Digital Afterlives

From Social Media Platforms to Thanabots and Beyond

Debra Bassett

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Contents

Introduction

We are all going to die; but in the words of Freddie Mercury "Who Wants to Live Forever?" Technology exists that enables us to create avatars that will allow us to "live forever" and promises to give us the ability to advise future generations. We live in a digital era where ubiquitous social media are part of the everyday lives of many. These social media platforms were designed for the living; however they are being used to communicate with the dead.

Some time ago my friend's daughter died suddenly, and I was amazed to find that five years later people were still talking to her on the Internet as though she was still alive. I began to explore how people were using the Internet to stay in-touch with the deceased, and found a plethora of Facebook RIP sites-which had been set up following the death of loved ones-being used to remember, memorialize and communicate with the dead.

There are a growing number of technology companies who are entering the death-tech industry. They are creating sites where people can create and leave digital messages to be delivered posthumously. Furthermore, there are people creating chatbots of their dead friends and relatives, and people embedding the deceased into computer games. But what effect does this have on the bereaved? This chapter explores the ramifications of these Internet-enabled posthumous memories and messages; and looks at how the reanimation of the dead in our digital society may be blurring the boundaries of the hitherto dichotomous states of life and death.

The Reanimation of the Dead

When I discussed my research with colleagues and friends I heard the same comment from multiple people: "Isn't that an episode of Black Mirror?" Black Mirror is a science fiction television series created by Charlie Brooker, which takes a dystopian view of future and current technology and their potential ramifications. One particular episode entitled "Be Right Back" features technology that enabled the bereaved protagonist to communicate with Ash, her dead boyfriend, via a social networking platform. The platform used algorithms to scrape data from all social media platforms and profiles used by the deceased to create a posthumous bot of Ash that she could communicate with. The bereaved girlfriend eventually upgraded the bot to a fully human-like synthetic version of Ash, which had been uploaded with all his characteristics. I had to admit, the tech companies offering to make posthumous chatbots and avatars were getting pretty close to the Black Mirror technology. Companies such as Eternime, Eter9 and Humai are using Artificial Intelligence algorithms to create virtual selves which, they claim, will posthumously interact with users as if they were still alive; allowing users to "live forever" as virtual avatars.

In his 1995 paper Edwin Bos predicted the emergence of platforms such as Eternime by discussing the possibility of an "extension" of life by the design of interactive talking photographs. He suggested, when designing such technology, the bereaved need to be carefully considered. This notion of designing for death was also discussed in a 1997 book by transhumanist Timothy Leary (see Ellis Gray 2015). Leary was terminally ill when he wrote his book, which suggested that systems could be designed to upload and record events during you life, which could be used to immortalize your consciousness after death.

The quest for immortality is not new and is well chronicled: The magnificent Egyptian mausoleums demonstrate how human kind has attempted to be remembered beyond their mortal lives. Immortality and the ability to be remembered forever was once a possibility for the rich, famous or infamous. However, the Internet is enabling anyone who desires to be remembered–and has Internet connectivity-the ability to create a lasting digital legacy and the possibility of being posthumously present through digital reanimation.

Digital endurance may blur the distinction between being alive and being dead, and could even lead to a theoretical redefining of what it means to be dead: For some, social death precedes biological death, for example, those suffering from dementia may feel isolated from society long before they die biologically. But the Internet is providing a platform where users can remain socially active following biological death. Users of platforms such as Eternime or LifeNaut are 'intentionally' creating a social afterlife but there are many others who are socially active on what I describe as 'accidental' posthumous platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and LinkedIn. It is these 'accidental' socially dead that can potentially create problems for the bereaved.

From second death to second loss

The term "second death" was used by Patrick Stokes in his 2015 paper to discuss how the deletion of "digital remains" may impact on the "ontological and ethical status of the dead" (Stokes 2015). However, my current research has highlighted that digital endurance is creating a new fear for the bereaved: Fear of losing the data created by-or commemorating-the deceased. In a 2018 paper I build on the work of Stokes, by suggesting that second death or deletion of posthumous data is being experienced by some as a 'second loss' and the fear of this second loss is creating a new form of anxiety for the bereaved.

Fear of second loss resulting from technical obsolescence of hardware, and loss of data emerged throughout my current research; as Massimi and Baecker note (2010), technology is rarely designed with inheritance in mind. A participant named Pam told me how she has not upgraded her mobile phone for 5 years because of a treasured answer phone messages from her daughter, and although there are software packages available that would allow her to save the messages, she is too frightened to try them

and fears that somehow she will lose some of the "essence" of her daughter. In her 2012 paper on continuing bonds, Elaine Kasket reported similar findings of participant's fears at the possibility of losing Facebook profiles of the deceased (Kasket 2012). For the bereaved, the Internet has become an important tool for the creation and inheritance of posthumous memories and messages, which many find comforting. However, for some, it blurs the boundaries of when 'real' death occurs and moreover where the dead dwell.

Digital Dasein

It was only in 2013 that in the UK, British Telecom turned off its dial-up service, which required our computer hardware to be hard wired for Internet connection. But in a relatively short space of time we can now connect to the Internet via Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and 4g, which allows us to use the Internet on the move, at any time, in any place (providing the infrastructure is available). Now, we can WhatsApp and FaceTime with people on aeroplanes, trains and cars. The Internet is not only providing new spaces for people to communicate, it is a new space in itself. Technology and the Internet are blurring spatial boundaries by enabling people to be co-present: that is physically present and virtually present at the same time in different spaces.

This familiarity of being co-present and the knowledge that others are also co-present, may well encourage the phenomena of talking to the dead online, and a feeling that the dead are not really dead anymore, but in a new space which is a hybrid of being alive and being dead. Imagining the dead being "somewhere" is obviously not a new phenomenon: for many world religions the souls of the dead exist in a form of paradise or heaven, which allows for an afterlife. However, with the rise of atheism it could be suggested that people are looking for a new space: a virtual heaven, where the cyber souls of the dead can reside — The Internet could be providing this space.

The terms absent and present describes states of "being" and are associated with the works of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In his 1927 work Being and Time, he analysed the concepts of "being" and introduced the notion of "Dasein" a German word which literal translation is "being there" (Heidegger 1962). In a 2011 presentation psychologist Elaine Kasket discussed Heidegger's existential concepts of Being-in-the body, Being-with-others-in-the-world and Being-towards-death. In this presentation Kasket asks 4 questions: 1) What is the nature of the digital being of a Facebook profile? 2) What about when someone dies? What is the nature of their Facebook profile then? 3) Is building a durable biography in life a denial of Being-towardsdeath? 4) Does interacting with deceased others make us more aware of our own Being-towards-death? (Kasket 2011). But Kasket's presentation does not ask questions about the digital memories created in life and left as a digital afterlife. In another 2011 paper, Joohan Kim suggests that in addition to Heidegger's res extensa (being of nature) and res cogitans (being of mind) there is now a third entity that he calls "res digitalis", which he suggests sits between the two. Digital-beings he suggests forces us to re-read

Heidegger's concept of "Dasein as being-in-the-world" since he suggests Dasein becomes digi-sein: "being-in-the-worldwide-web" (Kim 2017).

In 2015 a paper by Meese et al suggest that a person's personhood can be extended after death by digital media (Meese et al. 2015). But if this is the case where does this personhood reside? Here, this chapter expands on the papers of Kasket and Kim by challenging Heidegger's assumption that death is the ultimate end of dasein, and adds a further question to Kasket's list: Are the dead who achieve a digital afterlife in a posthumous "digital dasein?" I suggest the Internet is blurring our knowledge of where "there" is; it creates a place where time and space are unconstrained, and therefore creates the possibility of a "posthumous dasein", that the dead "exist" somewhere with a posthumous social presence in a virtual afterlife. Meese et al note that they, along with other researchers, have found that social media platforms have been "implicated in the continuing social presence and agency of the dead" (ibid). Extending existing notions of de-centred personhood (see Hallam & Hockey 2001; Hallam et al 1999; Hockey et al 2010). They go on to suggest that online platforms make the difference between the living and the dead increasingly indistinguishable in a technosocial context, moreover the difference can be inconsequential at particular points. The key idea that if the persona of the dead uses the same social media platforms as that of the living, Meese et al suggest they may be considered as a kind of "person".

Digital Zombies

In a 2015 paper I suggested the term Digital Zombies to describe the social active re-animated dead. These digital zombies differ from Candi Cann's Internet ghosts (2014) as they do things in death they did not do in life. In a 2013 paper Alexandra Sherlock discusses these "posthumous representations" using examples of dead celebrities being used in advertisements (Sherlock 2013). A contemporary example of the digitally resurrected dead is Audrey Hepburn appearing in a Galaxy chocolate advertisement several years after her death. Smart phones and social media platforms ensure digital zombies and Internet ghosts are no longer confined to our laptops and home computers: they are in our pockets, handbags or even on our wrists making it easier for the dead to communicate with us.

The Uncanny Valley

My current research explores how these memories and messages from the socially active dead affect how people grieve, and how people react to Internet ghosts and digital zombies. In 1970 the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori coined the term "uncanny valley" to describe people's reactions to robots that resemble humans too closely. He found that people liked robots that only displayed a few human characteristics, as this

allowed them to fill the gaps with their imagination. However Mori noted that the more human-like the robots became, the more creepy people found them (Mori 2012). This idea was supported in 2004 with the release of the Warner Brothers films The Polar Express, a CGI animation film. Critics commented that the film made them feel creepy as the too human-like characters appeared "soul dead" (Clinton 2004). According to Freud writing in 1917, this notion of the uncanny is linked to death and dead bodies and "all that arouses dread and creeping horror" (Freud 2004). In the not too distant past the dead popping up on social media platforms seemed to echo this uncanny valley response.

In their 2010 study into bereavement and technology, Odom et al describe how participants were shocked at the dead "popping up" on social media sites (Odom et al. 2010). Other research supported this finding (Marwick and Ellison 2012; Massimi 2010; Pennington 2013). It was only in 2013 that Brubaker et al described how the bereaved found "new encounters with the dead" on social media platforms distressing, describing these encounters as "startling". However, the findings of my current research suggest that in the relatively short amount of time since these papers were published, people seem to be getting used to the dead popping up on the Internet and their perception of what is "creepy" is changing the landscape of the uncanny valley. Reanimated digital zombies still generate feelings of unease for most people, but with the recent growth of the death-tech industry, it may not be long before the uncanny valley disappears completely.

Death in Digital Worlds and Thanabots

Not only are there 'real' world digital zombies the 'virtual' world also has it's digital zombies in the form of posthumous avatars: In 2016 Bethesda, an American video game publisher created and embedded a character named Good Guy Evan in their Fallout 4 virtual world game. Evan and his brother had been huge Fallout 4 fans before Evan died suddenly. The game publisher read a post on a fan site about Evan's love for the game and created the avatar and embedded him within the game, enabling friends and family to interact with his posthumous avatar within the virtual world of game play. It is not only game creators who create places for the dead to dwell: When Eugenia Kuyda started her chatbot company Luka in 2013, its main offering was as a restaurant recommendation bot. However, when her best friend Roman Mazurenko died in 2015 she created an AI bot from the huge collection of text conversations between them. She frequently sends texts to her deceased friend, and the chatbots replies mimicking her friend. Eugenia is not the only person using griefbots in an effort to remain socially connected to the dead: James Vlahos regularly texts his father to discuss the latest football results or sing their favorite songs together, but James's father died in 2017. James created his Dadbot from an audio history he had complied whilst his father was still alive, he then created the bot with Pullstring technology enabling him to

send and receive messages from his deceased father. Interestingly his father witnessed his wife interacting with the Dadbot before his death. A participant in my research named Noah told me that he too had created a bot of his deceased father and during an interview I asked Noah how much he had changed or added to the bot since its initial creation:

> *I can always add new little anecdotes for him to share, or new varieties of ways for him to express whatever he already talked about (Noah)*

Noah explains that he can work on the listening side of the Dadbot and improve how the bot reacts to what he or someone else says to it. But crucially Noah explains why he feels there is a "line", which he does not want to cross for fear of falling into the uncanny valley.

> *In the process of creating the Dadbot...I was always wanting it to be ...better and better and better.... you know with more...knowledge and...better able to respond...and more of my father's signature vocabulary.....so I always wanted to improve it...but then at the same time there is this kind of weird ....I know there is a line...out there where...that it would somehow get...too good and then ...I would be in the uncanny valley place....that it was creepy .... that it was becoming almost like my dad but it wasn't really him and....I've struggled with ....been asked....you know where is that line....like what would ,....what if you could do him as an animation and what if you could have a synthesis of his...real voice...and .....I knew ...I know that's a line out there and when I think about an animated version of him for instance that just gives me the creeps...personally. (Noah)*

For Noah, although he had the technical ability to improve and changed the bot it was important that his Dadbot remained as near to its original form as possible. But just how far will others go to create a more airbrushed version of themselves or others?

Digital Doubles and the Ultimate Selfie

In 2013 "selfie" was The Oxford Dictionaries word of the year. The word selfie describes the act of taking photographs of ones self and posting them onto social networking sites. These photographs are usually produced using smartphones held at arms length-or using a selfie stick-but can also be taken with the phone aimed at a mirror. These narcissistic photographs-which are usually air-brushed representations of ourselves using filters-are being used to personally control how we present ourselves on social media, and have fast become ubiquitous. In 2014, the virtual reality pioneer Jacqueline Ford Morie came up with the concept of the "Ultimate Selfie" that she described as a "learning avatar". Morie explains: "At least a dozen companies are focused

on avatar creation now, and it is not difficult to find a place to have your entire body scanned" these digital doubles she suggests, could use activity from our social networks to digitally capture our characteristics; moreover, these avatars could continue after we exist.

Disembodied Brains

Whilst Jaqueline Morrie does not advocate the uploading of human consciousness into machines to achieve digital immortality, there are companies working on this challenging idea. The Terasem LifeNaut program based in Vermont, USA allows you to create a "mind file" to store your cognitive information; a "safe space to store you life experience" allowing you to "back yourself up". The exponential growth of the emerging technologies needed to deliver and support the cyberconsciousness, mindclones, mindware and mindfiles discussed by transhumanist pioneer Martine Rothblatt do not seem far away (Rothblatt 2014). Bell and Gray of Microsoft Research agree that it may be possible a "cyberized" version of you will be able to learn, evolve and eventually take on a life of their own. Rothblatt's research has led to the creation of Bina48, a humanoid robotic head that holds the mindfile of her real-life wife Bina Aspen. This social robot makes various public and media appearances with Terasem's executive director Bruce Duncan, and in 2017 Bina48 was the first robot to complete a college class: Bina48 attended a Philosophy and Love class at Notre Dame de Namur University (NDNU) in California, where she engaged in class discussions and was awarded a college certificate for her participation. Technological advances that enable the creation of digital zombies such as Bina48, raise important questions: Bina48 was created from a living person, but what will happen when the real Bina dies? Will Bina48 remain socially active? Moreover, will the friends and relatives of the real Bina find Bina48 a comfort or a disruption to their grief?

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how people are experiencing the nascent phenomenon of the socially active dead in our digital society. While social media encourages us to socialize with the living, it also offers the opportunity to ensure the dead remain part of our everyday digital lives. Moreover, with the continual evolution of technology enabling us to live on past our physical lifespan; and in a time where many people digitally capture themselves on a daily basis, the era of the digital doppelganger has already arrived.

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