

#RIP: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CHANGING EXPERIENCE OF LIFE AND
DEATH

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The mediated closeness experienced by social media users is built on the ongoing accumulation of personal information by corporate owned social media platforms. Each user's digital footprint becomes more intricate as this collection continues across their life's procession, leaving something behind after they die. Social media platforms have become intimately insinuated into life and finally, into death. These haphazard archives were never created with death or grief in mind. But users die, and their friends and family use social media to grieve; death isn't something a platform or its users can avoid. This thesis examines the ways that death and grief are experienced and how social media is facilitating and changing that process. The study approaches social media and death historically, discursively, and economically. It discusses the history of mediated death, the experience of grief over social media, and the political economy of the socially mediated dead.

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Dedicated to the memory of Lucas Hunter Keye.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On November 11, 2016, millions of people all over the world were suddenly pronounced dead. Facebook, the world's biggest and most profitable social media platform, indicated their passing by adding a message to the tops of their profiles explaining they were now memorialized. "We hope people who love [the dead user] will find comfort in the things others share to remember and celebrate [their] life" (Quoted in McNeal, 2016). The language on their profiles suddenly became past-tense (e.g. job locations were preceded by "worked at"; "lives in" became "lived in"), and the word "remembering" was added before their name (McNeal, 2016). In an instant, these Facebook users were sequestered from the present, and locked in the past. Their profiles lay still, each a monument to something "that-had-been" (Barthes, 1980/2000).

The cataclysmic event was, of course, an error somewhere in the code that makes up the platform (Cellan-Jones, 2016). Those millions of users remained very much alive, and despite some anecdotal tales of frantic mothers and preliminary eulogizing (LaFrance, 2016), most people quickly recognized the situation to be an unfortunate software malfunction and not a fatal error in the bodily hardware of millions of people. "Dead" users shared screenshots of their memorialized profiles, flooding Facebook's largest competitor, Twitter, with the uncanny images and a plethora of attendant quips and hashtags (Peyser, 2016). One Twitter user's caption read, "so apparently this is a FB glitch but i think it describes how we all feel inside rn," likely referring to the recent election of Donald Trump (linhtropy, 2016).

The press had a field day, putting out headlines like “Facebook killed us all” (Murphy, 2016), and “The election was so bad Facebook thinks everyone is dead” (Weber, 2016). The story made its way from tech-blogs like “Gizmodo” (Peyser, 2016), to long-running traditional media like *The Atlantic Monthly*, where Adrienne LaFrance claimed, “Facebook goes full Nietzsche, Declares Users Dead” (2016). Facebook had rectified the glitch by the end of the day and, aside from the 8,000 or so users who probably did *actually* die (Elliot, 2015, p. 381), everyone was revived by the morning of November 12th, living again as if nothing had ever happened.

For a brief period today, a message meant for memorialized profiles was mistakenly posted to other accounts. This was a terrible error that we have now fixed. We are very sorry that this happened and we worked as quickly as possible to fix it. (Quoted in Anthony, 2016).

Coming less than a week after the 2016 election, and amidst the criticism levelled against Facebook for the spread of “fake news” on its platform (Rogers, 2016; Solon, 2016), the death scare was another black eye for the company. But it was hardly its first brush with death. Since its early years, Facebook has struggled to deal with its “death problem” (The Week, 2010). In fact, the “memorialization” of those users’ profiles, however premature, was a creation of policy and code that Facebook had implemented to mitigate the inherent problems that surround the inevitable deaths of its users. The option to memorialize was introduced in 2015 after years of complaints and lawsuits by the surviving loved ones of users who had died (Rogers, 2015; Schonfield, 2015). Its creation was part of an ongoing effort by a company that’s trying to accommodate something that doesn’t fit but won’t go away—death—into its business model. That business is a platform that was originally designed as a fun way to connect college

students (Facebook - About, n.d.) but would become a ubiquitous part of modern communications and relationships, and an engine of incredible profit (Facebook, 2017)

Social media technology has changed human life, and human communications in many ways. The mediated closeness that users experience through their online social networks is something new, as is the amount of personal information that is constantly being shared and collected. Users maintain a sort of always-on presence in each other's lives, no longer restricted by location or by time; communications are effectively instantaneous and smartphones and other devices allow users constant access at all times. The digital footprint of each user grows and becomes more complex every day, through their own actions as well as their automatically collected data. These social platforms have become increasingly insinuated into human lives and, finally, into human death.

Platforms like Facebook—haphazard archive and social surrogate that it is—were never made to deal with anything as intimate and painful as death and grief. Twitter, LinkedIn, and Snapchat, likewise, have struggled to address the deaths of users of their services (LinkedIn, n.d.; Snap Inc. 2017; Twitter, 2015, para. 2). The stated purpose of modern social media platforms is to connect people. The boilerplate mission statements of these platforms claim to, “give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook - About, n.d.), to “connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful” (LinkedIn: Overview, n.d.), or to “give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers” (Twitter | About, n.d.). As an industry, however, the purpose of these platforms is to create profit for the corporations and startups that own them by connecting people to brands, serving paid advertisements, and by aggregating and mobilizing user data that is

constantly being collected. But those users die, and their friends and family use the same platforms to grieve; death isn't something that social media companies or their users can avoid.

Journalists and other commentators have approached this new phenomenon steadily, since the complaints of grieving families brought it to light in 2009 (Fletcher, 2009; The Week, 2010). But the “symbolic immortality” (Sherlock, 2013) and funerary functions afforded by social media have only begun to garner critical focus in the academy in recent years. It's an area that is ripe for further interdisciplinary study. Humans, after all, will continue to die in the foreseeable future, the data collected by social media platforms will continue to become more personal and specific, and the rapid expansion of social media adoption across the world does not appear to be slowing anytime soon (Facebook, 2017; Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). If anything, death on social media will become more socially and technologically complex, and more impactful to living social media users.

The technologies that have made platforms like Facebook such compelling memorials are being repurposed by a nascent industry for which death is not an externality to be addressed, but the central focus of its business model. Straight out of classic science fiction (Phillip K. Dick's *Ubik* comes to mind), platforms like SafeBeyond and Eternime offer users AI-assisted archives of their personal content, to be mobilized after their deaths. Services like SafeBeyond (Sullivan, 2015; Zomorodi, 2017) are already allowing people to leave audio and video recordings behind, in an interface reminiscent of a social media platform like Facebook. The user of SafeBeyond adds content in the form of voice recordings, and dictates when, how and to whom their

content will be made available should they die (Sullivan, 2015; Zomorodi, 2017).

Eternime is a startup that claims its platform will offer much more: “virtual immortality” (Eternime, 2016). Though the technology behind the platform has yet to be revealed, its teaser website claims it “preserves your most important thoughts, stories and memories for eternity” (Eternime, 2016). The ethical ground around these technologies is murky, but the longing to bring back the dead remains as powerful as ever.

He now set down all the communications apparatus, rose stiffly from the chair and momentarily stood facing the misty, immobile, icebound shape of Joe Chip resting within its transparent plastic casket. Upright and silent, as it would be for the rest of eternity. (Dick, 1969, p. 189).

This uneasy junction of technology and mortality has proven fertile ground for modern science fiction narratives. When Dick wrote *Ubik*, the technology, that he imagined would reanimate dead consciousnesses, was distant and esoteric (1969). Today many social media users have experienced interactions with the remaining profiles of the dead (Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015). Products like Eternime make that kind of reanimating technology seem possible, even inevitable (Eugenios, 2015; Vinge, 1993). While academics and journalists will continue to examine and argue over these technologies, art, as always, is engaging with them in interesting and sometimes illuminating ways.

Recent science fiction such as, *Black Mirror* has taken Eternime’s concept into a near future that’s as dark as it is believable (Booker, 2011). Episodes like “Be Right Back” (Booker, 2013) and “San Junipero” (Booker, 2016) explore the implications of an AI-assisted simulacrum of a dead person; and of a human-made virtual afterlife, respectively. Modern radio drama *LifeAfter* explores the creepy possibilities that a social audio platform (similar to SafeBeyond) could create when hijacked by hackers (Dryden,

2016). The main character is nearly driven mad by the simulated voice of his dead wife, created from the hours of audio she had recorded and the personal data she had left behind when she died (Dryden, 2016).

The discomfort brought about by the “living image of a dead thing” (Barthes, 1980/2000, p. 78), hasn’t only inspired speculative work set in the near-future. Nonfiction media has no shortage of strange and compelling narratives that center on the phenomenon of socially mediated death. As I’ve worked on this project, colleagues and friends have regularly sent me links to newspaper and magazine articles, personal essays, tech-blog posts and yes, listicles on the subject. These stories can be affecting, shocking, hilarious (as in the case of Facebook’s mass execution of its users), and bittersweet. It’s clear that this topic that is being discussed across popular media in many ways.

Many of these articles feature straightforward reporting on the way death functions on a given social media platform, usually Facebook. Upon the creation of the “memorialized” profile in 2015, Zach Schonfield at Newsweek wrote, “Facebook finally figured out what to do with dead people” (2015). Kaleigh Rogers at Motherboard informed users they can now “update your status to ‘dead’” (2015). Others underline strange and problematic phenomena that have emerged due to the algorithmic processes that govern the platform and the actions of opportunistic grifters: “Why are dead people liking stuff on Facebook?” (Meisler, 2012); “Facebook friend requests from dead people hint at horrifying truth of 'profile cloning'” (Griffin, 2017).

“Think pieces” on the subject have also proliferated, aiming for a more philosophical approach to our relationship with the dead using social media. In *The Atlantic*, Paul Bisceglia argues that it’s a positive change that offers relief to grieving

people and pushes against the culture of privacy around death and dying (2013). A recent BBC editorial asks, “Is it healthy to talk to dead people on Facebook?” (2016), and mostly answers itself, “yes.” Adrienne Matei at Quartz looks to developing technologies (like Eternime) that use AI to simulate dead people, delving into the ethical quagmires that surround them (2017). In *the Guardian*, Rana Dasgupta snarkily scolds overzealous Instagram users, saying they’re only making their own obituary.

Despite all the work that social media users do to document themselves from one day to the next, what is recorded is not life. Rather it is death-in-life: it is “existence” from which life has already fled, leaving behind a digital husk. (Dasgupta, 2016, para. 7)

The most intimate of these articles are the personal essays, pieces of narrative nonfiction that detail the author’s experience of mediated grieving using social media; grasping at the digital remnants of their beloved dead (Bolick, 2010; Buntin, 2014; Nicolson, 2017). Julie Buntin’s wrenching piece, “She’s still dying on Facebook,” explores the permanence of a lost friend’s image, created through the platform (2014). For Buntin, “her death happens over and over online” (2014, para 1). “I can’t reconcile my memories with the fragments she left online, but those fragments are the only thing, concretely, that remains” (para. 18). Vanessa Nicolson’s recent piece, written 8 years after her daughter’s death, recounts how her grief made Vanessa “do something terrible on Facebook” (2017). Vanessa, while logged into her dead daughter’s account, had commented disapprovingly on a picture posted by her daughter’s ex-boyfriend showing he was in new relationship. Nicolson’s personal essay describes her process of apologizing to that man after many years had passed, and her own continued grieving on Facebook (Nicolson, 2017).

I offer these examples of the many ways that socially mediated death has been approached in popular media, to show the broad and varied interest that this topic has in our current historical and technological moment. Death is, paradoxically perhaps, the end result of life, and the societal processes around it are among the most culturally significant (Bazin, 1960; Cuomo, 2007; Kroeber, 1927). The presence of a dead user profile on social media may only be so much meaningless data, but the affective power of the remaining image can bring about deep emotional connections in living users. Inquiry into this strange new happening is important, because people are important to each other. And people increasingly relate to each other in the mediated space of these social platforms, living and sometimes also dead.

This thesis will engage with the modern phenomena of the deaths of social media users, the social and technological processes around those deaths, and the digital remnants left behind. Here, I am concerned with the experiences of average people, and not the often-performative online grieving that is done for celebrities or others who are notable beyond their family and peers (Proud, 2016). This study will approach this topic in 3 different, but connected, ways that will each draw on different bodies of literature from the humanities and social sciences. This document approaches social media and death historically, discursively, and economically. Its first chapter looks at mediated death in Western history, following the thread of technology and culture that lead to the current era of social media. It begins in Ancient Greece, finding an interesting predecessor in the personalized funeral steles of Greek technicians (Cuomo, 2007).

The second chapter discusses the nature of grief and mourning on social media, and the kind of relationships that mourners can maintain with the remaining online

presence of their loved ones. It employs textual analysis on the comments that have been posted on two Facebook profiles of dead users, delving into the unique communicative situation that occurs. It also compares the experience of viewing the social media profile of the dead to Roland Barthes discussion of looking at photographs of the dead in *Camera Lucida* (1980/2000).

In its third full chapter, this study considers the role of dead social media users in modern capitalist production, and the ways their data can continue to profit the platforms that have collected them. It uses Dallas Smythe's theory of the audience commodity in broadcast media (Smythe, 1981/2012) as a jumping off point to think of the way that modern social media platforms can profit off of their users, even after death. It will also use the autonomist Marxist concept of immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1997) as a way to theorize the continued work of dead social media users, long after they've exited the material world. One particular way that a dead person's remaining image is exploited involves the viral sharing of videos of the deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police. The chapter will close with a discussion of the inherent paradox of the use of these videos in activism.

The conclusion will briefly look to the future, discussing dead users as a way to imagine new configurations of personhood emerging from human engagement with technology. By using these different perspectives, this thesis will underline the many ways that death on social media affects memorial discourse, the political economy of communication, our understanding of history, and maybe of ourselves.

CHAPTER II

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MEDIATED DEAD

Social media platforms are only the most recent mediated spaces where images and remembrances of the dead have been sought out and shared (Sumiala & Hakola, 2013). The communicative dynamic between the living and the dead has played out differently across cultures, and across historical time periods (Gibbs, 2013). This process has happened alongside the development of art forms and technologies that have been used to represent the concept of death, and the dead themselves (Gibbs, 2013). Culture, art, and technology have been intertwined, influencing each other since a human first scratched a shape into the dirt. And since that time, media have impacted the human experience of death and dying.

Representations of death and those who have died have been created and received differently across time periods and cultures, but have remained culturally powerful items and forms of communication (Bazin, 1960; Cuomo, 2007; Kroeber, 1927). This chapter will attempt to place the current moment in context, as the most recent step in this long history of mediated death. It will consider technologies that have allowed for that representation and discuss their impact on cultural grieving and memorial practices, drawing examples from antiquity, medieval Europe, mass mediated America, and the growth of the worldwide web. As such, its concepts will bleed over into the following chapter on social media and grieving processes (p. 34), and the two chapters will refer to each other.

This chapter is concerned with the Western world starting in antiquity, but focused mostly on industrial modernity and the eras that followed, however

conceptualized (Berman,1982; Lyotard, 1984), leading up to our current moment. While hardly exhaustive, this work reaches back in time, seeking threads that connect experiences and communicative practices around death to the modern phenomenon of death as mediated by social media platforms. This is done in the hope that the experience of death and grief over social media can be better understood in comparison to some of the technologies that preceded it: web “1.0,” 20th century mass media, photography, and earlier representations in medieval and ancient Europe.

In medieval Europe most media were religious, and many paintings depicted the dead as characters occupying the same plane as the living (Geary 1994). During this period, the boundaries between the living and the dead were less rigid in the public imagination (Geary, 1994; Gilbert, 2011; Hallam, 1999). As the West entered the Victorian era, death and grief became a much more private matter (Bennet & Huberman, 2015; Walter, 2015). Industrialization drove urbanization, which broke up close-knit communities (Bennet & Huberman, 2015; Walter, 2015). Families became spread out, distant from one another. The experience of grief became something much more solitary, the grieving person surrounded by others who didn’t know the deceased, particularly in their working lives (Walter, 2015). In many ways, this private grieving has endured into the information age, as families and communities have spread further apart (Gibbs 2013).

The invention of photography allowed for the capture of subjects, alive and dead, in time, and for their image to be saved in relative perpetuity (Barthes, 1980/2000; Bazin, 1960; Benjamin, 1969/2012). This had a tremendous impact on culture and on the technologies that followed. In 19th century England, the dead were photographed just after they had died, leaving behind indelible (but morbid) images of loved one for their

family (Kearl, 1989; Sontag, 1990). As hundreds of thousands died in the American Civil War, images of the dead were captured by photographer William Brady, showing images of death and destruction in his New York gallery (Faust, 2008). For the first time, a war was “brought home” and images of death were readily on view.

Photography blurred the boundary between life and death. Photographic technology could capture an image of a living person, that could appear alive long after death (Barthes, 2000/1980; Sherlock, 2013). Barthes’ discussed the medium’s paradoxical relationship between the “dead” instance that is represented and the “living” photograph. The section on photographic technology, will engage with Barthes’ work on images of death, along with others whose work has approached the phenomenon of the photographs of the dead (Barthes, 2010; Cole, 2016; Sontag, 1990 Yacavone, 2012).

Radio and (later) television were the first place that many would hear of deaths deemed “newsworthy,” and a space where the sounds and images of dead celebrities could be found (Kearl, 1989). The parasocial connection that many shared with television personalities and characters has been compared to the way that social media users experience their interactions with the dead (Klastrup, 2015). However, newspaper obituaries remained the only mediated artifact of most average people’s dead loved ones (Hume, 2000). These obituaries also served as the only space of remembrance outside of the gravesite and funerary services, and a place that grieving family members could choose how to portray their dead loved one (Hume, 2000). Obituaries were also the template for the kind of online memorial websites that emerged in the 1990s with the advent of the worldwide web (Sofka, 1997).

Prior to social media, and the kind of automatic memorial artifacts left behind by users, there were earlier uses of digital technology to memorialize the dead (Sofka, 1997). These websites began in the 1990s, created by html-savvy grievors for their loved ones, and for celebrities (Sofka, 1997). An industry grew up around this practice, and tech startups began creating platforms that allowed for the easy uploading of images, and the creation of unique memorial websites (Graham, Arnold, Kohn, & Gibbs, 2015). While many of these platforms still exist, the business model has lost much of its viability to social media platforms and many of these sites have folded, leaving digital memorials unmanaged or gone altogether (Bollmer, 2013; Legacy Multimedia, 2012, comments, iMorial, 2011). The discussion of these pages as mediated stand-ins for graves or memorials (Graham, Arnold, Kohn, & Gibbs, 2015) naturally leads into the following chapter on social media and grieving.

Late Ancient Greece

The way the living think of the dead is impacted by the way those dead are represented through art and technology. Funerary arts, meant to memorialize the dead, are some of the oldest examples of human media (Bazin, 1960; Cuomo, 2007; Kroeber, 1927). Across cultures, some of the most powerful and lasting objects of art are created to commemorate a death, help the dead in the afterlife, protect the living from the dead, or mitigate death in some other way. There are countless examples of the major role that death has played in human media, across time and place. Film theorist Andre Bazin contended that the initial function of human artistry was, “the preservation of life by a representation of life” (1960, p. 5). In one of his last essays, he discusses this “primordial

function” of art: “If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation. The process might reveal that at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex.” (1960, p. 6).

Like the Egypt Bazin hints at, and many other civilizations before it, the Ancient Greeks left behind artifacts with an incredible complexity despite being thousands of years old. A great deal of funerary art remains among the statuary and buildings normally associated with the era (Cuomo, 2007). Serafina Cuomo found a large amount of surviving art devoted to the remembrance of individual artisans and technicians in Greek antiquity, not only to leaders or gods (2007). These were respected citizens who worked in specialized fields, certainly not every lowly Greek worker, but they were not people of great power or otherwise of historical import (Cuomo, 2007). These “low technicians” weren’t mentioned in surviving Greek texts, but Cuomo found that material remains such as, “funerary monuments, tombstones, urns, sarcophagi,” could yield a great deal of information about these citizens (2007, p. 78).

Greek society was highly sophisticated in its later period, the 1st and 2nd century CE, and technicians were part of a “middle class” of free citizens who paid for their own funerary arrangements and wanted control over their representation after death (Cuomo, 2007, pp. 80-81). Cuomo’s work shows that these citizens’ modest monuments were quite personal, representing the dead in scenes they chose for themselves (2007, p. 81). She notes a “high significance of funerary self-representation for members of the lower orders and for upwardly mobile elements of society,” adding “those groups were also more likely personally to ensure that they would be remembered by posterity, rather than

leaving it to family, associates, or the state itself, as was primarily the case, for instance, for senators” (2007, pp. 81-82). And unlike senators’ memorials, these private citizens’ remains were interred in “enclosure tombs” which were only accessible to relatives or work colleagues” (Cuomo, 2007, p. 80). The funerary steles of these free citizens often used symbolism from their life’s profession (the carpenter’s square, for example) and depicted the dead in scenes from their everyday working lives. Cuomo contends that, “work scenes or tools were often the direct expression of the technician’s self image” (2007, p.82).

These individualized representations, the product of a proto-bourgeois class that sought self-expression and control over their own remembrance, bear an interesting similarity to the modern social media profile. Social media user profiles aren’t intended as grave markers, of course, but they are places where users put forward a version of themselves through all their different activities (Graham, Arnold, Kohn, & Gibbs, 2015). That version is what remains, to be visited by family and friends like the enclosed tombs of the Greeks in late antiquity. This kind of self-personalized remainder wouldn’t be common again for millennia. Representations of death and the dead would, however, continue to play a major role in European culture following the decline of the Greco-Roman civilizations (Binski, 1996; Geary, 1994; Gilbert, 2011).

Medieval Europe

Death was always nearby in medieval Europe. Life for most was one of toil under feudal rule with little access to health care (Gilbert, 2011). Famine and plague decimated populations, and images of death featured prominently in the art of the late middle ages

(Binski, 1996). The Church (in its different iterations) exerted control over society and nearly all media was religious, featuring themes of death and sin (Binski, 1996, Hallam, Hockey, & Howarth, 1999). In medieval painting and literature, death was lurking in the dark of night or the deeper reaches of the forest, waiting to pollute the living (Gilbert, 2011). Art often depicted dead characters occupying the same plane as the living, and there is evidence that this conception death (as co-existing with life) was held in the popular imagination as well (Geary 1994; Gilbert, 2011; Hallam, et al., 1999).

The boundaries between the living and the dead were less rigid. In effect, the dead existed alongside the living. But unlike the Greek technicians, or today's dead social media users, medieval dead had little control over how they were to be represented. They were mostly represented as dangerous, twisted creatures who sought to harm the living (Pratt, 1996). In medieval art and literature, Gilbert finds that "There are ghosts and revenants who, although dead, actively speak and will, disturbing the properly living" (2011, p. 1). These dead, when named, are not extensions of their living selves, but changed by the pollution of death (Hallam, et al., 1999). In many stories, however, the dead weren't named or individualized; they had simply become nondescript ghouls, haunting the fearful living (Geary, 1994, Gilbert, 1996).

The dead were even included in the economies of many medieval communities, considered partners to exchange commodities with, much like living trading partners (Geary, 1994). There are many examples of this, such as a 9th century Germanic property owner's written instruction that in trade dealings, "the living, the dead, and the future dead" must be prayed to as stakeholders in the deal (Geary, 1994. p. 80). This

speaks to the closeness of dead to the living in that era: “The living should be seen as those who are going to die; the dead as those who will live again” (Geary, 1994, p. 80).

The representations of the dead in the art of medieval Europe presented them as ghastly, foreboding creatures (Gilbert, 2011). A recurring motif depicted in church paintings across late Medieval England and France was the “Three Living and Three Dead” (Geary, 1994, Gilbert, 1996; Hallam, et al., 1999). It came from a 13th century narrative poem, filled with descriptions of the titular dead three as “rotten and worm-eaten,” and “ugly and strange” (Binski, 1996, p. 136). The tale was something of a fable, a warning to the other 3, young (living) aristocrats, that they would someday be polluted by death no matter how high their station (Binski, 1996). One of the foul dead calls to the living, “Until now you were so pure and perfect/However you’ll rot before the end” (in Binski, 1996, p. 136). This macabre story and imagery served to “collapse the social hierarchy” (Hallam, et al., 1999, p. 19), pointing out that all would meet the same end regardless of their status in life.

Church artists reveled in garish depictions of the three, presenting them in various stages of decomposition and with worms slithering out of their eye sockets (Binski, 1996; Hallam, et al., 1999). This kind of macabre imagery became increasingly prevalent, especially after the Black Plague decimated 30-60 percent of the population of Western Europe in the 14th century (Platt, 1996). Death *itself*, personified, became a popular subject of religious and secular artworks, represented by a skeleton or decayed corpse (Platt, 1996).

The development of macabre imagery brought representations of the dead further into view within medieval visual culture, particularly after the Black Death. Between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries death itself was personified in the form of a cadaver. Death was rendered as active

and triumphant, circulating at every level of society to change it. (Hallam, et al., 1999, p. 18).

Hallam et al. suggest that all these representations of death “effectively preserved the social presence of the dead” in medieval society (Hallam, et al., 1999, p. 34). This dynamic would change along with upheavals in art, technology and philosophy that ushered in modernity. Medieval people lived in different configurations of serfdom, living collectively in villages, recognizing the power of the church and monarchy as ontological facts and death as a mystical process (Binski, 1996; Walter, 2015). “The tolling church bell announced that the village as well as the family had lost a member” (Walter, 2015, p. 11); death and grief was experienced communally. The dead would soon lose their place among the living, as western civilization became more secular and individualized, and mercantile—then industrial—capitalism took hold (Bennet & Huberman, 2015; Gibbs, 2013; Walter, 2015).

Death in Victorian Society

Unlike the lively dead of the late medieval period, in 19th century Victorian England, “the dominant trope for representing and talking about the dead was one of solemn rest and peaceful sleep” (Gibbs, 2013, para. 5). The industrial revolution and the needs of industrial capitalism had broken down the medieval village, making workers out of serfs who took their labor power into growing cities to toil in factories (Marx, 1971). At the same time the Enlightenment’s influence had moved Western Europe and the United States toward a scientism that opposed the mysticism of earlier eras as “superstition” (Kellehear, 2007).

As the West entered this Victorian era, death came to be regarded as a private matter. Private citizens, living far from their extended families or any shared memory of a dead loved one, had little context for being openly distraught (Walter, 2015). Bells tolled all day in London or New York City, after all, and none were universally significant. Death became “sequestered” from society; dying increasingly took place in medical facilities behind closed doors, and grieving people went on through their working lives, surrounded by people who had never known their dead loved one. (Bennet & Huberman, 2015; Walter, 2015).

Thus the main mourners are no longer co-resident, and may spend much of each day in the company of people who never knew the deceased. This means that grief becomes a private experience; the more dispersed the chief mourners and the more fragmented their social networks, the more private grief becomes. Some of those encountered in a typical day may “support” the mourner, but they do not share his or her grief because they did not know the deceased. (Walter, 2015, p. 12).

In many ways, this sequestration of death and dying has continued into recent history (Gibbs 2013). Families and communities are only living further apart, and mourning and grief have become something to be managed by therapists in private (Walter, 2015). Death is mostly experienced in wealthy nations as the final chapter of life for the elderly (Kochanek, Xu, Murphy, Minino, & Kung, 2011; Walter, 2015). Euphemisms like “end of life” have replaced death, and funerals have become “celebrations of life.”

During the 19th century, Victorian era, technologies developed that would change the way people experienced death and have a lasting impact into the current moment:

Photography

Susan Sontag claimed that, “All photographs are *memento mori*” (1977/1990, p. 15). For Sontag, “To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt” (1977, p. 15). Roland Barthes saw the capturing of photographic images as being tied with death, and somehow imbued with the power to break through the sequestration of death and grief from modern society:

For Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. (Barthes, 2000/1980, p. 92).

During the Victorian era, a new technology was emerging that would change the experience of life and death (Bazin, 1960; Sherlock, 2013). Over the course of the 19th century, photographic technology would advance tremendously. The ability to capture light and fix it in place using a chemical process changed the world. While *camera obscura* and earlier optical technology had allowed for a concurrent reproduction of space, it wouldn’t be until the 1820s that Nicéphore Niépce would create a process to reliably fix those images to a medium (Bazin, 1960). For the first time in human history, a moment could be taken out of time. Bazin claimed the photograph “embalms time,” adding, “now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were” (Bazin, 1960, p. 8).

As this technology was refined, taking less time to fix an image and requiring cheaper and less volatile chemicals and photographic media, a peculiar practice became

common among the Victorian Middle class: having their loved ones photographed after death (Hallam, et al., 1999). These portraits were taken soon after death, before any decomposition had occurred. It was a perfect time for a portrait, since the unmoving dead couldn't blur a several-minutes-long exposure by twitching or adjusting their stance. Given the high-contrast, monochrome nature of the prints of that time, the subjects don't appear dead, but in a peaceful slumber (Hallam, et al., 1999). Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth note, "there was a tendency to present the deceased in a lifelike manner so that the dead appeared, for instance, as though in sleep" (1999, p. 35). They go on to describe the social role this kind of photography played in families:

Photographic images were used to record the end of life but also to overcome this end in that they provided the dead with a visible presence within domestic spaces. The physical features of particular family members were preserved, thereby providing a means by which a person was held within view and incorporated into the continuing life histories of relatives. Post-mortem photography therefore operated as a representation which provided a basis for the narrative reconstruction of the deceased's life" (Hallam, et al., 1999, p. 35).

These personal photos allowed for the kind of private ritualization of death, sequestered within the family home, that fit the social changes of the Victorian era (Hallam, et al.; 1999). But one event in the United States would put gruesome images of death back in the public eye. The American Civil War was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands (Faust, 2008). The North wasn't nearly as decimated as the South, but photography allowed them to see the death and destruction of the war. (Faust, 2008; Sontag, 1990). Newspapers could not yet print photographs, and they featured elaborate drawings of battles instead. Photographer William Brady's images were copied by illustrators for these newspaper features, but he began to show the photos themselves in a gallery in New York City, bringing gruesome images of death into the public sphere

(Faust, 2008; Sontag, 1977/1990). One unknown *New York Times* writer described the images effect in vivid detail:

The living that throng Broadway care little perhaps for the Dead at Antietam, but we fancy they would jostle less carelessly down the great thoroughfare, saunter less at their ease, were a few dripping bodies, fresh from the field, laid along the pavement. There would be a gathering up of skirts and a careful picking of way; conversation would be less lively, and the general air of pedestrians more subdued. As it is, the dead of the battle-field come up to us very rarely, even in dreams. We see the list in the morning paper at breakfast, but dismiss its recollection with the coffee. There is a confused mass of names, but they are all strangers; we forget the horrible significance that dwells amid the jumble of type. The roll we read is being called over in Eternity, and pale, trembling lips are answering to it. Shadowy fingers point from the page to a field where even imagination is loath to follow. Each of these little names that the printer struck off so lightly last night, whistling over his work, and that we speak with a clip of the tongue, represents a bleeding, mangled corpse. It is a thunderbolt that will crash into some brain -- a dull, dead, remorseless weight that will fall upon some heart, straining it to breaking. There is nothing very terrible to us, however, in in the list, though our sensations might be different if the newspaper carrier left the names on the battle-field and the bodies at our doors instead. (Unknown, *New York Times*, 1862).

Photography and motion pictures have complicated the rigid duality of living and dead. Barthes' discussion of the uncanny in photography captures the medium's paradoxical relationship between the "dead" moment and the persistence of the living image. Barthes found this most pronounced in photographs of the dead, "If the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak that the corpse is alive, as corpse: it is the living image of the dead thing [. . .]. By attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive" (Barthes, 2000/1980, pp.78-79). It's that vitality that suggests a similar uncanny effect that the experience of seeing the dead on modern social media creates in the living. In this way, social media are experienced more like photography and cinema than any media that

preceded them. Barthes theory of photography and his own experience, viewing images of his mother in his grief over her death, will be discussed further in chapter 2.

“Photography is inescapably a memorial art. It selects, out of the flow of time, a moment to be preserved, with the moments before and after falling away like sheer cliffs” (Cole, 2016, p. 197).

Newspaper Obituary as a Memorial Form

The 19th century also saw the expansion of newspapers across the United States and Europe (Fowler, 2007). Innovations like the circular press made it much easier to print more pages in much less time (Hume, 2000). As daily newspapers began to circulate, they started to include what were known as death notices. These one or two sentence mentions dryly informed readers of deaths, but provided no details about the lives the deceased led before they met their ends (Fowler, 2007; Hume, 2000).

Newspapers might feature fleshed-out obituaries of notable people like politicians and performers, but there was no room for the remembrances of average citizens (Fowler, 2007).

In the tail end of the 19th century, sometime after the linotype machine’s invention in the 1880s, many newspapers began to include more pages and sections (Hume, 2000). With this added room, space for the remembrance of people who had passed away could be sold to grieving families (Fowler, 2007). Those families could choose what kind of written memorial they wanted to create for their dead loved one (Hume, 2000). Like the photos of the dead, obituaries gave families a lasting representation of their dead loved ones that they could keep at home. The obituaries could also be shared—clipped and sent

to distant relations through the mail, perhaps—something that could not be done with a precious, one of a kind tintype photograph.

Janice Hume's study of 8000 American newspaper obituaries dating back to 1818 shows "the newspaper obituary has a commemorative role. It distills the essence of a citizen's life, and it reflects what society values and wants to remember about the deceased" (2000, p. 7). She found the format to be largely unchanged but the obituaries, in an effort to paint the dead in the best light, spoke volumes about the values of the time they were written (Hume, 2000). "In the nineteenth century, for example, obituaries promoted character traits such as courage or honesty, and in the twentieth work ethic was the dominant value" (Hume, 2000, p. 153).

Nigel Starck (2006) and Barbara Fowler (2007) both approached the form of obituary in their respective books on the subject. Fowler parses obituary as a literary form, discussing its emergence and its societal role in creating "collective memory" (2007). She also notes its role in lifting up bourgeois dead (whose families could afford obits), further contributing to societal inequality (2007, p. 8). Starck is more concerned with the conventions of a proper obituary, and his somewhat tongue-in-cheek analysis is peppered with examples of bad or jarring obits. He provides a practical template for newspaper editors to write obituaries, and urges those editors to fit the family's wishes into the template as much as possible (Starck, 2006. p. 218).

Starck and Fowler both describe obituary as a form, one with conventions that haven't changed much over the past century. The newspaper obituary would remain the only mediated memorial for average citizens until the emergence of memorial websites in the 1990s. This obituary form created the template that was used by later online

memorials (Sofka, 1997). Even though these online memorial sites (as well as social media) have created more interactively deep memorial spaces online, many families still prefer to put an obituary in their local newspaper.

As a side note, I might add that the literature on obituary is surprisingly slim. There are many books on the subject, but most do little more than collect interesting or shocking obituaries from history. Aside from Fowler, Hume, and Starck's work (all more than a decade old), there is practically no study of obituary history or obituary as a form. This is an area that is ripe for further research.

Death in 20th Century Mass Media

Radio and Television

Radio and (later) television were the first place that many would hear of deaths deemed “newsworthy,” and broadcast media became a space where the sounds and images of dead celebrities could be found. But most average citizens' deaths wouldn't make it to these media unless there was something notable about the way they had died. In 1989, sociologist Michael Kearl went so far as to say:

Apart from rare firsthand experiences with mortality, the death lessons of modern individuals are primarily received from television, cinema, newspapers, and the arts. No longer directly exposed to natural death (of both humans and, increasingly, large animals), people generally learn only of atypical deaths, as only they qualify as being either newsworthy or entertaining (Kearl, 1989, p. 379)

The parasocial connection, the viewer's perception that they have a relationship with an entertainer or character's mediated image, has been clearly noted by mass communications research (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Giles, 2002). Social media has

extended the focus on celebrity deaths beyond broadcast media. The countless memorial proclamations made by users after one of these deaths clearly shows a continuity in this kind of fan behavior (Phillips, 2011). But social media platforms have also allowed for the deaths of everyday people to be similarly memorialized. The parasocial connection that many shared with television personalities and characters has been compared to the way that social media users experience their interactions with the dead through these platforms (Klastrup, 2015).

Online Memorial and “The Worldwide Cemetery”

The online memorial website is the most direct precursor to the social media profile that remains after a user has died. Of course, social media profiles of the dead are an unintentional consequence of platforms made for the living. Memorial websites, on the other hand, are purpose-built for the remembrance of someone who has died and, in that way, are akin to the newspaper obituary. Whether custom built by a web designer, or generated using templates from one of many services (Graham, et al., 2015; Legacy Multimedia, n.d.; Sofka, 1997), these sites are meant to be a central place for surviving friends and loved ones to grieve and remember a person who has died. Today, social media profiles often become a similar place for this activity, so a discussion of this earlier online memorial form is enlightening.

Before the collected user data of social media allowed for the accidental memorials that remain on those platforms after death, early user-generated websites began to memorialize people who had passed away (Sofka, 1997). The so-called “digital revolution,” and the visual network of the worldwide web that exploded in the early

1990s, allowed internet users with a little HTML knowledge to memorialize celebrities and loved ones (Sofka, 1997). Eventually an industry grew out of these websites, offering simple tools for grieving loved ones to create digital remembrances online (Graham, Arnold, Kohn, & Gibbs, 2015). Today, much of the traffic of this sort goes to social media profiles, and the online memorial industry, though still active, has greatly diminished (Stride, n.d.; Walter 2015).

The 1990s was a time of turbulent change to the communication structure of the western world, and memorial and grieving practices were greatly affected by these changes. The digital revolution that made *everyone* a publisher (Shirky, 2008) also made everyone an obituary writer, should they choose to be. Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), consumer browser software like Netscape Navigator, and the proliferation of dial-up Internet Service Providers allowed a new mass mediated space to be built on the networking structures and protocols that had powered the early internet (Naughton, 2001). This visual, point-and-click medium, the World Wide Web, was an easily traversable network of static pages, interconnected by html hyperlinks but not yet indexed by search engines (Naughton, 2001). HTML was a relatively easy language to learn, and the mid-1990s saw an explosion of personal websites uploaded to spaces on local or national ISPs, and on hosting sites like GeoCities and Teleport.

These early homepages, heir to the diary and precursor to the blog, were places for (mostly) young people, privileged enough to be online and savvy enough to learn html, to create personal pages about themselves and the things they were interested in. When celebrities passed away, web pages devoted to them would spring up. These pages would also start to be made for lost friends and family, using the same personal hosting

sites (Sofka, 1997). The web advanced rapidly and automated editors began to be offered by ISPs and hosting platforms, allowing people without HTML skills to create their own pages by 1996 (Global Village, n.d.). Rudimentary networks of like pages formed around topics, creating “web rings,” and eventually Web Ring indexing software made navigating the rings more accessible (Mieszkowski, 2001). One of those web rings, “The Ring of Death,” connected and indexed memorial sites, making it easier to find specific memorials (Weil & Gazis-Sax, 1996). Early search engines and other services began to index the web as well (Wall, 2016), allowing internet users to seek out websites of interest. These DIY online memorials began to be sought out when someone passed away. Most people were looking for sites that memorialized famous people, or people who had died in notable or gruesome manners (Sofka, 1997), similar to television content. But memorials to average citizens were steadily being created and sought out by people who knew them, as the number of people online grew rapidly during the 2nd half of the 1990s (Global Village, n.d.).

Inevitably, for-profit digital memorial services offering a suite of options and easy to use design tools emerged. These pages were often much cheaper than newspaper obituaries (Sofka, 1997) and easier to share with anyone using email, already at 70 Million worldwide by 1997 (Global Village, n.d.). They allowed people to upload photos of their loved ones, anecdotes, and remembrances that wouldn’t fit in a newspaper obit (Sofka, 1997). “Guestbook” features, followed by more robust commenting widgets allowed for internet users to leave their own remembrances, to find a sense of community in grief, and to communicate blessings to the dead (Graham et al. 2015). These features are something of a precursor to the communicative behavior allowed by social media.

Studies of memorial website users have found a similar blurring of the boundary between the living and the dead on these websites (Graham et al. 2015). The first major memorial site to offer such a suite of features—so, the first one might call a *platform*—was “The Worldwide Cemetery,” which still exists and will be discussed further below (Worldwide Cemetery Inc., n.d.)

In her 1997 study of memorial resources on the early web, Carla Sofka discussed these memorial websites alongside chat rooms for grieving people, sites that collected information on burial locations, and other examples of what she termed, “thanatechnology.” Sofka described early memorial sites like “The Place to Honor Grief” that allowed users to post personal narratives to memorialize their deceased loved ones. She noted the site “incorporates aspects of memorialization and ritual” (Sofka, 1997, p. 559), though it did not have many of the communicative features that later memorial sites (and social media) allow. The users of the site could share remembrances of their dead loved ones and discuss their personal grieving processes, but there was no way for readers to offer comments or consolations, or participate in any ongoing communicative processes. “The Place to Honor Grief” no longer takes new submissions, but it has archived all those made between its founding in 1996 and 2002, when the site stopped taking submissions (Golden, 2015). The site also includes a list of links to many users’ personal memorial webpages, made for their dead loved ones (Golden, 2015). Nearly all the links lead to a dead end, however. Most were on public hosting platforms like Yahoo and AOL that had cleared these old user pages long ago.

A more durable online location for memorial can be found at the World Wide Cemetery, which has held onto the domain name cemetery.org for more than 20 years.

Sofka found the World Wide cemetery to offer a very thorough, and fairly affordable service in 1997:

The World Wide Cemetery is one of the most impressive sites for memorialization of a loved one. Individuals can erect a permanent monument to a loved one for a nominal fee (less than \$10 at the time of publication). These memorials can include images (photos, artwork) and sound, giving visitors an opportunity to see and potentially hear things that provide a connection to the life of the deceased. The element of ritual is incorporated by allowing visitors to leave flowers at a particular grave site or for all individuals in the cemetery (Sofka, 1997, p. 559).

The original 1995 site tried to approximate the spatial characteristics of a physical cemetery, complete with a (cartoon) gated entrance page and cemetery “plots” (World Wide Cemetery Inc. n.d.a.). As of May 2017, the World Wide Cemetery still exists, all its memorial plots intact and waiting for digital flowers to be lain across them. Those flowers today are \$9, and give the user the opportunity to leave an image of a flower or a written remembrance; the price for a plot has gone up to \$100 (World Wide Cemetery, n.d.). That higher price comes with a 100-year guarantee on your loved one’s memorial space (World Wide Cemetery, n.d.). A portion of the fees are put into a fund that will maintain the site and hosting for those 100 years (World Wide Cemetery, n.d.), something of real value given the short-term nature of much web hosting.

The World Wide Cemetery has endured, and its curators have put some thought into ensuring its future. Memorial and obituary sites often fold, however, sometimes shutting down their hosting services and thus deleting their memorials from the web (Legacy Multimedia, 2012, comments; iMorial, n.d.). Discussion boards about memorial platforms are filled with heartbreaking personal account like this one:

Do you know anything about Memory-of.com? I have had my baby boy’s memorial site on their for 4 years now and it hasn’t been accessible this week. Says some server message when you try to access the site. I am nervous because it

has been this long. Could they have shut it down and my memorial to my son that has collected candles for years is all gone? (Legacy Multimedia, 2012, comments).

Other sites exist in a kind of limbo, still hosting their memorials but not appearing to add new ones. One example is iMorial.com. The site's marketing, press releases and social media presence seem to have ended in November of 2011 (iMorial, n.d.; iMorial [Twitter], 2011; iMorial [Facebook], 2011). The site still appears to accept new users, but it has not added new entries since this time either. Its memorial pages are intact however, if not a hosting priority; the site is intermittently "down" and memorial pages load slowly. Several ads also load on these pages. The ads are for end-of-life services like will-preparation, life insurance, networks of funeral service providers, and other businesses whose profits rely on the societal processes around death and dying. The boxes on the page where the algorithmically served ads populate appear are notably more modern than the rest of the site. It's clear that the site is still profitable as real estate for ads, and not much else.

This doesn't bode well for the surviving loved ones of people whose memorials are hosted on iMorial. The advertising value of the existing memorial content will likely decline if new entries aren't being added (Sherlock, 2013). iMorial's user agreement offers only this guarantee: "As long as iMorial exists so will your memorials" (iMorial, n.d., para 12). It's worth pointing out that today's social networks also don't offer any guarantee that a user's data will be held for any length of time. Facebook, for example, withholds the rights to user data but has no provision for it's archiving (2015). If, at some future time, Facebook's hosting costs outweigh their profits, the company has every legal right to stop hosting user profiles.

With an examination of the development of memorial websites, the stage is set for the revolution of social media and its impact on the experience of death and grief. The following chapter will discuss some of the specific communicative practices that occur between the living and the dead, as mediated by social media.

CHAPTER III

GRIEVING IN THE AGE OF FACEBOOK

The specter of death haunts every human life, as its inevitable end. As the previous chapter underlined, the rituals and practices around death and those who have died remain powerful and important, across cultures and (Walter, 2015). This chapter focuses on grieving and memorial practices, and on the ways the living and the dead communicate using social media. It discusses social media profiles as locations of remembrance akin to memorial sites or graves, and the communities of mourning that can emerge around them. The chapter also examines the communicative practices of social media users when they are addressing those who have died, and discusses the way that the living experience dead users' profiles. To these ends, this chapter will engage with relevant literature and a textual analysis of the comments posted on the Facebook profiles of two deceased users. It will also use Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* as a way to think of the jarring experience of viewing and interacting with a dead user's "living" social media profile.

Heart Emoji, Sad Emoji: Profiles of the Dead as Sites of Collective Mourning

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the past two centuries have been characterized by a public stoicism around death and grieving, following the dispersal of community brought on by the Industrial Revolution (Bennet & Huberman, 2015; Walter, 2015). Social media have changed this, allowing for an instant community of mourning when a user dies (Bennet & Huberman, 2015; Sherlock, 2012; Walter, 2015). Death has become something more present and tangible, and less of an abstract concept, particularly to

young people. “[N]ew social media publicise the deaths of friends of friends, bringing mortality just that bit closer to home” (Walter, 2015, p. 15). This phenomenon, that Tony Walter calls “de-sequestration,” breaks down the barriers between young people and death and brings the reminders of dead friends and acquaintances into the media they regularly engage with. These mediated *memento mori* collapse the Victorian imperative of privacy, and evince a move toward a more public relationship with death. In their survey comparing the language of gravesites to that of online memorials, Graham, Arnold, Kohn, and Gibbs also refer to a “desequestration” (2015). They found that “the public and private merge in a celebration of inner experience, propagated through new information and communications technology” (Graham et al., 2015, pp. 51-52).

Social media platforms have quickly, if unintentionally, become the most prevalent form of what Carla Sofka called “thanatechnology” (Sofka, 1997, p. 553), her term for digital technologies that aid in the processes of death and grief, such as the online memorial pages discussed in the last chapter (pg. 27). Facebook, with its focus on building a personal profile and on the long-term collection and mobilization of personal data (Pybus, 2011), is particularly well suited to being used by the friends and family of dead users as a place to virtually congregate and share remembrances (Church, 2013; Marwick & Ellison, 2013). Facebook is “not only a virtual space to commune with the living, it is also a place to honor, memorialize, and engage in dialogs with the deceased.” (Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2012, p. 1). Those personal dialogs with dead users will be addressed in the following section; here we will focus on the social processes around death that are enacted on Facebook. Unlike cemetery plots that are fixed in place, or paper obituaries that are distributed to private readers, “Memorial sites on Facebook offer

an alternative space to mourn that is public, collective, and with archival capabilities.” (Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2012, p. 1).

However immaterial the Facebook profile may be, many have described it as a *site* of memorial. Kern, Forman, and Gil-Egui’s content analysis of 500 memorialized Facebook profiles found they “provide a place to ‘visit’ with dead loved ones” that is “similar to tombs in the offline world.” (2012, p. 8). Scott Church (2013) describes a similar “gravesite” dynamic in his textual analysis of a dead friend’s profile. Kelly Rossetto, Pamela Lannutti, and Elena Strauman also found the profiles of dead users to provide functions of physical memorials, “providing public space to memorialize the dead and also serve a ritual function, providing a place for loved ones to return again and again similar to the way they would return to a gravesite to place flowers or mementos.” (2015, p. 982). This is quite reminiscent of the the way users are meant to experience plots in the “World Wide Cemetery” mentioned in chapter 2 (pg. 27). In a twist on the concept of the social media gravesite, Walter likens the social media profiles of young adults who have died to “roadside shrines” that are created when someone is hit by a car (Walter, 2014, p. 231). These impromptu memorials are a place for young people to congregate and grieve, away from the officially sanctioned locations like cemeteries where adults may find them.

The memorial activities around dead user’s profiles may better be understood as an ongoing process, and not simply a spatial metaphor (Pennington, 2014; Walter, 2015). Walter also discusses the perpetual nature of the memorial on Facebook, “no longer just a physical grave to be visited on occasion, but digital reminders that can pop up unannounced on one’s mobile device at any time” (2015, p. 14). This continual process

isn't tied to one location, whether physical or virtual, it plays out across a social media user's daily life and their connected devices. Natalie Pennington's work suggests that the role the profile plays is related to the gravesite. But her focus is on the enactment of the funeral, not the site where it happens:

The profile page of a deceased user can be seen not only as a memorial structure like other online memorial web pages or forums, or a gravescape... but as similar to a wake or funeral that is not bound by the constraints of time where the network of friends and family can communicate with each other about the deceased. (Pennington, 2014, pp. 236-237).

There is another way that Facebook serves a communal function around a death, though it's one that is short-lived. In the early days after someone has died, Facebook users share information on the dead user's profile (Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013; Klastrop, 2015; Marwick & Ellison, 2013). Surviving friends and family of the dead will use the medium to verify that the user is, in fact, dead, and to organize the activities that follow, from bringing food to family members and planning informal vigils, to sharing the details of the funeral service (Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015). While playing a significant role in the wake of a user's death, several studies have found that communication between living users begins to steeply decline after memorial services are conducted for the dead user (Church, 2013; Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013; Klastrop, 2015; Marwick & Ellison, 2013; Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015). Instead, the living users tend to transition into communication *with* the deceased (Church, 2013; Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013; Klastrop, 2015; Marwick & Ellison, 2013; Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015).

“Miss U”: How Living Users Communicate with the Dead

When a social media user dies, the huge amount of personal data that the user has shared leaves behind a new kind of memorial (Graham, Arnold, Kohn, & Gibbs, 2015). Given the communicative nature of social media, this remaining profile can be “talked” with as if the user were still alive. Some have even gone so far as to claim that the personal data collected in these profiles create an “authentic duplicate of identity” (Bollmer, p. 142). Duplicate or not, the type of interactions that living users can have with dead users is far different on social media platforms than any prior medium (Graham, et al.; Walter, 2015). Some media researchers have likened this communicative dynamic to the parasocial relationship that television viewers can experience with celebrities and the fictional characters they portray (Klastrup, 2015; Giles, 2002). Of course, the mediated identity that a living social media user relates to is one created from all the things that had once been shared by a dead user. (Klastrup, 2015; Church, 2015). In this way, the profiles left behind hearken back to the Ancient Greek funeral steles discussed in chapter 1 (Cuomo, 2007): an extension of a person’s chosen representation that endures after they have died.

The Facebook “timeline” of a dead user offers a clear example of a change in the experience of death for social media users. The chronological feed of a user’s Facebook activities (previously known as the “wall”) becomes an active site of remembrance, discussion, and later, of conversation (Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013; Marwick and Ellison, 2013; Walter, 2015). Church’s textual analysis found that people interacted with the deceased’s profile as though she were still “there” (Church, 2013, p. 186). Marwick and Ellison (2013) also found many examples of this sort of conversational interaction

with the Facebook presence of the deceased. The type of communicative relationship allowed by platforms like Facebook contributes to the desequestration of death from public discourse, as mentioned above, but it seems that it's also weakening the sequestration of the dead themselves from the living.

If, in the Victorian era the dominant trope for representing and talking about the dead was one of solemn rest and peaceful sleep, then the dead no longer slumber. Rather, they are becoming a decidedly more boisterous, lively (if you'll excuse the pun) and continuing presence in people's lives through ongoing engagement in social media that does not readily forget (Gibbs, 2013, para. 5)

Despite the communal, memorial role that the profiles of dead users play, many different studies have found that the majority of the communication on these profiles is directed *to* the deceased user and not to the community (Church, 2013; Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015; Walter, 2014). As time passes, the Facebook profile that remains after a user has died becomes a virtual space for conversation with the deceased (Church, 2013; Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013; Marwick and Ellison, 2013; Walter, 2015). This progression has been noted by Facebook researchers using different approaches to the deaths of users on the social networking platform (Church, 2013; Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013; Marwick and Ellison, 2013; Walter, 2015). Church found the comments left on his dead friend's profile were mostly directed to the deceased as though she were alive. "Though her wall offered a locale for her friends and family to eulogize her to the community, they chose instead to engage in the modality of continued communication with her" (Church, 2013, p. 186). One young man's profile, analyzed by

Marwick & Ellison, gives an excellent example of the kind of quotidian conversation that can be directed toward dead Facebook users. Though the young man had been dead for over a year, his profile was host to many friends' boastful commentary about their sexual exploits, "today was a good day it was your day I bagged this chick and I felt you looking over me proud I just wanna say swagg nd good nigh" (Marwick & Ellison, 2013, p. 392).

Quantitative work has also shown many instances of the phenomenon of communication with the dead Facebook users. A kind of parasocial interaction is exemplified in a content analysis of 550 Facebook profiles that showed the vast majority of communication as being directed to the deceased (Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013). Another mixed-methods study also found that many users described the way that, "being able to still view the deceased person's posts and photos put on Facebook before his or her passing fostered a sense of continued relational connection," and "Constant access through Facebook made it easy to maintain communication and connection with the deceased" (Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015, p. 982).

Facebook now provides 3 options for the management of dead users' accounts and profiles: the profile can be "memorialized," which closes it off from many functions of the site; a public R.I.P. page can be created; or the users' family can simply delete the profile (Facebook, n.d.a). This is discussed in further detail in chapter 3. The platform didn't always offer these options, however, and many surviving loved ones still don't use them (Buntin, 2014; Church, 2013; Hiscock, 2014). Whether by choice or circumstance, not selecting a way to manage the Facebook data of a dead user will leave it embroiled in Facebook's algorithmic processes; still communicating (in a way).

The following section examines 2 such Facebook profiles of people who have died. The analysis of these profiles focuses on the way that the living interact with them. Using textual analysis, I hope to find patterns that show something significant about Facebook's impact on the way that people experience death, the way they grieve, and the way they address their deceased loved ones.

Methodology

I've accessed 2 open, personal profiles that haven't been "memorialized" and thus continue to function as "normal" Facebook profiles. This data is publicly available and shared on Facebook. Both profiles are accessible without being logged in as a friend, and the data is published publicly on the web. However, all data will be fully anonymized to protect the memory of those deceased users, their loved ones, and the identities of the users who comment on their profiles.

I've analyzed these Facebook profiles, focusing on the interactions on their timeline. I've captured the communications that the living have made in the form of written posts to the dead user, and I've recorded the sharing of any links, photos, memes, etc. after the death of the user. I've also logged the comment data with metadata like the date, type of interaction (comment, post, etc.), and the number of replies and "likes" where possible. These data are collected in 2 corpora of texts to analyze for each profile. I haven't captured identity beyond indicating the type of relationship (e.g. family, friend) that the commenter had to the dead user.

I'd like to look at the 2 corpora separately, focusing on two stages of the interactions that happened: 1.) The period after the Facebook profile holder was

announced to be dead; and 2.) The period beginning after the user's memorial service. The literature marks a distinction in the type of communicative behavior that was found on Facebook during these times, showing much of the communication immediately following a death to be directed at people other than the deceased (Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013; Marwick and Ellison, 2013; Walter, 2015). Those who knew the deceased offer eulogistic statements about them, attempt to find out more information, and organize memorial activities during this time. It's only later that the interactions on the page have been found to be directed to the dead Facebook user (Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013; Marwick and Ellison, 2013; Walter, 2015). With these times separated, a clearer image of the different practices of communication can emerge.

I will use a strategy of textual analysis on the data taken from the profiles. My methodology draws from the analysis style Church used to approach his dead friend's Facebook profile (2013). Church collected the many textual interactions on her page chronologically, using the rhetorical structure of the eulogy to contrast aspects of the things written on her page with the way people speak at funerals. Eulogies serve two main purposes, they "acknowledge the death," and then, "transform the relationship between the living and the dead from present to past tense" (Jamieson & Campbell, 1982, in Church, 2013, p. 186). This move from present to past-tense marks the transition from living to lived, and the sequestration of the dead.

Following Church, I'll be using the comments on Facebook profiles as the texts to analyze. But for the purposes of this study, instead of using eulogy as an analytic, I'll use the simplified semiotic analysis suggested by McKee:

Addresser: when we interpret a text, we often look for clues about who the author is, the image that we construct of this person is the 'addresser' of the text (whether or not that is actually the person who created the text).

Addressee: All texts include clues about who they are intended for... The image we construct of who a text is aimed at is the 'addressee'. These concepts can be very useful as we think about questions of 'wedom' and 'theydom', and the ways in which we make sense of other people.

Phatic functions: Not all of the elements of texts are interpreted as information. Some 'signs' are there simply to reassure us of the kind of relationship that we have with the addresser. The most famous example of this is the way that we interpret the spoken text: 'How are you?' 'Fine. And you?' 'Fine.' For most English speakers, this isn't interpreted to mean that the speaker is actually doing fine (Mckee, 2003, p. 131).

These three categories, *Addresser*, *Addressee*, and the *Phatic Functions* (I'll say the *way of speaking*) provide a way to look at three important factors in the communications on these Facebook pages: Who is talking to the dead (in broad categories, e.g. friends, family)? Who are the dead, how are they conceived of in the communications? Finally, how are people speaking to the dead? What kind of expressions are they using in their communications? Here I'm less concerned with specific phatic expressions, than with the way the dead are spoken to and about and the kind of language that is used.

To these three categories, I'll add a fourth cribbed from eulogy: time and tense. I'm interested in the ways that the dead are talked about and to, with regards to the

passage of time. Are people on their profile referring to their existence in the past tense or the present? Do they change tenses depending on the conversation? Do different types of relations use tenses differently?

My four categories of analysis, then, will be:

1. Addresser
2. Addressee
3. Way of Speaking
4. Position in Time (Past/Present Tense)

Analysis

The two profiles both belonged to Americans who had died unexpectedly. One, a young man, was 20 years old when he died. The other, a late-middle-aged woman, was 59 at the time of her death. The young man had died in 2009; the woman in 2015. Both profiles were left open and unmemorialized, and both have seen continued engagement with Facebook friends. At the time of data collection, May 12, 2017, both profiles had been commented on in the past 2 months. I'll approach the corpora of collected comments on these profiles using the 4 categories described above: Addresser, Addressee, Way of Speaking, and Position in Time.

The category of addresser, indicating who is commenting on the dead user's profile, is populated by those who were close to the deceased, as one might expect. Those who address, or comment, using Facebook fall into 3 categories on these personal pages: friends, family, and co-workers. Both profiles seem to have avoided the kind of random "grief tourists" that some research has found (Phillips, 2011). The middle-aged

woman’s commenters lean more heavily toward family and co-workers, while the young man’s timeline is mostly populated by friends, who leave comments like, “What a trip, I

	Profile 1	Percent	Profile 2	Percent
About Dead User	Male, 20 years at death		Female, 59 years at death	
Time Passed Since Death	8 years		1.5 years	
Total Posts	85		38	
Birthday	40	47%	21	55%
Addressed to user	63	73%	18	47%
Addressed to community	19	23%	14	37%
Familiar	71	84%	17	45%
Formal	11	13%	15	39%
Present tense	50	59%	22	58%
Past Tense	32	38%	13	34%
Posts Between Death and Funeral				
	18	21%	12	32%
Present tense	8	44%	0	0%
Past Tense	10	56%	12	100%
Addressed to user	9	50%	5	42%
Addressed to community	9	50%	7	58%

Fig 1: Data from 2 dead users’ Facebook profiles.

was literally having a (super random) dream about you last night” (Anon 1, [Facebook Profile], n.d.). The middle-aged woman’s page has more remembrances from family, and many co-workers’ remembrances of professional achievements. For example, one comment fondly recalls that, “She was a great colleague, tireless and compassionate” (Anon 2, [Facebook profile], n.d.).

The next category, the addressee (or who is spoken to), offers somewhat more compelling information from both profiles. The communication on both profiles eventually switches from mostly being directed to the community, to mostly being directed to the dead user. In the immediate days following the death, much of the communicative activity is consumed by the logistics of a modern death: sharing the sad news, verifying that the user has really died; sorting out support for their family; planning memorial services; and disseminating information about those services. These kinds of comments largely come from family and close friends, speaking to the community: “UPDATE: Candle light vigil on Weds. night. Don’t know where yet but will probably be in ***** area. More will be revealed ...” (Anon 1. [Facebook profile], n.d.). But what’s more remarkable is the change in addressee that occurs over time, in much more conversational comments posted on both profiles. Like Church (2013) and Rossetto, et al. (2015) observed, there is a steep decline in comments addressed to the community after the user has undergone some type of memorial rites in the “real” world. Before the funeral there are many more comments sharing stories *about* the recently deceased, using pronouns like “him” and “her” but rarely, “you”. For example, “The world lost an amazing individual” (Anon 1. [Facebook profile], n.d.), or “She was a unique and kooky human being” (Anon 2, [Facebook profile], n.d.).

After the memorials, the type of communication changes increasingly from comments *about* the dead to messages *addressed to* that dead user. Like the commenters on Church's friend's page (2013), the Facebook friends of these 2 users seem to refer to them more directly, the more that time has passed since their deaths. This happens tragically: "FUCK YOU [user]! YOU WEREN'T SUPPOSED TO LEAVE BEFORE ME GOD DAMN IT" (Anon 1. [Facebook profile], n.d.). But it also happens in ways much more mundane: "Hey bud.miss you! I'm thinkin you were behind [friend] finding my missing wallet so thank you :)" (Anon 1. [Facebook profile], n.d.). The substantial majority of the comments do acknowledge a sort of separation, despite communicating in the second person with the user. This "wish you were here" kind of communication exemplifies what Marwick & Ellison refer to as "context collapse," a softening of barriers between the dead and the living (2012, p. 391). The mode of communication becomes more casual as the time since the person's death grows longer, often appearing more like messages to an old friend who's moved away:

Today my mom and I were talking about something random and limp wrist came up(from those dirty dirty smut novels she read)and I know you would have just laughed your ass off with us. Not to mention the good old days of you in her lingerie ☺☺☺ miss you friend always (Anon 1. [Facebook profile], n.d.).

This familiar speech was heavily used in both profiles, though not always quite *so* familiar. The middle-aged woman's profile had considerably less profanity, and generally better grammar, but most of the communications were in the casual language of friends and family. The third category, the way of speaking, has proven to bear little fruit for the purpose of this study. Aside from a few poetic remembrances, more officious or grand language is mostly reserved for the ad hoc obituaries that are the posts that announce the users' deaths.

I found out you were leaving us the very minute I was addressing your Christmas card and thinking of how I missed you and wanted to see you. My heart breaks for you and your amazing family. We had so many fun times together, and you truly were an honorary mother to me. I'm so thankful I got to spend so much time with you, and I truly regret not seeing you much over the last few years. Tonight, my mind is filled with fond memories of late night parties and dream interpretations, our times together in art classes ... and of you officiating my wedding. You were a beautiful soul, a genuinely caring and amazing woman and friend. My heart breaks to know I'll never again get to speak to you, or see your beautiful face or hear your sweet voice telling me to be careful driving home. I hope wherever you are you can find some peace, and know that so many people on Earth love you and will think of you often. ... I love you forever and always ... Your legacy lives on through your beautiful family and the many works of art you left behind. (Anon 2, [Facebook profile], n.d.).

Finally, the fourth category is the tenses of the comments on these 2 profiles.

Much like the addressee, the tense used by the commenters changes over time as well.

Interestingly the tense of the language in the comments seems to have an inverse relationship with time; as the user's death fades further into the past, their Facebook friends are more likely to refer to them in the present tense. The dead users are addressed directly, and apprised of life events or included in reminiscences: "im drunk as shit just like i was when iw as last at your apt after that concert this time im not puking and ur taking care of me and putting me to bed lololol" (Anon 1. [Facebook profile], n.d.). This phenomenon was also observed by Church (2013), and Rossetto, et al. (2015). Both profiles do have rare instances of a commenter speaking of the dead user in the past tense, and more commonly using the kind of schizoid sentences that place the dead user in both the past and present at once:

I thought I'd start to get passed that with time...I haven't. Thankyou for coming to my birthday before everything- it's nice to have that to look back on, along with all the other memories since we were 4.
I hope you know you're loved. (Anon 1. [Facebook profile], n.d.).

Those are the exception, however; the move from past to present tense in the comments is apparent on both profiles. Alongside this temporal shift, one clear category of comments emerges in the corpora of these 2 profiles, and it's a type with its own rules that are unique to Facebook: birthday messages.

Facebook collects users' birthdates and notifies their friends each year, ensuring each user receives a deluge of perfunctory well-wishes, while also ensuring engagement from those commenters with Facebook's platform (and, of course, its ads). Both profiles saw a huge uptick in commenting activity on their users' birthdays. These messages are also mostly addressed to the deceased in the present tense. In the case of the middle-aged woman, some of her Facebook friends appeared to genuinely not know of her death. Some shared YouTube videos of birthday songs, or birthday card memes on her profile. One image grimly instructs her to, "Make a Wish!" (Anon 2, [Facebook profile], n.d.). However, many others seem to be aware she has passed and leave quick birthday messages with subtle acknowledgements that something is different, like the ellipses in this post: "Happy Birthday my friend..thinking about you...Xo" (Anon 2, [Facebook profile], n.d.). Others leave messages like "We love your light [user]!" (Anon 2, [Facebook profile], n.d.). Only one friend decides to flatly acknowledge the death of the profile's user, simply posting "R.I.P." (Anon 2, [Facebook profile], n.d.).

The young man's birthday messages have declined over the passing years since his death, but a dedicated group of friends has continued to post on his page each year. Some of these friends comment periodically on his page, but many only visit on this day when they're reminded by Facebook. Ironically the birthday messages in recent years have tended toward the memorial, unlike the everyday updates that are common on his

page at other times. Friends remind him that he is “loved” and “terribly missed.” One message left on his most recent birthday reads, “Miss you and think of you often my friend. Happy birthday” (Anon 1. [Facebook profile], n.d.).

Perhaps as his Facebook friends are aging into their late 20s—marrying and having kids, pursuing careers, and compiling more of the societal markers of adulthood—the yearly ritual of commenting on his birthday has become more like flowers on the grave of a fallen friend: something one does when they visit home so they can return to their working lives without guilt. His profile is held in time; he will always be 20 years old while his friends age and change. His image online can be glimpsed as if it were the moment of his last status update, complaining about an exercise routine, and it will remain that way for as long as Facebook stores old profiles (Anon 1. [Facebook profile], n.d.).

The Experience of Viewing the Dead User’s Profile

The deceased user’s Facebook page remains a site of connection to their many friends. Photos and text utterances are as present as they have ever been and are still liked, shared, and commented upon as such. Alexandra Sherlock refers to this phenomenon as “symbolic immortality” (2013), and traces its antecedents back through previous technological epochs and the mediated representation of the dead they allowed. She sees social media as a potential site of “re-enchantment” bringing a mythical and supernatural quality back into our relationships with death and the dead (2013). Sherlock returns to Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* and his phenomenological inquiry into the

experience of looking at photographs of the dead, particularly one photo of his dead mother (Barthes, 1980/2000).

Barthes described the unease that a viewer experiences when gazing at “the living image of a dead thing” (Barthes, 1980/2000, p. 78), something that is similarly experienced by visitors to the social media profiles of the deceased (Sherlock, 2013).

In Photography, the presence of the thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric; and in the case of animated beings, their life as well, except in the case of photographing corpses; and even so: if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing. For the photograph's immobility *is* somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ("this-has-been"), the photograph suggests that it is already dead. Hence it would be better to say that Photography's inimitable feature (its *noeme*) is that someone has seen the referent (even if it is a matter of objects) in *flesh and blood*, or again *in person*. (Barthes, 1980/2000, pp. 78-79).

Barthes was explicitly focused on photography in *Camera Lucida*, claiming a singularity in the experience of viewing still photographs that was lost in the cinema and other formats (1980/2000; Yacavone, 2012). The *punctum* that “wounds” the viewer could only exist for Barthes’ in the still image (1980/2000). Photographic technology collapsed time by attesting that its subject, or *referent*, had existed. But it can only be glimpsed as an instance, pulled out of time like the young man’s Facebook profile (1998/2000). Barthes’ dead subjects were mediated through time by “the action of light on certain substances” and “the formation of the image through an optical device,” (Barthes, 1980/2000, p. 10). I argue (against his wishes, I would imagine,) that a comparison can be made to the remaining data image of a dead user, similarly captured in time by a technological process. Only it’s the past actions of the dead user, and the

algorithmic processes of Facebook that collected their data and now serve them up to be engaged with.

Barthes set out to create a phenomenological methodology for studying photographs, but his work became as much about grief as about photography after the unexpected death of his mother (1980/2000; Yacavone, 2012). He described the experience of looking into a photograph of his mother, and shouting “there she is!” upon finding something of her in it (1980/2000, p.99). Someone engaging with the remaining social media presence of a loved one may experience that moment in much the same way.

The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star (Barthes, 1980/2000, p. 80).

The social media profiles of the dead may, like Barthes claimed of photography, “have something to do with resurrection” (2000/1980, p. 82), whether or not it’s something powerful enough to make users doubt the permanence of death. However, the technologies that harvest the data that human users constantly share become more sophisticated every day. These digital ghosts remain among us, each generation more complex. Could the parasocial connections become so believable that the dead person’s digital representation becomes an entity in its own right?

The BBC sci-fi anthology show *Black Mirror* smartly addresses the near-future dilemmas that mourners will face with only minor digression into the fantastical. In the episode “Be Right Back”, a young woman grieves her boyfriend after losing him in an accident (Booker, 2013). When she receives a message from him, seemingly from beyond the grave, she can’t help her curiosity. The message is an advertisement from a

service that uses data-mining to recreate the dead, forming an AI from their life on social media and the other data they've generated. The AI is placed into a robot body that looks like her dead boyfriend, inevitably proving an uncanny facsimile that the woman can't bear, but can't quite bear to destroy (Booker & Owen, 2013).

This kind of science fiction is effective because it's not really *so* far-fetched. In fact, most people probably have enough personal data spread across the internet that it would be no great feat to create a fairly believable simulation of their identity if one could access all of it. Facebook and the many other social media platforms that vie for users have a vested interest in anything that drives "engagement" and keeps people interacting with and through those platforms. The further engaged the user, the more ads they can be served and the more of their personal data can be harvested and spun off into new products that can be sold back to them. What better way to engage users than the promise of continued contact with their beloved dead? The following chapter will discuss the ways that social media platforms continue to profit off users who have died, and how users' digital selves labor on.

CHAPTER IV

TO TOIL AND SEEK NOT FOR REST: THE LABOR OF THE DEAD ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Much has been written about the volume of personal data collected by social media platforms (Werbin, 2011; Fuchs, 2012; Bollmer, 2016) and its use by both governments and private industry (Fuchs, 2011, 2012). The collection of data on a medium's audience, and its implication in capitalist production have been discussed for decades (Fuchs, 2012; Meehan, 2002, 2005; Smythe, 1977, 1981). But the sheer volume and particularity of data collected, and the way they are used automatically, instantaneously, and invisibly by algorithmic processes is something new (Bollmer, 2016; Fuchs, 2012; Terranova, 2015). This volume of data remains after the death of a user and continues to be monetized both directly, in the case of a deceased person's digital image being used to spur further engagement; and indirectly, as the data continue to be accessed by the algorithms that govern the platform(s) the deceased had used.

The following chapter will discuss the ways that the data of the living is collected and stored by social media platforms, how that information continues to be used to profit the platform after a user dies, and the implications of these developments. It will focus largely on Facebook, as the most populous and active of the major social networks (Elliot, 2015; Pew Internet Research, 2017), but my intention is to suggest qualities that exist in this type of communicative technology, not the particular flavor or brand. Using Smythe's concept of the "audience commodity" as a guide, this inquiry will also engage with modern work that has built on that approach. The latter part of the chapter will use the concept of "immaterial labor" (Lazzarato, 1997) as another approach to the "work" of social media users and as a way to imagine the continued labor of users after death. The

chapter will engage with autonomous Marxist theory about labor. Finally, this chapter will close by briefly discussing a related phenomenon, that of the production and viral sharing of videos of Black Americans being killed by the police. These videos are shared by activists to uncover police violence but, paradoxically, the videos are caught up in the same processes that monetize any other user generated content online.

The Audience Commodity in the Age of Social Media

The work of Dallas Smythe on the “audience commodity” (1981) put forward the concept of the audience of a medium (Smythe was largely concerned with broadcast television, but touched on radio and newspapers as well) giving up their time in the service of conglomerate profits. The audience’s time becomes the commodity, their “audience power” the product for entertainment companies to sell to advertisers. “Because audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed, it commands a price and is a commodity” (Smythe, 1981/2012, p. 187). This time is then packaged into demographic segments using the increasingly complex TV ratings and viewership data-collection apparatus employed by ratings agencies such as A.C. Nielsen (Smythe, 2012/1981). As Smythe puts it: “Scientific sampling yields results as reliable for audiences as it does for grain, sugar” (Smythe, 2012/1981, p 189). As technologies and methods for sorting and quantifying audiences have advanced, new products have come to the market, purporting to offer more specific, granular audience classification for advertisers targeting television viewers (Meehan, 2005). This process of quantifying and sorting audiences is the precursor to the data collection done on social media users today.

Smythe has been criticized for accepting the accuracy of this type of ratings data. Meehan, for example, has critiqued Nielsen's flawed methodology and Smythe's apparent acceptance of it as "scientific" (2002, 2005). This critique has little to do with Smythe's major theoretical move, however, which brings communication into the productive base by focusing on the economic relations between the audience and the media industries, instead of the ideological content being communicated through those media. Smythe saw this as the "blind spot" in critical approaches to the media (Smythe, 1977), which had been much more concerned with the "'messages,' 'information,' 'images,'" etc. in mediated communication that he saw as "superficial," and "divorced from real life processes" (Smythe, 2012/1981 p. 187).

Smythe's characterization of the work of the audience as labor in the production of a commodity has been returned to by scholars who study broadcast media, and more recently by those researching digital platforms and their users (Caraway, 2011; Dolber, 2016; Fuchs, 2012). This commodity, audience power, can be sold to advertisers and the state, and the information gathered is used to spur those same audience members into further labor, audience or otherwise, and into the consumption of certain goods over others (Smythe, 2012/1981). Decades after Smythe advanced the concept, the collection of a medium's user data and its sale to advertisers operates somewhat similarly, but in an exponentially more complex and automated fashion (Dolber, 2016; Fuchs, 2012). The great difference is that it is no longer the users' time that is valuable, it's all the rich data made available about that user, and about user demographics in aggregate, that advertisers seek. The web 2.0, and later social media revolutions have allowed for a

much deeper and more invasive collection of user data (Fuchs, 2012; Terranova, 2015). And those users, as human beings, tend to die.

When approaching the political economy of death on social media in a mode inspired by Smythe, the focus must be on the processes that create value from user activity, and how it may continue to be used for corporate profit. What kind of user data is collected, what is stored after death, and how does it continue to be used to profit the platforms that collect it? The content of all the communicative acts that occur during and after any user's life are much less important, akin to the "free lunch" of television programming (Smythe, 1981, p. 194). This modern free lunch may not be the carefully produced content that Smythe spoke of, made to "whet the prospective audience members' appetites and thus (1) attract and keep them attending to the program, newspaper, or magazine; (2) cultivate a mood conducive to favorable reaction to the advertisers' explicit and implicit messages" (Smythe, 1981, p. 194). Under modern communicative capitalism, the "free lunch" that keeps users returning is the constant communication and connection allowed by social media platforms. Jodi Dean describes the draw of networked digital platforms as the "form and vehicle for the individualized consumption, participation, and creative needs expression of subjects compelled to be personally satisfied" (2010, p. 135). After a user dies, their content and its continued presence in these platforms can serve as a free lunch as well, drawing engagement from living users (Bollmer, 2013; Klastrop, 2015; Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015).

It doesn't require much digging to see how much economic power these major social media platforms wield. The companies' publicity materials are quick to point out just how large and lucrative these platforms have become. Facebook's most recent

investor report showed the company's net income surpassing \$10 billion in 2016, and provided this list that underlines the platform's staggering user engagement:

1. Worldwide, there are over 1.86 billion monthly active Facebook users (Facebook MAUs) which is a 17 percent increase year over year.
2. There are 1.15 billion mobile daily active users (Mobile DAU) for December 2016, an increase of 23 percent year-over-year.
3. 1.23 billion people log onto Facebook daily active users (Facebook DAU) for September 2016, which represents a 18% increase year over year.
4. There are 1.74 billion mobile active users (Mobile Facebook MAU) for December 2016 which is an increase of 21% year-over-year
5. On average, the Like and Share Buttons are viewed across almost 10 million websites daily. (Facebook, 2017).

Table 2. Facebook User Statistics.

Facebook's marketing materials for advertisers provides a fairly deep description of the kind of analytics the company offers to advertisers (Facebook, n.d.), and a description of its data collection processes is used to lure investors in its newsletter (Facebook, 2017). To understand just how deeply social media is insinuated into human life, the description of the types of data that these platforms collect and store can be illuminating. Facebook's many different APIs (Application Programming Interface) provide software that advertisers may use to track user activity and target ads (Facebook, n.d.). These APIs offer powerful big data analytics that can be simply accessed using a command line interface. For example, the targeting feature allows advertisers to,

“Specify targeting options for your ad set in four areas: interests, demographics, behaviors and locations” (Facebook, n.d., para. 2). But within those categories are data points as fine as neighborhoods-frequented, type of device used, and how much time is spent on Facebook. (Facebook for Developers, 2017). The platform also offers what it calls the “Audience Network”, a service that “lets you extend your ad campaigns beyond Facebook to reach your audiences on mobile apps, mobile websites and videos,” and its marketing notes that “We use the same Facebook targeting, measurement and delivery to make sure each ad on Audience Network helps you reach your campaign goals” (Facebook Business, 2017, para. 3). The service allows Facebook’s collected data to be leveraged by companies to target users even when they aren’t on the platform.

A deeper analysis of these data collection processes is certainly called for. But it’s hardly controversial to say that the users of social media platforms are the raw material that the industry uses to produce value. These statistics clearly show a data collection and advertising infrastructure that’s significantly more sophisticated than the audience sampling of Smythe’s time. These Facebook stats also show an incredible level of user engagement with that platform, and a massive and constant sharing of personal data.

These same users will inevitably die, and all of the intricate data that was collected on each of them will continue to produce for the massive corporations that own their chosen social media platforms. The body releases its contents as it decomposes, in one final contribution to the life processes of the world. Likewise, deceased users slough off a final volume of information into waiting data centers, and the instance of a death creates a new category of data to be collected from the friends and family who use the

same platform to mourn them. (Bollmer, 2013; Klastруп, 2015; Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015).

Control of Personal Data

Upon a death, a user's surviving loved ones do exercise some control, with a few options for the social media content of the deceased. As mentioned in Chapter 3 (p. 39), Facebook instituted two options in 2009 that addressed these concerns: the "memorialization" of a person's profile effectively making it private, only available to those already connected to it and sealed from further changes (Kern, 2013; Marwick & Ellison, 2012); or the option of an "R.I.P. Page" that functions more like a brand's page, and is open to the public (Klastруп, 2015). Effectively, then, there are 3 ways that a person can endure on Facebook after they die: as a normal profile page, still able to "interact" with others; as a memorial profile, sealed off from Facebook's algorithmic processes and only visible to those who were already connected to it; and as an R.I.P. page that is created by others in memory of the deceased, though still likely using many of that dead user's shared assets such as photos and quotations (Klastруп, 2015).

As of February 2015, Facebook allows individual users an aspect of control over their own profile should they pass away. The "Legacy Content" menu is buried deep in the privacy settings menu, not prominently displayed. Facebook may not want to advertise the settings, but they do give users something akin to a last will and testament with regards to their Facebook presence after they've died. The user can choose a "Legacy Contact" to manage their profile after their passing, a person able to "do things like pin a post on your Timeline, respond to new friend requests, and update your profile

picture. They won't post as you or see your messages” (Facebook, n.d.a). This contact will become the keeper of the memorialized page, a responsibility that only becomes greater the more personal data is available on the user’s profile. Facebook will continue to store all the collected data and communications on the dead user. The company withholds the right to change the terms, noting, “we may add additional capabilities for legacy contacts in the future” (Facebook, n.d.a, para. 5). The other option is to have the account deleted automatically “If you don't want a Facebook account after you pass away, you can request to have your account permanently deleted instead of choosing a legacy contact” (Facebook, n.d.a). Of course, if the user has not made any selections here, their loved ones are left with the same options mentioned above. Research into death on Facebook has shown that many profiles remain active, and continue to interact with other users (Elliot, 2015; Kern, 2013; Marwick & Ellison, 2012). There may not be living users to add updated content to these active accounts, but their profiles remain available for many of the automated processes described above. (Meisler, 2012).

Some other social media platforms have options to give some control over user to the deceased’s family. Twitter will allow “verified” family members to request the deactivation of a user’s account and to archive its tweets, but the family member must provide “information about the deceased, a copy of your ID, and a copy of the deceased’s death certificate” (Twitter, 2015, para. 2). Professional networking site LinkedIn requires similar documents as well as a link to an obituary and an e-signature (LinkedIn, n.d.). However, some platforms still have no clear provisions for dead user’s accounts and content. SnapChat, for example, has no stated policy for dead user’s accounts. The multimedia messaging app is known for the ephemeral nature of its communication, and

its privacy policy claims that user content is deleted from its servers (Snap Inc. 2017). But the policy also notes, “the rest of our services may use content for longer periods of time, which means those services may follow different deletion protocols,” and “we may retain the content as long as necessary to offer and improve the services” (Snap Inc. 2017, subheading: “How Long We Keep Your Content”).

In the most recent accessible year, 2014, the CDC reports 2,626,418 deaths in the United States (Kochanek, Xu, Murphy, Minino, & Kung, 2016, p. 1). Of course, many of those people may not have been social media users; unsurprisingly, the major causes of death were those that inflict older people toward the “natural” end of life. The same study lists the top 15 causes of death. Of those listed only one, suicide as the 10th most common, is a major cause of death for young people (Kochanek, et al., 2016, p.1). In 2014, less than 27 percent of adults over 65 had any kind of social media account, as opposed to over 84 percent of those aged 18 to 29 (Pew, 2017, fig. 4). Still, the data suggests that hundreds of thousands of younger Americans, likely social media users, will die every year. And the usage of social media by older Americans who are more likely to die is rising as well, already at 35 percent by 2016 (Pew, 2017, fig. 4). As of 2016, 62 percent of online adults 65 and over are on Facebook (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016, p. 4).

Worldwide, it is estimated that 8,000 Facebook users die every day (Elliot, 2015, p. 381). One marketing company’s publicity stunt claims to have used mathematics to predict 2065 as the year there will be more dead than living profiles on Facebook (Hiscock, 2014). The same “study” also estimated 428 Facebook users die every day and 312,500 every month (Hiscock, 2014). Dubious methodology and the implicit

assumption that Facebook will endure aside, this marketing company wouldn't have pursued the answers to these questions were there not an interest in how to approach the phenomenon coming from the businesses that use its marketing services.

My point with all these statistics is this: the number of social media users dying will likely continue to increase, and many of the social media profiles of those dead users will continue to “remain in perpetuity” (Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013), neither deleted nor sequestered from the algorithmic processes that profit their respective social media platforms. The profiles and data of these users will continue to labor after the user's death. They will drive “engagement,” as virtual spaces for other users to spend their time, and thus continue to offer their usage data to the platform, and be served ads. This seems to me a very compelling “free lunch” (Smythe, 1981, p. 194) to draw in living users whose time on the platform is valuable.

The data collected on the dead users also will continue to be used in creating new targeting analytics for advertising as well, still “rich venues for mining and analyzing social media data” (Leskovec, 2011, p. 277). Digital technology has allowed the work of the audience to continue producing its commodity from beyond the grave. Even after the productive capacity of a dead user declines, when other users stop interacting with the dead profile and the dead user's unrefreshed data no longer triggers algorithmic advertising, that user's aggregate data will forever be held by the platform. Each new dataset and product that a social media platform creates to sell to advertisers will contain the still-valuable data of the dead alongside that of the living.

The Immaterial Labor of the Dead

As the section above has made clear, the users of social media have taken on a much more active and productive role than Smythe's commodity audience did in their time. The nearly 2 billion worldwide users of Facebook (Facebook, 2017) actively engage with the platform, commenting and sharing, creating memes perhaps, or taking polls; each action creating more data to be used to better target them for advertising, to further their engagement, or to further the engagement of those connected to them. These users are engaging in the production of wealth through their "immaterial labor" (Lazzarato, 1997) for these social media platforms. The second section of this chapter discusses labor in what many have described as a new configuration or type of capitalism brought on by information technology (Hardt, 1999; Lazzarato, 1997; Moulier-Boutang, 2012; Terranova, 2000). To simplify: the labor of many does not happen in physical work, but in work that involves communication and/or creativity, and produces intangible goods or the affective conditions that allow for commerce (Hardt, 1999; Lazzarato, 1997). This kind of immaterial labor includes the "kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion" (Lazzarato, 1997, p. 132). Much of the very broad literature that touches on these concepts is concerned with creative professionals, information workers, customer service providers, and others for whom their vocation necessitates communication over material production. Countering the rampant tech utopianism of the early web era, these critiques sought to point out that the "relative abundance of cultural/technical/affective production on the Net, then, does not exist as a

free-floating postindustrial utopia but in full, mutually constituting interaction with late capitalism” (Terranova, 2000, 43).

With the advent of the world-wide web, and in particular the “web 2.0” explosion of platforms that allowed for users to easily generate their own content (Andrevic, 2013; Dean, 2005; Terranova, 2000, 2004), many scholars began to increasingly focus this approach to production on the “voluntary” participation that web users were devoting to their unpaid labor online. To Terranova, “the Internet is animated by cultural and technical labor through and through, a continuous production of value that is completely immanent to the flows of the network society at large” (2000, p. 34). This “free labor” is “simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited, (Terranova, 2000, p. 33). Considering the above-mentioned value of our engagement with social media, and the amount of time many put into it, a consideration of the immaterial production of social media users is timely. Much recent work has begun to examine this phenomenon using the concept of immaterial labor, such as Pybus’ discussion of the immaterial labor of “tweens” online (2011), or Jin and Feenberg’s work on the monetization of social media content (2015).

Terranova’s free labor and Lazzarato’s immaterial labor both draw from the worker-centric theory tradition known as autonomism which has its roots in the Italian *operaismo* (literally, “workerism”) movement, and a resulting move in European Marxist thought to focus on workers and their lives over hierarchies and structures in capitalism (Terranova, 2000, Hardt, 1999, Cuninghame, 2010). A key component of this move was the concept of the “social factory” insinuated into the everyday lives of the working class, where “work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion

a truly complex machine.” (Negri, 1992, in Terranova, 2000. p. 133). In the social factory, the creation of value is intermixed with social processes and much of it is unpaid. Fuchs ventures into this territory in his modern revisiting of Smythe: “the factory is not limited to the space of wage labour, but extends into everyday life” (2012, p. 716). He connects Smythe’s audience commodity to immaterial labor by returning to one of the founders of *operaismo*.

At the highest level of capitalist development social relations become moments of the relations of production, and the whole society becomes an articulation of production. In short, all of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over all of society. (Mario Tronti, 1962, in Fuchs, 2012, p. 719)

This broad body of theory, seeks to describe modern capitalism and capitalist production in Marxian terms, but to also note a change in the system that humanity labors under. Like Smythe, these theorists return to Marx, reinterpreting his centuries-old writings and applying them to the present. But Smythe sought to append modern processes to Marxist theory, while many theorists coming from the Autonomist Marxist tradition see a new mode of capitalism following the industrial, “Fordist” factory age. Beyond simply post-Fordism, this “cognitive capitalism” is a new configuration of capitalist production with new configurations of labor and value, as well as new possibilities for workers’ resistance. (Moulier-Boutang, 2012). In *Cognitive Capitalism* (2012), Moulier-Boutang attempts to describe this new mode of capitalism and the role of workers within it.

The mode of production of cognitive capitalism, if we want to give a description that is concrete but sufficiently general to cover all of all of its various situations (the production of material goods, services, signs, and symbols), is based on the cooperative labour of human brains joined together in networks by means of computers. The very rapid development of organisational forms such as project

management, arrangement of small units articulated into networks and operating under outsourced relations of subcontracting, partnerships and logically based relationships is the public manifestation of this transformation. (Moulier-Boutang, 2012, p. 57).

Moulier-Boutang returns to Marx to theorize this new capitalist mode, seeking new insights from Marx's compiled notebooks, *The Grundrisse*, "the autonomists' favorite text," according to Terranova (2000, p. 44). Like autonomists before him, he draws from a passage known as "The fragment on machines" (1971), in which Marx describes a changing process of laboring brought on by the "fixed capital" of machines. The passage describes processes whereby machine aided production allows for "general social knowledge" to become a "direct force of production" bringing labor into the "real life process" (Marx, 1971, 706). Moulier-Boutang describes this epoch of capitalism, pointing out "this important fact of a living activity that co-produces labour as living activity" (2012, p. 54). This productive configuration of the living labor of human workers and the technological configuration of machines, or "fixed capital," is what Marx referred to as the "general intellect."

Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*; the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the *general intellect* and been transformed in accordance with it; to what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process. (Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1971, p. 706, emphasis in original)

This body of theory, then, is concerned with life processes as labor under this new stage of capitalism. It is "the development of the social individual which appears as

the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth” (Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1971, p. 705). Though Marx, and even many modern theorists couldn’t have predicted just how intertwined individuals’ social actions have become with the production of wealth in this era of mediated connection. Much of this work as well as studies of social media use (Pybus, 2011; Waite & Bourke, 2013) would suggest that those life processes are playing themselves out in a virtual, mediated space as much as they are in the “meatspace” that living bodies physically exist in. Though a casual observation could probably reveal as much. The sheer number of Facebook daily users mentioned above speaks to the powerful wealth creation that these processes entail. In a more recent paper, Terranova referred to this modern communicative paradigm as “[t]his direct integration of the social relation into a market-oriented economy” (Terranova, 2015, p. 114). It’s important to point out, however, that this production continues whether or not the living labor of human beings is actively engaged with it. These platforms continue to create value from the data collection mentioned above. In his discussion of living labor on Facebook, Horning describes the process: “Life experience (self-production, self-expression, relationship forming, etc.) is being transformed through social media into something abstract and redeployable behind the scenes by capitalist firms: data.”

The immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1997) poured into social media—the crafting of digital artifacts, writing, sharing, time, meme-making etc.—largely remains after the death of a user, marking an important shift. Before this modern media technology existed the intangible products of the common worker would be exhausted, much like the physical labor value, at death. With the archiving and the algorithmic sharing that social media platforms allow this is no longer the case. The toil of the living in the social

factory becomes “fixed capital” in a way, as their data is stored for later retrieval. That data can be used in the social processes playing out over the web, interfacing with living people and machines without being tied to a living person. So, what, if anything does it mean? As the flows of capital become increasingly untethered from anything material or concrete (Terranova, 2000; Moulrier-Boutang, 2012), is there a productive unit left behind after death that can continue contributing to this new era of capitalism? If so, does it ever expire? What are the implications for living workers who may be working in a digital graveyard, sharing memes with the data corpses of their friends?

Over time, the value that these profiles can generate necessarily diminishes without new data being added by a living users. That “symbolic immortality... is likely to fade over time” (Sherlock, 2013), leaving a decreasingly effective volume of data for driving engagement. But these technologies will continue to advance, and the collection of personal data will only become deeper and more particular. The corporations behind the social platforms we use will continue to think of strategies and technologies toward the mobilization of that data for profit, including the remaining data of the dead. A continued critical engagement with these media is necessary, at the level of the communicated symbols traveling across them, but also at the level of the economic relations between the corporations that own these media and their users (as I’ve attempted to do here). The new phenomenon of users’ deaths on social media offers an entry point to question just how much users’ lives are freely given to these platforms.

Final Thoughts: Viral Videos of Black Death

The tragic phenomenon of the viral videos that spawned Black Lives Matter (Roos, 2014) has created a unique category to be viewed through the labor lens of this chapter. Thus, I'd close with a suggestion of an area ripe for further research: a discussion of the labor of the dead in the terms of more concrete consumables, the much-shared videos of the death of Black people in police custody. As shareable content, these videos are buttressed by ads and enmeshed in social media analytics. Each iteration of death, then, is a tiny transaction that was never consented to by the deceased. The producers of the videos, who are often the grieving loved ones of those killed, are never compensated for the videos they've uploaded, and they've relinquished control over the image of their loved one's final moments as raw material for the communicative processes of social media.

While having many of the same implications inherent to user-generated-content that I've mentioned above, the fact remains that the production of the images of these deaths—not to mention the consumption—occurs in and reinforces a racialized distinction between “who may live and who must die” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 11). Mbembe's concept of necropolitics (2003) and its inverted relationship to Foucauldian biopolitics, describes the control of death as a way to control the lives of people in marginalized populations. These videos of Black Americans deaths are shared to push back against that control, and the “necropower” of the police. But they are, paradoxically, creating a growing body of archived Black death online. The repetition of these deaths online may further contribute to a normalizing of such images and an

association of Black bodies with police violence, and black death as inevitable (Harriot, 2017).

This archive will also continue to profit YouTube and the platforms where the videos are shared. The video of Eric Garner's death at the hands of the NYPD, for example, has been viewed over 300,000 times (New York Daily News, 2014). That's not considering the myriad reposts, re-edits, and re-broadcasts of the moment of Garner's death. To suggest that a purely economic analysis of this phenomenon is needed would be ridiculous. But there are openings to consider these videos alongside a structural conversation around mediated death and labor. An analysis of the amount of ad revenue made by YouTube (thus, Google/Alphabet) for example, could highlight the way that even the struggle for justice is subsumed under cognitive capitalism and the racism of the state.

As the data of the dead continues to labor, something of the identity of the dead endures as well. This mediated persistence is only one way that these still-very-new digital technologies are changing the way that life and death are experienced and understood. The conclusion will discuss the way these changes may subtly push against the way humanity conceives of itself.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This document has approached the fairly new phenomenon of death on social media in many different ways. First I placed modern social media in its historical context, comparing it to art and media forms that came before it. The ways that societies throughout history have represented the dead have held considerable power and cultural import. (Bazin, 1960; Cuomo, 2007; Kroeber, 1927). By discussing the technologies that represented the dead in the past, the first full chapter provided one way to think of the dead user's social media content: as a memorial item, to be approached like the funerary art of ancient Greece, or the obituaries of the modern American newspaper. The online memorial website industry was also discussed, as precursor to today's social media memorials but a form drawn from the past.

The communicative nature of social media platforms provides an almost purpose-built textual archive of the interactions of users. To study grieving and memorial practices on social media, the profiles of dead Facebook users provided an insight into the ways the living and the dead communicate on the platform. These profiles became locations of remembrance akin to memorial sites. The communicative practices of the Facebook friends who visited these sites changed over time. As the death drifted further into the past, the commenters increasingly spoke directly to the dead user, and referred to them in the present tense. The experience of viewing, in the present, the representation of someone whose life has passed is also discussed.

The final full chapter considered these communicative processes as instances of profit for the platforms that they happen on. It analyzed the ways that the data of the

living is collected and stored by social media platforms, how that information continues to be used to profit the platform after a user dies, and the implications of these developments. It adapted Dallas Smythe's concept of the "audience commodity" (1977/2012) to the modern data-collecting regimes of social media platforms, noting some of the automated ways that user data is monetized. This analysis also suggests a way that "living labor" can be done by the dead, using the autonomist Marxist theories of "free" and "immaterial labor" (Lazzarato, 1997; Terranova, 2000). As the factory has moved into the lives of each user and their data becomes the raw material of production, the data left behind still may produce for the companies that own them long after death.

Whether "living labor" or simply living, the mode of being of many modern humans is one that is enacted as much in the physical world as in virtual, mediated spaces online (Waite & Bourke, 2015). The data that remains after death still exists and functions in the communicative matrix of the social media platform, interacting with other users and enabling automated processes. The preceding work has discussed mediated death in a historical context and the precursors of death through social media. It has discussed the communicative dynamics on dead user's profiles, and the way those profiles may be experienced by living users. Finally, this document has discussed the role of dead user's data in the ongoing digital economy of modern social media. As a final note, I'd like to place this discussion of social media and death alongside a greater conversation about the place that the human subject occupies in a changing bio-technical and social configuration.

This is, of course, a change that is unevenly impacted by the location and relative wealth of a person (Pew Research, 2017a). The parts of the world that are saturated with

personal internet connected devices also, unsurprisingly, tend to be centers of accumulated wealth (Pew Research, 2017a). That wealth's accumulation has its own history, one tied up colonialism and racism, and the most "wired" nations are many of nations that benefitted most from European imperialism and domination in the past 500 years (Leigh, 2010). So, it's worth pointing out that these changing, newly mediated experiences of death (and life) are hardly universal. Another interesting direction for further study is the kind of "digital death divide" that will grow as the dead of these "wired" regions live on digitally, and do not elsewhere.

If not universal, a change is certainly happening on the connected side of that divide. This may just be the latest iteration of the human relationship with images of their dead, but it may also be part of a change in human ontology borne of the digital tools humans created. Thinking about the living remains of the dead social media user leads one to questions like: *What is the thing that communicates on social media after someone is dead? What was it when they were alive? And what does it mean for the future?* Approaching social media and death this way, and engaging with theories that approach technology and the location of the subject, raises more questions than it answers. After this varied examination of the phenomenon, I'm looking toward a changing present and possible futures. It's a speculative endeavor that, like the death of a social media user, destabilizes boundaries that may have once seemed solid.

In her 1981 "Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway imagines a "chimeric" being, "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1991, p. 149). The bulk of many people's social reality happens today on social media platforms, instead of in-person (Pybus, 2011; Waite &

Bourke, 2015). Users engage in social processes online throughout their daily lives, always reading, commenting, “liking,” etc. What’s more, the impetus to engage across these platforms is constant; even when socializing in the physical world, social media users continue to share images and reflections from the experience (Pew Research, 2015). Like Haraway’s cyborg, the social media user is a hybrid: embodied in one physical time and location while enmeshed in a social reality that occurs in virtual space, across a global network. “[S]ocial reality,” Haraway adds, “is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction” (1991, p. 149). Among social media users, these social relations are lived online.

Waite and Bourke draw on Haraway’s concept of “the cyborg” to explore the relationship between data and self in the Facebook use of a group of young people (2015). They find their subjects use Facebook as an, “embedded extension where virtual/material are fluidly melded into one permeable, blurred ‘Facebook-as-cyborg’” (Waite & Bourke, 2015, p. 549). They view this “collapse” as a product of the young people “integrating material selves within virtual confines, fluidly moving between online and offline and confusing various other conceptual dualisms in the process” (Waite & Bourke, 2015, p. 549).

These young social media users live their social relations and experience the world online as much off. The cyborg user Waite and Bourke describe, a creature living in a space between the material and virtual duality, also speaks to a blurring of the line between life and death. That is to say, the data was once part of a cyborg, the bodily component of which has now died. This data can continue the cyborg’s existence in a way, now only in the virtual space of social media. Something still exists, still transmits

and receives, still exercises a kind of agency. As the mechanisms that mobilize collected user-data continue to become more complex, so will this cyborg.

One school of thought would see this hybrid subject as part of a teleological evolution toward a more perfect human. Self-described futurists like Raymond Kurzweil speak of a rapidly approaching “singularity” that will see an end to death, among other advances. This concept of the singularity, extrapolated from a paper by science fiction author Vernor Vinge (1993), envisions a future where automation and AI allow for the next evolution of humanity. Transhumanism is similarly focused on the creation of new individual selves, in interesting configurations of body and technology (Fukuyama, 2004).

This view has strangely extended into Human Resources, and other fields concerned with finding new and more productive versions of workers, declaring a “Dawn of the Social Cyborg” (Campbell & Finnegan, 2011), and strategizing how to maximize these hybrid human workers’ productivity. The drive to create a better, more productive individual fuels the market for “quantified self” technologies that constantly collect data on their users. This new kind of techno-being is perhaps the perfect “dividual” that Deleuze theorized (1992). Through the kind of “perpetual training,” that tech utopians fetishize, “Individuals have become "dividuals," and masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘banks.’” (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5). Kurzweil’s dream of an eternal individual might be its own undoing.

In her manifesto Haraway was critical of this perspective, and her conception was opposed to “an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency,” (1991, p.151). Other theory aims to break down this self entirely. Following Bruno Latour and others who

have put forward an ontology that de-centers human agency, Benjamin Bratton's *user* may be human but doesn't have to be (2015). Part of his theorization of the "accidental megastructure" of the Anthropocene, dubbed "The Stack," the user layer is "a contemporary image of the self" (Bratton, 2015, p. 71). "Humans and nonhuman *Users* are positioned by The Stack (perhaps rudely) as comparable and even interchangeable through a wide-ranging and omnivorous quantification of their behaviors and effects" (Bratton, 2015, p. 71). The destabilizing of the subject/object hierarchy again calls into question the place of the self as we have come to understand it, and also suggests another way to imagine the human user who has died: still a user, only a different kind.

Like Bratton's user layer, the sort-of-self that a modern person builds online may not be human (and may not really be that person) but it is an entity that continues to participate in the ongoing communicative web of modern social media, even when the user isn't actively inputting information. When the user is busy, when they sleep, when they offload social processes to automated features, their presence online continues to participate. When a user dies, the thing that lives was already actively "being" them online. This issue can only become more complex as technology advances.

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