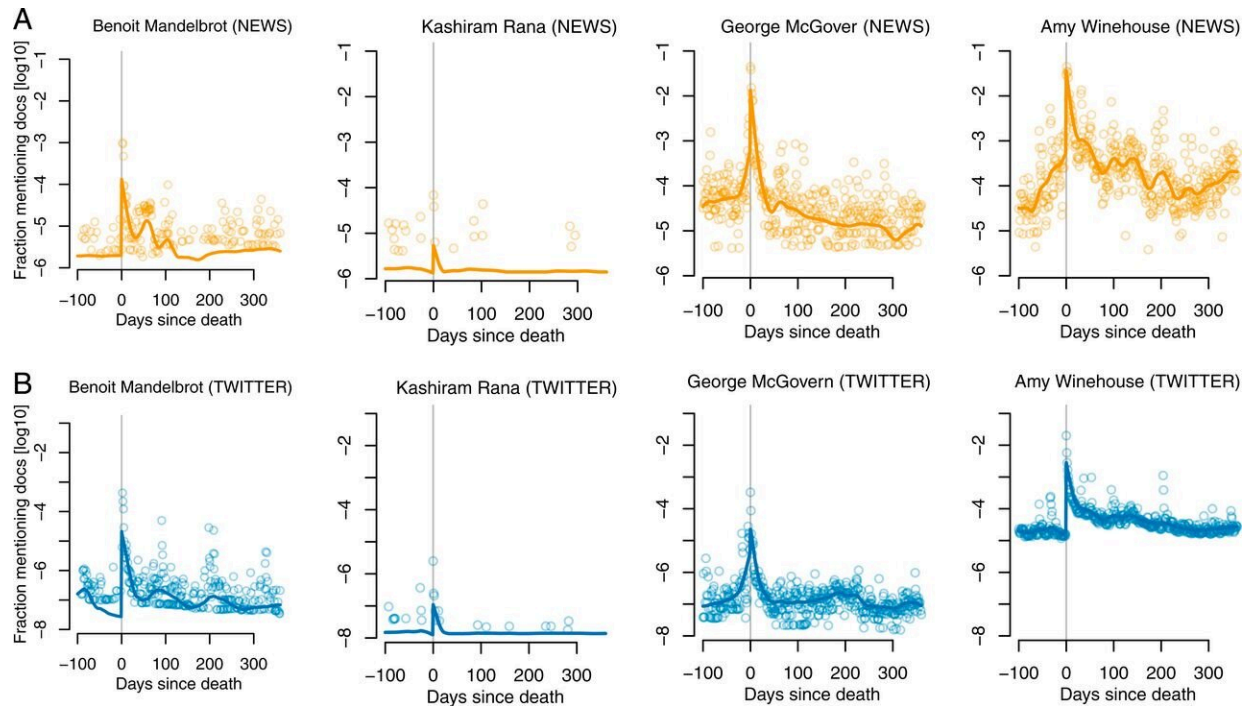


Study explores post-mortem fame

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Examples of mention time series for four deceased public figures, as observed (A) in the news and (B) on Twitter. In mention time series, the x axis specifies the number of days since death, and the y axis, the base-10 logarithm of the fraction of documents in which the person was mentioned that day, out of all documents published that day. Light circles correspond to raw mention time series, and dark curves, to their smoothed versions. Credit: DOI: [10.1073/pnas.2106152118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2106152118)

It's an age-old question—who lives on in a society's collective memory after they die? New EPFL research has tracked the mentions of

thousands of public figures in the year following their deaths, helping to reveal who is remembered, and who is not, after they are gone.

Cleopatra, Genghis Khan and Elvis are just a few historical figures that make up an elite group of people who live on in our history books and collective memory. But what of more recent public figures that perhaps weren't quite so famous? Who is remembered by society after they die?

By tracking mentions of more than 2,000 public figures who died between 2009 and 2014, and using algorithms to crunch the numbers, scientists from EPFL's Data Science Lab (dlab) in the School of Computer and Communication Sciences, with colleagues from Stanford University's Department of Computer Science and Department of Linguistics, have begun to answer this question.

The research, published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, analyzed the daily frequency with which they were mentioned in both the mainstream news and on Twitter during the year before and the year after [death](#). The study revealed four prototypical patterns of postmortem memory—a "blip," "silence," "rise," and "decline."

"The most frequent pattern relates to about half of all people. They're not much talked about before they die, when they pass away there is a small blip and then it goes back to the pre-mortem level. Another quarter of people show a pattern that is basically completely flat, they don't even get an obituary in most newspapers," says Head of the Data Science Lab, Assistant Professor Robert West, and the study's lead author.

"A further eighth spike when they pass away, then mentions settle at a level that is higher than when they were alive. The rest spike when they die, then drop to a level less than when they were alive. These people are often politicians or athletes, for example, who are no longer doing the things that got them into the news. So, you get a few people that are very

famous and most are not at all. There are a handful of superstars that are really remembered while most people are not," he continues.

So who are those whose fame rises after death? First, if you die young it's likely that you will get more short-term attention, and similarly if you die an unnatural death. But the study found that the largest average long-term attention boost was for artists as they create a legacy of cultural heritage that survives them.

"As an example, Whitney Houston and Hugo Chavez were included in the sample group and, on the day they died, both saw a spike in mentions as the world remembered them. In the year that followed it was a different story with Houston's "rise" lasting a year while Chavez slipped into the "decline" pattern," West explained.

He was also surprised at the consistency of mentions across mainstream news and [social media](#) and the finding that news seems to play an additional role to social networks. It both caters to public curiosity, for example reporting on the spectacular death of a young person, but also plays a role as a steward of collective memory when an old person or an accomplished leader dies after a life of achievement. The extent to which Twitter plays both roles is weaker.

Looking ahead, West and his team want to research the impact of the circumstances of death, and whether or how they influence if someone is remembered. He's also interested in the way in which people are remembered although this is much more difficult to measure.

On a more reflective note, the work has prompted West to think about our notions of fame and make the most of each day, "What this research says to me is that fame is a rare thing and it's probably not worth pursuing because even if you try very hard, and the people in this data set are probably among those that tried the hardest, it doesn't last. I am

appreciating 'living in the moment' because if even these people aren't remembered then I know I won't be."

More information: Robert West et al, Postmortem memory of public figures in news and social media, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2106152118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2106152118)

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