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 evolution of digital practices in relation to public grief and the building of public (communal) identity, including the impact of digital recording and sharing of one’s 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-

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