

Articles

Death, Memorialization, and Social Media: A Platform Perspective for Personal Archives



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RÉSUMÉ Cet article examine les pratiques de commémoration et de deuil des utilisateurs de médias sociaux en ce qui a trait à la création, à l'accès et à la diffusion des archives personnelles. Comme les archives personnelles s'étendent pour comprendre le contenu créé et sauvegardé sur les plateformes des médias sociaux, les archivistes et les créateurs d'archives se doivent de considérer comment l'accès aux profils d'utilisateurs et aux collections personnelles ainsi que l'interaction avec les profils des personnes décédées sont déterminés et affectés par les fonctionnalités des plateformes. Puisque les plateformes déterminent comment les utilisateurs sont représentés dans les systèmes, ils influent sur le contexte de création et sur l'accès futur à l'information personnelle. Il existe des limites à la représentation et à l'accès sur ces plateformes puisque les données des médias sociaux dépendent des ressources de réseautage pour l'intégrité de leur contexte, ce qui soulève des questions relatives à la gestion continue de l'information personnelle après le décès d'un utilisateur. Les auteurs présentent des données d'entrevues qui suggèrent que les utilisateurs des médias sociaux considèrent leurs profils comme des archives personnelles, malgré les preuves qui font état du fait que les fonctionnalités des plateformes peuvent restreindre grandement l'accès futur et la capacité de commémorer des collections ou d'y ajouter du contexte après le décès des créateurs. Les auteurs soutiennent que, lorsqu'il est question d'élaborer des théories et de créer des archives personnelles, les archivistes ainsi que les créateurs d'archives devraient adopter une vision des plateformes qui inclue de préserver l'intégrité du contexte des données de réseau, de faire face aux changements à la persistance des plateformes et de clarifier les attentes archivistiques dans le but de donner accès aux collections personnelles créées à partir des plateformes de médias sociaux.

ABSTRACT This article examines the memorialization and bereavement practices of social media users as they relate to the creation, access, and circulation of personal archives. As personal archives expand to include content created and stored on social media platforms, it is incumbent upon archivists and individual archive creators to consider how access to user profiles, personal collections, and continued interaction with profiles of the deceased are shaped and affected by platform functionalities. Because platforms govern how users are represented in systems, they also shape the contexts of creation and future access to personal information. There exist representational and access limits in these platforms because social media data rely on networked resources for contextual integrity, which raises questions about the ongoing management of per-

sonal information after a user has died. The authors present interview data that suggest social media users consider profiles to be personal archives despite evidence that platform functionality may heavily restrict future access and the ability to memorialize collections or add layers of context after a creator has died. The authors argue that, when theorizing and building personal archives, archivists as well as individual creators should adopt a platform perspective that includes preserving the contextual integrity of networked data, confronting shifts in the persistence of platforms, and clarifying archival expectations to provide access to personal collections created with social media platforms.

Introduction

While social media platforms enable new ways of living in the world, they also create new ways of encountering death, memorializing the deceased, and experiencing the legacies of those who have died. Social media platforms govern access to networked personal information in ways that archivists and individual creators should be concerned about if we want to ensure access to digital collections and personal archives in the future. Early accounts of social media considered disjunctures between online and offline life – forms of public and private expression, creating a sense of audience, and transitioning to adulthood, among others.¹ While alive, individuals must negotiate these disjunctures, but the persistence of social media accounts after a user has died presents several issues for long-term personal collections, and for the survivors who may want to access, govern, or continue to interact with these collections. Access to user profiles, subsequent collections, and continued interaction with profiles of the deceased raise questions about the ongoing management of personal information on these platforms post-mortem.

Personal archives research has largely focused on two interconnected areas: theorizing the research space and educating the broader public. The first pertains to theorizing and describing the “personal” in personal archives that are collected and stored in institutions.² This strand is devoted to describing the importance of an individual’s collection, as it is separate from more formalized recordkeeping projects, distinct from transactional and organizational systems. Historically, individuals represented in institutional personal archives have been famous writers, administrators, and politicians. While there have been major

- 1 See, for example, Genevieve Bell, “The Age of the Thumb: A Cultural Reading of Mobile Technologies from Asia,” *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 19, no. 2 (June 2006): 41–57; Eszter Hargittai and Eden Litt, “Becoming a Tweep: How Prior Online Experiences Influence Twitter Use,” *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 680–702.
- 2 For a survey of recent debates as compared with administrative and governmental records, see Catherine Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals,” *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001): 126–35; and Sue McKemmish, “Evidence of Me,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 24, no. 1 (May 1996): 28–45.

institutional efforts to collect personal papers that document the lives of women and minorities, there still remains a dearth of personal archive collections that represent the everyday lives of people from all cross-sections of society.³ With the proliferation of networked information and communication technologies (ICTs), the definition of personal archives has expanded to include the collections of potentially any individual with an archival impulse to document his or her life. New technologies create new potentialities for personal archives, from cellphone photographs to email correspondence and Twitter feeds.

A second strand of personal archives research has turned toward educating members of the public and equipping them with tools and systems for self-archiving – pragmatic strategies for individual creators to collect, organize, and curate digital assets that are stored on media in their purview.⁴ While there may be no expectation that institutions will collect these personal archives, many professional archivists and researchers acknowledge that the field of personal archives has transformed. They study how people circulate personal information and “archive” it now, advising individual creators on comprehensive preservation practices ranging from media-specific issues to software preservation, hard-disk backup, and emulation.⁵

Richard J. Cox has encouraged archivists to adopt new roles as educators in order to equip “citizen archivists” (or individual creators) with skills to archive and provide access to personal collections to their families and loved ones in the future.⁶ A fair amount of effort has been directed toward educating people about common misunderstandings in digital information management (e.g., system backup is not a long-term archival solution). While these education efforts demonstrate the importance of archival advocacy in the digital age, there remains plenty of practical and theoretical bridging to be done between personal archives found in institutions and the personal archives of individual creators.

Despite the turn toward preserving digital media, archivists and individual creators have yet to address many of the archival challenges presented by social media with regard to the multiple contexts of collection creation. There exist representational and access limits for users as a result of the technological designs of social media. Likewise, social media data such as user profiles rely on networked resources and many creators in order to provide and maintain

3 Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, “Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream,” *Archival Science* 9, no. 1–2 (June 2009): 71–86.

4 Christopher A. Lee, ed., *I, Digital: Personal Collections in the Digital Era* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011).

5 Catherine C. Marshall, “Rethinking Personal Digital Archiving, Part 2: Implications for Services, Applications, and Institutions,” *D-Lib Magazine* 14, no. 3/4 (March/April 2008).

6 Richard J. Cox, *Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling: Readings, Reflections and Ruminations* (Duluth, MN: Litwin Books, 2008).

contextual integrity. Moreover, these profiles are connected to disparate audiences, resulting in multiple contexts that shift over time. In this article, we explore these challenges through experiences of confronting, documenting, and memorializing death on social media. We present interview data from people who experienced the deaths of users in their networks and encountered their social media collections in a variety of ways.

Based on our findings about death and personal digital collections, we argue that archivists and individual creators need to address the challenges associated with archiving social media by adopting a *platform perspective*. With a platform perspective, we emphasize the co-constitutive role of a system's affordances and its underlying infrastructure in the creation, maintenance, and structure of an individual's social media data. Focusing on the platform functionality of one popular social network site, Facebook, we show that the structure of data within Facebook links content to specific user accounts, which results in an ad hoc personal archive that, in turn, has provided the conditions for a variety of memorializing and post-mortem social networking practices. Building on four years of mixed methods research on death, social media, and post-mortem social networking,⁷ we draw insights from the ways archival theories and principles have accounted for and represented the death of creators and the inactivity of collections in order to inform the design of social media systems and personal digital archives.

In addition to the platform as a whole, we provide a close reading of the functions and limitations of Facebook's current approach to death (i.e., through "memorialization" of an account) in order to illustrate the importance of a platform perspective when theorizing the future of personal archives created with social media. Interview data are presented in conjunction with our analysis of Facebook's system in order to elucidate the lived reality that social media users and personal archive creators are confronting as they experience the deaths of "friends" and loved ones. Their experiences with death and social media also highlight an implicit trust and expectation that personal information and user profiles on Facebook (and other social media as well) will persist into the future. To this end, we present case studies of living users, or "survivors," who network with the profiles and collections of users who have died. We aim to show that social networking and accessing personal collections not only includes personal memory but also the memories of a network of actors who may still be creating collections of their own.

We start by framing our work with a brief survey of research in personal archives, contrasting it (where appropriate) with issues addressed in social

7 Jed R. Brubaker, Gillian R. Hayes, and Paul Dourish, "Beyond the Grave: Facebook as a Site for the Expansion of Death and Mourning," *Information Society* 29, no. 3 (May 2013): 152–63.

media research. We then discuss our methodology, including an analysis of the technical functionality of Facebook as a platform. In our results, we engage with two areas important to archival studies: how individuals' experiences of death on Facebook are shaped by the functionality of the platform; and an examination of the solution Facebook introduced for profiles following an individual's death, known as "profile memorialization." We conclude by synthesizing these findings, articulating specific shortcomings of the existing Facebook platform, and we argue for an archival engagement with social media that adopts a platform perspective to account for the ways in which these data were produced and consumed, and how they may be accessed in the future.

Personal Archives and Memory Practices

The act of creating and collecting personal archives represents a significant kind of memory practice for individual creators as well as the collecting institutions that steward them.⁸ Personal archives document the cultural memory of society in private, individualized ways.⁹ Social media, however, turn the flows of individual, personal documentation into transactions between users in a creator's network, allowing other users to access and add layers of context.¹⁰ These transactions may range from close ties (such as family and friends) to loose network ties (such as a favourite sports team or a professional organization). Additionally, memory practices depend on the ability to create and preserve material culture for retrieval and access, as well as the capacity to add future layers of context after a person or event has passed. Often, personal archival collections allow creators to remember their individual experiences or memories from the past through the addition of narrative and reflection.¹¹ Collections creators reflect and memorialize through the ability to access documentation and material culture that has been preserved and saved over time, a practice that

8 Geoffrey C. Bowker, *Memory Practices in the Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

9 Hobbs, "The Character of Personal Archives," 127.

10 danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, no. 1 (October 2008): 210–30.

11 Joseph (Jofish) Kaye, Janet Vertesi, Shari Avery, Allan Dafoe, Shay David, Lisa Onaga, Ivan Rosero, and Trevor Pinch, "To Have and to Hold: Exploring the Personal Archive," in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Montreal, 22–27 April 2006* (New York: ACM, 2006): 275–84; Ian Li, Anind Dey, and Jodi Forlizzi, "A Stage-Based Model of Personal Informatics Systems," in *Proceedings of the 28th International Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Atlanta, 10–15 April 2010* (New York: ACM, 2010): 557–66; William Odom, Richard Harper, Abigail Sellen, David Kirk, and Richard Banks, "Passing On & Putting to Rest: Understanding Bereavement in the Context of Interactive Technologies," in *Proceedings of the 28th International Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Atlanta, 10–15 April 2010* (New York: ACM, 2010): 1831–40.

becomes all the more important when loved ones have died.¹² Personal archives also have an impact on the collective memory of society. Such collections document how individuals remember the past, characterize community relationships in the present, and memorialize activities over time. Community memory is built upon connections between individuals; thus, personal archives are integral to documenting how individuals are connected to communities.

Just as personal archives enable memory practices, they also document how such practices change with documentation technologies, including how they are shaped by the platforms we encounter and use every day. As personal documentation through social media platforms becomes a fundamental modality of twenty-first-century living, we see a democratization of the documenting of one's personal life and the influence of people who have died. Online memorials, virtual cemeteries, blog remembrances, and even live-tweeting funerals are all examples of this new modality to which personal archives can be linked. The documentation that is created as a community grieves also situates the significance of that individual in the various communities of which they may have been a part. The persistent use of these platforms also points to the importance for survivors to be able to access digital collections and social media profiles after a creator has died.

The democratization of documenting an individual's life with digital media has been attributed to the proliferation of ICTs, ranging from personal computing devices to the rise of social media platforms that allow us to collect, access, and share personal digital records.¹³ Moreover, digital technologies make it even easier for personal records to be shared and stored through digital backup and cloud storage, and arguably easier for collecting institutions to accession personal archives, though access issues may arise (e.g., privacy and personal information redaction).¹⁴ As memories are captured and produced in tandem with digital media, it is incumbent upon archivists and information scholars to consider the impact that digital, networked platforms will have on individual representations, as well as the possibilities of accessing society's collective memory, created with emerging social media.

12 Mary R. Harvey, "An Ecological View of Psychological Trauma and Trauma Recovery," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 9, no. 1 (1996): 3–23; Christine Valentine, *Bereavement Narratives: Continuing Bonds in the Twenty-First Century* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008).

13 Catherine C. Marshall, "Rethinking Personal Digital Archiving, Part 1: Four Challenges from the Field," *D-Lib Magazine* 14, no. 3/4 (March/April 2008).

14 Christopher A. Lee and Kam Woods, "Automated Redaction of Private and Personal Data in Collections," in *Proceedings of Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation: An International Conference on Permanent Access to Digital Documentary Heritage, Vancouver, 26–28 September 2012*, ed. Luciana Duranti and Elizabeth Shaffer (New York: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2013): 298–313.

We argue that within emerging networked social media platforms the “personal” in personal archives can no longer be individuated. With social media, an individual’s records are dependent upon networked relationships in online and distributed platforms; for example, relationships among other users who provide feedback, or the use of various interconnected platform services. While social media users may craft an identity through the content they post, the identity represented via these platforms is constantly acquiring new layers of context as other users in the network interact with this content, and contribute content of their own. Existing research has shown that after many individual creators die, survivors reappropriate these online profiles, transforming them into memorials.¹⁵ These memorial practices, in which survivors engage and enrich the personal collection of the creator who has died, complicate the boundaries of ownership, access, and governance over personal archives. In the next section, we discuss some significant aspects of platforms that shape collections created with social media.

Addressing Networked Collections with a Platform Perspective

With new digital technologies, many of our recorded memories are embedded, uploaded, stored, and shared on networked platforms. The meaning and significance of “platform” as a term to describe the milieu in which many digital records are created has changed over time from a computational understanding to a figurative definition that signifies the confluence of networked services and user-generated content. According to Tarleton Gillespie, the word “platform” is increasingly being used to describe “online services of content intermediaries.”¹⁶ Gillespie argues that the term “platform” subsumes tensions that exist between service providers and users of social media. Platforms collapse different actors and their stakes, namely, the range of differences between commercial and user-generated content in the creation and access of digital culture. Platforms are never neutral tools because they privilege certain types of use with particular ends (e.g., commercial viability, vendor lock-in, or enrolling new users). The range of uses that platform operators and social media designers create may in large part support the creation of and access to personal collections. However, what we want to investigate are the disconnections and discrepancies that users encounter regarding the control of and access to collections created with social media platforms.

15 Jed R. Brubaker, Gillian R. Hayes, “‘We Will Never Forget You [Online]’: An Empirical Investigation of Post-Mortem MySpace Comments,” in *Proceedings of Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing* (Hangzhou, China: ACM, 2011): 1–10.

16 Tarleton Gillespie, “The Politics of ‘Platforms,’” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (May 2010): 348.

For our purposes, we want to highlight that “platform” represents a tension of accountability and access between service providers and content creators, future users, and, perhaps most importantly, archivists, because collections created with these services are future personal archives. However, Gillespie stresses the important ideological work that “platform” as a figurative term does when describing social media. By employing it as a lens to discuss the disjuncture between social media access while living and post-mortem, we strive to bring the discourse of personal archives and social media engagement into alignment regarding the future impact on personal collections.

Unlike earlier generations of digital records, today’s photographs, videos, and correspondence collections are most commonly produced and shared via social media platforms into thick interconnected networks of other users and content (hereafter “networked interpersonal archives”). Far from being records stored in one place, these digital collections are increasingly subject to passwords, privacy policies, and strong and weak network ties with other individuals. The challenge for archivists and individual creators alike is to consider the possibilities and limits of personal collections that are created, collected, and stewarded in platforms as networked interpersonal archives.

Platforms affect the creation of personal archives and tailor future access and engagement. However, current understandings of platforms cannot describe all social media scenarios of access and representation in systems, and, furthermore, survivors often encounter serious or unsettling collections or decontextualized traces of users who have died. This is especially true of events and contexts that are being documented (as well as experienced) by individual users for the first time in networks governed by platform affordances. For example, when someone dies and users encounter that person’s profile, what service is the Facebook platform providing for the various communities who should want to access the deceased’s profile? What are the limits of use and access on the content created by users? For example, photographs can be decoupled from their original profile context. Recently, an image of Rehtaeh Parsons, a Nova Scotia teenager who died after attempting suicide, appeared in an online dating advertisement on Facebook.¹⁷ Though the online dating vendor who placed the ad violated Facebook’s advertisement policy, the image itself was scraped from yet another web service that crawls Facebook for images. The context surrounding Parsons’ profile and her death had been decontextualized from her photograph.

17 Andre Mayer, “Rehtaeh Parsons Facebook Ad a ‘Textbook’ Case of Online Photo Abuse,” CBC News, 19 September 2013, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/rehtaeh-parsons-facebook-ad-a-textbook-case-of-online-photo-abuse-1.1859585>.

Post-mortem profiles are an exception to many current design assumptions that Facebook has for user accounts.¹⁸ Examining how the living encounter the dead in social media demonstrates the work of representation that these platforms perform,¹⁹ as well as the kinds of access to content they govern. We argue that survivors experience these networked memorials as both a personal archive and a site of community bereavement. However, because the platform is built with the expectation of living users, there are unavoidable limitations that have concrete archival consequences affecting access, preservation, and retrieval of personal archives when collection creators die.

So what is a platform perspective and why do archivists need one? Consider going to a retirement party for a co-worker: attendees may be invited to the event through Facebook, check in on Foursquare once they arrive at the restaurant, take photos of the meal and post them to Instagram and Twitter, and then share group photographs of the event on Flickr for co-workers who could not attend. These networked collections are also subject to the layers of information that other individual creators in a network add to existing collections: consider the comments, tags, and “likes” on the event’s photograph album from co-workers who could not attend the retirement party.

In addition to social media platforms, collections are created with mobile phones, tablets, and media players. With each device and platform come new affordances for synchronizing across and shifting between sites where personal archives have previously been situated and contained. Moreover, software versioning, privacy policies, and the user interface are always subject to change with new ICTs. These new ways of sharing and collecting also create new memories, and new possibilities for archives and digital heritage. We now capture events as they unfold in real time, from multiple individualized and multi-platformed angles. A platform perspective encourages us to consider how networked affordances from social media platforms provide new possibilities to memorialize and document events, people, and places. By taking a platform perspective, we explicitly consider the role that social media services play in the construction of personal archives. This perspective takes current and future system functionalities and access privileges seriously, seeking to engage with them over the long term because these will govern future access to personal archives and the documentation of networked cultures.

18 J.P. Djajadiningrat, William W. Gaver, and J.W. Fres, “Interaction Relabelling and Extreme Characters: Methods for Exploring Aesthetic Interactions,” in *Proceedings of the 3rd Conference on Designing Interactive Systems: Processes, Practices, Methods, and Techniques, Brooklyn, NY, 17–19 August 2000* (New York: ACM, 2000): 66–71.

19 Alice Marwick, “Online Identity,” in *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*, ed. John Hartley, Jean Burgess, and Axel Bruns (West Sussex, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 355.

Context and Methods

While the arguments we present in this article apply to social media broadly, we focus on Facebook specifically. With over one billion users,²⁰ Facebook has become the largest social media platform to date, and its ubiquity in the lives of many North Americans makes it an ideal platform for considering the impact of its users' deaths. By one estimate, over 580,000 US Facebook users died in 2012 alone.²¹ However, with no automated means of determining the mortal status of users, Facebook accounts continue to persist long after their owners' deaths. The persistence of profiles, in conjunction with a Facebook platform designed to move information throughout its social networks, has created new opportunities for remembering and honouring the deceased, as well as unexpected and uncanny encounters with the dead in otherwise living networks.²² Far from a single site or space, the data we might associate with an individual are bound up with their "friends" and the Facebook platform. These interconnected data present challenges when addressing ownership and management of accounts and content. As such, we include analyses of two types of data: system analyses of the Facebook platform and experiences shared during interviews conducted with Facebook users who have engaged with post-mortem social networking.

Interview data are drawn from qualitative interviews conducted by Brubaker with sixteen participants (ten women, six men, ages 24 to 57). Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, recruitment relied on personal networks and snowball sampling. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to guide the discussion to topics and experiences that most interested them. The focus of interviews was on experiences with death on Facebook, but participants were also asked to reflect on their own preferences for the handling of their accounts post-mortem. All participants described encounters with at least one account belonging to a deceased individual, with most commenting on two or three. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were conducted in person via video chat (with screen-sharing functionality) and over the telephone. Participants shared profile data and related artifacts, including emails, obituaries, news articles, public Facebook groups, and blogs.

20 Facebook, "Key Facts," accessed 1 March 2013, <http://newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts>.

21 Nathan Lustig, "2.89m Facebook Users Will Die in 2012, 580,000 in the USA," *Nathan Lustig: Staying out of the Cubicle* (blog), 6 June 2012, <http://www.nathanlustig.com/2012/06/06/2-89m-facebook-users-will-die-in-2012-580000-in-the-usa/>.

22 Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish, "Beyond the Grave."

An inductive analysis of the interviews and related data was conducted using grounded methods. Open coding followed by memoing²³ was used to identify and group the participants' narratives into themes. Themes were then refined using a constant comparison method that "combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed."²⁴ Hereafter, we focus on themes related to ownership, future use and access, and interviewees' experiences of post-mortem social networking.

Navigating Death on Social Media

Existing social media research often focuses on issues of self-presentation and the negotiation of various audiences that broad public space affords.²⁵ While these concerns are often linked to the persistence of personal data, approaching a social media platform as an archival site is less common. Privileging the present and near-term over long-term heritage considerations is evident in cyber-sociology and in new media studies that argue for a reframing of social media platforms from sites of self-presentation to sites of interpersonal enactment.²⁶

New Types of Access

Interview participants identified unique issues about the level of access to the profile that Facebook provided. Many felt outside the group of survivors, but as a result of the Facebook platform they witnessed and encountered loss in a new way. The affordances of social media platforms often result in *context collapse*, a term used to describe how social media "flatten multiple audiences into one" and create overlapping audiences that users have to navigate.²⁷ Marcus, a middle-aged man, shared his experiences after the death of a college classmate

- 23 For more on the process of memoing as a method of analysis in qualitative research, see Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007).
- 24 Judith Preissle Goetz and Margaret D. LeCompte, "Ethnographic Research and the Problem of Data Reduction," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 51.
- 25 Judith Donath and danah boyd, "Public Displays of Connection," *BT Technology Journal* 22, no. 4 (October 2004): 71–82; Zizi Papacharissi, ed., *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
- 26 David Silver, "Looking Backwards, Looking Forward: Cyberculture Studies 1990–2000," in *Web.studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age*, ed. David Gauntlette (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 19–30; Helen Kennedy, "Beyond Anonymity, or Future Directions for Internet Identity Research," *New Media & Society* 8, no. 6 (December 2006): 859–76.
- 27 Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience," *New Media & Society* 13, no. 1 (February 2011): 122.

who had been killed in a car accident: “I didn’t know him... I mean, he was a friend of a lot of friends ... All right, I knew him well enough that I was listed in Facebook as a friend, but not well enough that I actually would post on his wall or had any interaction with him. But first I saw that he’d been killed in a car accident.”

The tenuous connection to the deceased enabled by the Facebook platform is evident in Marcus’s experience. Marcus does not identify as a survivor himself, not “knowing” the colleague personally or being a part of the various communities mourning his death. But as he described the community practices he observed, he spoke of his own growing “interest” as well:

And then what I saw was all of these other people that I knew posting on his wall... And just sort of seeing that happen around someone who I didn’t know at all, really, but ... finding myself interested in finding out more about this person. Not so much because he had died, but because of all of these other people I knew who were so affected – trying to understand what was affecting them and what they were going through ... [I was] relatively ... in sort of a cyberstalking way ... there really wasn’t much about him in Facebook. I mean, you could sort of see who his friends were through that. You could see, oh well, he likes such and such a TV show and this book or whatever, but I still feel like I don’t actually know him at all.

Participants identified different categories of “friends” as well as sets of behaviour a community creates by remembering a person in an active network of survivors. Marcus enumerated various categories of relationships with the deceased – categories that cast some behaviour as memorialization and his own as “cyberstalking.” However, it is worth pointing out that Marcus’s “cyberstalking” is the result of a platform that affords such behaviour while simultaneously collapsing the various roles “friends” might play across a range of different communities following a person’s death. In order to interpret post-mortem profiles, individuals have to gather up differing braids of context, ranging from the original profile data to changes after the creator has died, to observations about the range of network ties from others remembering the deceased through additions and remembrances.

Ownership and Management of Personal Data

Interviewees recognized varying degrees of governance and authority over personal information and the impact that existing account settings may have on access to profiles in the future. Facebook’s privacy settings, in particular, directly shape the possible access and interactions that other users can have with a given account. Many participants expressed a desire for their profiles to be accessible after they die. Laura, for example, a medical professional living in Southern California, told us of the positive experiences she had following the death of a high school friend. The importance of having an online space to

grieve the loss of her friend clearly influenced her own preferences about future access to her account. When asked what should happen to her Facebook profile after her own death, she replied, “Should my Facebook page be shut down? I don’t think so. I think I would like it to stay open and allow my friends to have a place to go.” However, even as she espoused her preference, Laura acknowledged that others might feel differently: “I wouldn’t feel like I would want it shut down, I guess. I’m sure some people would, though.”

For participants, access implied some level of ownership and concern for future access. The conflation between access and ownership was evident when talking with Henry, an artist living in the midwestern United States. When asked who owns a profile after someone dies, he explained that “it belongs to all the people that contribute to that page after they die. I think it becomes an open forum with no real ownership. It’s about somebody. But because the person who once owned it is no longer contributing, I think it’s – it belongs to the people that do [the] contributing.” However, in addition to the multiple human stakeholders, the technical platform has some claims as well. Henry, for example, was quick to qualify his statement by acknowledging the importance of Facebook: “I think that technically it belongs to Facebook because it’s – if you don’t have the username and password, they’re the only people that can shut it down.” These technical realities were often secondary concerns for the participants, but they did acknowledge the role of Facebook in stewarding personal information, as well as the uncertainty of ownership and long-term access for future users.

Survivors have concerns about the long-term consequences for these personal archives, even if not immediately realized. Jason, an older man from the Pacific Northwest, talked extensively about the death of his daughter several years ago and his experience years afterwards when returning to and revisiting the various artifacts – both online and off – that surrounded her death. Jason explained that prior to his interview he had begun to re-engage with some of the online comments left by a community that mourned his daughter’s death: “You don’t want to talk about death every day and post death all the time. But it’s been years since [my daughter died] – it had been years since I’d looked at it [online content] to be honest. I’m glad it’s there.” While somewhat surprised at the amount of content that still existed, he shared his joy at the ability to return and reminisce about his daughter. Indeed, he was considering scanning some of the physical letters and artifacts he had in storage in order to add them to the online collection: “And I know from experience how some memories slip away. And it’s good to put them somewhere. I suppose in the past you’d use a scrapbook or something like that. It’s sort of a digital scrapbook in this particular case.”

However, the public setting of online memorials presents new challenges. Jason, for one, described negotiating not only his relationship with his daughter, but also the new kinds of publics in which these data exist: “It’s a tricky thing,

because you don't want to necessarily go for the pity thing. Or you don't want – but it is a part of my life. She was a part of my life – still is – and you ... it feels like – well, I guess it's, to me, a really moving memorial to my daughter, somebody I really care about.”

Focusing on social media as a site of enactment includes considering these sites and their data in terms of archival provenance. The nature of these personal collections does present challenges for establishing a personal archive that includes social media. Specifically, as the data created and captured by these platforms are explicitly or implicitly interpersonal, an approach that is limited to archiving a single user's self-presentation is insufficient. Multiple contexts of personal archive creation and reception, including how death is encountered and archived on social media, are constantly shifting because of platform functionalities. Moreover, self-presentation in social media platforms is always evolving, acquiring new layers of context as time passes and a profile grows in content via network activity.²⁸ Instead, considering the data and collections at the level of a community network might be more advantageous. The infrastructure of platforms changes the nature of personal archives because it creates networked collections and multiple uses over time. The process of representing the disjunction of death and memorialization is a challenge to content intermediaries just as it is to users who actively engage with, share, upload, and create new content as part of bereavement.

The role that Facebook is now playing as an unanticipated long-term archive of personal collections is a challenge to individual users, archivists, and collecting institutions. It raises issues without definite answers about who owns what and when collections end. When Jason's daughter passed, her personal archive ended. But in actuality, as we learned from his interview, after his daughter's death Jason absorbed her archive into part of his own personal archive. His daughter's personal collection is unfinished as it becomes absorbed into a new personal collection, that of her father's. Additionally, Jason's scenario demonstrates the important temporalities and levels of authority at play: while initially engaging with the data related to the death of his daughter was painful and overwhelming, years later Jason described re-engaging with the archive as “moving” and an important part of his life.

Professional archivists have a stake in navigating context collapse over time in networked collections, just as individual creators and communities do. While the ways users engage with the data are varied and will change over time, it remains crucial to consider how these daily information practices will be accessed as evidence of cultural mores and social interaction in the future. From an archival perspective, future generations may see real value in accessing social media data. However, this archival viewpoint is clearly underutilized

28 Kennedy, “Beyond Anonymity.”

in many of our existing social media platforms. While some platforms such as Google offer after-death planning with Inactive Account Manager,²⁹ many of these services focus on downloading digital assets or deleting data altogether. They do not emphasize access for future users, platform specificity, or preservation. From a corporate standpoint, these personal collections represent traditional business transactions in an era of big data. Services like Facebook must confront a challenge associated with their success – namely, what are the implicit commitments that they have made to users of their systems? While many online communities are not explicitly designed with the long-term in mind,³⁰ it is conceivable that Facebook might span generations. The uncertainty surrounding the endurance of social media platforms presents challenges for archivists and individual creators. However archivists have a long-term commitment to preserving evidence in context. Anne Gilliland has written about how the archival approach to evidence is unique, because the “concern for evidence permeates all archival activities.”³¹ Because the archival concern for evidence accounts for context, temporality, integrity, and events that lead to the creation of records, it emphasizes contextual description in ways that current social media platforms often leave out. In the next section, we discuss how archival concerns for evidence are flattened by Facebook’s memorialization feature.

Memorializing an Online Account

In early November 2009, Facebook announced “memorialized profiles.”³² Memorialization allows Facebook users to notify Facebook’s customer support team via an online “memorialization request” form about the death of another user. Described as a way for “memories of friends departed to endure on Facebook,” memorialization serves two platform-level goals: first, with no publicly accessible national or international database of deceased individuals, memorialization provides Facebook with a mechanism for knowing which users are deceased and the ability to manage their accounts; second, it allows Facebook to avoid insensitively treating deceased individuals as living users by excluding deceased

29 Andreas Tuerk, “Plan Your Digital Afterlife with Inactive Account Manager,” *Google Public Policy Blog*, 11 April 2013, <http://googlepublicpolicy.blogspot.com/2013/04/plan-your-digital-afterlife-with.html>.

30 Amy Bruckman and Carlos Jensen, “The Mystery of the Death of MediaMOO: Seven Years of Evolution in an Online Community,” in *Building Virtual Communities: Learning and Change in Cyberspace*, ed. K. Ann Renninger and Wesley Shumar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21–33.

31 Anne Gilliland-Swetland, *Enduring Paradigm, New Opportunities: The Value of the Archival Perspective in the Digital Environment* (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2000), 10.

32 Max Kelly, “Memories of Friends Departed Endure on Facebook,” *The Facebook Blog*, 26 October 2009, <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=163091042130>.

accounts from searches performed by non-friends and algorithmic suggestions that might encourage an individual to interact with a deceased friend.

Memorialization irreversibly changes a user's account and profile. Most notably, "When an account is memorialized, we [Facebook] also set privacy so that only confirmed friends can see the profile or locate it in [a] search." Simultaneously, memorialization of a profile "prevents anyone from logging into it in the future, while still enabling friends and family to leave posts on the profile Wall in remembrance."³³ The memorial profiles feature reflects at least a partial acknowledgement on behalf of Facebook of the enduring archival value of the personal data Facebook maintains. However, during implementation, Facebook takes a number of cues from the tradition of computer science and information security. The disabled login hearkens back to the best practice of "least privilege," in which users are provided with only the most minimal access required to perform a specified activity.³⁴ Disabling logins has serious stewardship implications because it effectively eliminates the ability for a survivor to interact with Facebook on behalf of the deceased, and thus takes away the ability to manage, maintain, or even shut down an account.

As they are implemented, memorial profiles fail to acknowledge (or even permit) that other users may maintain the deceased's data post-mortem. Facebook has explicitly chosen not to enable delegation of data management to a secondary user, such as an archivist or a named survivor. With traditional personal archives, surviving family members or estate executors inherit personal archives after someone dies. Despite the broad democratization of personal archives and documentation enabled by social media, recognition of these data as archives does not yet exist as a common understanding or platform expectation (by archivists, social media corporations, or users). Moreover, it is a particular way of controlling access that maintains Facebook as the central authority and forecloses the possibility of archival management by individuals other than the content intermediaries. On one hand, Facebook is making overtures to survivors by providing the memorial profile feature, but on the other hand it neglects the impact this has on personal archives by preventing the implementation of archival practices and delimiting future access.

Invisible Archives and Future Users

It is unclear how best to preserve and present an individual's social media collections post-mortem. Moreover, it is still uncertain who has authority to govern the information once a creator has passed. Facebook currently retains the

33 Ibid.

34 Jerome H. Saltzer, "Protection and the Control of Information Sharing in Multics," *Communications of the ACM* 17, no. 7 (July 1974): 388–402.

governing authority and responsibility over the data, but when speaking with interviewees about access, notions of stewardship responsibilities were varied. Sean, a young computer scientist, claimed that “no one should own the account anymore. It should just go into limbo and exist on its own.” He justifies his position by explaining that:

Even though new people would wanna find [and “friend”] that person [the deceased], who knows whether that person would want to add them or not? People could assume so, but, like, I don’t know if they would want that to be there or act on their behalf. They had some sort of – they had created this network that they wanted, and because of that structuring, like, people should accept and preserve the way that it is. Maybe people can post to other things or, like, someone could proxy through someone else, saying, like, “Oh, Fred says that he wants to tell you something.” I sort of feel like they had it the way they wanted to, and for someone to go on there and manage it or doing some other things would sort of violate how they wanted to keep their identity.

Sean’s perspective is fairly consistent with Facebook’s implementation of memorial profiles. However, it stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from the opinions offered by Marcus, Laura, and Jason, presented earlier. In Facebook’s attempt to be sensitive to survivors, access to the memorialized profile is restricted. A profile that has been memorialized becomes invisible to anyone who is not already a confirmed friend in the deceased’s account. Likewise, recent adopters of Facebook cannot search for, let alone “friend,” the deceased. Without anyone to accept a friendship request, it is not possible for non-friends or new Facebook users to gain access to a memorial profile. This presents a challenge to future Facebook users and should be a concern for personal archive creators as well as archival institutions that collect personal archives. Several participants shared scenarios in which individuals joined Facebook after someone’s death for the express purpose of joining a community of bereaved. An archival perspective highlights even more poignantly how the restrictions on access will affect future users and the cultural memory of personal digital archives.

The memorial profiles feature is the institutional solution that Facebook has provided for survivors. However, it does not support the majority of practices and the nuanced preferences expressed by interviewees for accessing these personal collections. Interviewees approached memorial profiles with a fair amount of apprehension. Individuals expressed a wide variety of preferences for how best to manage the data of their loved ones, ranging from active curation to editing to closing the account to having the option of varied access restrictions. Survivors were actively engaged in appraising the potential value of these networked interpersonal archives by freezing dead accounts through the process of transitioning an account into a memorial profile. Presently, living users already negotiate access restrictions to their content and provide different levels of access to other users. Study participants discussed scenarios in which privacy

settings or the lack of login credentials by which to manage a deceased person's account resulted in the creation of a separate Facebook group specifically for the purpose of remembering the deceased. This approach allowed survivors to engage with other bereaved individuals online, creating more documentation, but it also bifurcated the community and respective conversations.

From Profile to Memorial

The decisions Facebook has made about the role of memorialized accounts fails to account for the shifting constituencies of traditional memorials. Facebook's current approach privileges the static preferences of the deceased and a snapshot of his or her network taken at the moment of memorialization. Personal collections are organic and have many uses in the life of the creator, as well as reuses after the individual has ceased to create records. We also acknowledge the possibilities for community memory found within personal archives. However, it is unclear that the Facebook platform can incorporate and leverage archiving options for communities of survivors in the system currently.

Presently, survivors have limited access options through memorialized accounts, but many are irreversible. For example, once an account has been memorialized it can no longer be retrieved through Facebook search. Irreversibility is especially problematic for bereaved individuals who can be particularly volatile following the death of a loved one. However, problems around irreversibility are not limited to the bereaved. Another participant shared an experience of profound shock following his decision to remove a deceased individual from his list of friends. Though he knew the technical ramifications of his actions, this "friend" was only an acquaintance, and he saw no reason to remain part of his social network. However, he shared the unexpected "horror" he felt after "unfriending" the deceased: "I realized I could never get him back." Issues around reversibility here echo findings by researchers studying technology non-use: when leaving a piece of technology, individuals often prefer a "selective and reversible disconnection."³⁵

Long-term retention and future access are based on an individual's social network at the time of death by restricting access to the existing network. Such restricted access means that even if the data associated with the memorial profile continue to live on in Facebook's system, access to the data and any networked community documentation the profile provides will die as the friends connected to the profile also begin to die. Despite the feature's name, the memorial potential of memorial profiles as currently designed is severely limited. As

35 Scott D. Mainwaring, Michele F. Chang, and Ken Anderson, "Infrastructures and Their Discontents: Implications for Ubicomp," in *UbiComp 2004: Ubiquitous Computing: 6th International Conference, Nottingham, UK, 7–10 September 2004. Proceedings*, ed. Nigel Davies, Elizabeth D. Mynatt, and Itiro Siio (Berlin, New York: Springer, 2004): 425.

Nicholas Grider argues, memorialization in information spaces “depends less on the implied eternity of a built physical environment than on the entirely different eternity of circulating information.”³⁶ Presently, the Facebook platform provides users with a host of ways to create personal archives but without a long-term view of their enduring value. Instead, an approach is needed that acknowledges conditional wishes of the deceased concerning their social media collections and the changing needs of the bereaved as they continue to memorialize people who have died, as well as possibilities for future access to these networked collections as personal archives.

Priorities for Archivists

Facebook’s current policies around memorial profiles are de facto archival policies that place representational, contextual, and descriptive limits on profile data post-mortem. However, as we have demonstrated, these policies fail to meet the diverse wishes and needs of the deceased and their survivors. Likewise, existing profile features fail to meet modern expectations about personal archives, which is the ability to retrieve and access collections over time, including adding layers of context through appraisal, description, and reuse.

Traditional understandings of personal archives are built upon the expectation that following an individual creator’s death, their personal collections will pass to a future steward (e.g., a family member, executor, or institution) whose responsibilities include governance and authority over access. Presently, content intermediaries like Facebook are supporting personal collection development, yet how the platform supports personal archives remains largely opaque. Thus far, most explicit articulations between users and content intermediaries about the future of collections have been enacted through privacy policies based on use. Privacy remains the primary avenue for governance over social media collections. However, the primacy of the living user’s authority over their collections undermines the possible legacy or heritage evidence that remains in profiles over time and after the user has died. At present, Facebook, the most widely used social media platform, merely tolerates post-mortem social networking practices to the extent that they conform to security models and design expectations that existed prior to the individual’s death. Provided this landscape, we propose three priorities for archivists planning for future engagement with personal archives created with social media:

1. *Preserving the contextual integrity of networked data.* Archivists should develop theories and research programs for personal archives created with platforms as networked interpersonal archives that include both individual

36 Nicholas Grider, “‘Faces of the Fallen’ and the Dematerialization of US War Memorials,” *Visual Communication* 6, no. 3 (October 2007): 267.

and community documentation. We must consider how social media platform functionalities restrict future access points by limiting interactivity with these collections, and how this shapes archival access, community memory, and the future of personal digital archives.

2. *Confronting shifts in the persistence of platforms.* Despite evidence that users see collections created with platforms as personal archives, service providers and content intermediaries do not ensure their persistence as archives. The management and longevity of collections created in platforms and their future access is dependent upon technical, social, and economic forces. Changes in terms of service, Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), system updates, privacy legislation, and commercial popularity each affect collection access and preservation over time. Archivists must intervene at the level of platform persistence by identifying tensions of accountability between service providers and users, locating economic and cultural shifts in documentation, and providing explanations (and critiques) of the impact that content intermediaries have on networked interpersonal archives.
3. *Clarifying archival expectations.* Archivists need to begin researching social media sites, their policies, system functionalities, security permissions, and individual user practice as areas for long-term archival engagement. We must share findings that concern the preservation and access of digital heritage with system designers, policy makers, communities, and cultural memory institutions. This includes clarifying whether users who create networked interpersonal archives and their survivors have reasonable legal and cultural expectations for preservation and access to personal archives created with platforms.

As we have shown, social media platforms like Facebook enable users to create interpersonal networked archives, but representing the death of users and allowing long-term archival access remains problematic within current platform capabilities. This is where archivists can contribute to the nexus between individual users as personal archive creators and social media platform designers and engineers. What we stand to gain in this endeavour is not only a broadening of the personal archives we are producing, but also a richer sense of our individual relationship to the cultural and humanistic project of producing an archive in the twenty-first century.

The permissions and security design presently employed by Facebook is premised upon users accepting friend requests, maintaining profiles, and circulating and generating content. When profiles are memorialized, Facebook privileges existing friends as the primary archival access points by allowing them to continue to interact with the deceased user's profile. This may work in favour of Facebook's functionality and reasonably adhere to the permissions granted by the now deceased user, however, this severely limits Facebook's potential personal archives and their future use as evidence. The post-mortem

profile as personal archive is limited to the configuration of the profile and network of friends at the point of memorialization. It does not support an evolving configuration of the network in the absence of the now deceased former owner to manage, moderate, or approve changes.

In arguing for the archival importance of social media to personal collections, its value as evidence to society, and its heritage implications to individuals, we recognize the importance of corporate institutions like social media rethinking policies and practices to handle death. Engaging social media at the platform level is important because of the limited options provided to existing users. Changing these practices requires a multi-perspective approach that engages Facebook designers and engineers, individual creators (who are both platform users and content creators), and archivists. Archival engagement with the platform also requires consideration of new users and new social media practices – not simply the ways that the current platform can support existing users and practices, but also future possibilities. Archivists and archival systems have supported cultural memory and memorialization practices in addition to representing the death of creators in collections for hundreds of years. Representing the death of the user, in addition to maintaining accurate description, access, and memorialization, involves complex, faceted understandings of heritage and governance over collections.

A platform perspective also focuses on the transfer of information and preserving contexts of personal archives creation.³⁷ Preserving contextual integrity can address the variety of experiences that users encounter when they witness and access the records of a social media network as part of a survivor community processing death. Users like Marcus, Laura, and Jason confront memorialization online through interpersonal networked archives in different ways. They must also reconcile themselves to the context collapse that occurs when a user in their network dies. The integrity of these contexts and changes of state are shared concerns for both social media scholars and archival researchers. Designing for and considering contextual integrity involves considering the appropriateness of information sharing relative to the intended context in which it was produced.

Conclusion

Archivists and individual archives creators can benefit from a platform perspective that acknowledges issues of access, context of networked profiles, and shifting policies that govern social media spaces and the content they contain.

37 Adam Barth, Anupam Datta, John C. Mitchell, and Helen Nissenbaum, "Privacy and Contextual Integrity: Framework and Applications," in *Proceedings of the 2006 IEEE Symposium on Security and Privacy, Berkeley, CA, 21–24 May 2006* (Washington, DC: IEEE Computer Society, 2006): 184–98.

We have used death, and related practices, as a lens through which to examine social media platforms as archival sites of engagement. The need for this perspective is particularly salient when users die and survivors continue to encounter and interact with their personal archives created via social media. As we have demonstrated in this article, Facebook as a social media platform falls short in meeting the needs of the users we interviewed in the course of this research, as well as the needs of archivists. The memorial profile is an ad hoc “archiving” mechanism that complicates and undermines essential archival functions of preservation, description, contextual integrity, and access to evidence over time. Furthermore, the current functionality of the platform negates many of the possibilities for profiles to act as personal archives, as well as how future Facebook users might access networked interpersonal archives. Clearly, the personal information that Facebook collects from its users (ranging from photographs and email messages to interactions and networked relationships) is evidence of business transactions and personal collections. A platform perspective for personal archives that includes social media engages new interactions for cultural memory in the digital age, accounts for communities that actively create interpersonal networked archives, and aims to ensure access to collections in the future. Engaging these spaces in the name of an archive at the platform level requires that we think about designing new interactions and setting new expectations around how our personal archives may be used, not just over our lifespan but over multiple lifespans.

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