Ephemeral Platforms, Enduring Memories:
Errors and Digital Afterlife

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Taking death as an empirical site of sociotechnical errors, this article explores how the end of life highlights the disjunction between individual mortality and platform ephemerality. Inadequate platform policies often render digital legacy inheritance logistically challenging, leaving the personal data of the deceased unattended and lingering as digital phantoms in cyberspace. Online memorialization poses a design glitch for social media platforms by transforming deceased user profiles into unfenced memorial spaces. Real-life instances such as RIP trolling and grief tourism demonstrate how platform algorithms exploit the emotional value of posthumous data, inadvertently shaping the grieving process and imposing an emotional toll on the bereaved. The "death glitch" lays bare the precarity and complexity of digital infrastructures, which grieving individuals are ill-equipped to navigate. In this article, I outline two common types of sociotechnical errors engendered by death, highlighting the complexity of making the death glitches legible to platforms designed for fleeting interactions and algorithms aimed at scalability.

Keywords: digital legacy, grief, death, postmortem interaction, digital afterlife, digital remains

Having a life on social media is easy; erasing it is less so. You might appoint a legacy contact to access all your data, or your immediate relatives or close friends may request to memorialize your Facebook account upon the verification of a death certificate (Facebook Help Center, n.d.); X (formerly Twitter) and Snapchat provide the option of account deactivation, requiring a series of legal documents (Snapchat Support, n.d.; X Help Center, n.d.). None of them are easy, being fraught with bureaucratic and legal formalities. Social media platforms have grappled with the thorny issue of legacy data management through a patchwork of inadequate and reactive policies (Park, Sang, Lee, & Jones-Jang, 2020). As a result, physical death greets virtual immortality, where the digital footprints of the departed linger on, confronting the living with the ghostly traces of lives now extinguished. Digital mediations of affect and intimacy, which form the core of interpersonal exchanges, assume a life of their own across the boundaries of online and offline spaces, transcending individual mortality. As Meese, Nansen, Kohn, Arnold, and Gibbs (2015) discussed, the posthumous personhood produced by computational code and digital texts extends one's social presence and connectivity beyond physical life. Ubiquitous uses of digital technologies rework our experience of death as much as with our living and being, from the immaterial digital footprints that record biometric information to the tangible electronic devices that used to be held in hands of the deceased and sit by their pillows. Following the digital remains, mourning practices have gradually migrated online, fragmenting and emerging through the digital interactions that are defined by a fleeting ongoingness and subject to algorithmic

calculations. This radical shift in bereavement experience begs critical questions: How might we memorialize, cope with loss, navigate the postmortem connectivity, and manage our digital legacies that are stored in an immaterial information system beyond our manipulation and control? This article traces the sociotechnical errors and failures surrounding death, highlighting the disjunction between platform ephemerality and individual mortality. The examples discussed in this article expose the tensions between streamlined digital memorialization services and diverse mourning practices, illustrating how social media platforms, despite their intent to foster connections, often fall short in accommodating connections that extend beyond physical life.

Unfenced Online Memorial Spaces

Social media provides an unofficial memorial space that offers a wide range of mourning options. It affords asynchronous, one-way communication, cultivates grief communities centered around the deceased, and facilitates expressions of individuality that traditional funerals and offline memorials do not permit (Carroll & Landry, 2010). The flexibility and creative possibilities of online memorialization have integrated grief into part of the digital routines, often in the form of expressing condolences under mourning posts. However, the public-facing nature of social media spaces troubles the boundaries of grief and memorialization, which not only causes "context collapse" where personal and public spheres merge (Marwick & boyd, 2011) but also leaves legacy user content vulnerable to trolling and spam.

A poignant example of this vulnerability occurred after the tragic drowning of Matthew Kocher in Lake Michigan on July 27, 2013. A Facebook memorial page was set up to honor him, intended as a space for friends and family to share memories, messages, and photos. However, this page quickly became a target for Internet vandals. One user posted images of drowning scenes with the taunting comment "LOL u drowned you fail at being a fish" ("RIP Trolling," 2013). This behavior is a specific kind of Internet harassment known as "RIP trolling" (Phillips, 2011), which involves posting sarcastic, inflammatory, or offensive comments on predominantly social media sites like Facebook where memorial pages are accessible to the public. Phillips' (2011) study traces the memorial trolling back to disaster humor, contending that such trolling can be seen as a product of a corporate media environment that fetishizes, sensationalizes, and commoditizes tragedy. According to Phillips (2011), in addition to affecting the bereaved, RIP trolling is targeted toward "grief tourists," who have no real-life connection to the deceased person yet engage in online mourning or expressing grief on platforms out of curiosity and boredom. Riechers' (2013) work demonstrates that how grief becomes entertainment for Facebook RIP page visitors, echoing that grief tourists' random participation in online mourning for self-aggrandizing purposes could cause emotional harm for the bereaved.

Insincere and exploitative interactions such as RIP trolling and grief tourism exacerbate emotional distresses for the bereaved, highlighting that the vulnerability of deceased users' data, which, without adequate management, is left defenseless against data exploitation. For example, personal social media pages that are transformed into memorial sites following a user's death frequently become targets for spam messages, as the algorithms driving these platforms continue to treat these accounts as active, while in most cases no one is managing the account. Even without new content being posted, deceased or inactive accounts can receive interactions such as likes, comments, or tags from other users or automated bots.

Social media algorithms typically use interaction metrics (such as comments and likes) to determine account activity. In cases where an account continues to receive interactions (from humans or bots), the platform might mistakenly consider it active. For grieving friends and family who visit these pages to honor their loved one's memory, the disruptive spam messages taint what should have been a space for remembrance. The harassing messages undermine the secrecy practices (Lingel, Trammell, Sanchez, & Naaman, 2012) of the mourning community, which intend to create private, reserved spaces for grief within the semipublic social media sites.

In the absence of proper maintenance, these unattended digital remains are often subject to the shifting priorities and algorithmic calculations of platforms, reflecting a strategic approach that aligns with the platforms' commercial objectives. The unfortunate reliance on commercial platforms for personal memorialization underscores the fragility of digital legacies in an environment where corporate interests override the sanctity of personal and collective mourning.

Digital Memory Reminders After Death

Philosopher Davide Sisto (2020) argues that throughout history, almost all media technologies, from analog to digital, have been availed to preserve the image of the dead—paintings, letters, photography, recorders, videos, to name a few; meanwhile, death is incarnated through the sheer absence that permeates the phantomlike presence. Approaching social media as an infrastructure of memory, it becomes evident that platforms like Facebook are not mere venues for social interactions but mnemotechnological systems that preserve, curate, (re-)present personal archives and collective histories, each affirming its own temporal logics. French philosopher Bernard Stiegler (1998) develops the concept of "mnemotechnics," namely memory technologies, positing that technologies are more than tools for recalling or recording memories; they are integral to the formation and organization of human memory itself.

Our past histories are archived through digital content and punctuated by automatic digital reminders, from birthday notification to "On This Day" features. They select and represent "memorable" moments, occasionally marking past events with awkwardly festive animated confetti and balloons. What people remember does not always converge with what the platforms remember, but the editorial role they assume has delineated the discontinuity and blanks of human memory. Social networking sites create a continuous and ever-accumulating form of memory, which remains dormant yet capable of transforming past relationships through the reactivation of latent connections (Hoskin, 2009). However, this sense of temporality, manifested by continuousness, is sustained by the enduring ephemeral (Chun, 2011), where the memory constantly refreshes into its permanence.

The digital remains, documenting the vivid presence of the deceased in their lifetime, comfort the bereaved by affording instant posthumous communications that serve the illusion of immortality. Social media moments exist within the intersecting temporalities—fleeting in their immediacy but enduring in their potential for unexpected revival. The inobtrusive and ubiquitous presence of digital remains creates ambient intimacy that mediates the loss of the bereaved. Recent research shows that people commonly resort to digital technologies to maintain emotional connections with the deceased, including both the physical devices

and the digital files (Massimi & Baecker, 2011). The possible loss of online data of the deceased signifies the permanent deprivation of the traces that constitute the most personal and private attachments.

Social media sites function as archiving devices, inviting users to curate, stage, and even reinvent memories. Automated features such as birthday reminders and photo highlights impose a predefined priority of remembrance upon users, often without sensitivity to user's current emotional states. In bereavement context, these automated reminders can intrude on the grieving process, insensitively resurfacing memories of loss or disrupting the natural course of mourning. An example of this is receiving cheerful reminders of a deceased friend's birthday or resurfacing past interactions with loved ones, such as the "friendiversary" notifications or picture highlights. These glitches are not merely technical errors but rather the platforms' algorithmic failure to recognize and adapt to the profound changes in human relationships caused by death. While digital platforms meticulously catalog one's digital past, they remain comfortably agnostic to the "felt memories." This incongruence—where an algorithm fails to recognize the changed context of human connections—exemplifies the sociotechnical errors inherent in the current design of social networking platforms.

By facilitating an online continuation of individual legacies, social media platforms sculpt a form of immortality intricately mediated by algorithmic calculations. The narrative of one's digital legacy can diverge significantly from personal or historical accuracy, being shaped instead by the platform's priorities and business models. The enduring legacy data remains entangled in the complex interplay of user content, algorithmic mediation, and platform economics, framing our remembered past as much through what is highlighted as through what is omitted.

Conclusion

Focusing on the sociotechnical glitches engendered by death (Kneese, 2023), this article has navigated the errors and complexities that arise within platforms designed for ephemeral interactions yet tasked with storing enduring memories. The concept of glitch, originating from the Yiddish *glitsh* (meaning a "slippery place"), is appropriated in digital contexts to denote a failure or breakdown provoked by the complexities of death. These glitches that appear as technical mishandlings—such as algorithms failing to recognize death as a change in user status—are inherently social. They expose the platforms' inadequacies in handling the discontinuities between life and death, showcasing moments where the dead seem to surface from beyond through algorithmic mishaps, such as unexpected reminders from past interactions or automated birthday wishes from deceased users' accounts. Death, once again, unveils critical vulnerabilities at the intersection of human social needs and technical system designs.

The conflicting temporalities have posed challenges for humans resorting to digital archives for remembrance. The tensions translate to a design dilemma on the platform side—how to provide streamlined, scalable tools for digital memorialization while still accommodating the immense diversity of cultural mourning traditions and deeply personal grieving experiences. On one hand, platforms seek standardized, scalable solutions that can be efficiently deployed across their global user bases. On the other hand, centralized memorialization options for posthumous account management allow for operational simplicity.

The examples and discussions presented also underscore the profound impact of these platforms on grief processes and highlight the vulnerabilities of digital legacies, which are susceptible to algorithmic misjudgments and sociotechnical failures. Instances of RIP trolling and grief tourism illustrate how digital spaces, while offering new ways to commemorate and mourn, can also become arenas for data exploitation, adding to the emotional distress of the bereaved. This dual role of social media complicates the narratives of posthumous presence, where the memorialized are both honored and potentially dishonored in spaces that remain poorly regulated.

The complex, multifaceted nature of how humans process death defies one-size-fits-all approaches. Grieving is an extraordinarily intimate phenomenon shaped by innumerable cultural, religious, familial, and individual contexts. While social media facilitates human connections of all sorts, it struggles to accommodate the loss of them and the subsequent efforts to reconstruct them. The desire for streamlined technological solutions clashes with the need for nuanced, flexible spaces that can adapt to the varying mourning practices across communities and cultures. People do not experience loss through a monolithic lens. Thus, rigid platform policies will inevitably fall short for many bereaved users.

While businesses may rationalize streamlining the processes around death into systematic protocols, human experiences of grief represent a nonlinear, fragmented landscape. This tension between operational imperatives and the radically distinctive human experiences they attempt to accommodate reveals a disconnect baked into platform design. Built to foster human connection, social media's commercial goal works against its capacity to holistically contend with connections when the mortal boundaries between life and legacy begin to dissolve.

As we consider the future of memorialization in the digital age, the concept of "forgetting as an ethics of care," as discussed by Kitchin (2023, p. 172), emerges as a crucial intervention. Integrating mechanisms that mimic the natural human propensity to forget could serve as an act of care, which "protects the future of the person from a colonization by the past" (Esposito, 2017, p. 3). Forgetting ensures that digital platforms do not merely act as archives of perpetuity but also as spaces that respect the nuances of human memory and the need for closure.

Ultimately, this dialogue between remembering and forgetting invites a reevaluation of how social media platforms handle the legacies of the deceased. It challenges these platforms to evolve beyond their roles as keepers of memory to thoughtfully accommodate digital afterlives. This will require a concerted effort from technologists, ethicists, and policymakers to reimagine the algorithms and data policies that govern digital afterlives, ensuring they align more closely with the ethical imperatives of memory and forgetting. Only then can the digital landscape provide a space that truly honors the dead while compassionately supporting the living as they navigate grief in the digital age.

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