Digital Identity and Social Media

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Chapter 6
Digital Death:
What Role Does Digital Information Play in the Way We are (Re)Membered?

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ABSTRACT

Within this chapter, the authors consider the emergence of new cultures and practices surrounding death and identity in the digital world. This includes a range of theory-based discussions, considering how we remember and document the absence of information and how communities and individuals deal with the virtual identities of their loved ones after death. This highlights the evolvement of digital practices in relation to public grief and the building of public (communal) identity, including the impact of digital recording and sharing of ones identity(s). Furthermore, the chapter stresses the relevance of the mediation of memory, discussing how mediation impacts one's own identity and the communal cultural identity of society at large. Finally, the chapter concludes by considering what role personal choice plays in the way we deal with digital data, and more widely, our digital selves after death.

1. INTRODUCTION

"When we change the way we communicate, we change society" (Shirkey, 2008). Since its creation in the late 1960s, the Internet has acted as a useful tool for easily accessing a wealth of information on any topic. However, in recent years, its status as a 'tool' for knowledge extraction has been far surpassed. The Internet has become an engaging space where people choose to spend time; socializing, buying, selling and living. The movement of the Internet from informational navigation tool to a community marks a new form of social phenomenon.

Our methods and systems of communication infiltrate every aspect of our lives; from our choice of regular contacts (friends), to our actions and self-documentation. Even the way we cogitate emotion, empathy and trust is (to a certain extent through the wide adaptation of the internet) constantly being mediated (and re-mediated) through our communication systems and online-behaviors. The way people interact, engage and comprehend this mediation will be core to this chapter as we consider the social and cultural implications of Death and Identity in the Digital world.

Death and Identity are very broad and multi-dimensional topics. In the capacity of this book chapter our treatment of this topic and its research areas will be necessarily brief aiming to tease out interesting points, thus beckoning the reader into the vast fields of Digital Death and Digital Identity. Thus, the key objectives of this book chapter are focused on: (1) understanding the virtual community, including how social networks and the social virtual world enable people to construct and view their own identities; (2) considering the role that these identities, through virtual environments and social networks, can play in bereavement and remembrance; (3) demonstrating the sociological significance of identity within digital networks; and (4) questioning how present and future generations can have access to the history that is now being created and documented in the virtual space.

The book chapter is organised as follows: In section 2 we present the motivation for Digital Death, Bereavement, and Digital Archaeology. In section 3 we discuss the role E-mail, community, and group identity play when faced with information 'absence' and death, and in section 4 we question whether public grief has a role in rebuilding public identity. In section 5 we identify the impact of recording and sharing digital information on communal identity, relationships and history. The mediation of memory through archives, artifacts and people, is discussed in Section 6, whereas Section 7 deals with experiment-

ing with digital artifacts and whether individual elements of our digital selves can reveal traces of our identity. Finally, section 8 discusses the importance of personal choice when considering death and identity in the digital age, and section 9 offers our conclusions.

2. MOTIVATION FOR DIGITAL DEATH, BEREAVEMENT, AND DIGITAL ARCHAEOLOGY

The increasingly social environment of the digital world (Panteli, 2009) means that people are spending a considerable amount of their time interacting in the virtual space. For example, the virtual platform Facebook experiences a phenomenal growth (150 million users in February 2009, 400 million by February 2010 (Facebook, 2010)). To unpick slightly what this incredible growth means from a sociological point of view, we must consider some of the key attributes of virtualization. In the virtual space, physical distance is nullified. This allows family and friends to remain constantly updated on each other's lives, telepresent, giving them the ability to support each other through both highs and lows. Despite this phenomenal growth, there is very little formal research/study given to the use of these platforms for bereavement support, or more generally into 'digital death.' In the seminal paper (Pitsillides, Katsikides, and Conreen, 2009) the authors stress the need for formalizing the topic of digital death and identify a number of its dimensions.

The birth of clinical medicine and hospital-based treatment in the 1900s de-socialized death by removing it from the home and making it scientific rather than spiritual (Monroe, 1980) (Hieronymus, 2002). This 'private approach' to death led to a view of bereavement and grief as primarily an individualized, 'internal' experience (Hockey & Small,, 2001), (Walter, 2008). This view removes bereavement and grief from its

social context and leads to a view of 'death and dying' as the province of specialists whose expertise is rationalized, medicalised and securalised' (Jessop & Ribben-McCarthy, 2005).

Virtual platforms have the potential to re-address this, allowing for a more collaborative form of grieving. Members of communities such as Facebook have responded to death (within their network) mainly through user generated 'tributes,' allowing loved ones to continue to write messages to people, who have passed away, thereby continuing to engage with their digital identity, even after death. Social networks have the potential to act as a strong support network, a space where people can share stories, photos and videos about that person, within a closed network of friends. However, this can also be abused as seen within MyDeathSpace, (MyDeathSpace.com, 2009) a community unaffiliated with MySpace. MyDeath-Space is "an archive of dead people's My Space accounts" and due to its open external network, this site has, at times been subject to abuse. (For example spambots and strangers leaving lewd messages on loved ones memorial walls.)

However, as families become increasingly spread out across the globe, it will become increasingly important that services are created to allow family members the opportunity to grieve together, at least virtually. Thus, if a family member is unable to attend the funeral in person, there will be a virtual way of obtaining closure (e.g. Jim Clarke of Clarke & Son, a funeral parlor in Ireland, already offers "online streaming of funerals" (Pachal, 2007).) Lately there have also been a small number of companies starting to emerge offering services, which consider a person's 'digital assets' (DSwiss AG, 2006), (Entrustet, 2006-2007), (Legacy Locker, 2009), (Vital Lock, 2010). The emergence of these companies highlights the beginnings of awareness, towards the issue of digital death and digital assets. Related projects, which discuss the topics of death within a virtual context, include: the death of a virtual character (Owens, 2008), the attachment of the site-specific grave to a non-

site specific memorial (Andres-Clavera & Cho, 2008), (Malkin, 2006) and the role digital data plays when we remember the deceased (Gaulers, 2006). However, none address digital death and bereavement in a formal way.

Furthermore, the networking of ones 'digital remains' leads us to consider what place digital information has both sentimentally and historically. When considering the sentimentality of digital data and the relationships we form in the digital world, one must consider how trust (Panteli, 2004), (Platt, 1999) and empathy (Lambropoulos, 2005), (Thompson, 2001) can be evolved within the virtual space. By considering recent research into simulation, projection (Zahavi, 2008), and mirror neurons (Gallese, Eagle, and Migone, 2007) we seek to explore whether relationships, and the memory of those relationships, can be fully cognized when mediated. Or does this mediation (Dijck, 2007), ultimately change the way we form attachments and trigger memories? (Flusser, 1990) The archiving of this data also leads us to consider Digital Archaeology, which akin to its real world counterpart comprises of the analysis of historical artifacts, including rubbish and buried bodies (Kelsey & May, 2005). Digital information, therefore if seen in this context, has the potential to provide a detailed account of our present Digital Heritage (Lusenet, 2002): comprising of society, identity, and culture.

3. THE ROLE OF E-MAIL, COMMUNITY, AND GROUP IDENTITY PLAY WHEN FACED WITH INFORMATION ABSENCE AND DEATH

The contemporary "Homo-Interneticas" (Krotoski, 2010) is familiar with sorting, logging and analysing e-mails. However despite this familiarity, we do not often consider the system of exchange and emotional investment we initiate, by simply sending e-mail. Within this section,

we question what happens to both the communication and the individual themselves, when our systems of communication break down. How do human beings deal with this 'absence' in the age of information excess? Moreover, how long does it take before they begin questioning 'the e-mail's' lack of presence and commence in the construction of narratives around the 'missing bits'? Thus turning this lack of communication into a 'new form' of communication, which is built upon the uncertainty, cognition and non-documentation one experiences through the 'missing' communication.

Furthermore, because this form of digital communication exists solely in our minds, as memory, it plays on "our ability to [accurately] predict and explain the actions [of others]… to project ourselves imaginatively into their situation," (Zahavi, 2008) so the 'missing' data initiates a form of empathetic memory and cognition that generally is not instigated in day-to-day e-mail correspondence. This is because "electronic memories can be informed more easily than cerebral memories, they store information much longer, and they permit an ease of copying of that information… [therefore] we need no longer attempt to store this information in our brain." (Flusser, 1990) Thus, it is evident, that because we cannot document the e-mail we did not receive; we are more likely to remember it. This becomes even easier if the e-mail in question insights a reaction in us, for example: annoyance, emotional vulnerability, or anger. This reaction is linked to us questioning the reason behind the e-mail's absence and its potential importance in our lives. If not through simple memory, "how [can] you photograph [or document] 'the intangible presence of absence'?" (Farrell, 2001), and whether it is necessary to have such a complete documentation or evidence of every event.

Francesco D'Orazio the creator and founder of Myrl (Myrl: Connecting Worlds, 2008) in a recent interview helped us further unpick this concept, especially when thinking about communities rather than a single individual and their e-mail.

Myrl is an online platform aimed at uniting the virtual neighborhood and allowing its users the opportunity to travel and explore a range of virtual worlds while keeping 'constant' the same avatar and profile, allowing for the greater development of attachment among virtual friends/users who would have the ability to 'get to know each other' across a range of platforms. This development or movement toward 'connecting worlds' has not only the potential to begin to defragment our digital identities but also carries within it the latent possibility of a centralized point through which one could have the access and ability to inform an entire network of virtual friends of a loss. Thereby allowing them as a community or neighborhood to identify with their loss and have a cohesive collection of memories of the avatar, with the support of the community as a whole. The theory of a community working together through potentially painful emotions is supported by (Walter, 1996) as he states "what helped me were not 'internal dialogues with a deceased person' but external dialogues with others who knew her… [it was not] a matter of friends 'supporting' the bereaved, but of a number of bereaved persons working out together who [the deceased] was and what she meant to them." The virtual world has the opportunity to allow for a range of networked 'external dialogues' between dispersed loved ones and thus the formation of online community around a persons remaining digital data.

Although the creation of a community to deal with bereavement was not Francesco's intended purpose, Francesco D'Orazio was interested in considering this as a potential use of his network. Francesco is not someone who is unfamiliar with experiencing death and loss within virtual worlds. Within an informal conversation (D'Orazio, 2009), he related to us his own personal experience of loss within Second Life (Linden Labs, Founded 1999). Francesco had a friend and fellow avatar, whom he had known for around two to three years, 'walk' up to him and say "I have a hole in [my] brain," then shortly afterwards, disappear.

Francesco confided that at the time, he felt he had no option but to try not to think about it, for him there could be no resolution, only assumptions. Francesco considered his friend to be 'missing.' This 'missing' could be explained either by death or simply by the decision 'to do something else with her life.' He related though, that despite this inconclusiveness he would have liked some way to honor her because at least to him, she was lost. Photographer David Farrell refers to this experience of unknown loss as the "poignant and… haunting 'diaspora of the disappeared'," (Farrell, 2001) when referring to the missing in Ireland. We believe there are strong parallels in the uncertainty of grief with regard to both the physical and virtual 'missing.' Through this and other observations we begin to question: How much responsibly should the networks of communication systems have for both the friendships and the losses they facilitate?

To take this element of community experience and virtual 'linking' of people a step further we have constructed a short investigation into Virtual Graveyards. Through immersion and first hand exploratory research into Second Life, within our pseudo-identity, 'Luma Ashdene,' we were able to experience, document and interview those who interact and 'live' within this system of communication; including the forming of relationships, participation in spiritual rituals (Enoch & Milena, 2010), (Beit, 2007) and their experience with loss, both in the physical and virtual space. One such resident who was happy to be interviewed (Full interview appears in: Pitsillides, 2009) was Silverax Greenwood, creator of Second Life's "Pet Cemetery." (Greenwood, 2008) Silverax, was happy to talk about his experiences within Second Life and his reasoning behind designing and manufacturing a virtual pet cemetery. Among the many questions posed to Silverax the one we are most interested in exploring in this chapter is 'why a person would want to visualize death in a virtual space?' Although Silverax was unable to precisely answer this question, his comments regarding the nature and necessity of his own

Pet Cemetery and those who use it, did shed some light on this question. Silverax stated that he had originally created the pet cemetery due to a personal loss, in the physical world. When no one in 'RL' (real life) Japan was prepared to give his pet a proper burial Silverax found a new way to express his grief. He explained that although avatars generally did not visit the graveyard on a regular basis, the simple fact that they had a grave there allowed them to "feel ease" because they felt they could "have grave."

And it is this ability, to 'feel ease' and 'allow grief' that gives the 'grave,' whether physical or virtual, its appeal. The 'grave' allows an individual the opportunity to exchange an element of the ownership of that which they have lost, their loved ones former identity as a living human being, for a lasting memento, a space to mark the event, both in their mind and surroundings. Thereby resting, in time, not only that which they have lost but their own grief. Consequently, this coordinate in time and space becomes not so much a place to experience loss, as a place to trigger memory. Loved ones, know of the grave's existence and therefore, the continued existence of a physical symbol of that person in this world. It also allows loved ones the security of 'knowing' that if they visit that space and 'marker', they inevitably have access to memory, without document or animation.

This leads to the consideration of the purpose and role of web cemeteries, which have been in existence since 1995, just thirty-five years after the creation of the Internet itself. These early cemeteries "provided simple e-mail forms of memorial submission." (Roberts, 2006) This highlights that despite the existence of physical graves there may still be a need for its virtual counterpart. What can virtual graves offer that physical graves don't? To begin to understand this, it must first be broken down into various parts: how death itself manifests in the digital world? What new and old forms of ritual and culture surround it, including the new 'needs' and cultures of contemporary society that would make virtual graves and memorials particu-

larly attractive? For example: mounting costs, lack of space and universal global access; (Stevens, 2009) and the unavoidable circumstances in which physical memorization is impossible and therefore virtual memorization becomes the primary form of bereavement.

4. PUBLIC GRIEF: DOES PUBLIC GRIEF HAVE A ROLE IN REBUILDING PUBLIC IDENTITY?

"Loss is a personal affair … it is based on the particular persons perception of an event. It can be actual, fantasized or anticipated, conscious or unconscious. It includes biological, social and psychological factors." (Hadjikos, 2009) Loss is something we all encounter and have experience of throughout our lives, and although the degree and way in which we experience loss differ, it is an experience we are familiar with. Because of the bi-polarity of loss, it can simultaneously act, as both an alienating and collaborative force within society.

The death of Princess Diana was an event that shook the British public and perhaps remains one of the most poignant moments of public grief in recent British history. Thus it is often referred to as 'the day that will remain in the memory of the British public forever.' In England grief is generally a private emotion, experienced only within a close network of friends and family who knew the person directly. (Walter, 2008), (Hockey, 2001). Diana was a public figure, 'the people's princess.' This made people feel like they could share in this loss and publicly express the grief they felt. Through this shared emotion a bond was created within the British public; for a couple of days millions of people shared both experience and identity. They were: 'the bereaved British public who had just lost their Princess.'

"Many people across the country brought [flowers] and placed them along with very personal messages written on attached cards ... A single flower with a message ... read 'Beautiful Lady, Rest in Peace, With Love, Sam (A homeless friend.)'"(Walter, 1999) Through this example we see the vast and varied cross section of society who felt genuine loss and engaged in communal grief. Public grief can be considered as a "way of rebuilding community," and through grief we feel a connection to each other and associate with each other in an emotional way.

Public grief has taken place for as long as we have had community. To look at the shift in ritual practice in the modern digital age we will consider the recent death of pop star: Michael Jackson (1958-2009). Michael Jackson is another well-known example of public grief but unlike Diana, this time flowers were not the main feature of memoriam. The death of Michael Jackson marked a landmark in digital culture because so much of the public grieving, remembrance and memorialization took place in a digital environment. The specific nature of the online space is its ability to allow for "ridiculously easy group-forming," (Shirkey, 2008) which we see in the worldwide online discussion and memorialization of Michael Jackson. This highlights people's desire to be "part of a group that shares, cooperates, or acts in concert… [but which] has always been constrained by traditional costs." (Shirkey, 2008) The online space has allowed people to unite in their grief and form strong if transient bonds, with others around them grieving.

The Internet has even become the informant. During the death and aftermath of Princess Diana the TV was the main source of information; information was disseminated from a centralized point, one to many. However in the case of Michael Jackson, many people discovered and followed the news of his death through online sources, as these sources were faster than conventional methods of press and had the ability to easily "announce [and disseminate the news] to a potentially global audience" (Mayer-Schonberger, 2009) and once the news was 'announced' and a few key players knew about it, it had the potential to filter down

through social networks and be updated by individuals (many to many) through 'status updates' and 'tweets.' For example, on Facebook, 'friends' commented on the passing of Michael Jackson, many lamenting this loss in some way, either by donating their status as a tribute e.g. "RIP King of Pop" or perhaps by tagging their favorite song on You Tube. The Internet allowed for an almost viral spread of tribute and the immortalization of Michael Jackson, who will not only remain in the memory of the public but in their processors and networks.

The presence of the Internet in this and other memorializations demonstrates a paradigm shift in the previous model of communal mourning. This shift means that any person can now quickly and cheaply announce their grief globally, thus identifying themselves as part of an online community that is no longer focused within a specific district or even a specific nation. This has also caused a shift in the dynamics of power in mourning. In the past, communal mourning on a global scale could only be achieved through fame or status. Now, not only can we remember on a global scale but we can also 'be remembered' globally. In this paradigm, people from all over the world have the opportunity to group together and feel that moment of connection (togetherness), irrespective of their fame or status.

5. THE IMPACT OF RECORDING AND SHARING DIGITAL INFORMATION ON COMMUNAL IDENTITY, RELATIONSHIPS, AND HISTORY

Digital sharing is an area which has boomed over the last decade. With the advent of IRC chat rooms (1995) (About mIRC, 1995-2010), digital social networks (1997) (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), social virtual worlds (1978) (Damer, 2010) and MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games: 1984 (Damer, 2010)) the way people communicate and share digital information has altered

drastically. To understand what this means for the community at large, one must first question, what it means for each individual to 'share' a piece of themselves with a collective, and for there to be a perfect record of each of these 'sharings'. Then one may begin to consider how having this record may affect human nature, culture and our group dynamics. By leaving behind our 'flawed' human memory, we are led to question whether in the quest for immortality (of information) we are eroding our power to forget.

Forgetting is something which has throughout time protected us both from an overload of information and our own past (Mayer-Schonberger, 2009). Before digital memory, if you had an argument with a friend, they would have their side and you would have your side. Eventually the fight would be forgotten. There would be no proof as to who was right and who was wrong. However if you have an argument with a friend in the digital age, your words have a real chance of 'coming back' to haunt you. Your friend can now come back to you three weeks, three months or even three years later with your exact words. They can even have shown these words to various third parties and have received comments and opinions. The most recent public example of this being an e-mail, examined and displayed within Sophie Calle's exhibition, "Talking to Strangers" (Calle, 2009-2010)

The appearance of this document, this non-temporal bit of evidence, means that we can no longer be spontaneous or flippant with our wording. Each word uttered in the digital realm has consequences; it builds up an image of us, not just for today but forever. Thus it becomes almost impossible to escape or erase the digital identities we create for ourselves. Mayer-Schonberger claims: "forgetting plays a central role in human 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." (Mayer-Schonberger, 2009) As we inevitably

live more of our lives digitally and have access (digitally) to a perfect memory of both our own and other people histories, there will undoubtedly be an accumulation of digital paraphernalia that we may wish to forget. However what happens when there *is no physical object* to 'destroy' or when all the information is online and exists primarily in universal (or private) servers perhaps long after we are 'gone'. "Like late Heidegger, recent Borgmann sees that the direction technology is taking will eventually get rid altogether of objects." (Dreyfus & Spinosa, 1997)

However in the digital world, we mostly ignore the fact that some personal information may be potentially dangerous or damaging to our futures. We devote time and resources to finding new ways of 'saving' and 'retrieving' information, rather then considering the necessity of this information in the first place. Dreyfus and Spinosa consider this to be "the difference between the modern library culture and the new information-retrieval culture… more has changed then the move from control of objects to the flexibility of storage and access." (Dreyfus, 1997)

6. THE MEDIATION OF MEMORY THROUGH ARCHIVES, ARTIFACTS, AND PEOPLE

Currently the physical day-to-day 'acts' of human beings 'living' goes unrecorded and is often unrecordable. Therefore it could be suggested that we, as individuals, are in fact the most complete archive of self and self-identity; anything exterior to that, is simply fragments and mediated memories (Dijck, 2007). As Derrida accurately observes in this statement, "it goes without saying, if one could put it that way, that Freud's phantom does not respond. That is at least how things appear. But can this be trusted? In promising secrecy for a virtual response which keeps us waiting, which will always keep us waiting, the signatory of this monologue lets it be understood that Freud would

never say in public, for example in a book and in what is destined to become a public archive, what he thinks in truth secretly" (Derrida, 1996)

This quote inspires the question; how does experiencing something live, differ to experiencing it through a document, archive or digital mediation? Objects contain memories of how they were used and who used them in their 'material culture.' This is initiated by our interaction with them and the traces of our presence we leave on them. As stated by Flusser (1990) "When people started to build a cultural memory (i.e. when they began to create and maintain soicocultural diversity), they used two types of memory supports, or objects that store information. The first was airwaves in vocalization, the second was stones, bones and other hard objects" (Flusser, 1990). Does experiencing an event or watching the use of a particular object live, affect the way we remember it? When we experience events live we are embodied, we have our senses at hand and these senses are constantly bringing back information that is stored away as part of the 'whole' picture becoming a memory. "Damasio answers this question by explaining autobiographical memory as a function of extended consciousness that involves emotions and feelings." (Dijck, 2007) This memory is then easier to recall at a later date, than say an e-mail which is a solidly text based form of communication.

To delve further into the use of objects both physical and virtual as a storage for memory and identity, we look to a particular artifact: the image. "In the analog age, personal photography was first and foremost a means for autobiographical remembering…they were typically regarded to be a person's most reliable aid for recall and for verifying life as it was, despite the fact that imagination and projection are inextricably bound up in the process of remembering" (Dijck, 2007). The image has always had an important function in the construction and preservation of our culture and identity. In simplistic terms, photographs which are successful as autobiographic mnemonic devices are those which one has successfully linked

to particular memories and thus are a trigger: "in this glum desert, suddenly a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I animate it… The photograph is in no way animated (I do not believe in "lifelike" photographs), but it animates me: this is what creates every adventure." (Barthes, 1981). However the photographs intrinsic promise to 'capture' the identity of a particular person, in a particular moment in time, often falls short of our expectations.

As Barthes emotionally recalls when sorting through old photos of his mother, his frustration is evident when he states "I never recognized her except in fragments… I would have recognized her among a thousands of other women, yet I did not "find" her" (Barthes, 1981). In this short extract Barthes has identified some of what makes this type of memento: photographs, old possessions and even writing, so valuable to us. As stated previously these possessions are not valuable because we hope to 'find' our loved one there. The value of such possessions is intrinsic, deeper and embedded within ourselves; for it is not the object or even the person we seek to find. What we seek, sometimes without even realizing it, is the myriad of lost and buried memories within the swirl of our own head. We are thus "animated" by such memories and "animate" the memento. So perhaps the triggering of a memory becomes more important than the capturing of one. Within the world there are many options for the creation of a live memory space, which can be triggered by any sense, action or artifact. This point was further iterated through a statement we received from a palliative care nurse regarding a message left on Facebook in memoriam, following the sudden death of a close relative. *"I like knowing that what I wrote is stored somewhere and would feel sad if it were deleted - It would be like deleting her memory"* (Palliative Care Nurse, 2009). Thus we see that the message itself has become a part of the loved ones identity and through its public display part of the cultural memory of that person.

This leads us to question, what may happen when the major extent of human memory, and societal cultural memory is stored digitally? Human beings have always dreamed of a day when it would be possible to access information and memory at the click of a button. As early as 1945 Vannevar Bush imagined an "encyclopedia Britannica [which] could be reduced to the volume of a matchbox. A Library of a million volumes [which] could be compressed into one end of a desk… [and that] the material for a microfilm Britannica would cost a nickel, and it could be mailed anywhere for a cent" (Bush, 1945) This has become the reality nowadays, with old encyclopedia books being replaced by virtual encyclopedias, such as Wikipedia. On the other hand, fifty-two years later in November 1993 Michael Gruber questioned: "What if all your books had only a twenty-year life span before you had to make copies of them?" (Gruber, 1993). Gruber is referring of course to the great problem of digital information storage, the fact that digital data, which as previously stated, now includes memories, identities, conversations and interactions; is constantly in danger of becoming unreadable. Thus if we wish to keep such important, not to mention emotive information intact, within the fast paced digital data world, there must be an equal rise of digital restoration and upkeep, as there is of digital storage of information (Lusenet, 2002). In 1999 Microsoft started 'MyLifeBits,' a project set about to animate Bush's dream of a "Memex," (Bush, 1945) a device capable of creating a complete record of a human life. "Gordon Bell has captured a lifetime's worth of articles, books, cards, CDs, letters, memos, papers, photos, pictures, presentations, home movies, videotaped lectures, and voice recordings... He is now paperless, and is beginning to capture phone calls, IM transcripts, television, and radio. "(Microsoft Cooperation, 2010)

However throughout this meander through the past there is still the underlying question: 'What is to be done with this mass of information once we have spent our lives accumulating it?' How

do we begin to edit down a lifetime's worth of information, making it relevant, when we need it, both to our loved ones and society? Nowadays we tend to keep information simply for the sake of keeping it (because we can) or because we are afraid of losing something we might need? This is further enhanced by the "base capabilities of tools like Flickr [which] reverse the old order of group activity, transforming "gather then share" into "share then gather"." (Shirkey, 2008) Thus we have begun to base aspects of our personal identities on our ability to add to the collective group 'identity'. In other words "how does my identity or 'status's' compare with that of my Facebook friends?" and "Do I have enough photos to show my relevance and status within the group?" This is exacerbated through the continual comparison of identities within the 'news feed,' where aspects of our identity are formed into a list of 'live' data which is constantly juxtaposed with those around us and thus our 'group identity' within the Facebook network (or any other social network) becomes intrinsic to our own 'personal identity.'

Therefore, when thinking about 'Cultural Identity,' 'Cultural Memory' and 'Digital Death' (including the potential deletion of digital data) one must consider the relevance of 'shared' data to our historical and sociological futures. Regarding archiving, in the non-virtual world, rubbish and buried bodies are an archaeologist's bread and butter. So therefore, is disregarded digital information in the digital world. The information we are inputting to these systems every day has the potential to provide a detailed account of our present digital society and culture ('Digital Heritage'). To consider Digital Heritage, we must first consider the amount and type of data typically being inputted into social networks; including photos, popular music, films, messages etc. Where should this information relating to ones 'digital lives' exist, including after death, and what should its context be? Should it be placed in a digital museum, at a funeral or in a historical archive?

One suggestion by info-maven Hank Roberts was the creation of a 'museum of information' (Gruber, 1993). Roberts argues the relevance of this information being placed into a museum; because museums as "collections are spotty and odd sometimes, because whenever people went to look for anything, they brought back 'everything else interesting.'… - a library makes everything available and throws out old stuff; a museum has lots of stuff tucked away as a gift to the future" (Gruber, 1993). Already it is possible to "Google or look up in Wikipedia hundreds of thousands of the dead" (Walter, 2008). However, one can question what results from this unorganized cluster of narratives of a person's life, and what can one learn about a person by simply Googling them.

7. EXPERIMENTING WITH DIGITAL ARTIFACTS: DO INDIVIDUAL ELEMENTS OF OUR DIGITAL SELVES REVEAL TRACES OF OUR IDENTITY?

How do digital artifacts engage and enrich a person's digital identity? To open this conversation an experiment was constructed, with the aim of uncovering what explicit and implicit information digital sources, from a range of networks, store about a person's character, attitudes and life. The aim of this experiment was to consider the way varying degrees of decontextualization and mediation affect the way various third parties view a person's digital identity.

Thus the experiment was undertaken in which four elements of a person's digital self (a random selection of Facebook photos, avatar screen shots, a screenshot of their inbox and a screenshot of their desktop) were separated and given to four separate groups (of ten individuals) to analyze and uncover any information available about who "this person was...". This experiment has been an important aspect of our research as it displays

both the potential and also the potential danger of using the massive archive of digital data being accumulated as trustworthy primary sources, especially when segregated from their respective networks and communities.

The experiment yielded some interesting results and observations. The group who analyzed the Facebook photos discovered qualitative information and reported descriptively through image analysis that 'this person is' a *young, female, art or design, full time student*. Their proof was that she appeared to be *young and trendy, attended a lot of parties and appeared in hot spots in East London, wearing Tatty Divine*. Another group was presented with screen shots of the person's avatar. They also employed image analysis and 'discovered' that 'this person is' a *teenage boy, possibly around fourteen,* as the female avatar depicted what many members of the group termed to be *'an idealized version of a woman'* which led to this assumption.

The group whose job it was to analyze the person's inbox discovered that 'this person is' a *middle-aged man, 'who had very few friends'*. Their reasoning for believing this was the textual analysis of his inbox, which contained multiple *e-mails from companies regarding business opportunities and time saving strategies and only one personal message*. The last group was given a screenshot of the person's desktop, which allowed the group to employ both textual and image analysis. This led them to discover that 'this person is' a *young female designer*. They reasoned this because *she had a feminine vintage print as her desktop wallpaper and the Mac desktop contained various design programs. They also discovered through many icons, her interest in craft and tattoos and reasoned that she is thinking of starting a business, as icons containing business plans and strategies littered the desktop*. All groups were surprised when it was revealed that each of these sources was an element of the same person's digital persona. Despite the difficulty in extracting one's identity from given digital information relics,

as the example above shows, we speculate that the situation could perhaps improve as more data became available (e.g. within a network) but this is an untested hypothesis. However, it is also worth noting that this mass accumulation of data, may also introduce considerable 'information noise', which may render the exercise of uncovering a persons overarching digital persona very difficult, and perhaps even entirely untrustworthy.

Within our current research on digital death and digital identity we consider the archivalization of digital data as an important area to investigate. Firstly due to the exponential growth of each individual's digital assets and identity(s) and secondly due to the development of new policies and research projects currently working towards the complete archivalization and preservation of digital data and social networks. The immense increase of archived 'primary sources' can be problematic when trying to understand even simple facts about a person's digital life, never mind an entire society or cultural trend.

The British Library stated in a recent report from their "Digital Lives" project that "the role of personal archives in daily life and their research value have never been more profound. The potential benefits to society and to individuals are both deep and far reaching in their capacity to empower research and human well being and advancement."(John, 2010) This valuing of digital data sources has also been reflected by The Library of Congress in the United States, which "has been collecting materials from the web since it began harvesting congressional and presidential campaign websites in 2000. Today (they) hold more than 167 terabytes of web-based information, including legal blogs, websites of candidates for national office, and websites of Members of Congress" (Raymond, 2010). We would propose that if we are to begin to use digital data as 'digital historical artifacts' we *must* begin to consider how, as digital ethnographers or digital archeologists, we are to navigate and excavate the digital space (See Figure 1)? The creation of relevant criteria

Figure 1. A cartoon that displays, in an ironic way the problem of focusing on simply 'saving everything' without first considering what 'use' this data will be as an end-product and how it will inevitably impact our future view of history and society
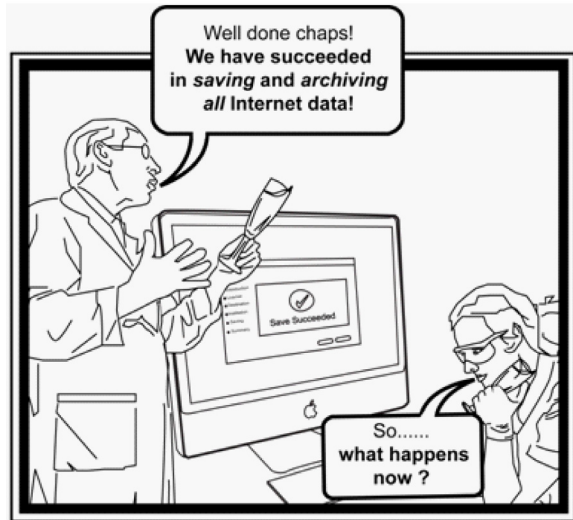
or systems to evaluate this 'web of sources' will become imminent in obtaining measurable results, however for this to work one must account for the interconnectivity and fluidity of the web (and its ability to introduce substantial 'information noise') and thus any method of analysis we are to create must reflect these attributes.

It is evident that throughout the ages both narratives and artifacts have played a key role in keeping the memory of ancestors and important people alive. The results of this experiment make one wonder how much we actually know about a person if we interact with only one source or a small 'part' of their digital identity, or even a large, but perhaps 'noisy', part of their identity? It also follows that "communication media and the historical development of inequality and power have expanded the role of the dead from the family to wider communities, states, and even the entire world" (Walter, 2008). In the digital age we can

all join in this form of immortality. Our information, image and writings have an equal potential of remaining online and being 'rediscovered,' as anyone else's. "Through digital memory… [we are surveyed] not just in every corner but also across time." (Mayer-Schonberger, 2009)

8. THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL CHOICE WHEN CONSIDERING DEATH AND IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

We live in an age where "we have virtual acquaintances, virtual colleagues and even virtual friends. If they die, how are we to be informed? Do we even have a right to be informed? ... Most of our virtual identities do not expire immediately with our body. Digital information tends to have a different set of laws to the physical world and it will generally remain intact until someone decides to close the accounts" (Pitsillides, 2009). Legacy and preservation are still one of the biggest problems concerning digital data. There is currently very little info-structure in existence to deal with, when and how, to inform virtual loved ones of death and to deal with the aftermath of digital assets and digital historical artifacts.

For example, Second Life's 'Linden Lab' states that "if there is a legally binding will and testament they will divide assets and inform loved ones in-world of your passing." (Linden Labs, Founded 1999) However in order to do this Linden Lab requires: a testamentary letter or other appropriate order, a copy of the death certificate, a copy of the will and a copy of a government-issue ID sufficient to identify you and the reported death. This tedious process would perhaps prevent many people from attempting to inform virtual friends or indeed consider the relevance of digital assets. However one must ask, if this process were to be implemented, how far is Linden Lab responsible for the way these virtual friends receive this 'bad news' and the aftermath of their bereavement.

Furthermore at this time of deep sorrow, one has to identify all the virtual platforms their loved one was active with and inform them individually, through the same tedious process.

Within the session notes of a recent Digital Death Day[1] unconference, this topic of assets and decent was also touched upon and it was suggested by a prominent member of the Second Life community, Eli Edwards, that "social norms [must] develop around respect." People must be given the opportunity to state their intentions clearly so that if they were "never intending [this data] to be… seen in public" then this ethic should follow after death and not be decontextualized or 'pulled' across networks through content aggregators i.e. major search engines. It should be possible for people to at least state their intentions in a simple way, even if they are not considering their digital data as a part of their estate. This stating of intentions could perhaps follow the creative commons model, allowing for example simple statements such as "I don't want this avatar to be able to be populated by someone after death" to be performed.

As we begin to consider the concept of 'personal choice' it seems obvious but necessary to state that every individual deals with death in a very different way and therefore any legal system or info-structure we aim at developing must reflect this and be flexible enough to allow for a multitude of reactions, bereavement processes and personal data management systems. For this to work we would strongly advocate the position that each individual must take some responsibility for their personal digital data and begin to question whether the narrative(s) they are telling in the digital space reflect themselves. Furthermore, whether these narratives should form some everyday element of the way they are to be remembered. As stated by Turkle fifteen years ago "once virtuality is taken seriously as a way of life, we need a new language for talking about the simplest things. Each individual must ask: What is the nature of my relationships? What are the limits of my responsibility? And even more basic: Who and what am I? What is the connection between my physical and virtual bodies and is it different in different cyberspaces?" (Turkle, 1995)

9. CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter we have considered aspects of the impact and development (new cultures, practices and rituals) that digitalization has instigated and hybridized from the everyday material world. Within the broad areas of Digital Memory and Digital Death we have considered the role Identity plays in the continual development of an info-structure which: a) takes the ritual and culture of death and bereavement into consideration within the socio-virtual space; b) considers the need for new structures for the archiving of digital information for historical sociological use (Digital Heritage); and c) discusses how memory is mediated and what it means for a person to 'record' and 'share' elements of their digital persona with the collective. However, given the vastness and multidimensionality of the topic, we have barely scratched the surface. Much work still remains to be done, and the expectation is that this book chapter will be a motivating factor, and stimulate new directions of research in the rich field of Digital Death and Digital Afterlife; pushing the boundaries of how we identify with ourselves in the digital world and thus the way we view and deal with Digital Death.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Bereavement: Is the loss of a loved person through death, and the subsequent mourning/grief process.

Digital Death: The death of a living being and the way it affects the digital world or the death of a digital object and the way it affects a living being.

Digital Heritage: The accumulation and curation of digital data online, which could form the basis of an inexhaustible resource containing the exact documentation of our digital past.

Digital Historical Artifacts: Are digital objects, which contain information for the building up of archives or *Digital Heritage*, for example Social Networks.

Digital Sharing: To engage in an activity, online, in which information related to ones self is exchanged for information, of similar value, about other individuals or communities.

Mediated Memories: A memory, which is triggered and experienced through a technological medium.

Public Grief: Is the sharing of memories and the engagement of a community in activities that have the potential to relate, previously unrelated individuals through the shared need to express sadness towards the loss of a central figure.

ENDNOTES

[1]   Notes taken from the session entitled "One Physical Death, Many Digital Deaths: How to manage multiple personas Post-Death." Full notes from the 1st Digital Death Day (May 20th, 2010) available at: http://digitaldeathday.com/.