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Rest in Pixelated Peace Death and Mourning on Digital Platforms

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The relationship between death and technology is not recent. On the one hand, death involves what is fleeting and loss, whereas technology makes possible continuation and permanence.[1] In the analogue world, death is an essential part of human beings since it is a universal, biological fact in our cultural system. Sociocultural practices related to death and mourning can change because of historical events. Wars, natural disasters, pandemics, etc., have transformed to a greater or lesser extent the ways we say good-bye to the dead and deal with grief. In addition, technologies such as the printing press, video, photography, the Internet, and the different platforms have improved and diversified our capacity for commemorating them.

In recent years, interactive systems capable of adapting to individuals' experiences have been created, offering personalized alternatives for dealing with mourning and remembering the dead. Today, a person's digital life does not have to end with biological death, since technological advances —and especially artificial intelligence— have made "digital immortality" possible, understood as the preservation of a user's digital identity even after he/she has departed. This "digital immortality" can be planned or can

simply happen as the result of others' efforts to keep a user's memory alive.[2]

And this is the case because we live in a hyper-connected reality that challenges our ability to separate online activities and processes from those in the real world. We exist in both the analogue and the digital worlds, whose borders are increasingly blurry. Since we live between those two realities, it is only natural that experiences like mourning and death transform and adapt to digitality.

The Internet has grown disproportionately over the last decade. In that context, this dynamic space has become an immense digital cemetery that hosts social media profiles of people who have died, commemorative sites, and abandoned accounts, all contributing to a large amount of data and information floating in digital space. This is clear if we take into consideration the fact that the most utilized social media today (Facebook, YouTube, X, Instagram) were created an average of twenty years ago. As is natural, then, the youth and adults of that time who began to use them from the very beginning are now more mature. At the same time, the number of social media users over sixty has also increased.

Today, it would be impossible to imagine our daily lives without the intensive use of digital platforms for a multitude of purposes, which means the relationship with them has become dependent and complex. Our voyage

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through Internet leaves a deeper and deeper mark, particularly when we use social media, where a large part of our activities is documented, from simple moods and intimate moments with family and friends, to experiences and work-related content, all in a diversity of formats and styles. That is, we are faced with a personal info-diversity that grows, branches out, and expands online.

This platformization has had a series of implications for society's dynamics and has molded the way we work, communicate, and access information. The platformized society we live in makes possible greater interaction among people and at the same time re-dimensions many socio-cultural practices, among them those linked to death and mourning. The commemorations and links with people who have died have taken different routes thanks to digital technology. This was all boosted even more by the Covid-19 pandemic, which accelerated digital transformation in different fields: on the one hand, it fostered greater dependence on technological platforms by using them in practically all forms of communication and interaction with others. Videoconferences, social media, home delivery, and online education were some of the most heavily used activities. On the other hand, some of the more intimate aspects of our lives, such as grief, death, and our relationship to diseases, were also transferred to the digital space. There, we could see an important use of technological platforms both to document health-related processes, as well as to pray, hold wakes and masses, and even burials broadcast live. This became part of funeral services at the time but continues to be used today.

In a short time, social media, communications media, and user groups began to generate mechanisms for paying homage to people who died in the pandemic. The mourning mediated by this technology began to be one more option in the broad digital menu that the pandemic left us. To this are added different techno-spiritual practices that have emerged over recent years, in which we can also observe a growing technologization of sacred spaces around the world, responding to a series of religious and spiritual needs stemming from death and grief.

Social media have the characteristic of amplifying and making different kinds of content, practices, and manifestations visible. In the sphere of loss, social media allow a broader, more diverse public to present their condolences. What was traditionally done through locally or nationally circulated newspaper obituaries, churches,

or other common spaces, today happens on social media. If the person who died has a social profile, his/her account can turn into a memorial, whether through users sharing their memories in comments and other publications, or through options that the platforms themselves have designed specifically for that purpose. Today, the interactions among those profiles make up a part of our daily lives, and it is not strange that our favorite social network may post birthday reminders of someone who has died and is among our contacts.

In light of these changes in the dynamics of mourning and death mediated by technology, important initiatives, policies, and changes have emerged in the last couple of years regarding information about generating data and information about people who have died on social media. For example, in 2015, Facebook began allowing its users to choose a legacy contact to designate a relative or friend who has been trusted with caring for someone's Facebook page postmortem, giving that person attributions to manage its content. Memorialized accounts have the aim of offering relatives, friends, and acquaintances the possibility of sharing memories of the person who has died; according to Facebook stats, more than thirty million people look at and interact with these profiles every month.[3] Naturally, all of this has brought up concerns of different kinds; for example, legally speaking, some people have expressed trepidation about the protection of the deceased's personal data, identity theft, and issues linked to the inheritance of digital goods.

Social media like this also give you the option of creating virtual communities to pay homage to people, look at mourning practices and interests, commemorate the anniversaries of individuals' deaths, etc., whether it be of public figures, other people in smaller circles, or even by age group. In that sense, we should remember that virtual communities, digital spaces where users can meet to share opinions and experiences, have grown immensely in the last decade. They have different ends; however, we can see that they often tend to offer some kind of support (social, emotional, labor, among others), and share experiences and updates. This is especially important when people are going through mourning and carrying out the practices related to death since many users have found in these groups the unique possibility to share their memories and get emotional support that they otherwise would not have been able to get.

While issues related to mourning and death in digital spaces became more robust during the Covid-19 pandemic, academic interest in the different ways to commemorate the dead in the digital space began to grow in the 1990s. This means that the first virtual communities and websites of this kind date from that decade and have adapted little by little. The following are some examples:

- The Virtual Memorial Garden. This is a virtual cemetery created in 1995, whose design is reminiscent of a tombstone; its posts are mainly texts, but it also offers the possibility of uploading photographs and leaving virtual flowers.
- Respectance. This popular platform, designed in 2006, allows users to create a profile of the person they want to remember, similar to the one on Facebook; it also has a "wall" for posting messages and other multimedia items, and an option of being a follower and receiving updates.
- In 2020, *The Washington Post* designed a digital space where its readers remember those they lost from Covid-19 using preestablished icons and inscriptions. The site remains up as a digital memorial to those who were not able to say good-bye to their loved ones.
- The Compassionate Friends. Support networks for mourners who lost their loved ones before the digital world invaded our lives have also transferred their services to this sphere, creating virtual communities. This particular support group was founded in 1969 in the United Kingdom by two families whose children died around the same time in order to create an emotional network to provide consolation for those who lost children for any reason. In 1978, this initiative expanded to the United States, where it consolidated and grew, and it now offers "virtual chapters" that foster interaction among families who have suffered this kind of loss.[4]

Final Thoughts

Technology has made it possible to document a broad variety of formats for practically all human experiences, from birth to death. The Internet and concretely social media platforms have allowed people to interact and broaden out the content that we create.

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The ways we deal with death and grief have been transformed in the last decade, defying taboos, practices, and spaces traditionally kept private, introducing them into the collective sphere. Thousands of people die every day, and their digital remains make it possible to build a new narrative to memorialize them; even if they were not active on social media, their information can be transferred and memorialized.

Technology has made it possible to create virtual communities to maintain permanent links to the deceased, expand the grieving process, and foster the amalgamation of significant personal memories for long periods. Like in many other communities, these practices extend to the analogue sphere when people convene in-person events to memorialize the deceased. This means that the digital mourning community can branch out and become hybrid.

The possibilities offered by the platforms are giving rise to a new mixture of religious, spiritual, and informational needs whose scope has begun to be an area of interest for academia, making it a growing research field in different disciplines. Undoubtedly, interest in this topic will increase to the extent that more people *live online*. ◼M

Notes

1 S. Navon and C. Noy, "Conceptualizing Social Media Sub-platforms: The Case of Mourning and Memorialization Practices on Facebook," *New Media & Society*, vol. 25, no. 11, 2023, pp. 2898-2917, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211035769.
2 V. Ferreira Galvão, C. Maciel, V. Carvalho Pereira, A. C. Bicharra Garcia, R. Pereira, and J. Viterbo, "Posthumous Data at Stake: An Overview of Digital Immortality Issues," in ihc'21. Proceedings of the xx Brazilian Symposium on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Association for Computing Machinery, October 18, 2021, 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1145/3472301.3484358.
3 Facebook, "Updates to Memorialization," https://about.fb.com/news/2019/04/updates-to-memorialization/.
4 The Compassionate Friends, https://www.compassionate friends.org.