

SPECIAL ISSUE OF “THE INFORMATION SOCIETY”

The Death, Afterlife and Immortality of Bodies and Data

Editors

Connor Graham (University of Melbourne: <http://disweb.dis.unimelb.edu.au/staff/cgraham/>)

Martin Gibbs (University of Melbourne: <http://disweb.dis.unimelb.edu.au/staff/martingr/>)

Dave Kirk (University of Nottingham: <http://www.cs.nott.ac.uk/~dsk/>)

John Phillips (National University of Singapore: <http://profile.nus.edu.sg/fass/elljwp/>)

Call for papers

“Anticipation...does not evade the fact that death is not to be outstripped...”

Heidegger (1993:308)

As emergent information technologies increasingly pervade people’s lives, they are also increasingly a part of their dying and their deaths. For example, when someone dies, the connectivities and virtual communities supported by and lived through Facebook, MySpace and the like are transformed from viscous, ‘living’ portrayals of individuals in burgeoning personal social networks to digital memorials and components in more inert structures for someone who was. (Digital) photographs and video clips become a way to remember, commemorate, preserve and define various forms of digital immortality. Digital fragments such as text messages, Web pages, social networking sites, blog comments and so on populate an identity that promises to linger through these shards of ourselves as never before. However, as bodies decay and decompose after death, so do the digital fragments of the deceased slowly ossify and become fixed yet fragmentary traces of the life that once was. These “digital life documents” (Plummer, 1983) are then not only dependent on the producer and their immediate connections. They are also supportive of connections that remain after the producer is no longer alive as a part of larger ecologies of interests and exchanges where rules and customs are still evolving. They move from being part of the milieu of simultaneity (Jaureguiberry, 2000) to the property of history and “glacial time” (Urry, 2000).

“As people spend more time at keyboards, there’s less being stored away in dusty attics for family and friends to hang on to...The pieces of our lives that we put online can feel as eternal as the Internet itself, but what happens to our virtual identity after we die?”

[Faure, 2009]

Attention has recently turned to how social networking sites can become a form of memorial (Fletcher, 2009; Faure, 2009; Kera and Foong, 2009; van den Hooven, 2008) and how emergent technologies can define new forms of immortality and afterlife. As demonstrated by the quotation above, there is a temptation to apply what we know of the analogue world to the digital and argue, as with paper and offices (Sellen and Harper, 2002), that digital media will simply replace the physical stuff of rituals, ceremonies and ongoing remembering. These are the kinds of assumptions we wish to question and probe through this special issue. Our interests extend beyond commentary, discussion and debate around remembering and commemoration. They also extend beyond consideration of issues of access (i.e. who can get at the remains of the dead and how), representation (i.e. how the dead and their remains can be represented), control (i.e. who manages the transition from being to being remembered and how this is done) and maintenance (i.e. who is responsible for keeping the dead’s fragments available, accessible etc). Through examples drawn from actual cases, thorough analyses and well-argued conceptual discussions we also wish to address the practical, social, conceptual and ethical issues with:

- dealing with the physical and digital remnants of the once living.
- the ongoing management of the social ties between the living and the dead.

- the management of the 'stuff' (i.e. bodies, data, objects) involved in death.
- the possible extension of 'being-in-the-world' through the hybridisation of once living, sentient beings with other biological and robotic entities.
- support for death cults (e.g. www.vhemt.com) and desecration through digital technologies.
- the potential for immortality through digital macabre celebrations of death (e.g. www.mydeathspace.com), digital mashups of the dead's digital fragments (e.g. www.dziga.com/human-victor).
- new forms of grieving and commemorating via emerging technologies through, for example, the generation of digital archives for individuals and 'those that follow' alike (e.g. www.croptrust.org).
- different visions of the preservation, afterlife and immortality of self and society through the digital.
- cultural issues with dying, death, afterlife and technology.

We also wish to reflect on how the apparent ubiquity and uniformity of new technologies contrasts starkly with the diversity of beliefs and cultural practices with regard to dying, death and afterlife. Some of the questions we wish to address through this special issue include (but are not restricted to):

- How do we appropriately design, store and archive the dead's digital fragments and how can grieving, remembering and 'letting go' be supported through them?
- What are the issues around ordinary technologies transforming into memorials, evoking powerful memories, nostalgia etc?
- How will this ever-increasing mass of 'dead' data be managed and by whom?
- Should 'freedom of choice' concerning death be supported/promoted/safeguarded against through technologies such as social networking tools?
- What are the legal and ethical implications of digital desecration and the hybridisation of (the remains of) the dead with the living?
- What are the implications of and insights provided by the inevitable end of 'civilisation' for the design and management of digital resources?

These issues promise not only to stretch our analytical approaches and tools but also our methods, methodologies and ethical frameworks. Thus we wish to elicit submissions that address themes relevant to this call and, more generally, to "The Information Society" journal (<http://www.indiana.edu/~tisi/>). Through eliciting these responses we hope to gather together in a single volume a series of high quality, scholarly articles that are accessible to non-specialists to deepen our understanding of issues concerning technology, death and afterlife and immortality through new data, perspectives, conceptual treatments and/or analyses.

Submissions

Appropriate longer submissions (up to 7,500 words) include:

- Extended reports from the field;
- Critical literature reviews;
- Discursive pieces exploring themes;
- Deployments/evaluations of relevant technologies.

Shorter submissions (4,000 words) can include:

- Reflections on approaches and methods;
- Opinion pieces;

- Early reports on studies of technologies in situ;
- Design proposals addressing particular themes.

Papers will be due on 8th November 2010. We will aim to return reviews with feedback on acceptance/rejection and the need for any changes four months after that.

We recommend authors familiarise themselves with the scope and demands of “The Information Society” journal (<http://www.indiana.edu/~tisj/>) before submitting. Submission guidelines for authors are available from: <http://www.indiana.edu/~tisj/contributors/authors.html>. Authors should send digital manuscripts to: Martin Gibbs (martin [dot] gibbs [at] unimelb [dot] edu [dot] au) or Connor Graham (cgraham [at] unimelb [dot] edu [dot] au). Authors should also feel free to correspond with the special issue editors if they have any questions or are planning to submit an article.

References

- Faure, G. (2009). August 18, 2009. How to Manage Your Online Life When You're Dead. Available online [<http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1916317,00.html>]. Accessed November 2009.
- Fletcher, D. (2009). What Happens to Your Facebook After You Die? Time. October 28, 2009. Available online [<http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1932803,00.html>]. Accessed November 2009.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). Being and Time, translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. New York: Harper.
- Jaureguiberry, F. Mobile Telecommunications and the Management of Time. Social Science Information (Information sur les Sciences Sociales). 2000; 39(2): 255–268
- Foong P.S. & Kera D. 2008. Applying Reflective Design To Digital Memorials. SIMTech '08. Cambridge, UK.
- Plummer, K. Documents of Life: An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method. London: Allen & Unwin; 1983
- Sellen, A., & Harper, R. H. R. (2002). The Myth of the Paperless Office. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- van den Hoven, E., Smeenk, W., Bilsen, H., Zimmermann, R., de Waart, S., and van Turnhout, K. (2008) Communicating Commemoration. In Graham, C. and Rouncefield, M. (2008) Proceedings of the Second International Workshop on Social Interaction and Mundane Technologies (SIMTech'08). Lancaster University.
- Urry, J. (2000). Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century, London: Routledge.