



# Excavating Information Loss: Interview with Ella Klik



Ella Klik works on media theory and history with an emphasis on the intersection between technology, materiality, aesthetics, and memory.

Currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the USC Society of Fellows, she is working on her book manuscript *Undos: An Archaeology of Erasable Media*, which offers a theoretical exploration of deletion and exclusion in the design of recording technologies from the phonograph to the digital present.

**Michael Faciejew:** Information and knowledge are conventionally studied through practices of collection and recording. Can you tell us how you came to study practices of

**Ella Klik:** In thinking through concepts that are central to memory and trauma studies, such as forgetting, I began to recognize that the specificity of different media is often treated as peripheral to the analysis of texts and objects. My dissertation research subsequently took shape by thinking first and foremost about the materiality of techniques and technologies. I consider it essential to explore how popular imaginaries, commercial interests, and scholarly discourses often disavow the fragility, disorder, transience, and instability of recorded matter and of the devices and institutions that act as their caretakers. (Perhaps the most egregious example of this is microfilm.)

Zeroing in on erasure became a strategy for researching archives and recording media in a manner that draws from post-structuralist theories concerning the co-constitutive collapse of negative and positive. In my book manuscript I explore the functionality of deletion in the design of past and present recording media to show how the logic of erasure is surprisingly essential to cultural production. For instance, Thomas Edison conceived the cylinder shaver as a companion to sound recording technology. Put differently, the history of media creating various forms of “collectible stuff” relies on the ability to remove information for multiple reasons: technical, artistic, political, or financial. But the archival search for erasure (an interesting paradox in its own right) is only half of the story, as the encounter with recorded objects typically does not reveal traces of undoing. This is why conventional approaches to

**Michael Faciejew:** Your chapter in the volume [Miscommunications: Errors, Mistakes, Media](#) discusses “accidental” images taken and stored on contemporary devices—images that are transformed by blurs, glitches, and ghostliness. How does the unintentional archive you discuss destabilize our understanding of “information”? Moreover, given the proliferation of accidental recordings across digital media, is there more “unintentionality” at play in knowledge production today?

**Ella Klik:** The term information already implies that data is valuable for some aim, however undetermined; yet even accidental data is the product of various forms of capture and intervention. In this piece, I explored images produced by an unplanned encounter between the body and a photographic device. These objects indexically attest to the possibility of creating media even when control mechanisms are put in place to prevent such misuse. Arrested in photographic form, the accidental images expose the constant tension between several categories of media objects: things captured with intention, information that is retroactively deemed useful (ephemera for historical research, biological traces, archaeological remains, etc.), and finally, undesired records to be discarded. Becoming attentive to the latter category will remind us that information can move between such hierarchical categories and that the distinctions between them is often

Even more so, the images I was interested in show that apparatuses and systems can fail to meet our expectations yet continue to function. This challenges our common assumptions of what a frictionless relationship to technology looks like. That is, well beyond simple chance, the images hint at the potentiality of unruly media creating technically unintended yet aesthetically compelling objects. Of course, even unintentionality is variegated; in this context, I focused on the accidental initiation of the recording process, but there are also other instances where the accident appears at the recording stage or beyond it. Content accidentally caught “on tape”—pardon the anachronistic idiom—are of course rife on social media, producing comical or terrifying effects.

**Michael Faciejew:** In your paper [“We Should Have Had a Historian,”](#) you engage the relation of “accident” to “archive” in a different way. Looking at the 1969 moon landing, you discuss how the tapes containing the original footage were mistakenly recycled by NASA, meaning that the footage itself was erased. What methodological opportunities arise when knowledge goes missing or is corrupted? And how does your understanding of erasure distinguish between human error and technical glitches?

**Ella Klik:** This case study examines retroactive suppositions regarding how and what kinds of events ought to be recorded and preserved for posterity. Safekeeping is a cultural, political, and social decision that is often examined only when some kind of archival absence becomes perceptible. The disappearance of the moon landing tapes is an opportunity to cut through the many well-known treatments of this event, which is celebrated as a milestone in live broadcasting. In terms of methodology, I am particularly drawn to these kinds of events and the ways in which they are inscribed into the histories of media studies themselves. Instead of liveness and synchronicity, concepts usually attached to the media history of the moon landing, the eventual erasure is better understood in terms of the engineering decisions involved in the circulation and capturing of a historic event onto magnetic tape. The recycling of the data recordings sent from the moon is an accident initiated by archival constraints, but, at the same time, one that stems from the affordances designed into a system of actions: recording, transmission, storage, and reuse. On the one hand, this can be read as a story of data corruption, and on the other hand, as an archival mechanism working perfectly well, bearing in mind the limitations of space that most archives have to manage. That is, this accident could only have occurred because there was already a prescribed set of actions to be performed.

Conversely, glitches undo the imaginary of faultless execution within systems. It is precisely when errors and glitches derail the performance of processes and objects that we become alert to the workings of technology, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger and so many other thinkers have argued. Accidents and errors

construed, or glitch, more specifically, is somewhat different. One points to the “machine” and the other to the user, yet both are useful for thinking through the relation between humans and media.

**Michael Faciejew:** You are also working on a project that focuses on digital reconstructions of lost objects. Can you discuss what kinds of objects/documents you are interested in and how they are being recovered?

**Ella Klik:** With the exception of writings on dead/zombie technologies, most often we stop tracking the lifespan of objects when they obsolesce. In this project, I am primarily interested in processes of reconstruction and approximation that occur well after objects are no longer operable or tangible. For example, for “[Material Speculation: Isis](#),” the artist Morehshin Allahyari created 3D models of destroyed statues based on various information sources, allowing something lost to be printed into a new body and material. Allahyari’s work also anticipates future threats by embedding different layers and materialities of data within the object, evoking loss in terms of machine-readable techniques that inevitably obsolesce and the constant deterioration of matter.

These kinds of experiments suggest that loss is part and parcel of reconstruction and that alongside changing historical conditions, there are also technological shifts driven by market

disposing of devices, and “innovating” with new formats. I suggest that past and contemporary reconstruction techniques used by scientists and researchers in the natural sciences, humanities, and arts present an opportunity to think with the epistemologies of incomplete data and future loss rather than simply elide it. This research, then, is a coupling of questions that are both historical and speculative: what does loss look like when it is objectified, measured, and reconstructed?

**Michael Faciejew:** Can you elaborate on how the “designed ephemerality” of digital images, sounds, and other media plays out in contemporary culture? Should our understanding of the “archive” evolve in our cultural moment of ephemerality?

**Ella Klik:** I use the term designed ephemerality to point to a moment of dissonance, which is not necessarily limited to digital media but is frequently experienced online. While users have certain expectations of what media technologies do, their design also enfolds the possible execution of an opposite function. Every so often, a news story breaks about the disappearance of a website or the wiping of numerous files from one platform or another. These incidents serve as a reminder that the possibility of deleting data is central to the systems that keep it. The current moment is ambiguous in that we are haunted by both the fear of losing information and the anxiety over already stored data. Fleeting social media interactions that linger in the cache of users’ devices exemplify this tension. It seems that the more information is digitally archived by default

governments, the more there is a (re)fascination with ephemerality as a means of ensuring privacy, at least on the discursive level. Yet, as social media research repeatedly demonstrates, the majority of users of certain ages and nationalities have moved on from such concerns, suggesting that the appeal of these ephemeral curiosities may be due to factors other than the desire for non-storage.

This is all to say that I am not sure that the concept of “archive” should necessarily evolve or change in light of designed ephemerality since it remains as fraught a term as ever. For several centuries now, archives have performed an important task, which solidified our present (and exaggerated) beliefs regarding the lifespan of data and the prospects of accessing it in the future. Needless to say, archives have served as protectors and also gatekeepers of what merits collecting and what ought to be removed, something that is increasingly mirrored and transformed in demands for moderation of contents online (in other words, information considered worthy and unworthy to be hosted on publicly accessible platforms). Perhaps it is instead worth thinking about the problematic utilization of “archivability” as a marketing technique for digital products rather than shifting the focus altogether.

## Conversations we are having...

We want to revisit a wider range of older forms of world-making with open minds, as historical case studies that might inspire or constrain the new universalisms that surround us in the present day.