

After-life Presence on Facebook: Initial Analysis of Cases within the Mexican Culture

Luis A. Castro

Manchester Business School
The University of Manchester
luis.castro@acm.org

Victor M. Gonzalez

CIIDIT
Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León
victor.gonzalezgz@uanl.edu.mx

ABSTRACT

When we die our physical presence disappears but in many cases our digital presence on social networking websites might still revolve around others' life. Due to religious and personal beliefs, the concept of death has been entrenched in Mexican culture since ancient times and these beliefs can be seen on social networking websites when interacting with the dead. Mexicans seem to be using them to reconnect with the dead and increasingly maintain some form of contact with them. We present some initial observations on Facebook profiles of two late Mexicans to investigate how the bereaved deal with the dead of a loved one. We found several different topics amongst the messages posted by the bereaved on their deceased friends' walls. Furthermore, we posit some questions that can be used as research guidelines in the future. Finally, we also discuss some of the current and future implications for research in this particular area.

Author Keywords

After-life presence, Facebook, social networking websites, reconnecting with the dead.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Many cultures around the world have different notions of Death. Early civilizations included also different notions of Death such as the Aztecs with their goddess of Death Mictecacihuatl, the belief of afterlife in ancient Egypt, and Thanatos, the ancient Greek personification of Death. Yet, in modern life, and for those with access to social networking websites such as Facebook, the way we deal with the dead seems to begin to be permeated by the increasing penetration and usage of those technologies in

daily life.

When we die our physical presence vanishes but in many cases our digital presence on social networking websites might still revolve around the lives of the bereaved. Even though dying can be seen as part of the life cycle, many websites seem to have neglected this issue as part of their actual design and even their Terms of Service. Hence, the fate of the online data depends most of the times on the website holding it. Much of the data we post (e.g., blogs, Flickr photos) might or might not remain online after we die. This depends explicitly on how the website owners decide to manage the data.

However, talking about the dead online is not something really new. With the advent of the Internet in the late 90's, many websites were created to support the creation of online memorials for the deceased such as remembered-forever.org, memory-of.com, mydeathspace.com, amongst many others. One of the main characteristics of these websites is that they resemble physical cemeteries in many ways. That is, online profiles are created on a website which you can visit at any particular time. However, this form of contact with the dead might gradually change with the ever increasing penetration of social networking websites and the inclusion of most close friends within personal social networks created online [1, 2]. Hence, these days, the dead might be still able to 'hang around' the living within the same social circles on social networking websites.

Until recently, Facebook, one of the most popular social networking websites, used to have a 'reconnect' feature which suggested friends to reconnect, usually those friends who one rarely interacts with, if ever. In practice, this turned out to be somewhat uncomfortable for some users who had friends who passed way as some of their suggested friends to reconnect were late friends [3]. Facebook solved this issue by recently launching the memorialisation feature for deceased users (see [4]) preventing anyone from logging in as well as removing certain sensitive information (e.g., contact information).

Whereas online memorials have been in place for several years, the online presence of the dead in social networking websites is what seems to make a difference these days. The online profiles of the dead are not being moved or created on websites which you can sporadically visit –as

you would visit a cemetery— but they are now within the personal social networks. It is then important to understand how people deal with a peer's death on social networking websites such as Facebook and perhaps to understand how they manage or 'interact' with their dead friends. We argue that people use websites not only to post grieve-related messages but also to maintain a sense of perpetual contact with those who have passed away. This type of behaviour might have its origins particularly in the socio-cultural background under study, which in our case, Mexico, becomes particularly interesting given the strong and special meaning of Death for Mexicans.

SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

In Mexico, as in many other Latin-American cultures, dying is seen from a very particular perspective. Mexicans observe several rituals to celebrate and honour the lives of the deceased. Several religious and socio-cultural manifestations are living witnesses of the entrenchment of Death amongst Mexicans. One of the most popular and worldwide-known religious traditions is the Day of the Dead whereby modern Mexicans remember their loved ones on November, 2nd every year. The origins of the modern tradition can be traced back to the indigenous observances of rituals dedicated to the dead. In the same way, the recent veneration for the saint-like figure of the "Santa Muerte" (Saint Death) has been a topic that has yielded a lot of controversy, especially within the Catholic Church. The deity is believed to have its origins in a syncretism between Mesoamerican (i.e., pre-Columbian) and Catholic beliefs. In this way, in Mexico many of the ancient traditions and beliefs have been gaining popularity and permeating daily life in many aspects. Now, with the ever increasing penetration of technology in daily life it is of paramount importance to understand how people make use of technology to maintain traditions, beliefs and interpersonal contacts with the dead. We believe that many of those socio-cultural manifestations in the form of traditions might be observed on social networking websites, particularly Facebook. Also, we consider worthwhile to study how Mexicans use it to reconnect with the dead and maintain certain forms of spiritual communication.

OUR APPROACH

Our approach mainly discusses the following issues:

- Religious and Personal Beliefs Observances
- Reconnecting with the Dead
- Online Profile as Presence

It can be argued that many of people's personal beliefs in daily life are reflected online. In the previous section, we discussed a couple of traditions and beliefs that seem to be entrenched in Mexicans' daily life, not only in their home country but also increasingly abroad (e.g., in the USA). To this aim, it is important to understand the role of personal beliefs and religious observances in the way technology is being used. We argue that it is possible that online personal profiles of deceased people are being used to perpetuate the

contact with those who have passed away, similar to the way long-distance friendships are maintained. That is, we argue that the physical contact no longer exists but contact is still maintained through eventual 'dialogue'. In many cases it seems that there is a genuine interest not only to honour the life of the dead but also to maintain a conversation and conveyance of the latest news (e.g., giving birth). In this sense, the religious backgrounds as well as traditional notions of death might come into play to forge new forms of connections facilitated by the penetration of technology in daily life.

Also, it can be argued that the perception of a person's online presence varies when this person perishes. Having the online presence amongst the living might convey rather an awkward feeling, especially at a place of frequent/daily usage such as social networking websites like Facebook. Issues such as this one might be of particular interest for the design community as the insights obtained from fieldwork with actual users might reveal a connection between personal beliefs and religious observances, and the online behaviour of users.

Methods

For this study we use thematic analysis of wall posts such as the type of analysis suggested by [5], as it can provide significant insights into trans-physical communication. In the same way, the temporal dimension of communication can help to devise the role of online mediums to maintain a sense of connection to the dead. Moreover, it is of paramount importance to understand the role of the online presence in the shaping of online behaviour towards the death of a loved one. For this, interviews with family members as well as friends of the deceased can be fundamental to understand the personal motivations for maintaining connections with late relatives or friends. Again, understanding the motivations behind this sort of behaviour might provide designers with significant information that can facilitate decision making during the design process.

Initial Observations

For this position paper, we had access to a couple of Facebook profiles of two recently deceased friends of one of the authors. Although very limited, this sample provided some empirical evidence about the need of exploring this area, especially if we take into account the ever increasing penetration of social networking websites in daily life. Previous to the study, we contacted their next-of-kin to ask for permission to carry out the analysis. After the positive response, the Facebook profiles were saved and analysed using standard spreadsheet software. Both profiles under study belonged to male users with an apparent active social life. User A, 19, recently finished high school and was doing ESL (English as a Second Language) course abroad. On the other hand, user B, 24, recently finished a bachelor's degree in his home state.

Following his death in mid June, 2009, user A received 310 new messages on his wall, an average of 1.57 messages per

day, without considering comments on each message. On the other hand, user B obtained 113 new wall messages after his death in early September, 2009 averaging 0.97 new posts per day. Amongst the main topics on their wall we have:

Holidays, birthdays and death anniversaries

Their friends tend to write on their wall to congratulate the deceased on their birthdays or other holidays such as Christmas. In a similar fashion, monthly observances of the death are manifested in the form of wall posts by friends.

Conveyance of the latest news

The conveyance of the latest news seems to take place often as well. News such as giving birth or achieving something important is often observed on both profiles.

Interactions

There are also several interactions in a way that somehow resembles the way a long distance friendship is being maintained, although this is necessarily one-way at least in the physical world as we do not have any empirical evidence of the emotional gain that this 'communication' might represent for the bereaved.

I-miss-you comments

There are messages to show the deceased how much they are being missed in their lives and others' lives (e.g., family).

Confessions

Although not so frequent, some confessions are being posted although not always disclosed. For instance, some users might write "I did this and that regarding you know what".

Other

Posts generated by Facebook applications, which may or may not include personal messages.

Main differences between Offline and Online Behaviour

We observed certain differences between the way grief is being experienced and shown online and offline. First, at least in Mexico, in the offline world is very rare to observe someone publicly 'talking' to a dead person out loud as it seems to be carried out online by writing on their wall so everyone can read the message. Secondly, grief observances seem to go online in a sense that instead of physically taking flowers to the cemetery—a very common practice amongst Mexicans—, people are now posting messages on the private wall on Facebook which somehow might resemble a visit to their grave. These differences might indicate how technology is permeating several aspects of our lives and this can be indicative of how future generations will deal with delicate situations.

FURTHER RESEARCH AND FUTURE WORK

Being such a new topic of interest for research there are several questions that remain open. We will next comment on these and several other issues that are to be addressed in future research.

First, there is no doubt that religion somehow delineates the way socio-cultural traditions are being held in several countries. It can be argued that Mexico has been one of the strongholds of Catholicism in Latin America. So, what is the impact of religion on the online observances of grief in Mexico? Does it influence the way people behave if we compare it to other cultures (e.g., the USA)? Surely, some of these issues might not be answered now, but they can be of certain interest in the near future as research in the area unfolds.

Second, an issue that should be investigated from a psycho-social point of view is the way the online presence becomes a surrogate presence of a dead person. For instance, when you are interacting with friends online, you are aware of your friends' online presence and that their physical presence might be somewhere 'out there' in the physical world. This sensation of knowing that someone is 'somewhere' might change when somebody dies. Even when a deceased friend' online profile might have not experienced any modification whatsoever, the lack of a physical presence seems to transform the way we perceive their online presence. The sensation you obtain when you visit an online profile changes. And so, to what extent the online presence becomes a surrogate presence of the physical one? How real becomes this after-life presence? Is this surrogate presence as perceptible and noticeable as to when the physical presence was around? A similar case can be used using another scenario: online games. What would you do if you know that the person you were playing last night with, passed away a week before? Even if the account was being used by her or his brother the feeling we get might be odd. In the same way, an awkward feeling can be obtained by receiving emails from a friend who recently died, even if email messages are automatic responses (e.g., holiday emails). So, is 'interacting' with the dead any different than interacting with the living? When interacting with friends at a distance using an asynchronous communication service there is an interactional "vacuum" as there is no certainty of when the response will arrive [6]. If a response does not arrive when expected, the reliability of the communication channel might be put in doubt and the message might even get re-sent just for the sake of confirmation. When interacting, with the dead, however, it seems that there is a tacit acknowledgement of message delivery. Thus, it seems that messages are automatically read and there is an actual 'dialogue', even when communication is one-way.

Third, at least in Mexico several funerary customs such as attending a funeral, attending to the "Novenario" (9 consecutive days of praying the rosary at the deceased's house), sending a "crown of flowers" are commonplace across the country. This is usually a gesture of affection towards the bereaved and has usually positive social connotations. With the advent of new technologies this behaviours, although still strongly rooted, might be moving online within newer generations. We observed on both

profiles that some people were continuously posting messages. Even when the actual motivation is unknown, some of these can be due to the social norms currently observed offline. That is, attending to a funeral and attending a “Novenario” have positive social connotations and so it might have, one could argue, frequently posting messages since it is also a gesture of public nature. Of course, at the moment there is no strong empirical evidence to support this but we will address these and other issues in the near future.

CLOSING REMARKS

The types of interactions we mentioned here posit theoretical questions that have to be answered in order to better understand the use of technology as a means to maintain connections with the dead. Also, this topic raises some moral, ethical, and legal issues pertaining to the maintenance of online information belonging (or used to belong) to a deceased. Should all the online information related to a late user be deleted? The Terms and Conditions of websites such as Facebook confer certain ownership of the information to the user, but who owns the information when the user passes away? Does the bereaved own it now? Is there going to be an online will whereby users can individually decide what shall happen to the information once they pass away? We believe that these considerations will be made in the future when law enforcement agencies

become more aware of the moral, ethical, and legal issues that are beginning to be faced. Certainly, for social networking sites, which rely to a great extent on the profits generated by users as consumers, late users are no longer potential or captive consumers but rather the bereaved visiting their profiles. This surely will have certain impact in the way the online profiles of late users are being displayed and managed. We will be reporting on these issues as well as further analysis during the workshop and future conferences.

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