How to Delete the Dead: Honoring Negative Affective Experiences with Postmortem Data

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ABSTRACT

Formative experiences in human lives are often unpleasant. Yet social technologies today are designed to presume positive experiences; "design for delight" is even a principle in user interface development [9]. So when humans have negative life experiences like the loss of a loved one, which often include technology-related tasks, the designs of their technologies can exacerbate that negativity [5]. It is these negative experiences—interactions that trigger negative affects related to human sadness or distress—that design and engineering can and must honor. My dissertation will frame death as a key example of a difficult life experience that often requires digital interactions and digital tasks, yet currently lacks adequate tools to facilitate compassionate and meaningful interactions in a digital context. Incorporating empirical work in human-computer interaction with roots in cultural anthropology, I propose a project that will examine the role of ritual in technologically mediated human interactions during times of grief. Through interviews, participant observation, and tech support, I will create ritual-based practices around postmortem data that will honor the experiences people have of the presence of the deceased within that data, while maintaining the necessary control or closure of accounts that may be preferred.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**; **Collaborative and social computing**; *User studies*.

KEYWORDS

postmortem data, profile deletion, user experience, ritual, affect

CONTEXT AND MOTIVATION

Recently, HCI researchers have elevated the importance of people's experiences with social technologies during difficult life experiences [4, 7]. Some of this work has resulted in new functions and standards in computer-mediated communication platforms, such as Facebook's Legacy Contact [1] and Google's Inactive Account Manager [6]. These technologies enable compassion by communicating human needs and allowing people to address those needs. However, as a mediator of human communication and relationships, technology can be cruel in the neutrality of its intermediary role. The medium can make the message more painful. My work will focus on people's negative experiences at the intersection of death and social media, and work with participants to create new, meaningful experiences that hold space for life's painful moments. Honoring negative experiences matters because of how frequent and varied such experiences are in online platform design (e.g., [8]. Additionally, existing work in HCI has identified the possible benefits of incorporating rituals into grief-related online experiences [10]. Rather than viewing negative experiences as anomalies, my work will explore how we might recognize and validate them as not extra, but essential, to digital interactions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In light of the context above, my dissertation is guided by the following research questions: 1) What is it like to manage a deceased loved one's social media profile? 2) How does one carry out the wishes of the deceased in regards to their online accounts? 3) How could these experiences––postmortem data management and disposal––feel more compassionate?

PRIOR WORK

My completed studies focus on in-depth evaluations of Facebook Legacy Contact (FBLC) and Memorialization as the only dedicated social media feature for postmortem account stewardship. I examined

FB's options for people to decide how their data will be handled after they die, and the various resulting experiences and challenges for the bereaved. My findings from these studies guided improvements in the Legacy Contact system, and have laid a foundation for design experimentation toward the best possible future experiences of online grief.

Evaluating Postmortem Data Management Setup

The first study evaluated the FBLC setup process, asking how users form and communicate expectations about what a postmortem manager's responsibilities would be. I conducted 30 qualitative interviews with adult FB account holders in the US who either configured their own settings or were chosen for future management by someone else. I found that account holders chose the FB Friend they felt closest to, and that selection was often reciprocated. Both account holders and legacy contacts felt confident that they had communicated (or could communicate) well about the legacy contact's responsibilities, but their expectations did not align with the actual functionality of the Legacy Contact system. The misalignment of user expectations and system functionality indicates that postmortem management systems require a setup process that is fundamentally different from the quick-clickthrough standards of everyday interaction design.

Evaluating Postmortem Profile Stewardship

The second study evaluated the experiences and challenges people face when stewarding memorialized profiles. I conducted 28 qualitative interviews with people serving as legacy contacts for memorialized FB accounts. I identified the relationships between legacy contacts and the deceased, common practices and expectations, and that people were chosen to be a legacy contact for one major reason: trust. My analysis found disconnects between how people understand trust in the context of interpersonal relationships and how trust is technically implemented. This part of the study resulted in a high-level discussion about the challenges of representing the ambiguity of interpersonal trust in impersonal systems [2].

WORK IN PROGRESS

The third relevant study to my future dissertation work is currently in the analysis phase. This study involves the most popular preference that FB users have about what should happen to their profile after they die: deletion.

Evaluating Postmortem Profile Deletion

During the summer of 2019, I conducted 19 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with English-speaking FB account holders. These interviews took two forms. The first set of interviews (N=15) were with people who had selected the "Delete After Death" option in their settings, asked why participants

had chosen that option, and what detailed expectations they had for what their surviving loved ones would need to do to complete postmortem deletion. The second set of interviews (N=4) were with people who had experienced the deletion of a deceased loved one's account and asked about the efficacy of the process as well as difficulties or problems they may have encountered. Though I have not yet analyzed the interview data from these participants, initial memos and discussions with various product stakeholders at Facebook produced the early findings I describe in this section. The most salient findings (to be described in detail following analysis) are as follows:

(1) All account holders who chose Delete After Death described their motivation toward that choice as being the least complicated task for surviving loved ones.
(2) All account holders who chose Delete After Death expect that their surviving loved ones would be able to save photos or other content from their profile prior to its deletion.
(3) Most account holders who chose Delete After Death reported no objections to their surviving loved ones *not* deleting the profile.
(4) Three of the four participants who had experienced the deletion of a deceased loved one's profile reported strong negative emotions (i.e., confusion, anger, sadness) in response to the profile's disappearance.

The interview data promises to provide both rich and practical insights into the experience of postmortem data deletion. Insights from these interviews will inform the ritual project proposed below, as well as design implications that will be applicable to any online service that is wrestling with questions of how to handle postmortem data.

The findings from my three evaluations of FBLC compliment others' empirical studies of online memorials as having emerged from spaces that had been created by the deceased during their lives (i.e., [3], and [7]). The re-purposing of content for memorials described in each of these works all indicate a core difficulty in postmortem data management: that those with the most control are the least invested in the initial setup process, while those with the least control will be most affected.

Having completed these studies, I possess expertise in both the human challenges of handling a loved one's postmortem data, and the technical challenge of building postmortem data management systems. To continue building knowledge in this area, I have designed a three-part study to address postmortem data management's paradox of control, and work toward making postmortem data management—and by extension, any interaction with emotionally difficult content—more compassionate.

FUTURE DISSERTATION WORK

I propose an interview-based, participant observation study that aims to intervene in postmortem profile deletion, which was the most difficult experience my completed works identified.

Re-imagining the Experience of Postmortem Profile Deletion

As previously stated, a paradox of control plagues designers of postmortem data management systems. My study of deletion preferences specified that, even if it was the stated wish of the deceased, deleting a loved one's FB account is an abrupt and painful experience. I plan to re-imagine, redesign, and test how people might delete a loved one's postmortem profile on FB through the co-creation of rituals specific to the needs of my participants. My study would employ a research through design methodology [11] by engaging a group of participants in an embodied ritual focused on the deletion of a deceased person's social media profile. The postmortem profile deletion study identified the deletion experience to be unexpected, too sudden, and too complete. These pain points, inverted, suggest that deletion should be anticipated, slow, and iterative or selective.

To allow people to anticipate, slow down, and be selective about their loved ones' profile deletion, I have planned 3 interactions with people who have recently lost someone and wish to delete that FB profile. Participants will develop a deletion ritual to honor the memory of their loved one and complete the profile deletion. Following a planning consultation, I will volunteer to attend and help facilitate these rituals. Involvement in participant's rituals will provide insight into the community's experience of deletion, and allow me to better understand the impact of deletion. The final portion of the study will involve reflection interviews with the participants.

The primary contribution of this study would identify the elements of ritual (i.e., temporal, physical, and visual) that can be applied to an embodied process of deleting profiles and other postmortem data, and develop suggestions for how social media platforms should change the process and experience of deletion after account holder deaths.

EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

Through a combination of qualitative interview, participant observation, and design methods, I anticipate that my dissertation work will have the following contributions:

- **Pushing the boundaries of a death-avoidant culture.** Through intentional affective experiences that are shaped by a goal of compassionate computing, these interventions on the most popular social media interfaces will contribute to healthier individual and community responses to universal human mortality.
- **Normalizing emergent online grief practices.** My work will equip designers of social technologies to create respectful memorial experiences for people who want to remember loved ones online. My work will also equip people who are active on social media to make informed decisions about their own postmortem data management, and and provide comfort to people who want to honor their departed loved ones' wishes to delete their social media profiles.

- **Reifying the concept of data deletion rituals.** By combining an embodied practice with intangible presence through online platforms, data deletion rituals will stand as an evocative concept and a practical tool to further the scholarly understanding of how people experience identity and relationships through technology.

Over the lifetime of my research career, I envision kinder data deletion becoming an example of how online interaction platforms can best approach HCI for all difficult life experiences. This dissertation is my first step toward guiding people who create systems to consider a holistic human perspective of what is possible with these technologies that mediate our relationships and let us perform our identities. It will be an important step forward in the maturity of the digital human experience to create options for users that honor what a person's online presence is. I imagine a future in which postmortem profile deletion honors the social value of a person's online presence, and offers that person's community the thing that all human communities have needed for death: a common experience that acknowledges the loss and moves everyone into a new normal together.

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