As Plato rightly noted, it would take too long to recount all that King Thamus said for and against young Theuth’s many inventions. However, when it came to the technology of writing, the wise king took serious issue with the exuberant inventor’s claim to discovering “a sure receipt for memory and wisdom.”

Thamus scornfully replied: “Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrances by external signs instead of by their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. As for wisdom, your pupils will have a reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant” (*Phaedrus*, 274d-275a).

The irony is unmistakable and delicious. Plato, the most famous writer in the western canon, speaks through Socrates, perhaps the most famous philosopher in history (in spite of the fact that Socrates never wrote anything, and precisely because Plato did), fabricating on paper an oral exchange between a mythical king and inventor in order to deconstruct writing as a tool not for remembering but for forgetting.

In his delightful new book, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in a Digital Age*, Viktor Mayer-Shönberger likewise examines how technology reconfigures remembering and forgetting, but takes quite a different tack.

In contrast to King Thamus, Mayer-Shönberger is preoccupied with the possibility of what he calls “perfect remembering.” As he describes, “[f]or millennia, the relationship between remembering and forgetting remained clear. Remembering was hard and costly, and humans had to choose deliberately what to remember. The default was to forget. In the digital age, in what is perhaps the most fundamental change for humans since our humble beginnings, the balance of remembering and forgetting has become inverted. Committing information to digital memory has become the default, and forgetting the exception” (p.196).

This is problematic, Mayer-Shönberger contends, because “[f]orgetting plays a central role in decision-making. It lets us act in time, cognizant of, but not shackled by, past events. Through perfect memory we may lose a fundamental human capacity—to live and act firmly in the present.” (p.12) Adding his own twist to Plato’s ironic understanding of the power of the written word, Mayer-Shönberger offers a prescription that might well be described as a *memento mori* for our digital existence. Because the digital age inverts Tacitus’ *corpora lente augescet cito extinguuntur* (“bodies grow slowly and die quickly”), because our digital corpus will not die, we must impose an expiration date—i.e., *we must remember to forget!*
Mayer-Shönberger’s memento mori digiti (he never calls it that) is proposed as an imperfect antidote to digitization, cheap storage, easy retrieval, global access, and increasingly powerful software, the sum total of which extends and eclipses the power of the written word. Together, these advances in information technology create a world where search engines and databases can “remember” our every move and where social network sites are able to “recollect” intricate details of our lives with considerable persistence.

After detailing the importance of remembering and forgetting, Mayer-Shönberger offers several examples of the attendant consequences in the demise of forgetting. For starters, the demise of forgetting has a panoptic effect. Because we don’t know whether or when others might revive our digital memories, we tend to behave as though we are always being observed (p.109). At the same time, we generally fail to recognize that digital memories are subject to external manipulation. Among Mayer-Shönberger’s many excellent examples is an interesting discussion of eBay’s shifting approach to online reputation: “By the spring of 2008, the widespread behavior of gaming reputation memory led eBay to a dramatic reversal of its informational policy. … Whereas since its beginning, eBay’s trademark had been to remember reputation, it has now introduced the deliberate forgetting of bad experiences.” (p.95)

But Mayer-Shönberger’s central focus—indeed, the subtitle of the book—is the virtue of forgetting in a digital age. Forgetting allows us to “regain the freedom to generalize, conceptualize, and most importantly to act” (p.118). “Without our ability to forget, whenever faced with a decision we would always recall all our past decisions, resulting in potential indecision…” (p.117). We are offered numerous examples as food for thought. In one, we are asked to imagine two friends with a complicated history, saddled with digital memories and, consequently, an uneasy ability to transcend the past—“the idea that John, good old John, blatantly deceived [Jane] is suddenly at the forefront of her mind. … Without Jane’s wanting to, digital memory revived an event she had failed to recall, muddying her positive emotions towards John” (p.113-4).

These examples illustrate the important role that forgetting has played throughout human history, enabling us to escape the shackles of our past. Mayer-Shönberger also enumerates various dangers inherent in perpetual digital memory and the ease with which personal information can be taken out of context. "Digital tools [hasten the] transition to systems of abstract ordering and categorization, stripping away original context. … In contrast, going through a conventional file sequentially provides quite a bit of context. It may help one to understand how a situation evolved over time, and add background and circumstantial information that is largely missing from an information snippet directly accessed through digital retrieval. Much of the ordering structures used by digital retrieval disregard such context" (p.78). The subsequent use of digital memories also runs the risk of disregarding important social context—"...if [Jane and John made amends] ‘in person’ rather than over email, Jane's digital memory will not retrieve it. Reconstructing the past without that important piece results in a fundamentally incomplete picture.” (p.122)

Restoring some semblance of balance is necessary, Mayer-Shönberger contends. It requires an “extra quantum of human effort”—an institutionalized shift in human and social awareness, emerging technological tools and legislative support that will “flip the default back to where it has been for millennia, from remembering forever to forgetting over time.” (p.169) Here, his memento mori digiti comes into play. “One possible way we can mimic human forgetting in the digital realm is by associating information we store in digital memory with expiration dates that users set.” (p.171) He imagines software that precludes users from saving a document without marking an expiration date, a small bit of meta-data that would serve as a reminder of the enormous volume of personal information collected and stored about us, much of which we may well wish to forget.

An ingenious supplement to the ‘limited collection’ principle expressed in global data privacy regimes, “[e]xpiration dates limit the amount of information companies, and even the government, may have
available on consumers and citizens.” (p.175) Recognizing that this might require the support of laws mandating information storage devices to include code to support expiration date meta-data (and to control the persistence of the expiration date even after it is shared), Mayer-Shönberger imagines what is, in essence, a privacy-friendly digital management system (DRM). Except that the purpose of these DRMs is to provide technological enforcement to only one kind of right: the right of expiry. Expiration rights are offered as a supplement rather than an alternative to other possible responses to the demise of forgetting in a digital age—digital abstinence, information privacy rights, digital privacy rights infrastructure, cognitive adjustments, information ecology, and perfect contextualization—the shortcomings of each of which he discusses in considerable detail.

*Delete* is an excellent book, worthwhile for anyone interested in surveillance studies, informational privacy and the broader digital agenda. As a scholar working in the area, I enjoyed reflecting on the intriguing and inspiring arguments supporting the reinstatement of forgetting through institutionalized expiry dates. I agree with many of his claims but, more importantly, the book carefully and artfully frames a debate that desperately needs to happen. Although some critics might complain that the author never spells out exactly how an expiration-based scheme would work or how it relates to existing data retention proposals, in fairness, his proposal was never intended as the last word on the subject: “[w]hile I believe in the validity of enabling forgetting through expiration dates, I acknowledge that they too come with inherent weaknesses, and fail to address all problems of remembering. … I want us to commence a wide-ranging, open, and intense discussion about forgetting, and how we can ensure that we’ll remember its importance in our digital future” (p.198-199).

In the spirit of contributing to the broader discussion, I end by framing two sets of additional questions implicated by Mayer-Shönberger’s argument but not (adequately) discussed in his book.

What is the fundamental relationship between “internal” and “external” memory? In what sense are “digital memories” like human memories? Or, is this just an enticing metaphor?

Pursuing these psychological questions is crucial since *Delete’s* central argument is premised on a strong link between digital and human memory. Mayer-Shönberger expressly relies on Schacter and other notable psychologists to refute a view of human memory as merely the wetware version of digital information storage and retrieval, adopting the prominent view in the literature that memory is influenced by current events and priming, is reconstructed once recalled and is altered by later experiences.

If memories *do* consolidate over time, what exactly is the psychological link between “forgetting” and “deleting”? And, if we set permanent expiration dates, how will we achieve the digital corollary of remembering things that were once forgotten? After all, the psychological literature indicates that forgotten information is not so much “deleted” from our minds as it is modified or reconfigured when we recollect memories in the context of our present condition. One wonders, how might psychological processes of remembering and forgetting be affected once significant digital “memories” have been wiped clean?

A second set of questions arises when we move from individual memories to notions of collective/social/cultural/historical memory. While Mayer-Shönberger pays significant attention to individual psychology, he doesn’t spend much time reflecting on what sociologists, anthropologists, archivists or historians might say about the *Delete* proposal.

Certainly, social and cultural influences affect how we adapt our memory of an event to present circumstances and *vice versa.* “Forgetting” in this sense is different from deleting; it is not simply a biological/mechanical disconnection that disables access to old information. Unlike individual memory, collective memory can actually strengthen with age. Likewise, collective memory formation (what a
culture “remembers”/“forgets”) depends on various social influences, including who has voice, authority, power or ownership of the evidentiary or historical record.

In this context, there are many who would seek to preserve digital memories in perpetuity. For example, some believe that the recent donation of “public” Twitter feeds to the U.S. Library of Congress offers a (democratizing) opportunity to expand/enhance our historical record. Privacy controversies notwithstanding, the existence of these archives could provide tremendous insight regarding the views of millions of citizens, including their largely unedited reactions to important social, cultural and historical events. At the same time, recognizing that someone is empowered to make decisions about that archive, the question of who-gets-to-delete-what becomes a much more significant and contentious question not easily addressed by the individualistic Delete proposal. Likewise, we will need to consider the effect of individual expiration policies on social remembering and forgetting.

All of this points to what I find most intriguing about this book. Delete not only reminds us that the persistence of digital records has enormous and untold social repercussions but also hints at a shift towards what others and I have called an evidentiary society—a world where the recording of an event is at least as valuable as its meaning. Plato understood this when he wrote down the myths recounted by his teacher Socrates. The same might be said of me as a reviewer, knowing that the digital memory captured in an online, open access journal is sure to outlast the blobs of ink preserved on cellulose pulp that gave rise to these modest reflections about a book well worth reading.