

Death and the Social Network

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ABSTRACT

We analyze profiles and associated comments on social network sites following the death of the user to suggest two novel approaches to death and computing. Using the dead as examples of “extreme users”, we develop recommendations for design of Web2.0 applications that consider the importance of intersubjectivity in online identity construction and management, and the ubiquity of technospiritual practices.

Author Keywords

Death; extreme users; intersubjectivity; identity persistence; technospirituality.

INTRODUCTION

Like many social network site (SNS) users, Ashley’s recent birthday was celebrated with best wishes posted by friends to her MySpace page. Affectionate messages that declare their love, include promises to see her soon, and share favorite lyrics make Ashley’s page appear typical for a 23-year-old woman. However, amidst profile attributes describing her age, location, and that she is a “*Strawberry Daiquiri*,” one personal attribute is not immediately clear: Ashley is dead.

The mass adoption of SNS has also resulted in an increasing number of profiles representing individuals who are no longer alive. However, the death of a user does not result in the elimination of his or her account nor the profile’s place inside a network of digital peers. Instead, the collaborative behavior of friends such as Ashley’s give a continued life to the identity these profiles represent. The active use of profile pages of deceased users raises questions about the nature of death in this sociotechnical context. Given that SNS make possible a technological “identity persistence” [3], we are presented with new questions when designing for death.

In this paper, we describe a preliminary analysis of the use of SNS upon the death of the primary account holder (hereafter: the user). We do not treat the dead as a subset of users who must be designed for (nor an eventual category that all users will belong to) [11], but rather as a case of extreme users [6,8] who, in the specificity of their technological needs, offer broader implications for the design of social network and digital identity technologies for the living as well.

In this paper, we open up two related issues for discussion: how death reveals the importance of intersubjectivity in the technical construction of subject and author, and how posthumous postings reveal the ubiquity of technospiritual practices in mainstream American culture. Ultimately, when designing systems that interact with user data collaboratively produced inside of networked environments, we must account for new ownerships of data and the value of this data beyond the intentions of the original author.

BACKGROUND & METHODS

To understand the role and potential of social networks after the death of a user, we collected a dataset comprised of profile pages of now deceased users (including the visible comments or wall posts), preliminary interviews, and public comments related to this topic found on Facebook, Twitter, and various newspapers and blogs. Profiles and associated comments were collected from MySpace and Facebook by soliciting the authors’ networks of friends, as well as through a random snowball sampling of MyDeathSpace.com.¹ Interviews were solicited from friends and colleagues with first hand experience with this phenomena and have been used to understand the complexity of potential interactions. This dataset is exploratory in nature, and as such the comments included in this paper are predominantly limited to social network sites. We are currently planning a broader-scale deployment of this study to produce a larger set of SNS data. For now, we present two preliminary, analytically determined findings: intersubjectivity and technospirituality.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

There is much to be gained by adopting a critical humanist perspective when evaluating the intersections of death and technology. This perspective is even more crucial when considering digital identity technologies. As Massimi and Charise [11] note, Foucault considers the ways in which authorship creates the possibility of a type of immortality as an author’s work is taken up and used by others. For Foucault, this treatment is inevitable as “[authors] are objects of appropriation” [7:309]. Likewise, Derrida speaks to the impossibility of ever moving beyond an author’s work [5]. He argues that even if we move beyond an

¹ MyDeathSpace.com is an “archival site of obituaries of MySpace members” that links MySpace profiles with obituaries or news reports of the individual’s death.

author's corpus, his influence will continue, "haunting" the works that have replaced him.

When considering SNS profiles as authored identities, the coconstitutive nature of subjectivity is important. Due to the central role of the reader as appropriator of an author's work, we turn to intersubjectivity as a theoretical concept for investigating death in a SNS context. Originating from Hursel's work in phenomenology [9], intersubjectivity places an emphasis on shared cognition and addresses "the myth of the isolated mind" [15:7]. Intersubjectivity is particularly useful when considering the collaborative nature of identity; namely, that identity develops as it is performed for others. The importance of this performance can be seen in feminist literature (notably Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* [4]) and work in narrative psychology on autobiographies asserts that identities are not only socially constructed, but also socially granted [12,14].

The role of subject and author are central in an analysis of death and technology. SNS, however, reveal the complexity of authorship, and the intersubjectivity of users (dead and alive) within these spaces. Upon the user's death, it becomes clear that profiles and identities in SNS are not constructed in isolation. Identities are situated in networks of "friends" who, through their association and/or active contribution to a user's profile, collaboratively construct these intersubjective identities [2]. This is a seemingly obvious point; after all, users join social networks with the explicit purpose of connecting with other users. However, acknowledging the collaborative authorship of these profiles, not to mention the collaborative authorship of the self, is often overlooked when discussing issues such as data ownership, security, and privacy.

The wall posts left by friends on a user's profile or page contribute as much to the individual's identity as the profile attributes that the user chooses and displays. Although this is a continuously occurring process, it becomes particularly apparent after the user has died. Friends who continue to post to these profiles reinforce the deceased user's place in a social network while gradually adding identity content to this persistent space. Moreover, posts across time resituate the profile in an ever-evolving social network.

Take Andrea, for example, who over the four years since one of her friends died often returns to this friend's profile page to post updates on her life. What starts with posts of mourning and loss gives way to new love, an engagement, and eventually a wedding: *"I can't help but think back to when we were kids. You're supposed to be one of my bridesmaids. Me, you, jessica, and dana are supposed to sit up all night the night before and talk and giggle."* Posts like these not only intersubjectively construct identity, but also situate users in the present through reflections on the past.

SNS also serve as social archives. Zieke, who died of cancer earlier this year, is routinely informed that friends have tagged him in the photos they upload. As SNS such as Facebook increasingly serve as universal directories [3],

SNS act as social directories as well. The continued involvement of dead users in the social practices of the living suggests their importance inside of social networks and contexts that still exist.

Many of the profiles we collected showed evidence of being modified and/or maintained. The technical capacity for intersubjective authorship on SNS also makes the profiles of dead users vulnerable to SPAM and other undesired content. Although a third-party user sometimes chooses to remove the account of a user after death, some accounts take on new life when a third-party (in our data, typically a family member or spouse) takes control of the account. It is common for a third-party to augment the profile, typically adding details about the death or funeral arrangements to the "About Me" section or the profile's comments section. In one Facebook-based scenario, we observed the father of young woman login to her account and post logistical information about the upcoming funeral to her wall. This initiated a handful of conversations between members of this woman's social network and her father in which condolences were offered and memories were shared. It is clear from the wall posts that the father had not anticipated these interactions or the *"little view of a portion of [my daughter's] life and the many wonderful friends she has."*

These additions are usually added soon after the user has died, however, there is evidence that third-parties continue to use the system even years later. Most obvious is the removal of SPAM or content otherwise deemed objectionable from the profile's comments or wall. However, on one MySpace profile, the remaining comments suggest that profile modifications extended to the removal of a subset of friends. Although it is difficult to see why modifications are made, the visible grooming of the virtual tombstone reveals a type of identity-maintenance in which third parties continue in the persistence of particular identities for the dead, extending to the management of the user's network of friends.

DEATH AND TECHNOSPIRITUALITY

Post-mortem wall-posting persisted beyond the initial period of shock and dismay at the loss of a friend and the planning of memorial services. We observed many friends who returned again and again to their dead friend's MySpace or Facebook profile for several years after their loss. These posts reveal a commitment to persisting the experience of the user, and the use of the Internet, among other media, to connect with them. Such posts often clustered around calendar events, wherein posters expressed sadness that users are not present to celebrate birthdays, graduations, or holidays together with their living friends. For example, following their high school class's graduation, one friend wrote: *"I really wish you were here to go through graduation with us."*

However, posts commonly end with an assertion that the user was, in fact, there, participating, or watching. As many

friends comment, *“Wish you were here, but I know you’re in heaven watching...”* Others affirm, *“even though you are not here physically, you are with us all in spirit...”* Just because users are dead does not mean that they are not watching, or even sometimes joining in the fun or sharing the joke. Before graduation, one friend wrote, *“i wish you could be at your graduation receiving [sic] your diploma tomorrow night :/ but I know you will be looking down at us.”* After a family thanksgiving dinner, another friend wrote to her dead sister, *“Did you see when Aaron pulled away from Grandma when she tried to kiss him?”* Such a post places the user present in the center of the action, continuously and spiritually involved in the lives of their friends.

These posts display a symmetry wherein the dead are assumed to still be active “in heaven” and continuing to amass experiences. Postings appear regularly on the comment sections of dead users’ pages checking in to relay a recent story or a laugh, asking *“hope ur well up there”* or asserting *“I kno ur livin it up up there!!!”* Users are characterized as *“having a grand time, even though we’re celebrating [your birthday] in different places from now on.”* Friends continue to wish each other happy holidays (*“I hope you had a great Christmas in the heavens”*); one observed posting even checked in post-Christmas with the following: *“How was your Christmas? Mine was ok ... got clothes and stuff what about you?? I’m going to see you tomorrow! Did u get my text message?”* Such a post is fairly standard in the daily interactions of teenaged users, although in this case, *“I’m going to see you tomorrow”* refers to a cemetery visit.

The use of tokens to associate with dead loved ones is common to many cultures: however, what is of especial interest here is how such comments express religious convictions both through the use of technology and in how they are used as opportunities to communicate with the persistent, active, dead. The use of the Facebook wall or the MySpace comments section becomes critical to maintaining strong friendships with the dead that persist after their loss “down here” but which will continue in future. Friends comment, *“I promise not to let another year go by before I get in touch again”* and exclaim, *“I know one day we’ll associate with eachother [sic] again!”* Users demonstrate their continued conversation with the dead on many registers: one posted on Facebook *“I introduced [my girlfriend] to you through your memorial service picture that I have always kept in my room...”* Many online messages are laden with the religious beliefs of the User and the friends, sometimes articulated and sometimes unsaid. For example, *“I’LL SEE YOU WHEN CHRIST DECIDES FOR US TO MEET AGAIN...”* and *“See you when I get to heaven [sic]”* express the specific commitment to the Christian afterlife wherein believers will be reunited. Following Bell [1], we characterize such activities as “technospiritual practices.”

The “technospiritual” has received much recent attention in HCI. Qualitative studies have shown how faith-based

communities use or resist Internet technologies for communication with their laity, how users maintain a variety of practices to maintain the godliness of their devices, or how devices are used to assist in time- and location-sensitive activities such as daily calls to prayer or Sabbath [1,17,18,19,20,21]. The use of SNS to continuously communicate with a user in the afterlife and engage in posthumous profile management can be framed as another example of “technospiritual” practice. This framing points to a continued historical trajectory that interweaves physical and metaphysical phenomena in the course of everyday spiritual practices. Invisible media such as electricity, magnetism, and the ether were all formerly enrolled in explanations of paranormal activity and posthumous communication, and even featured in movements such as Victorian spiritualism and popular use of the Ouija board at the turn of the twentieth century [13,16]. As contemporary designers, we often underplay the “ethereality” of the “Ethernet”, but this quality may be central to users’ experiences, explanations, and emergent interactions with such intangible media.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although a brief overview, this study of SNS profiles that remain active after the user dies offers three design implications to the human-computer interaction community. First, the emphasis on intersubjectivity exposes the importance of third-party user interaction features as constitutive of the primary user’s identity his or herself. The activity of the SNS page despite the loss of the user draws attention to the user’s location as embedded within an active and evolving community. Although especially visible after death, this is no less true when the user is alive. The critical humanist approach allows us to see the centrality of death relative to human experience by complicating understandings of the self as individually-produced and managed. Identities are not only socially constructed: they are socially granted. Thus ownership and identity extend beyond the authoring user. We therefore see the user and their data as contingent on the network in which they both exist. Should we cease to think of Web2.0 sites as primarily “personal publishing tools” or profiles as entirely user-controlled, and instead focus on seemingly-secondary aspects such as the wall or the comments section as rich platforms for engagement in the situated co-construction of identity, then an entirely new space for design intervention and opportunity will open.

Second, the everyday practice of writing to a dead friend through their SNS profile shows that technospirituality is not something that simply happens “out there.” Prior studies of religion and technology have often located “technospiritual” practices as something that happens “out there” among extreme user groups: in South America, in Africa, or in South-East Asia [1,18]— or even in extreme faith-based communities in the United States [17,21]. Consistent with the postcolonial turn in Human-Computer Interaction [10], we believe that such practices are not

situated “out there” – nor are they simply “here too.” Rather, the posthumous SNS posts require us to reconfigure our very notions of “here” and “there”, “users like us” and “others”. This does not mean that we should not be attuned to the specific socio-cultural positioning of our study’s sample: far from it.² But what it does mean is that the pervasive use of SNS as a medium for communication with the dead requires us to examine not whether or where particular cultures seamlessly enroll technology in their spiritual lives, but how, and how best to support it.

Third, the attention paid to these “dead users” evidences subtle interactions around the visibility of these profiles and a user’s death. There is a tension between the desire to engage the dead online, and the potential unease when a technological system presents unexpected ghosts. While Facebook’s recent “Reconnect” feature elicited anger in the Twitterverse at the seeming “insensitivity” to the mortal status of friends, it did inspire a cascade of comments that appear mournful, more than angry. “Facebook tells me that I need to reconnect with you,” wrote one woman on the wall of a recently deceased friend. “I wish it was as easy as picking up a phone or typing these few words. I do miss you and think about you often!”

Such a comment should caution against removing dead users or otherwise allowing their mortality status to influence the interactions within the system. After all, when looking at Ashley’s profile, and how the system continues to persist her identity in tandem with the friends who shape it with fond memories and loving remarks, it becomes clear: Ashley is very much alive. The potential harm of removing an account (and the associated identity) from an existing network reinforces how extreme users such as the dead may require special design sensitivities for the living. As a friend concluded, scribing a farewell on one user’s wall, “Who ever is running Tony’s profile now...plz NEVER delete it.”

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² The profiles we collected were mostly crafted in the mainland United States, belonging to Protestant/Evangelical Christians and Mormons.