After the breakup in a digital world: Purging Facebook of painful memories

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Digital possessions are in vast collections spread across multiple devices, applications, web-services, and platforms. Credit: Carolyn Lagattuta

The era is long gone when a romantic breakup meant ripped-up photos and burned love letters. Today, digital photos and emails can be quickly deleted but the proliferation of social media has made forgetting a bigger chore.

What about the ubiquitous digital records of a once beloved that lurk on Facebook, tumblr, and flicker?

"People are keeping huge collections of digital possessions," says Steve Whittaker, a psychology professor at UC Santa Cruz who specializes in human-computer interaction. "There has been little exploration of the

negative role of digital possessions when people want to forget aspects of their lives."

In a paper, "[Design for Forgetting: Disposing of Digital Possessions after a Breakup](#)," Whittaker and co-author Corina Sas, of Lancaster University, examine the challenges of digital possessions and their disposal after a romantic breakup. Sas worked on the research as a visiting professor at UCSC.

Pervasive collections

Digital possessions include photos, messages, music, and video stored across multiple devices such as computers, tablets, phones, and cameras. Their pervasiveness "creates problems during a breakup, as people 'inhabit' their digital space where photos and music constantly remind them about their prior relationship."

In interviews with 24 young people between the ages of 19 and 34, Whittaker and Sas found that digital possessions after a breakup are often evocative and upsetting, leading to distinct disposal strategies. Twelve of the subjects were deleters; eight were keepers, and four others were selective disposers.

They presented their findings last week in Paris at the Association for Computing Machinery Conference on [Human Factors](#) in [Computing Systems](#), the premier international conference on human-computer interaction, with more than 3,300 attendees. The paper will be published in the conference proceedings.

Some of the heartbroken may want to forget but are "extremely resistant to actual deletion," Whittaker and Sas found, most often the "dumpees." Others later regret disposing of everything.

Disposal is made more difficult today because "digital possessions are in vast collections spread across multiple devices, applications, web-services, and platforms," they write. "When the relationship is good, this promotes a rich digital life. But when it sours … people have to systematically cull collections across multiple digital spaces."

Untagged but not deleted

Facebook photos can be untagged but not deleted if posted by someone else. "It's time consuming and emotionally taxing because people tend to re-engage with possessions, especially photos," they note.

Some of the initial tactics encountered: changing one's relationship status to "single," immediately unfriending or blocking ex-partner's access to ones' profile.

Whittaker and Sas propose that software solutions might help scrub cyberspace of painful memories, for instance automatic "harvesting" using facial recognition, machine learning or entity extraction. Or a holding pattern until a cooler head prevails.

"A lack of disposal tools meant most participants either kept, or disposed of everything," they said. "Keepers took longer to heal, disposers often regretted their impulsiveness."

'Pandora's Box'

The authors propose a "Pandora's Box" that could automatically scoop up all the digital artifacts of a relationship, put them in a single place for later strategic deleting or retention. Or a trusted friend could be put in the position as a gatekeeper.

Or there could be new tools for active selection from collections of digital possessions to create a "treasure chest" of valuable items that may retained for later happy memories.

Whittaker joined UCSC in 2011. He was previously a professor in information retrieval at the information studies department at the University of Sheffield. He has also been a research scientist at HP Labs, Lotus, AT&T Labs, and IBM. His research was supported by a grant from Google.

Selected comments:

"Deleting everything was a kind of symbolic gesture of starting fresh as well as not having to look at it again."

"I kept everything, including pictures, videos and messages about her. I do not look at them very often; sometimes I feel sorrow but sometimes I feel happy when I see that beautiful time."

"Having photos on my phone and computer did cause me to feel sad, but I immediately removed them after the breakup, in order to more on. I got rid of all the things that were common between the two of us."

[What hindered moving on?] Occasionally finding things that I had missed throwing out or deleting: the odd email stored in Outlook on the computer I didn't often use or messages I missed on a social networking site I didn't use much."