

composition of photographs, yet their potential circulation has grown unfathomably wide. The same holds true for moving images. If shooting a home movie was once an elaborate and costly endeavor that entailed careful planning and selection, in the twenty-first century, it has become just one of a number of daily screen-based activities, from streaming videos to FaceTiming with friends. At no cost and in virtually no time, representations of the most quotidian moments can now be broadcast to millions of viewers.

Once relegated to the margins, children and teens are no longer absent from images or represented merely through the eyes of adults, and this appears to hold true, albeit with some notable discrepancies, around the world.⁴⁸ As we near the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, young people have access to both still and moving-image technologies and to the platforms needed to disseminate images. In the future, childhood and adolescence will increasingly be seen and understood through the lens of children and teens rather than that of adults. This is a welcome shift. If the destiny of a child of the 1950s or the 1970s was to end up as an actor in a silent family film orchestrated by the head of their household, children and teens are now empowered to direct, shoot, and star in their own movies. There is also a growing audience for young people's media creations. While most children and adolescents continue to produce media for friends and family, they can also reach a much wider audience.⁴⁹ The value of putting media into the hands of young people is not at issue here. The issue this book seeks to explore is what happens when these largely spontaneous representations of childhood and adolescence are not only widely and indefinitely circulated but also turned into data. After all, who is this "data subject," and how do they manage both to forget and to achieve the sometimes necessary and liberating experience of being forgotten?

2

Forgetting and Being Forgotten in the Age of the Data Subject

For children and adolescents, forgetting and being forgotten hold specific import. After all, the process of growing up is contingent on both forgetting one's younger self and having it forgotten by others—at least the parts of that self that one can't bear to carry forward into adulthood. As I contend in this book, digital media technologies interfere with this process. While the consequences of this interference are not yet fully known or understood, I am certainly not the only one concerned about the potential impact.

Recent attempts to enact legislation in support of the "right to be forgotten" have been driven at least in part by concerns about children and youth. A proposal by the European Commission (EC) on the right to be forgotten originally paid particular attention to young "data subjects": "The data subject shall have the right to obtain from the controller the erasure of personal data relating to them and the abstention of further dissemination of such data, especially in

relation to personal data made available by the data subject while he or she was a child.”¹ In a 2012 speech, Viviane Reding, then vice president of the EC, underscored this point: “It is the individual who should be in the best position to protect the privacy of their data by choosing whether or not to provide it. It is therefore important to empower EU citizens, particularly teenagers, to be in control of their own identity online.”² When the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation finally came into effect in 2018, the legislation still contained provisions concerning the collection and processing of data belonging to children under the age of sixteen.³

Young data subjects have also been singled out for protection in other jurisdictions. Since 2015, California minors, but not adults, have had the right to request that information they post online be removed, and the state’s businesses must notify all minors and their parents of this right.⁴ The California legislation, however, applies only to material a young person has posted online themselves, not to material posted by others. Emerging legislation in the United Kingdom goes much further. In preparation for the country’s exit from the European Union, UK legislators have been working to draft data erasure laws that would replace and extend the reach of the European General Data Protection Regulation. The United Kingdom’s Data Protection Bill, drafted in September 2017, contains twenty-three mentions of the word “child” and provides strong protection for children and teens.⁵

That data erasure laws in both Europe and North America have focused on young people is not entirely surprising, since these laws reflect the common assumption that children and adolescents lack sound judgment. But minors’ ability to judge what to post online is not my focus here. Rather, I explore the importance of the right to be forgotten—and the right to forget, which is frequently contingent

on being forgotten by others—particularly for young people. Growing up is as much a process of forgetting and being forgotten as it is an accumulation of knowledge and experiences. As a result, long-standing concerns about children, adolescents, and the media need to be radically rethought. Instead of asking how to protect young people from online predators, the real question we should be asking is how to protect them from themselves and, more specifically, from the selves they may eventually wish to leave behind as they arrive in adulthood.

Reparative Perspectives on Forgetting

Collective forgetting, like collective memory, is generally understood as a social phenomenon. While there are certainly many reasons why people forget en masse, collective forgetting is nearly always characterized in negative terms. This is not surprising, since it often involves a form of forgetting that supports a specific political mandate, such as forgetting about the legacy of colonialism or slavery.⁶ By contrast, individual forgetting is often represented as a reparative process by philosophers, psychoanalysts, and experimental psychologists.

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche concludes that forgetting might simply be a matter of shutting the doors and windows of consciousness. Just as one might close the door of one’s study to focus on work, from time to time one needs to close off one’s consciousness:

To shut the doors and windows of consciousness for a while; not to be bothered by the noise and battle with which our underworld of serviceable organs work with and against each

other; a little peace, a little *tabula rasa* of consciousness to make room for something new, above all for the nobler functions and functionaries, for ruling, predicting, pre-determining (our organism runs along oligarchic lines, you see)—that, as I said, is the benefit of active forgetfulness, like a doorkeeper or guardian of mental order, rest and etiquette: from which we can immediately see how there could be no happiness, cheerfulness, hope, pride, *immediacy*, without forgetfulness.

Nietzsche is emphatic: for the person who cannot forget, there can be no happiness, no hope, and no immediacy. The person who cannot forget “cannot ‘cope’ with anything.” And yet, he goes on to point to a strange and inherent contradiction in humans: “Precisely this necessarily forgetful animal, in whom forgetting is a strength, representing a form of *robust* health, has bred for himself a counter-device, memory, with the help of which forgetfulness can be suspended in certain cases.” Rather than view forgetting as something that threatens memory, Nietzsche implores his readers to consider an opposite scenario—one in which memory threatens the necessary and welcome practice of forgetting. “Forgetfulness is not just a *vis inertiae*, as superficial people believe,” he insists, “but is rather an active ability to suppress, positive in the strongest sense of the word.”⁷

Since Nietzsche, other reparative readings of forgetting have been put forward by thinkers across disciplines. Sigmund Freud’s observation that we frequently forget or distort events as a way to cope with those things we find intolerable or traumatic is likely the most well known reparative reading of forgetting, but it is certainly not the only attempt to substantiate forgetting’s potential function. In his 1932 work *Remembering*, the psychologist Frederic

Bartlett remarked that forgetting may hold “great psychological importance.”⁸ More recently, a growing body of work has emphasized the benefits of forgetting. The neuroscientists Michael Anderson and Simon Hanslmayr have further developed the concept of “motivated forgetting.” Like Nietzsche, who suggests that forgetting is necessary to maintain some semblance of happiness, cheerfulness, hope, and pride, Anderson and Hanslmayr argue that “to sustain positive emotions or concentration, belief in some state of affairs, confidence, or optimism, it may be necessary to reduce accessibility of experiences that undermine those states.”⁹ Likewise, the experimental psychologist Benjamin Storm observes, “As frustrating as forgetting might seem, we are far better with it than we would be without it.”¹⁰ In the era of digital media, however, the once taken-for-granted ability to “shut the doors and windows of consciousness for a while” is now at risk.

In the twenty-first century, even Nietzsche’s metaphor takes on a profoundly different meaning. The word “window,” after all, is now more likely to conjure up the window on a screen than the architectural feature to which he originally alluded. But closing the windows on our devices is profoundly different from closing the windows in our home. Closing the windows and drawing the curtains prevents us from seeing out, but it also prevents the world from peering in. When we close the windows on a digital device we can no longer see out (what’s online is closed off), but this act does not prevent others from peering in. While we take a rest, others can and do continue to monitor us (even taking note of our inactivity). The window metaphor aptly underscores the difference between the experience of forgetting and being forgotten in an analogue and a digital world.

If the experiences of forgetting and being forgotten were once intertwined, this is no longer the case. In the digital world, we can

close our windows or even go entirely off the grid. But when we log off, even though we reduce our digital footprint (the data we leave behind), our data shadows (the information others generate about us) continue to multiply. In short, the individual's desire to forget (to shut their windows, delete their data, go off line, and disconnect) has little bearing on being forgotten by others, because the data subject remains active even as the living individual to which it is linked lies dormant. Our data subject continues to expand and gain notoriety without our knowledge, troubling attempts to achieve the "active forgetting" that Nietzsche deemed so necessary for mental health and contentment. It is on this basis that the legal scholar Antoinette Rouvroy suggests that what we may be witnessing now is a radical reversal of Nietzsche's formula:

All this suggests, in particular, the possibility of an inversion of the relationship between memory and oblivion: the "capacity of forgetting," *biologically inscribed in the human being*, a condition of a robust health according to Nietzsche, giving way to a non-biological "faculty of memory." . . . While humanity has historically struggled against the limits of memory, with forgetfulness prevailing by default, we now seem to be engaged in a process whereby the relationship between forgetfulness and memory is being reversed. By default, all information (sound, visual, textual) will soon be recorded and kept in a digital form, and forgetting, which requires the active erasure of data, will become the exception rather than the rule.¹¹

But what are the consequences of active forgetting no longer being able to override the pervasive memory of data, especially for children and adolescents?

Subjects without Boundaries and Curfews

At the center of discussions on the right to be forgotten is a new and still ambiguous social actor—the "data subject." Despite the widespread use of the term in legal literature, defining who or what a data subject is remains challenging. In some contexts, the data subject refers to a set of data relating to a particular subject. In other cases, the term is used to describe any identified or identifiable "natural person." But the concept usually points neither exclusively to a set of data nor to a natural person, but rather to a relationship between the two. The data subject is, in this respect, defined by his or her (or its) relationship to a natural person. For example, my data subject exists to the extent that I also exist, but this is where things begin to unravel. After all, when I die (i.e., when I am no longer a material presence in this world), my data subject may persist. While the data subject is initially dependent on the existence of a natural person, it may over time accrue enough agency to "outlive" the person to which it was once tethered. This explains why some people now have "social media wills."¹² This is also precisely why child and teen data subjects merit special consideration.

Although people of all ages change over time, children and teens are especially subject to change. One is generally a very different person at nine than at thirteen, and then again at twenty-two. The problem that faces young data subjects is that one's nine-year-old and thirteen-year-old data subjects may outlive their welcome and interfere with the ability to get on with one's emerging adult life. While earlier generations of young adults may also have faced the occasional return of their young selves (e.g., in the form of an embarrassing family photograph or high school yearbook), these selves

(or representations of selves) had strict boundaries and curfews—they were not nearly as free to roam across space and time.

To date, the most fully realized response to the indiscriminate and seemingly effortless remembering of data subjects is the concept of the right to be forgotten. This right, which now informs data erasure legislation in Europe and continues to gain interest from legal scholars in other jurisdictions around the world, recognizes that in the digital world, where remembering has become so pervasive, we occasionally need to intervene to correct the balance.¹³ The Dutch legal theorist Bert-Jaap Koops proposes that three interrelated assumptions with broader legal, ethical, and social implications underpin the right to be forgotten. First, one might see the legislation as promoting a “clean slate” or “fresh start.” This concept already informs several areas of law, including juvenile criminal law and credit reporting, and is designed to promote a healthy form of “social forgetting.” But Koops identifies two additional assumptions: “A social perspective that outdated negative information should not be used against people,” and “an individual self-development perspective that people should feel unrestrained in expressing themselves in the here and now, without fear of future consequences.” For Koops, at stake in the right to be forgotten is not only the right to avoid having one’s past dragged indiscriminately back into the present, but also the right to not be confronted with one’s past in a way that would disrupt one’s ability to forget. Koops notes that the right to be forgotten “highlights the importance of being able to forget and of being able to act without fear that your current actions may haunt you for the rest of your life.”¹⁴

It seems reasonable to conclude that forgetting is important for many reasons, including individual self-development. Where there is no forgetting, or where forgetting is the exception rather than the

rule, minor risk-taking activities, including those that are part and parcel of growing up, will become too risky to carry out. If adolescents were once more or less free to shapeshift their style, trying on different outfits, politics, and identities, there is now a risk that these “phases” (as they are often disparagingly labeled by adults) will be permanently enshrined online and will define the individual well beyond the moment in which they were adopted. But at what cost? Whether one exposes too much and pays the price, or is overly cautious and avoids taking the sorts of risks that are part of self-discovery, living in a world where forgetting and being forgotten are increasingly out of reach has consequences.

Forgetting and Identity Development in the Digital Age

Today, even minor incidents are endlessly repeated in the echo chamber of the internet. Somewhat surprisingly, however, this was not always the case. Early on, the internet promised to provide an exceptionally safe space for exploring the extremes of one’s politics, identity, and desires without consequence.¹⁵

In the 1990s, the ability to leave the material world behind—and along with it, all its worries and shameful moments—was widely extolled as the internet’s greatest promise. It was this promise that informed my earliest research on online communities and youth. In early 1997, which was even before the term “blog” had been coined, I started to research the personal websites of transgender-identified youth. Roaming from one community to the next in the web-hosting site GeoCities, I discovered dozens of young people using the web as a way to inhabit a gender identity that did not match their assigned gender at birth. Transgender rights had not yet become a topic of widespread public debate, and there was very little public awareness

on the specific needs of transgender youth. What I discovered in these early online spaces—most of them located in GeoCities' "West-Hollywood" community, where, as in the real West Hollywood, everyone was welcome to express their sexuality and gender as they pleased—were virtual spaces where otherwise vulnerable youth were able to freely explore their identities at low risk. This lack of risk was largely due to the way people chose to use the web at this time and due to the web's technical limitations. There were no photographs or videos on these early websites; most of them contained only texts and clip art. The creators rarely attached their own names or locations to their sites and had no real reason to do so. For the transgender youth in my study, the internet presented itself as a safe place to try on an aspect of their identities they could not explore in their material lives.¹⁶

In the 1990s, a surprisingly high number of people turned to the internet precisely because it promised to liberate them from the shackles of the material world and from their own histories. It was, in a sense, embraced because it was seen as a space of forgetting. As the sociologist Sherry Turkle wrote in her 1995 book *Life on the Screen*, "When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass."¹⁷ This process, Turkle contended at the time, offered us unlimited access to explore and role-play new identities. But she remained cautious, warning, "We are dwellers on the threshold between the real and virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along."¹⁸ Yet, by and large, Turkle's early work on online communities was consistent with a broader belief at the time that the internet held the potential to set us free.¹⁹

In *Life on the Screen*, Turkle focused on online gaming worlds and multiuser domains (MUDs), which permitted anyone with a computer, internet connection, and basic computer skills to reinvent

themselves however they liked and explore the alternate universes then proliferating online. In these spaces, noted Turkle, "The characters need not be human and there are more than two genders. Players are invited to help build the computer world itself. Using a relatively simple programming language, they can create a room in the game space where they are able to set the stage and define the rules." These worlds were open to people of all ages. In one space, Turkle reported encountering an eleven-year-old player who built a room she called "the condo": "It is beautifully furnished. She has created magical jewelry and makeup for her dressing table. When she visits the condo, she invites her cyber friends to join her there, she chats, orders virtual pizza, and flirts."²⁰

For children and teens growing up in the 1990s (and even for many adults at the time), this was precisely the internet's appeal. Cut off from the "real world" and more closely linked to the geek culture of games such as Dungeons and Dragons than to reality, the internet was a place for fantasy, role-playing, and identity experiments. While it is true that at least some people spent those early years of the internet engaged in far more mundane tasks (e.g., setting up a Hotmail account or learning how to carry out online research), for many others it was a place to abandon one's material life, biology, and assumed identity—to leave one's gender, race, age, and physical constraints behind and live out other identities in other worlds. It was a place to get away from it all—to adopt a new name, play out kinky sexual fantasies, and enter MUDs to switch genders and even species. This feature, Turkle contended, made the internet a critical space of identity development, especially for youth.²¹

To support her point, Turkle turned to the work of the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, specifically to his concept of a psychosocial "moratorium." In *Childhood and Society*, published in 1950, Erikson

argued that the adolescent mind “is essentially a mind of the *moratorium*, a psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult.”²² Despite his choice of words, Erikson did not consider adolescence to be a period of delayed experience. The moratorium, explained Turkle, “is not on significant experiences but on their consequences.”²³ Both Turkle and Erikson, while recognizing that all experiences have consequences, contended that adolescence is generally understood to be a time of risk-free experimentation, and that this experimentation serves a specific societal purpose.²⁴ In his 1968 book *Identity: Youth in Crisis*, Erikson described the psychosocial moratorium as “a period that is characterized by a selective permissiveness on the part of society and a provocative playfulness on the part of youth.” “Each society and each culture,” he continued, “institutionalizes a certain moratorium for the majority of its young people. . . . The moratorium may be a time for horse stealing and vision-quests, a time for *Wanderschaft* or work ‘out West’ or ‘down under,’ a time for ‘lost youth’ or academic life, a time for self-sacrifice or for pranks.”²⁵ Whether one is on a vision quest or working at a ski resort or just skipping class to party, this moratorium has long served a very important purpose. In Turkle’s words, “the moratorium facilitates the development of a core self, a personal sense of what gives life meaning.”²⁶

Of course, Erikson and Turkle were writing in different eras. In the early 1950s, when *Childhood and Society* was first published, and even in the early 1960s, when the revised edition was issued, Erikson was living in and reflecting on a world where it was easier to view adolescence and even college years as a sort of “time out” where a young person was free to experiment with relatively few consequences—that is, if they had the gender and race privilege to do so. By the time

Turkle was writing *Life on the Screen*, in the early 1990s, the world was in flux. College-age students were facing an increasingly competitive job market and a sluggish economy, and the AIDS crisis had changed the stakes of sexual experimentation—suddenly, the worst consequence of having sex was not heartbreak or unplanned pregnancy but death. But this is precisely why Turkle believed online communities were coming to play such a critical role in the lives of adolescents. Virtual communities, she insisted, “offer permission to play, to try things out. This is part of what makes them attractive.”²⁷ If the adolescent “moratorium” is understood as a critical stage of personal development—a period of experimentation when one can try out various rituals, creeds, and programs as part of a larger process of “searching for social values which guide identity”—the internet promised a space where such reckless experimentation could safely persist, even in a period of economic uncertainty and AIDS.²⁸

In the end, however, the internet’s development would take a radically different turn—one that is now compromising the very concept of an adolescent moratorium on consequences. The moratorium is based on a shared societal understanding that adolescence is a time when young people should be able to take certain risks in the name of “finding themselves” and even make a few mistakes along the way. But in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the spaces where such self-discovery can safely be carried out without consequence are rapidly shrinking.

By the early 2000s, the web was already becoming a radically different space. With the arrival of social media platforms, beginning with Facebook in 2004, people’s online posts became increasingly tethered to their natural self. While it may not have been obvious at the time, from the outset, social media platforms were about closing the gap between the virtual and the real, a gap that had originally been

a defining feature of the internet. Fantasy spaces continued to flourish (e.g., in the virtual world Second Life), and they still persist in online gaming, but social media would ultimately prove far more popular and pervasive than the web's early fantasy-driven spaces ever were. As reality came to dominate online spaces, however, another shift took place: online spaces began to require users to register using their real-life identities. The days of creating email accounts without any verification of one's actual identity were already long gone. A growing number of sites were also becoming linked to pay-per-view or pay-for-use services. For adolescents, a large amount of material was now behind pay gates and was accessible only with a parent's permission and credit card. At the same time, for adults, more mundane aspects of daily life, such as banking and managing utility bills, started to move online. As a result, teens could no longer count on even the most Luddite parents being ignorant of the online world. Once a mysterious portal to another world where one could adopt an alternative gender, don wings, or have sex with mythical creatures, the web started to look a lot more like everyday life. Unbeknownst to many users at the time, this is also when our digital footprints started to accumulate at a much more rapid pace. By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the realm once known as "cyberspace" (a concept appropriately borrowed from the pages of science fiction), which had promised to help us forget who we really were, had become, instead, an obstacle to forgetting and being forgotten.

Reestablishing a Psychosocial Moratorium

As recruiters and human resources specialists readily admit, few hires are now made without at least a preliminary online search. Many recruiters even hire third parties to dig up data on job candi-

dates that may not be easily retrievable with an initial Google search. Candidates are also frequently rejected on the basis of the unflattering impression left by their digital footprint.²⁹ But job recruiters are not the only people taking notice. Prospective spouses are now also subject to extensive online searches, often by extended family members, and so too are applicants for everything from coworking spaces to summer camps. Where an interview once sufficed, a search is increasingly the norm. Everyone, in a sense, has become the sum of their online archives.³⁰ But with this shift, something profoundly important is lost—the psychosocial moratorium that at least some youth in some contexts once took for granted. The question then becomes, How can we restore this moratorium, and even expand it?

Data erasure legislation is one response, especially legislation directed at minors (such as Privacy Rights for California Minors in the Digital World). Yet, such piecemeal laws on their own are probably inadequate for re-establishing a psychosocial moratorium for youth. Young people around the world are already deeply implicated in digital life as both consumers and producers. Granting special data erasure rights to some youth in some jurisdictions would not solve the broader problem.

What if instead of legal grounds, the moratorium were established on technical grounds? In *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, Viktor Mayer-Schönberger argues that it is time to "reset" the balance and "make forgetting just a tiny bit easier again than remembering." His proposal does not call for any sweeping legal solutions; it hinges instead on several alternatives, including a technical solution that seeks to mimic human forgetting by allowing users to set expiration dates for information stored online. Such expiration dates, he explains, "are not about imposed forgetting.

They are about awareness and human action, and about asking humans to reflect—if only for a few moments—how long the information they want to store may remain valuable and useful.”³¹ At first glance, the proposal sounds both reasonable and viable, but would such a solution be widely embraced? That is, is there really a collective desire for digital information to disappear over time, especially among children and adolescents? On this account, Snapchat stands as a particularly compelling example.

Snapchat was launched in 2011 as a social media platform that enabled texts and images to be shared for only a limited amount of time. After being viewed, “snaps” would be automatically deleted. Targeted primarily to millennials but quickly embraced by a younger demographic, including many children, the platform at first appeared to offer just the sort of moratorium that would enable young people to share and connect with others online without long-term consequences. In theory, with Snapchat, a person could share a silly or even compromising text or image without any fear that it would come back to haunt them. (In fact, the photographs are cached after being removed from the server, but they are rendered difficult to retrieve since the file extension is changed.) Early on, Snapchat was seen as a welcome addition to the social media market, and it was even embraced by some parents of younger social media users as a “safer” option than Instagram or Facebook. This support quickly dissolved, however, when critics began to regard the app’s built-in capacity to delete images as a feature that was promoting risk-taking behaviors, especially among young users. It didn’t take long for the app to come under attack as a device engineered for sexting. The social media scholar danah boyd contends that this perception was largely promoted by journalists.³²

In reality, neither the app’s claims to ephemerality nor its critics’ claims that it was used primarily for sexting proved to be entirely true. The original version of Snapchat did limit users’ ability to store images and texts, though it was not the case that the images simply disappeared after being shared. Savvy users quickly learned how to get around these limitations; they would take screenshots of images shared on the app and then preserve or recirculate them on other platforms.³³ Several studies on how and why people were using Snapchat also revealed that the sexting rumors were exaggerated. In a 2014 survey of over a hundred adults, only 1.6 percent of respondents reported using Snapchat primarily for sexting; 14.2 percent reported having occasionally used it for this purpose; and almost a quarter, 23.6 percent, reported using it for what the survey categorized as “joke sexting”—sending sexual or pseudo-sexual content as a joke.³⁴ In her work on teens and social media, boyd reached a similar conclusion: “Asking teens about Snapchat,” she writes, “I found most were using the app to signal that an image wasn’t meant for posterity. They shared inside jokes, silly pictures, and images that were funny only in the moment. Rather than viewing photographs as an archival production, they saw the creation and sharing of these digital images as akin to an ephemeral gesture. And they used Snapchat to signal this expectation.”³⁵

Snapchat merits specific attention here because of its unique relationship to time and memory. On the one hand, users seem to enjoy Snapchat because of its promise of ephemerality. On the other hand, they have been quick to subvert the platform’s ephemeral nature. It was snappers, not Snapchat, who were initially responsible for finding creative ways to capture and store snaps. Eventually the company followed their lead, introducing a timer setting appropriately

called “infinity,” which allows permanent access to snaps.³⁶ What the Snapchat example underscores is that young people would likely reject any intervention designed to place expiration dates on the information they generate and post online.

While the reasons for this rejection are no doubt complex, one factor may be that sentimentality and nostalgia run especially high among tweens and teens and often manifest themselves in collections of all kinds. Anyone who has recently been a tween or teen (or currently lives with one) will appreciate that adolescents frequently insist on keeping even the most superfluous items (ticket stubs, playbills, ski-lift passes, bottle caps, outgrown T-shirts, and so on). These objects are not exactly souvenirs but rather, in the words of the literary critic Susan Stewart, “kitsch objects”—consumer objects whose value is not monetary but rather inscribed with some sort of collective practice or experience or identity. They are, Stewart suggests, “souvenirs of an era not of a self,” and this is also why they “tend to accumulate around a period of intense socialization, adolescence.”³⁷ These objects enable adolescents to believe in the illusion that they can hold on to the very things they can’t bear to let go (e.g., an intense relationship or especially memorable experience). In the digital age adolescents are still collecting, but in addition to material photographs (e.g., strips of photographs snapped in photo booths) and physical artifacts, they are now also accumulating digital artifacts. The Snapchat example suggests that any attempt to place expiration dates on data—even those set by individual users—may face a powerful opponent: adolescents’ often strong feelings of attachment to artifacts of all kinds, including digital ones. While adolescents’ sentimentality and nostalgia may pose an unexpected challenge to forgetting, however, twenty-first-century forgetting faces far greater obstacles.

3

Screens, Screen Memories, and Childhood Celebrity

Predicting the long-term impact of growing up with one’s childhood and youth forever present is difficult in part because it is an experience with few historical analogues. One notable exception is the fate of childhood celebrities. This topic is so frequently mined in television exposés and entertainment magazines that anyone could probably recount at least one story about a young celebrity’s demise. If these stories are the stock-in-trade of tabloids, it is likely because they nearly always follow a predictable narrative arc and focus on a single character who requires no introduction. Embedded in these typically sordid tales is also a common assumption: overexposure as a youth is dangerous—a nearly certain pathway to substance abuse, crime, imprisonment, or even early death. Sadly, there appears to be at least some truth to this assumption.

One of the most frequently repeated cautionary tales about the dangers of childhood celebrity is that of the three young actors who