

What happens to our digital selves when we die?

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For a decade, people have been using facebook to tell friends and family about milestones in their lives, posting pictures and sharing anecdotes to create rich virtual representations. But what happens to those representations when the people who made them die?

The problem of what to do with accounts of the dead is very real, and Facebook's own policy keeps changing. Currently, it does not offer living [users](#) any way to specify what will happen after their death. But a loved one's survivors have three options: after supplying proof of death, they can either deactivate the page, leave it as is, or "memorialize" it. The latter choice effectively transforms a profile from personal journal to gathering place, where mourners assume the job of posting content. Depending on the user's privacy settings, anyone can share memories on this type of page.

Kathleen Scheaffer is one user who finds these options limiting. A librarian at the Faculty of Information, Scheaffer found herself wondering about online mourning practices after losing several people close to her who were Facebook users. To investigate the question, she teamed up with Rhonda McEwen, a professor at the Institute of Communication, Culture and Information Technology at UTM.

Scheaffer and McEwen interviewed 18 recently bereaved Facebook users to see what impact the social network had on their experience of loss. (The sample size was small owing to the difficult emotional process of participating in the research.) On the positive side, mourners said that

memorialized pages gave them access to immediate support; posts by others could be deeply comforting.

But the researchers also found that Facebook can spur a sort of jockeying among mourners where users compete to show who loved the deceased person best. Further, Scheaffer speculates that the constant lure of a perpetually accessible page might induce pathological grieving, whereby the bereaved aren't able to move on with their lives.

Michael Massimi (PhD 2012) is a post-doctoral researcher with Microsoft who studies the Internet's role in social support. He contends that Facebook can be a powerful outlet for mourning, especially for those who can't attend memorial services in person. But in his work with Bereaved Families of Ontario, he also found "that people sometimes want a separate, safe space away from Facebook . . . they don't want to talk about their grief [there] because it seems like a frivolous place to talk about something so profound. Just think of a news feed where ads and funny photos of kittens might be intermixed with sincere expressions of grief."

And what if the personal archive of an ardent atheist becomes a vehicle for the religious well-wishing of relatives he might not even have liked? Scheaffer points out that unless living users deal with their own digital property premortem, their powers of personal curation are threatened – not only by Facebook but by other companies as well. Massimi says that question is "very much an open one," dependent on local jurisdiction and legal precedent.

In view of all this, Scheaffer and McEwen recommend that Facebook offer users "digital estate options," and that they freeze users' profiles completely, so they are separate from memorial pages.

Facebook is skewing ever-older in its demographic reach, which is why

Scheaffer believes that it – and other [social networking websites](#) – have an obligation to take their policies on user death seriously. Her views are timely in a world where deceased users' photographs have been misused, and "likes" erroneously attributed to them. "I'd like to see a little more education around digital identity, and pressure on companies to make decisions based on research rooted in integrity – not just what's best for them," she says.

Provided by University of Toronto

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