Designing Post-mortem Profile Deletion as a Community Ritual

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Abstract

The ephemerality of the digital world is strangely incompatible with our physical, mortal existence. This is most evident when people who use social media die and leave behind a digital footprint that insinuates their presence. The lack of recognition of the emotional significance of the deceased's social media presence has made post-mortem profile deletion a barrier to the ongoinginess of survivors. The work described here incorporates community ritual practices with principles of slow HCI to develop a planning tool for ritualizing profile deletion that honors both the deceased's wishes, and the healthy ongoingness of bereaved survivors. Those closest to the deceased will plan a ritual that recognizes and honors their attachments to the deceased's digital presence, while completing the task of deleting the specified account. We believe that making profile deletion a community ritual will support bereaved people by giving them permission and instructions to honor the significance of the deceased's digital footprint.

Author Keywords

post-mortem profiles, deletion, death, rituals, online grief, digital rituals, action research

CCS Concepts

•**Human-centered computing** → **Computer supported cooperative work;** *User studies;* Human computer interaction (HCI);

Introduction

Within the context of social computing, recent research has addressed how data allows one's presence to continue beyond their death. The question of this "ongoingness," however, must extend beyond owners of data. Ongoingness is bound up with survivors as well. People who lose a loved one are now tasked with managing the deceased's digital footprint, from accounts to devices, whether they planned to do so or not. For social media specifically, new features now empower users to plan ahead for their surviving loved ones. Yet, can the bereaved ever truly be prepared for the myriad tasks they become responsible for at the request of the deceased?

Existing work in HCI tends to focus on post-mortem data management as an individual act, presumably the result of HCI's traditional focus on single users [2]. Our research, however, shows how management practices, especially when a digital footprint is involved, are deeply communal [7]. In contrast, many scholars have documented how social media platforms provide new spaces for communal grief. Brubaker et al., for example, claimed that social network sites like Facebook expand death socially, temporally, and spatially [4]. However, much of this research is based on the continued presence of spaces such as post-mortem profiles, begging the question of when and how such spaces should be put to rest [18].

We believe that these three types of expansion, while broadly beneficial, may actually be making the experience of loss more isolating for those closest to the deceased. As platforms begin to include features for death and bereavement, it is incumbent on us as researchers and designers to provide insights and develop best practices to support survivors as they build a new normal after a loss [12]. We believe the next major step in enabling ongoingness must bridge this gap between honoring the deceased's wishes (along with laws and terms of service) and honoring the meaning that death brings to technology and digital artifacts.

In this paper, we outline early stage research we are currently pursuing to address survivors' experiences of post-mortem profile deletion. Our aim is to re-imagine their digital task as something akin to a temporally anchored funeral. Below, we describe our approach to addressing the gap between practical wishes and symbolic meaning from the perspective of communal ritual experiences, and ask: How might we design deletion of a loved one's data as a communal ritual?

Memorialization in the Absence of Ritual

Online memorial practices have been observed since the earliest days of the Internet [17]. Extensive research details these practices, focusing on the preservation of online memorial spaces (e.g., [1]), the types of community that memorial spaces support [5], and their impact on well-being [10]. Yet, beyond Facebook's memorialization and Legacy Contact [3], social media platforms have not directly designed for the meaningful memorial practices of surviving loved ones. In most cases, online profiles are being reappropriated as memorial spaces, sometimes only enabling a semblance of community (e.g., [8]) that is easily disrupted

[9]. By considering the communal significance of bereavement, our approach extends "thanatosensitivity" [11] to consider how we might design these spaces to support communal rituals.

In our recent work, we have detailed the experiences, especially the particular difficulties, people currently have with post-mortem profiles and expressions of grief online [7]. Those managing memorialized profiles on Facebook reported a need for collaboration or permission from other survivors, as well as better preparation for what tasks they would and would not be able to perform with the memorialized profile. If Brubaker et al.'s "expansions" are what has changed about death and grief in an online context, and the difficulties we report are new in that same context, it follows that inverting those expansions through a ritual—a limited social group, in a designated space, at a specified time—would re-condense people's digital experiences of death and mourning. Along with repairing the hurtful downsides of social media's new grief-related pains, our aim in this work is to help people find meaning in a context that our culture has not yet built ritual for. The following study would guide the creation of such a ritual, and evaluate the resulting experience. Our research aim is to provide a framework for creating communal processes for deleting profiles and other post-mortem data, and to develop suggestions for how major social media platforms should change the process and experience of deletion after an account holder's death. That is to say, a meaningful digital ritual will return familiar limitations to people's experiences of death and grieving, thus building a bridge between familiar and unfamiliar encounters with death.

Study Design: Community Deletion Rituals

In our pilot work we have identified key points of emotional distress in deleting deceased people's Facebook profiles. We observed that the abrupt nature of deletion limits the opportunity for people to a) honor the meaning that a post-mortem profile has, and b) account for meaning around the act of deletion.

In response to our observations, we have created a resource for groups of survivors to use in creating their own data burial ritual for a deceased person's Facebook profile. We consulted with chaplains, religious leaders, dying people, and their families to understand how familiar practices can serve to bring closure. Because of the physical practices that are common across cultures in meaningful rituals, we then turned to work from trauma studies and psychobiology to understand ways that rituals and embodied practices can alleviate emotional distress. Finally, we considered principles of slow HCI [14] and seamfulness in design [6] to understand ways of designing technologies that are more amenable to ritual and meaning making.

Using our framework, we are planning a series of workshops with people who have recently experienced a loss and have been asked by their loved one to delete their profile. In each workshop, participants will develop a deletion ritual to honor the memory of their loved one and complete the requested deletion. Following these planning workshops, we will volunteer to attend and help facilitate these rituals, and ask each participant to complete a follow-up survey. Involvement in participant's rituals will provide insight into the community's experience of deletion, and allow us to better understand the impact of deletion and iterate on the

planning workshops in the future.

Ritual Planning Workshop
Our planning workshop aims to guide individuals through designing a ritual for disposing of a social media profile, but with adequate openness so as to encourage people to incorporate their own existing traditions and belief systems in meaningful ways. We will ask our participants to focus on the basic elements of memorial event planning, while considering specific tasks and objectives survivors commonly have with regard to a deceased person's social media profile.

The workshop will plan a ritual event involving three components:

1. The gathering of people closest to the deceased, led by the person with the permission and ability to delete the profile

2. The collection of physical objects and activities significant to people's memories of the deceased

3. A final acknowledgement and farewell to the deceased person's online presence

The components are drawn from extensive interviews with people who either managed a deceased loved one's social media profile [7], or wish they could have done so.

Drawing from multiple religious and spiritual traditions, our planning prompts focus on stories, embodiment, and constructing meaning. Situating our investigation within the context of familiar traditions is critical given the socio-cultural work they already do for people. A central question in our design work is how to balance

the practical objectives around digital asset disposal with the needs of the bereaved, given the meanings often attached to those digital objects after a loved one dies. [16, 15]. Prompts related to physical objects and movements are inspired by research on trauma recovery in the field of psychobiology [19]. The purpose of each prompt is to make the event true to the person being remembered, and to create space for the bereaved to "story" that person for themselves [13].

The first set of questions focuses on practical details necessary for any event, such as the person's name, and the date, time, and place the ritual will be happening. The second set of questions involves preparation that will be necessary for each participant. Preparations would aim to prepare people emotionally, mentally, or spiritually (if necessary), as well as ask them to consider and gather physical objects they may want to include. The final set of questions focuses on the ritual itself, from verbal storytelling to physical movement or creative activities. The deletion of the profile is discussed at this point.

Facilitating the Ritual
While the actual ritual will be different in each instance, it is our intent to volunteer to attend as facilitators in order to keep the bereaved people free to participate. Taking inspiration from action research, our aim is to assist in whatever way possible, addressing technical questions and concerns that participant might have and enabling them to perform the ritual they designed. Following the completion of the ritual performance and profile disposal, we would ask participants to complete a survey. The survey would include questions about difficulty, appropriateness, catharsis, and replicability of the ritual, and enable us to analyze the efficacy of the

experience in addressing our ability to support people through the emotional distresses discussed above.

Conclusion

Though deleting one's social media profiles after death initially makes sense to most account holders, those who have experienced the deletion of a loved one's profile think differently. Due to the wide variety of ways that people use social network sites, we acknowledge the likelihood of unforeseen difficulties in facilitating people's digital disposal rituals. Additionally, we recognize the cognitive and emotional work that we would be asking participants to do in recognizing emotional attachments to digital presences. Yet it is our hope that our co-facilitated rituals will lead to the creation of a publicly useful, flexible ritual planning resource for managing a loved one's digital remains. It will be an important step forward in the maturity of the digital human experience to create options for users that adequately honor what online presence is. This workshop is part of a future that we imagine, in which post-mortem 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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