UC SANTA BARBARA

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Humans have always associated who we *are* with who we *were*. That is, our sense of identity — ethnic, tribal, national — came from the stories we told one another about our past. But what happens to us when we lose or ignore our shared history? What is our obsession with the instant-on *now* doing to our sense of time and history?

Those are some of the questions Alan Liu, a distinguished professor of English at UC Santa Barbara, tackles in his recently published “Friending the Past: The Sense of History in the Digital Age” (University of Chicago Press). A deep, scholarly exploration of history and the ways in which it has been shared, the book is the natural extension of his pioneering work in digital media and historicism.

Indeed, perhaps no scholar is more suited to writing about history in the age of Facebook and Twitter than Liu. He embraced the early rise of the internet and was one of the first to see how it could complement the humanities. In the early 1990s he began collecting internet links, and in 1994 created the website Voice of the Shuttle, a hand-coded collection of links to online resources in the humanities. Today he is one of the nation’s leading scholars of digital humanities.

Liu’s journey in that early World Wide Web piqued his interest in the nexus of “historicism and history,” he said, “and new information and communications media, which prized above all that which was happening instantaneously and had the highest value, right now, which fades in five minutes and would be gone after a day.”

It was, Liu said, the opposite of our traditional sense of history. He became interested in “understanding better how different people at different times and different nations conceive of history.”

History, he said, has at least two axes: temporal and social. In the former, the more history you’re aware of, the deeper your sense of history. Socially, the more history you’re aware of, the more you’re aware of the trappings of history around you, such as crowds, protest marches and the like. Put them together in particular configurations, he explained, and you have a particular generation or a nation’s sense of its relevant history.

“The internet, I began to see, was so much about sociality — social media, networks and reaching out to people — *right now* with almost no sense of deep time,” Liu said. “How do we square that with older ages which valued a different sense of history, one which bound their sense of a nation together and their sense of community based on ancestors and previous generations? How do we bind our nation together now without that older sense of temporality based on new social networks and so on?”

In “Friending the Past,” Liu mines humanity’s sense of history from oral traditions to the nonlinearity of Romantic poetry to the digital witchcraft of Web 2.0. History is not lost, he argues, but the way in which we narrate its place in society is so different than what we knew that we’re forced to reimagine the way the story is told.

He cites the aftermath of the French Revolution as an example of that challenge. It took a century for people to relearn how to think about history and retell the story of what was happening to them as a nation, he said.

“Immediately after the French Revolution,” Liu explained, “we have a whole 60 years of historians who sought to answer the simple question, ‘What is a crowd?’ Because they never had to answer that question before to tell the story of history. It used to be the case that to tell the nation’s history you just need to tell the story of kings and queens, and what happened in the great dynastic turnover moments.”

But the revolution featured 100,000 nobodies without titles or other easy references of world-changing importance. With the internet — a few microns deep and 7 billion people wide — we’re in a similar moment now, he said.

“How does social media work?” Liu said. “What is in one’s inbox? How does that represent one’s organization or corporation or community? We’re in that early phase

of trying to explain how this all holds together and is meaningful in a way that can be narrated and told.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.