out a reenactment.) To give a number of illustrative examples: when ADAPT reunited outside broadcast producers and engineers who had joined the BBC in the 1960s and 1970s, all had retired from the Corporation and none was still working in their former role. Simulations of other technologies recruited individuals who were not yet retired but were working in radically different settings or with technologies that had evolved beyond recognition. A television editor who had learned her craft with 16mm film at a Steenbeck table, for example, was now working with digital non-linear editing software. At the very least, participants came to reenactments prepared to revive past versions of themselves. Others – those whose had not retired or left broadcasting – volunteered to perform a day's work, simply swapping contemporary tools and equipment for those they had used in the past. The television editor took a day away from her Avid editing console to return to cutting 16mm film at a Steenbeck. As a result, to participants in reenactments of the recent past, the 'gap' between the present and the reenacted past often seemed remarkably small. After the shock of a reunion with old equipment and former colleagues, the next emotion expressed was often of surprise at how close the past seemed to be: though it has been so long, participants commented, *it seems like yesterday*.

There are many reasons why the past seems so recent to such participants. Some have nothing to do with the conditions set by the investigators, and everything to do with the workings of human memory. Many reenactments have asked participants to recall the work they did in their formative years, during the "reminiscence bump" thought to enhance memories of a person's teenage years and twenties. These memories, more detailed and vivid than those made during the years of middle age, will naturally seem surprisingly close to the present day. Furthermore, participants in reenactments such as these are usually recruited weeks or months in advance and tended to be 'auditioned' by the investigators via a telephone call or series of emails. During the period between the project's initial contact with the participant and their arrival in the reenactment space, all participants – whether consciously or subconsciously – reflected upon the history of their working life. In most cases, this process was entirely conscious. In fact, it was solicited to some degree by the project team. Participants recalled old anecdotes and made efforts to

remember old equipment. Often, they presented themselves in the reenactment space with a cache of personal archive documents, bringing payslips, photographs, and contracts as written counterparts to their memory. The overt outcome of this process is one of generous memory-sharing – “I thought you might like to see . . .” – but this everyday phrase masks a complex underlying process of memory retrieval. The participants, arriving with folder of photographs in hand, had spent some time in their memory boxes (physical and mental), and had in the process drawn themselves closer to their own past. Under these conditions it is little wonder that by the time the reenactment takes place, the reenacted past ‘seems like yesterday’.

Other, more physical, conditions of reenactment may have the tendency to make the past seem closer and more familiar. One of these is the absence of costume. Costumes carry great importance in traditional historical reenactments. A reenactment of the distant past requires its audience to suspend their disbelief in much the same way as a theatre performance or film screening. Suspension of disbelief may be aided by detail and authenticity: the more comprehensively realistic the reenactor’s costume, tools, and patterns of speech, then the more likely it is that the audience can immerse themselves temporarily in the reenacted world. In some reenactments – especially those in which the reenactment takes place both for the pleasure of the reenactors and for the entertainment or education of the audience – this immersion must also help the performers to enjoy their own activity. However, in this context, detail and apparent authenticity can also work against the suspension of disbelief. It creates a stronger contrast between the reenacted event and the modern world in which it takes place. However accurate the stitching on the Tudor reenactor’s coat, however strong the smell of gunpowder after the musket fight, the audience must eventually return their attention to smartphones, car parks, their own modern dress: to all of the trappings of their modern environment. In the reenactment of the distant past, then, detail and authenticity works both for and against believability: creating a deeper immersion within the

FIGURE 2.4 Bill Chesneau, Ray Sutcliffe, John Adderley and David Whitson participate in a reenactment of 1970s television film production.

reenactment event, but a stronger contrast between *then* and *now*. In an investigative reenactment of the recent past, involving living survivors, the reverse is true. Participants take part in the event wearing their own clothes: modern dress, not a costume. This is partly because the recent past creates an assumption that costuming may not be necessary. There seems to be little difference between the casual shirt, shoes, and trousers worn by a location camera operator in the 1970s and the same outfit worn by the same person 40 years later. (An historian of clothing, of course, might point to advances in synthetic and breathable fabrics. For true fidelity even to the recent past, reenactment organizers may conclude that even such a recent reenactment demands a costume constructed only from materials available in the 1970s or 1980s.)

The lack of a costume is just one of the ways in which the boundary between the reenactment and modern world – often a prominent delineation in a more traditional reenactment – is blurred and sometimes completely erased. Participants in ADAPT simulations were not fenced into a reenactment space. Neither were any of their contemporary accessories – such as mobile phones – confiscated or voluntarily surrendered during the reenactment process. Across a number of different simulations, this lack of a boundary created various challenges to historical fidelity. The project's simulation of 16mm location film shooting was interrupted and modified on a number of occasions when equipment stopped working and needed to be fixed using tools or accessories kept in vans parked outside the reenactment space. Participants traversed an invisible boundary between past and present, bringing tools and knowledge of the present into the space of the past. They were not discouraged from doing so and there was no suggestion that, by doing so, they compromised the integrity of the experiment. On another occasion, during one of the most important moments of a simulation of outside broadcast television production, one of the participants took a call on his mobile phone.

The final characteristic of ADAPT's historical reenactments, which it shares with informal online reenactments of the sort described above, may also be the most important. Participants do not self-consciously adopt 'characters'; instead, they 'play' themselves. Consequently they do not acquire or learn about skills, but revive and remember skills they once learned and, perhaps, still practise. This makes for a dramatic comparison with the traditional historical reenactor, who must learn how to hold and safely operate a Civil War musket, or – in the example described by Agnew and Cook – learn how to climb the masts and negotiate the rigging of a tall ship. There are plenty of online videos depicting the learning of new skills, but what unites most historical reenactments of recent technologies is the display of reawakened skills, and the performance of the connection between the intellectual statement "I remember" or "It seems like yesterday" and the physical experience of recalling where to put one's hands in order to operate a piece of machinery. This transaction is at the crux of what historical reenactment of recently used technologies must achieve, and it is for this reason that participants are neither dressed up in costumes nor fenced into an historical world nor asked to play a character they are not. These theatrical flourishes, though tempting because

they are so effectively modelled by historical reenactment television formats, must be avoided because they would hinder the very transaction that we are trying to get to: the reawakening of lost, forgotten, or dormant skill.

Conclusions

Historical reenactment television in its later phase; viral tech-nostalgia on YouTube; academic reenactments of the recent past: all profoundly different, but all born of a single historical moment. These are the cultural products of cheap, ubiquitous video camera equipment and widespread high speed internet access. Improbably, Facebook and YouTube have become laboratories for media archaeologists, enthusiasts, curators, and researchers. On these platforms, where historical research is performed without fanfare, funding, or institutional support, reenactments are pushed directly to the attention of the ‘crowd’ – that epithet for the vast undifferentiated mass audience thought to inhabit the world wide web. The crowd, though, is discriminating and specialist, and its members add their own expert memories and reminiscences, often detailing not only what they know and remember but also how they felt.²

In the historical spaces of the web, feelings matter. Affect has become a currency of online video, and so it is perfectly natural that emotional responses to old technologies should permeate online video reenactments. With affect as its fuel, the drive to capture and preserve nostalgia for recently deceased technologies is leaving a valuable digital exhaust: an unrivalled, semi-democratic, grassroots documentation of contemporary technologies. Never have everyday technologies, in full working order and in all their variations of design and permutations of usage, been so comprehensively and diversely documented by contemporary users. Future historians will not regret the personal and emotional investment put into these videos. Instead, such evidence of affect will be a vital component of their understanding of not only how technologies work but what they meant to the people who used them.

The practice of video-recording reenactments of the use of technologies and placing the resulting footage online may be relatively new, but as this chapter has demonstrated, it emerges from a series of well-established sources. Its roots are in the fields of historical reenactment and oral history, while the method of presentation and preservation owes much to technologies and visual styles developed by the ‘legacy’ media of scheduled television. The online platforms where these videos reside are not as revolutionary as they once seemed; what at first appeared to be disruptive new technology startups have become firmly entrenched in traditional corporate media structures. Online reenactment videos can, as I have tentatively argued here, be a form of history from below. But uploading the results to YouTube or shared on Facebook is simply to entrust the fruits of this labour to multibillion dollar tech giants. Online video sharing and social media have brought to the surface, and to some degree democratized, a shared impulse to record and reenact history before it fades from living memory. However, to

secure the evidence of these reenactments for the future, a further revolution is needed. Online video reenactments should be another impetus to develop the long-proposed notion of the digital public space: a posited “arrangement of shared technologies, standards and processes that will be collaboratively developed and commonly applied” (Ageh 2013, 6) in order to provide a non-corporatized, publicly owned space in which – among other purposes – cultural heritage might be preserved for the long term.

Notes

- 1 ADAPT was a research project that investigated the history of television production technologies by reunited retired television production professionals with obsolete equipment. The project filmed a series of historical reenactment exercises. The project received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 323626). The results can be viewed at <http://www.adaptTVhistory.org.uk> and the full collection of digital videos filmed during the project is located at <https://doi.org/10.17637/rh.c.3925603>.
- 2 The online debate around ADAPT has been relatively muted because the project did not exist in a social media space like Facebook nor offer a comment facility on its own website. A stronger example of this sort of ongoing debate may be found in initiatives such as Jackson’s *Pebble Mill Project*, discussed by Jackson elsewhere in this volume.

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