Immortality and resurrection of the digital self

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Abstract

We can safely predict that sometime in the future there will be more social media profiles belonging to dead than living people. In this work, we begin by characterizing the cultural meaning of the technological affordances that social media institutions have already associated with profiles that belong to dead people. We analyze current practices and we present future trends under the scope of the remediation theory [Bolter and Grusin, 2000], which suggests that at least initially, new media practices are just a mimesis of existing practices. In particular, we examine Facebook, which has already introduced several options for user profiles that belong to dead users. Finally, we raise awareness about novel technological and cultural issues that have been neglected or are not in the interests of social media institutions.

Keywords: digital culture, software, identity, messaging

Social media as heirlooms

By late 2017, Facebook had reported 2.2 billion active users (logged-in at least once monthly). Assuming an average age of 30 years old and a mean life expectancy of 80 years, then we can predict that by 2070 the majority of them will be dead. Although Facebook itself might not exist by that time, there might be other social networks that will attract the online activities of those users, who have become accustomed and enjoy to express themselves publicly on digital media. In contrast to our body and the rest of our material possessions, our social media profile consists of digital information and it is potentially eternal. Some people might present an idealized self on their timeline [Back et al., 2010], but we can assume that the majority of them might be more natural [Bargh and Chartrand, 1999] in their chat sessions, voice commands, and browsing habits.

In life off-line, most of the time, and with good reason, people are not concerned with what happens to them, or to their (material or intellectual) property after death. Some people might choose to leave a testament, which might be considered according to national legislation and depending to the requests by relatives. Moreover, there is usually national legislation or religious heritage that might define inheritance or burial practices. Thus, it is possible that social media institutions might need to regulate further the information content practices according to varying and evolving contemporary practices. In any case, we should also consider privacy matters, as well as individual wishes.

Who owns our social media profile after death?

The management of post death activities that regard the body and the (material or intellectual) properties are a matter of national legislation, religion, and choices made by the individual and by the relatives, which usually act according to contemporary cultural practices. Currently, Facebook supports the following profile actions after a death, which might be associated with traditional cultural practices, as follows:

1. Delete (Cremation)
2. Locked (Mummification)
3. Memorialization (Cemetery)
4. Legacy contact (Testament)

It is currently unclear what happens to our social media profiles after the death of the legacy contact. Should our profile be inherited together with the profile of our legacy contact to the next legacy contact and so on (e.g., just like that ring that our great-grandmama passed down)? Alternatively, if we consider the intellectual property legislation, then it becomes possible to transfer a social media profile to the commons after a number of years. Even if we decide to delete our personal copies of online interactions, some of them might be impossible to delete, such as chat and voice history, email, and photo [Gemmell et al., 2002], which have been stored in personal storage, in the cloud, or at other user terminals. Therefore, there is an emerging technological opportunity that digital data might be leveraged to extend our digital self eternally, either in archival format or even as a dynamic and evolving digital entity.

Is our social media profile going to go to paradise?

We are already familiar and we might have read the private letters of famous individuals at museums and edited volumes. Most of us should agree that reading love letters that do not concern us personally is a significant privacy breach, more so, when they concern a living person. Nevertheless, it is culturally established that at least for the famous among us, our cognitive heritage will be certainly archived and publicly displayed regardless of our wishes. Notably, the applicability of this analysis is already valid even for humans that do not own or have never created a social media account. For example, we can find Google Scholar profiles for important individuals, who are long dead (e.g., Herbert A. Simon died in 2001, which is long before Google introduced the Scholar service). Although scholarly publications are just a small aspect of a life, it is straightforward to extrapolate this contemporary practice to the rest of our technologically mediated selves.

Our embodied consciousness might remain uncertain about the happenings in afterlife, but there is some hope about its disembodied digital reflection. In the future, it is very likely that there will be

social media profiles of dead people curated by relatives, other interested parties, or even automatically by mining our digital remains that are distributed all over the internet. We suggest that technological determinism should not be the only guiding force in such matters and that cultural aspects might be more important in shaping the respective technologies and the new mediated practices. Therefore, we expect that religious institutions might become more active in shaping digital media practices. Moreover, existing religions might need to evolve themselves in order to provide suitable narratives and rituals for our digital selves.

Online resurrection

Besides social media profiles (friends, videos, photos, status updates), there is also a growing number of text messages and interactions with media content produced by others. Although text messages might be considered as a rather casual medium about not so important matters, they are an important representation of the self to others. There are already technological systems that could be trained with the text chat and voice archives left by an individual as an input, in order to produce a bot that behaves similarly to the individual, at least with regard to casual interactions [Newton]. The more data available for the training, the more believable the bot might seem (or even sound like). Moreover, new media technologies, such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and holography, might enable additional traces of online actions, which could be enacted in a future digital self.

In addition to verbal communication, a bot might also be enabled to produce new interactions (views, likes, emotions, etc) on new content created by other users. In this way, the digital remains might become the source of a generative and eternal interaction stream long after death. We suggest that as long as living individuals are happy to interact with others through social media (e.g., chat, like, etc) then it becomes technologically possible that there will soon be little difference between the living and the dead, at least with regard to our online interactions. Therefore, the more effort we invest in our online activities the more data we create for our future digital selves. Previous works have debated the balance among the real self, the idealized self, experimental selves [Turkle, 2011], as well as contextualized selves [Goffman, 2002]. Technology will soon enable us to consider the resurrected immortal digital self [Harari, 2016].

The last judgement of our immortal self

What actually happens to our social media profile after death is arguably of small importance to us at that time, since we will probably not be able to control or perceive its status. Nevertheless, there are several immediate, significant, and wide implications for ourselves and for research in various domains. As soon as we become aware

that the respective data will live forever, or even that the data could be leveraged to *resurrect* an eternal digital self, we might want to reconsider how we present ourselves online. In this way, at least for some people, the current presentation of themselves online might be significantly affected towards the curation of an eternal digital self. Moreover, depending on the quality of the reincarnated digital self, it might become obsolete to invest any effort to cure cognitive symptoms of diseases, such as Alzheimers. In terms of computing practices, when the hardware is failing we are moving the data and the software to new hardware.

In summary, we suggest that the current practices of death online are only a shallow mimesis of the richness and breadth of the cultural practices associated with death off-line. One possible explanation is that digital information is very special and contrary to human nature it is disembodied and potentially eternal, which makes it difficult to comprehend and to control, at least in the context of death. Thus, we call for a more careful examination of both the cultural practices and the humane wishes in the design of technological systems that concern the digital remains of individuals after death. It is currently unforeseen if and when the last judgement might happen, but it is quite certain that our digital selves will be forever judged, as soon as we depart.

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