Death in the Digital World

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The ghosts of lost loved ones have always haunted us, but the undefined role of the dead, the dying, and the grieving in the digital world is an ever-growing cultural haunting. This paper explores how memories of the dead are shifted and changed in the deceased's lingering digital presence, how grief is altered by the digital world, and the uncertainties that arise with no etiquette book to guide us through death in the digital world. As this new phenomenon encroaches on our lives, where does technological innovation used to remember the dead meet an attempt to resurrect them?

Death and grief are everlasting parts of life, bringing their own types of haunting within different cultures and experiences. As they naturally invade our ever-growing digital lives, however, these processes morph and change. "Anthropological research has long established that the dead in many cultural contexts have social lives," which has now emerged into a perhaps more puzzling idea that the dead have social media accounts (Mitchell et al. 413). Considering the social media accounts of the deceased, virtual memorials, and the expanding real and imagined technologies to continue life after death can enhance our interaction with these ghosts of death and grief in our increasingly digital society. This phenomenon that occurs at the intersection between death and the digital world has created a cultural haunting due to our lack of norms regarding it and the undefined lines in what is considered acceptable within the dead, the grieving, and the digital.

The Dead Have Social Media Accounts

The deceased of today's world leave ghostly traces of themselves in our minds, in photo albums, and in personal belongings, as they always have. As those who die leave behind their Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, however, they are ever-present in the pulse of the Internet. Consider Facebook with "over one billion users, and yet, more than 10,000 of them die every day" and they do not just delete themselves (Hiscock). These accounts linger on Facebook and the Internet because these technologies do not have the ability to understand the difference between when a user has simply not logged in and when they have died. The magnitude of

deceased people with Facebook accounts continues to expand by the second: "In fact, 428 [users] die every hour, so they're practically dropping like flies. And every day, these dormant accounts receive friend requests, get tagged in photos, and sometimes, they're even wished a happy birthday" (Hiscock).

Recognition that these accounts do not simply remain, but are interacted with, reveal their deeper reach into our culture from beyond the grave. The remaining posts and automated messages connected to a dormant account act as interaction on the part of the dead—a haunting from the ghost trapped in cyberspace. Naturally, it cannot be expected that new posts will magically be made from the beyond, but the previous comments, likes, and pictures will eerily remain. The old friend from high school that passed away will pop up on your feed as someone who still follows a suggested page. The retired teacher who has been dead for months will still appear in comments and suggested friends. These traces seem as though they will always remain as this relatively new cultural haunting has yet to identify itself as either a friendly or malignant spirit.

Cyberanthropology expert Michaelanne Dye goes as far as to theorize a possible change in identities of the dead: "Today, identities are co-constructed through social media interactions. Therefore, the deceased's online identity not only continues in the virtual space; it can also evolve and adapt as others continue to interact with the dead person's profile" (qtd. in Buck). The idea that a person's online identity continues beyond death suggests that these ghosts are not limited to a person's authentic character. When posts to these accounts become an inaccurate representation of the dead, it changes their online identity. Morphing an openly sarcastic and honest individual into a saint of compassion after death is more than an interaction with an account—it is a rewriting of their digital mark. If these accounts remain, they are forever present and if they become untrue to the person that once owned them, their loved ones can be haunted by the ghost of what once was an active online connection. These remnants of a person's digital presence, however, were once created by the living body, whether that is an accurate representation of our memory of them or not. We must consider the opposing remaining images of a loved one as their online presence, the entity created by digital memory, and the ever-present memory we create through our grief.

In Lieu of Flowers: Virtual Memorials

The dead are not only present online through traditional user accounts. Virtual memorials transform the quiet and private gravestone visit to a public and endless forum for remembrance where the living feed into a digital haunted house. It is important to consider the scope of these

online apparatuses:

> What is a virtual or on-line memorial? They are found on the Internet in a number of forms: On social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, in slideshows of the deceased set to music and uploaded onto YouTube, and on specialized memorial hosting websites created by charities, funeral homes, bereaved individuals, associations connected with specific illnesses, and notably in profit-based Internet sites which provide web-space at a cost to the bereaved individual (Mitchell et al. 415).

The variety in virtual memorial options are differing in scope and intimacy. While some act as simply a method of remembering through images, others are designed for interaction between grievers. Creating these digital spaces shifts traditional grieving to be considerably more public and practically boundless.

Posts to memorial websites have the potential to reach other people who are hurt by a death. This public aspect allows for connection and joint healing. This approach also allows for personal trauma to be shared with strangers and future generations. The virtual memorials are not limited to a period of time; the painful lamenting of someone in grief enters cyberspace forever, and those in grief are able to dwell in these spaces indefinitely. Just as the dormant account, these resources push the dead into a never-ending preoccupation and changing online identity. Virtual memorials often contain information both basic and intimate: obituaries, funeral information, pictures of the deceased, remaining pieces of their online presence, shared stories by Internet users, and posts of expressed grief. The appropriateness of varying posts in these spaces have no societal norms and thus fall on each individual's judgement.

Every citizen in our growing digital world should understand and consider the use of virtual memorials. Are they a source of comfort or a new way for our grief to linger and the pain of memory to haunt us? Not only are we trapped within our own pain but the moaning ghost of widespread grief and the phantom of cheerful memories slip into Facebook feeds and linger in Twitter timelines. Our choice in how to grieve may be limited or even removed by the virtual hauntings inflicted through new phenomena such as these virtual memorials. Pages that display both the pain and positive memory of the dead expand the impact of both their living presences and their absences. It can make the single pain of one person—whether they themselves decide to post their grief—feel as public and endless as the page for virtual memorial itself.

Virtual memorials, however, do provide options for handling memories of the dead online that better control the haunting of online grieving. Facebook allows accounts of the dead to be turned into virtual memorials. These "Memorialized profiles don't appear in public spaces such

as in suggestions for People You May Know, ads or birthday reminders" (Facebook). This removes some of the pain of active accounts such as receiving a birthday reminder for someone who no longer ages. The intent, and in some cases, the reality, is that memorialized profiles and virtual memorials confine the online presence of the dead and grieving to one location like a gravestone. People can join and post in these online places as they choose. They also provide the possibility of finding comfort in the posts of family and friends that knew the deceased. Virtual memorials magnify the visitation of a gravesite. The abilities of these online tools can be used to amplify the positives or escalate the difficulties of online grieving, which leaves us to navigate them thought-fully. One of the gravest dangers of this new digital element of death is that there is no etiquette book to guide us as we decipher for ourselves if the lingering online ghosts of our loved ones and public forums for grievers are a blessing or a curse. Where is the line between using technology to better remember the dead and trying to resurrect them?

Moonwalking from the Beyond: Recreation of the Famous Dead

The exceptionally talented and now well-known Vincent van Gogh, Franz Kafka, and Emily Dickinson only gained their fame after death. The way we remember famous individuals has always been focused on their talent and keeping that talent alive. Technology allows us to recreate the art of deceased famous people, which has gone to an extent worthy of ethical reflection. We have kept celebrities alive through social media hashtags and online song purchasing, but a line was perhaps crossed when remembering Michael Jackson and Tupac Shakur. Digital creations of these artists (often simply referred to as holograms) were designed to perform at the Billboard Music Awards and Coachella, respectively. Technology allows us to see these artists perform from beyond the grave as phantoms of their past performances. We have engineered pixelated ghosts to continue a legacy or perhaps to further economic gain. The question we must ask is where we should draw the line. We have gone from expecting a right to continue the release of music, with or without the consent of the dead, to a digital violation of their very bodies. One instance has gone as far as Hologram USA suing the late Whitney Houston's estate after the estate backed out of a hologram performance agreement (Toto). This lawsuit implies a sense of entitlement to the voice, music, and image of the dead. Digital advances reduce the memory of famous people to a shallow copy of the person that disrespects the dead and disarms the living in the pursuit of turn-ing out money-making holographic ghosts for public viewing.

We must be aware of the liberties being taken with deceased celebrities through these cultural hauntings. We should question if technology is being used to abuse the dead as a contin-

ued source of money or respect the dead in an effort to enhance their memory. These technolog-ical advances will continue and could easily become a normal occurrence. Digitally created stars such as Peter Crushing's digitally resurrected appearances in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* may have us questioning if we could know the difference between a digital recreation and a real hu-man being (Toto). As these occurrences become more common and more vivid, we may begin to question the value of talent and life when it can merely be recreated. Could celebrities never die in the eyes of users of film, television, and music? This possibility would leave the family members with only superficial digital remains of their loved ones. Could we one day never need living actors when we could create actions and images with technology? We need to consider what it means to recreate the famous dead and how far we should be willing to go.

The Tech of Frankenstein's Monster

As our world is constantly technologically advancing, the shift in how we handle death may be too much to bear. The Netflix series *Black Mirror* explores society and technology in alternative and future worlds. The episode titled "Be Right Back" follows the life of a woman, Martha, when she turns to a new software to cope with the death of her significant other, Ash. The pain of learn-ing she is pregnant combined with simple curiosity quickly causes Martha to use software that analyzes Ash's online presence. This software replicates a dead person's personality in text mes-sage conversations. A strong essence of who we are is left in our digital mark and this technology capitalizes on the lingering traces. Today, or in the near future, computer programmers may very well be able to create text responses that sound like the language used in online profiles.

With these types of technologies, there is a risk of companies abusing grief for profit. In the *Black Mirror* episode, Martha is tempted by the "new Ash" to provide video and audio footage of Ash so that the software would have the ability to talk on the phone. Her doing so could result in added charges or even a security risk. In her fragile state, Martha, as many of us might, took this opportunity instantly, without consideration for cost or risk. Though her spirits begin to rise, we are encouraged to ask if her fixation on recreating Ash digitally is psychologically healthy. Martha soon spends the vast majority of her time talking to the replication of a dead person—a ghost. She begins to ignore her living loved ones, even ignoring a phone call from her sister to speak to the digital doppelganger of her boyfriend. This type of technology could very well only delay the griev-ing process and create further controversy where remembering the dead meets disrespecting them.

The aspect of this episode that truly tests the ethics of technology and the dead is when this "new Ash" suggests the third level of this software. "Ash" tells Martha that there is a service that is still in the testing phases that she could try, but at a high cost. Martha agrees to the incredibly expensive service to give her new computer-based Ash a body. After a blank body is mailed to her home, Martha follows the steps to sync the digitally created consciousness of Ash to this new body that is also meant to look and sound like her lost love. It can seem easy to judge this character's choices, to dismiss this action as simply too creepy, and to claim that "I could never do this." The problem is that we all have known, or will someday know, the loneliness and pain from losing a loved one. It is important to protect people from technologies and companies that might take advantage of grieving people. Companies have already set up paid websites to house virtual memories and sued estates of the famous to make money off of holograms. We must be aware of evolving in-novations as they are more haunting than helpful, and judge if software like the creators of *Black Mirror* have imagined have a place in our world.

For Martha, this defiance of death was not the "re-do button" she had hoped it to be. Slow-ly, but surely, her interactions with the reincarnate Ash are inconsistent with the man himself. She notes that the body looks like Ash "on a good day" due to our tendency to post mainly flattering pictures online. He is a man-made ghost of his digital remains. Our digital identities are a part of who we are, but they are only a *part*. Martha's experience displays how our online selves do not know the moles beneath our shirts, the way we make love to our significant others, or the tone in which we have our lovers' quarrels. Simply, our online selves are not enough. When the character of Martha finally has a breakdown, she says to this digital imposter of her lover, "You're just a few ripples of you. There's no history to you. You're just a performance of stuff that he performed, with-out thinking, and it's not enough" ("Be Right Back"). Since human beings feel, love, and hurt in human ways, it is natural to wish for our deceased loved ones back often at any cost. Through this fictional story, however, we are warned of the repercussions of crossing the unclear lines within the overlapping of technology and grief.

Social media and the like are shifting the memory of the death and crafting dangerous pat-terns in grieving that have facilitated an uncertainty and lack of societal norms that feed into this new cultural haunting. We have no guidelines to navigate the ghosts on our social media feeds, let alone the possibilities of resurrecting the dead as technological advancement continues push-ing towards boundaries that we have not yet made. It is both the uncertainty and the possibility that haunt us. Finally, technologies and online interactions can make grieving easier, but to prop-erly use these and future technologies we must remember that death is a universal inevitability

we all share and those who are lost cannot be recreated in the digital mark they leave behind.

Otherwise, we risk being haunted by the ghosts we helped create.

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