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In P. Dias da Silva & A. Alves (Ed.), *TEM 2015 : Proceedings of the Technology & Emerging Media Track*.

Citation

Bourdeloie, H. (2015). Digital Lives of the Deceased: The Post-Mortem data uses. In P. Dias da Silva & A. Alves (Ed.), *TEM 2015 : Proceedings of the Technology & Emerging Media Track – Annual Conference of the Canadian Communication Association* (Ottawa, June 3–5, 2015).

Digital Lives of the Deceased: The Post-Mortem data uses

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Abstract This paper proposes to study the fact that a deceased person continues, after life, to have a “digital afterlife”. It shows how post-mortem digital presence contributes to re-introducing death into the social sphere, thus blurring the lines between mourning rituals and everyday rituals that rely on digital technology. Outlining a typology of how memorial websites are used, this paper shows that, in our hyper-connected Western society, the question of using post-mortem digital data concerns everyone, since it is now difficult to avoid having some kind of presence on the Web. Whereas some of the bereaved prefer to erase traces of the departed, others create memorial spaces for them or maintain and use these digital traces as if the dead were still alive. Digital memorial platforms, which spawn a specific form of expression, are therefore reconfiguring the relation to mourning.

Key words Digital afterlife; memorial websites; mourning; digital traces; identity; post-mortem data.

1. Introduction

With the rise of online social platforms, the saving and archiving of data concerning one's own life is a practice on the increase. Echoing this trend, questions now arise about the status and future of post-mortem digital identity in the experience of the bereaved. These are questions underpinning an ongoing research project in France¹ that we are currently working on and which forms basis of the present study.

The following exploratory analysis results from eleven face-to-face interviews for an average duration of four hours. These interviews were conducted with deceased persons' family and friends residing several cities in France from October 2013 to November 2014. Respondents are aged 22 to 55. Moreover, five interviews were conducted with French memorial websites actors (paradisblanc.com, defunt.be, peoplememory.com, memoiredesvies.com and <https://secure.edeneo.fr/>). This series of interviews shall be enlarged by an on-going series of interviews and quantitative survey.

Simultaneously, wherever that possible, we observed deceased persons' family and friends' digital traces, namely "friends" posts on semi-private spaces like Facebook, or posts by close family and friends on public memorial websites (e.g. paradisblanc.com). In such a case, bereaved parents and friends facilitated our access to Facebook profiles or private groups dedicated to the deceased. Due to this methodological construction, we have been able to reduce the bias of this kind of survey exploring the area of intimate relationships.

On the basis of preliminary results, we first explore in this paper how technical innovations such as memorial websites, SNS memorial accounts, etc. affect the mourning process and enable the bereaved to re-establish a relation with the dead.

¹ Project ENEID Éternités numériques (Research partners: Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3, Université Paris 13 Nord, Université de Technologie de Compiègne; coordinator: Fanny Georges, Université Paris 3), funded from 2014 to 2017 by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche: <http://eneid.univ-paris3.fr>.

2. Post-mortem digital existence in question

Since digital technology incorporates traceability functionalities and most people now have traces on the Web, sometimes against their wishes, post-mortem digital life is becoming a salient issue. Moreover, as online practices now support the West's cultural, informational, relational and leisure practices, the use of digital technology when someone dies is almost impossible to avoid, if only for practical reasons (e.g. death announcements). During one's lifetime, online self-exposition has become so ubiquitous that people who are invisible on the Web become suspect. The self-exposition made possible by online social platforms has radically changed the gap between the public and private realms. In fact, these platforms are helping to redefine the intimate – which is not to be confused with the private, as intimacy is a social construct (Baudry 2010). This is also the case for the frontiers between life and death (Schepens 2013), which become more blurred with SNSs as these tend to cloud the reality of a loved one's death. This is even more true when a person's death has not been reported to the digital platform, which is programmed to invite family and friends to interact with the deceased. Moreover, given that any publicised digital trace concerning the deceased could prompt anyone who so wishes to take on management of the symbolic (e.g. when a dead person's cyber account is kept open for tributes), digital media re-introduce mourning into social life and help to shift the dividing lines that formerly set apart what was taboo. These online platforms also transform the frontiers of mourning rituals insofar as their ubiquity now means that death is no longer assigned a specific status or specific location (Clavandier 2009).

In fact, whatever happens to a deceased's digital data, their traceability has an impact on the memorializing process (Merzeau 2014) and the social mourning process (Wright 2014), given that family and friends cannot overlook this traceability. On the one hand, the so-called "right to be forgotten" (i.e. the possibility for Internet users to have their personal Web-indexed data deleted during their life time) also applies to deceased persons. For living users, removing such traces requires determination, money and

know-how (Merzeau 2014), and the same is true for the deceased person's family and friends. They are generally obliged to give the Web service providers proof of their relationship with the deceased in order to have their traces removed. Besides, the question of legal ownership of digital assets is a salient issue.

In France, the Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés (CNIL), whose role is to protect personal data and individual liberties in the digital world on French territory, is not authorised to bequeath digital assets (CNIL 2013). This question of "digital death" has nonetheless been taken in hand by the Web major companies. Facebook pioneered reflection on the subject by creating memorial accounts in 2009 and several other Web companies have since followed suit. Google, for instance, has launched an "Inactive Account Manager" permitting an entire account and its contents to be bequeathed to a third party.

Besides, this legacy may be disturbing for some of the bereaved, should the family decide to delete the deceased user's account, thus removing all of their conversation threads and group of friends. Conversely, keeping a deceased user's traces may also be disturbing if the heirs transform their Facebook account into a memorial account. Indeed, this situation limits postings to those who were already his or her Facebook "friends," and digital friendship networks do not always reflect traditional friendships.

On the other hand, if the bereaved take no action to remove the deceased's digital identity, they will have to resignedly accept this digital persistence. They may then be exposed to the violence of programmed algorithms that often fail to distinguish between living and dead users. One case in point is Facebook's "Year In Review" app, which proposes its users a review of their year 2014 in selected moments they shared on their profile and which extracted the photo of one user's daughter who had died a few months earlier.² Similarly, some "active" profiles continue to exist as if the user were still alive. This creates a somewhat strange

² Peterson A. (2014) Facebook's 'Year in Review' app swings from merely annoying to tragic. In *The Washington Post*: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2014/12/26/facebooks-year-in-review-app-swings-from-merely-annoying-to-tragic/>

situation as Facebook proposes sending out a friend request to a deceased person, reminds us of their birthday or suggests that we insert a photo of our profile following a friend request to the deceased. For example, a banner at the top of our Facebook account says “Help Vincent Guilpin [deceased] recognize you”. These examples illustrate the unease that mourners may feel (Pène 2011) and also point to a potential clash between the actual reality they experience and what algorithmic reality shows them – which fuels tensions between technology and human sensibility. The question thus arises here of confronting practices that are *a priori* conflicting: on one hand, the relationship to the pain of grief; on the other, the relationship to technology, seen as inhuman, “cold” and governed by computation.

3. Reconfiguring the mourning process in the digital age: disconnecting and online practices connecting with the dead

On the basis of our preliminary observations, we will discuss two broad types of use and non-use: (1) disconnecting with the deceased or the removal of their traces and (2) creating specialist online memorial spaces. A third approach, setting up new digital-age mourning rituals and forms of expression, also came up in our analysis but, due to the limits of this paper, will have to be developed in another article.

3.1. Disconnecting with the deceased and removing their traces

Mourners may wish to disconnect from the deceased and erase their digital presence. Disconnecting with the deceased may involve removing all of their digital traces (Facebook account with its list of friends, telephone numbers, emails, text messages, etc.). Indeed, digital and mourning practices do not necessarily go hand in hand. The discourse of some respondents sometimes reveals a hierarchy between traditional and online mourning practices: the first belonging to the sacred sphere and the second to the profane. This is what is in question when the bereaved wish to remove the deceased person’s digital traces or, when unable to do so, they prefer to avoid all digital traces of the person. The reasons may be

religious. They may also relate to ritual or tradition in the sense that some respondents think that online mourning practices cannot replace traditional practices. Although the two types of rituality are complementary, the importance of digital forms can nonetheless be observed (Odom et al. 2010, Wright 2014).

3.1.1. Mixing the sacred and the profane

As hybrid spaces, online social platforms not initially designed for memorial purposes bring together the realms of the sacred and the profane, a mixture of genres that poses an obstacle for family and friends who sometimes resist using memorial SNSs. As the comments posted there sometimes evoke a mundane and materialistic world, they may seem at odds with life beyond the grave and the sacred dimension of death. The interviews and observations of the accounts also bring to light an expiatory exuberance. Objections are voiced regarding the excessive nature of some postings that resemble a show of suffering or exercises in hyperbole (e.g. poetic messages) or, on the other hand, the “obscene” or “disrespectful” (sic) nature of others. Sofiane (advertising space seller, age 26)³ deliberately stopped connecting to the profile of his deceased friend: “At the very beginning, me, I thought it was fine, it enabled me to meet lots of people on Facebook...to see lots of solicitations, positive sentences.... When I began to notice this one-upmanship for sadness, me, I felt disgusted and at that point, didn’t go onto his Facebook account any more.... So of course, to make things clearer, it wasn’t easy with Facebook... at that point, I saw the unhealthy side of it.” The show of grief on SNSs is reminiscent of the social dimension of mourning – as it was at least until the 1960s (Clavandier 2009). This social and expressive dimension is reinforced by online platforms, which make mourning a public affair (Walter et al. 2011). The comments of a 23-year-old student who had lost her younger sister concur with this view: “...we removed it last year. When she died, we wanted to remove it, but...people in her class had just posted some supportive messages for my family and me and they

³ We indicate the pseudonym (all respondent’s names have been changed), occupation, and respondent’s age when we have conducted face-to-face interviews. Regarding excerpts from posts on memorial websites or Facebook, we do not mention data that we do not have.

put prayers on... So we decided to live it... After, it started to run out of steam, nobody was posting messages and even though it was comforting at the beginning.” These accounts confirm that online memorial spaces may have the effect of prolonging grief (Brubaker and Hayes 2011). On the other hand, these new online rituals clearly have a cathartic function, akin to the rituals of the past (Clavandier 2009). These users’ behaviour thus needs to be interpreted in the light of the grieving process as an act of separation. At the outset, we see the deceased persons’ accounts are very “active” following their death or when calendar events such as birthdays or death anniversaries come round; and that postings fall off over time, a trend that concurs with previous research findings (Brubaker and Hayes 2011).

3.1.2. Biological death as opposed to the social persistence of post-mortem digital identity

The reasons for not using digital technologies in a mourning context may also depend on the painful feelings elicited by a post-mortem digital identity. The deceased person exists on-screen in texts, images, sounds and “movements” due to the traffic generated on memorial spaces, whether or not these are specialist sites. While this gives the impression that the person is continually active (Brubaker and Vertesi 2010), this presence can never replace the physical presence of the living person. In fact, the hardship stems from having to come to terms with the separation due to biological death and, at the same time, adapt to digital immortality, should digital traces persist and adversely affect mourners not “authorized” to remove them. As Web technologies affect social and not biological death (Odom et al. 2010; Walter et al. 2011), the bereaved are left with the feeling that they can socialize with the deceased eternally. Christine (age 53, currently unemployed) cannot bring herself to visit the Facebook profile of her daughter, who committed suicide at the age of fifteen, even though the profile is extremely active. Finding it too “alive,” the respondent chose to unsubscribe from the news feed of her daughter’s friends, using Facebook’s “Unfollow” option to stop receiving messages about her deceased daughter. Likewise, she no longer visits the public page, a community Page, created by friends

as a tribute.⁴ To avoid mixing genres and the dissonance between a person's biological death and their still active digital account, others choose to create dedicated memorial sites. These may be of three types according to the typology referred to earlier: websites allowing tributes to the deceased, that is, virtual cemeteries; existing profiles transformed into a memorial account as in the case of Facebook,⁵ or community pages dedicated to the deceased via Facebook.

3.2. Creation of online dedicated memorial spaces: faithfulness to the deceased and semantic concordance

Online social platforms provide an opportunity for irruptive expression, as symptomized by postings of an insulting nature. Some intimates create memorial spaces dedicated to the deceased, which can thus often serve to ease the tensions that sometimes underlie the management of post-mortem digital traces.

3.2.1. Arenas for expression and ad hoc rules of conduct

These spaces may be virtual cemeteries or Facebook accounts changed into memorials. We met one respondent (office worker, age 38) through the Paradis Blanc memorial website,⁶ where condolences can be posted, memories shared and virtual candles lit on the deceased's page. Having lost his 17-year-old son, he describes how he chose to turn his son's Facebook account into a memorial account so that only his "friends" could post messages and also to avoid any unwelcome and "disrespectful" (sic) intrusions: "At first, we wanted to leave his account open as we were getting lots of messages of support from his classmates, but little by little, people we didn't know sent negative messages telling us that he wasn't the first person to die of leukaemia so

⁴ Cf. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Liza-Alvaro-Repose-en-paix/292203854290192?fref=ts>. All the account profiles studied were in French (some comments were posted in Arabic and in English). We indicate real web addresses of Facebook profiles / pages or memorial websites since they are public and available. In this paper, we do not transcribe private posts on private profiles.

⁵ When an account becomes a memorial account, it can no longer be modified (it is impossible to add or delete friends), and will no longer appear in public spaces such as suggestions from the user's friends or birthday reminders.

⁶ The website can be visited at www.paradisblanc.com

there was no need to make such a fuss (...) And worse, his girlfriend had created a blog to pay him tribute, but a few weeks later, people came to make jokes and laugh at those who were leaving messages of support.” Creating a dedicated space thus makes sense for respondents seeking coherence between sharing the grief of a loved one and the practice of ad hoc rituals. This reminds us that rituals, as Durkheim wrote, are rules of conduct governing how people should act in the presence of things sacred (Durkheim 1912 [1960]). This coherence is what mourners are seeking: “I came across Paradis Blanc by chance.... There’s a serious side to it, there’s support among families and you’re not alone.”⁷ What drives these initiatives is the distinction between the sacred and the profane: escaping the heteroclitic behaviours found on SNS sites, which confuse the meanings of messages and detracts from a more fitting spiritual approach.

Yet, the creation of such spaces is sometimes problematic for the bereaved in cases where the deceased did not communicate any wishes regarding their digital legacy. How then can one remain true to the deceased’s personality and their *desiderata post mortem*? Here it is a matter of not betraying the deceased person, or at least the post-mortem representation that one constructs for oneself. Certainly, users can challenge message contents if ever these violate the normative codes associated with death. But the ever-present underlying question is how to remain faithful to the deceased’s personality, or in other words safeguard their identity or the identity given to them by their close entourage.

On this count, Sofia (student, age 24) remarked that a video posted on a group page dedicated to her deceased friend showed the friend singing a song that the deceased’s Muslim family viewed as vulgar. The family was upset about its posting and wanted to remove it. A posting on the wall of the Facebook public group’s page read:⁸ “*Si vous aimez vraiment LAMINE supprimer la vidéo que vous avez publier..... (c’est juste un conseil)invoquez le seigneur de lui pardonner....et qui lui accorde sa miséricorde*

⁷ One of the memorials: www.paradisblanc.com/amandine-blet.

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/220177249769/>. To see the group, we must be a Facebook member.

thank's"). This religious argument was countered by arguing for faithfulness to the deceased and for memory: "*je ss pas d accord avec toi souhaib cette video est un bo souvenir ça ne redonne un peu le sourire de le voir moi j ai bcp aimé nostalgie on devrai pas on être privé c"*⁹). Several testimonies are along similar lines. Faithfulness to the deceased but also respect for their family and friends are part of the recognized conventions in matters of death.

The other issue involves the legitimacy of addressing the deceased if one was only relatively close to them. Can one express sadness, reveal one's presence in the dedicated digital space or become part of the deceased's intimacy, etc.? Multiple postings by mourners who are not considered to be sufficiently close to the deceased may thus be viewed as indecent. The question of proximity to the deceased person is a recurring issue when it comes to funerals and mourning. Faithfulness to the deceased's personality and the legitimacy of paying tribute to them are intrinsically linked since the mourners' image of the deceased must not be sullied by a dissonant use of their Facebook profile. Thus posting numerous messages that reveal the deceased's personality may not only be at odds with the deceased's personality but also with the way the deceased used their account. In this area, filiation ties appear to be tolerated.

3.2.2. *The creation of online mourning communities*

On these spaces, people share the sacred dimension with others who have had a similar experience. The website users clearly state their need to express and share grief on a fitting space: "on this site [Paradis Blanc], there are lots of people who are there for the same reasons as mine; it's a site specifically made for that" (office worker, age 40). In fact, the creation of these spaces is also designed for diasporic uses: maintaining and sharing mourning with bereaved who are spatially dispersed. This use is notably linked to the geographic separation of families and to personal and professional mobility, which implies that the burial site may be far from the place of residence. Research into online social platforms

⁹ We have chosen to transcribe exactly the excerpts in order to reflect the French original style. Since all deceased's profiles we have analysed were in French, posts are mainly written in French.

concur that geographical distance is the most significant variable for the use of this type of platform (Lee et al. 2011). It is also the case when mourners create a specific online group entirely dedicated to the deceased so as to bear witness to eternal friendship. In this respect, some refer to a “community of mourners” to designate the messages addressed to the deceased on such group pages or profiles. Whether communal in essence or by default, these spaces create new forms of rituals that dovetail to varying extents with traditional rituals.

4. Communicating with the deceased person and connecting with the “afterlife” in the social networking age

While online social platforms facilitate communication with the living, they also make it easier to communicate with the dead (Odom et al. 2010; Walter et al. 2011; Georges 2013) and redefine ties. If the death of a loved one creates a feeling of rupture, SNSs can serve as a transition to physically separate oneself from the dead, or even maintain a continuity.

An analysis of postings shows that mourners directly address the deceased. The permanent connection creates continuity in their exchanges, which carry on into the afterlife, but it also changes the nature of this communication. More than tributes, posted messages express a genuine communication with the deceased, a posthumous connection reflecting a relationship that could have existed had the deceased still been alive (ibid.): “*Je te souhaite un joyeux Noël d’en bas.. Je t’envoies des milliers de cadeaux d’amour ♥*” (22 December, 2014).¹⁰ This is real digital communication with the hereafter (Georges 2013), although communicating with the hereafter has always existed within different frameworks (ibid.). The social Web thus allows relationships with the dead to continue (Brubaker and Vertesi 2010; Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Odom et al. 2010).

By making death visible in our everyday life and our most commonplace rituals due to the influx of messages in our

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Liza-Alvaro-Repose-en-paix/292203854290192?fref=ts>

electronic inboxes, SNSs are actively changing our habits and social relationships and redefining our relationship with death. They have impacted mourning rituals, which have not disappeared but rather have been reconfigured. In addition, if we refer to the Durkheimian conception of ritual (Durkheim 1912 [1960]), we find the social function of ritual and its tendency to create a moral and affective community (ibid.). In this setting, the notion of “ritual” associated with these new practices proves highly appropriate. However, the novelty brought by these technologies involves the hybridization of the collective and the individual, the communal and the unique, which offer the possibility of conversations with a deceased person that are private and public at the same time. Communicating with the dead has thus taken a different turn.

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