

Changing responses to death in the digital age

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Researchers Dr Paul Coulton and Selina Ellis Gray are analysing the ways in which western mourning practices are changing in the modern world thanks to the increasing amounts of personal data we leave online.

Selina Ellis Gray said: "Our deaths are now followed by the slow decay of a massive body of data, which include huge amounts created from regular social media use."

As part of her interdisciplinary PhD, she is questioning what happens to all our tweets, [status updates](#) and selfies after we've gone and how can we begin to design for these remains.

Until the social media boom the popular understanding was the public mourning was in retreat in the west, with social and religious traditions no longer having such a uniform influence on the way we say goodbye. But in today's Facebook age a new form of mourning has emerged. Selina Ellis Gray's ongoing research explores blogs about grief, memorial pages on Facebook, tributes on Instagram, shrines on twitter, digital scrapbooks and support groups for the bereaved springing up in diverse and highly personal responses to loss. Decades of similar digital content is also decaying, posing new problems to those that are left behind to manage it.

Dr Coulton said: "In today's digital age, when we die we often leave behind a digital legacy. Relatives are no longer only considering what to do with books, tea sets, vases and toolboxes but they are also thinking about online social remnants such as digital photos, videos, status updates and emails.

"While these ghostly reminders online are enabling new types of mourning practices, they are consequently presenting a number of challenges to the traditional role of custodianship as these remnants of digital life cannot be placed within rooms or on shelves in quite the same way as a piece of jewellery or a lock of hair.

"These remains are searchable, discoverable and open to reinterpretation such that the dead can return unbidden to haunt the living in unexpected ways."

The threshold between life and death has also become a much more public event with the last status updates and final tweets of victims of events such as the Colorado massacre becoming global news. Selina has documented how such spaces online have become highly visited, with some gathering over 10 million views and daily visitors who consider these places as a positive focus for their loss. She hopes her ongoing

research in this emergent area will have an impact on future technology design and also support services. Alongside her thesis, Selina has a number of publications forthcoming in 2014 and will be presenting at this year's first 'Death Online Research' symposium with other leading experts in the field.

Dr Coulton said: "These changing responses to death – and the digital legacy we leave behind – are posing all sorts of new questions and challenges, not only for technology designers and professionals who provide bereavement support but also for society in general."

Provided by Lancaster University

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