

Living and dying on social media



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Many of us share our lives online, but what happens to our digital identity when we die? **Georgina Cronin** argues that we have the professional skills to offer support to our users who may be going through the worst times of their lives, and offers advice on how to manage a digital legacy.

DID you know that one in every one people are going to die? Death is the one thing that is guaranteed to happen to us all at some point in our lives. It is an inevitability.

Another near-inevitability is that many of us will live out our lives in some way online, through social media and other such platforms. We share our holiday snaps, blog about our work, tweet to our friends and colleagues, and promote ourselves through professional networks on a daily basis. I have taught about using social media for much of my career, whether it is through using it as an outreach tool or to promote a personal brand. A lot of emphasis is placed upon being reactive and responsive on social media and that representing yourself honestly and openly is key.

But what happens when that all stops? The person who regularly updates their Facebook falls silent or the regular photos of someone's life stop appearing on Instagram. Or even a final message is posted, as in the case of Star Trek icon Leonard Nimoy, reflecting upon life before logging off. Many of us have experienced the death of loved ones and colleagues, but in the digital age, the process of grief and handling the affairs of the deceased have changed quite dramatically.

Mourning online

Death used to be a very public part of life, with many people dying at home and the deceased being laid out in a parlour space for people to view. Before the 20th century, you could not avoid death, as it was a regular part of people's lives, with high infant mortality rates and many people living in cramped accommodation. However as time progressed, more people died in hospitals or in care homes, away from others and in a very private way. Death became hidden and an almost taboo topic of conversation. However, as John Troyer of the University of Bath's Centre for Death and Society argues, death is not actually a taboo, we are just not encouraged to talk about it.

Yet, in the digital age, this conversation is

happening online more and more frequently. I have been researching and writing about death for the past few years but most of the contact that I have with the death community is online through blogs and social media platforms. Without those forums, the conversation would possibly not be happening at all. Death has been a part of the internet from the very beginning, with HTML memorial sites being commonplace. The use of social media to communicate death and dying extends this further with more people voicing their grief and loss in powerful Facebook posts and essays. Those who know they are going to die from having a terminal illness have used social media to talk about their experiences and even to campaign for charities or right-to-die legislation.

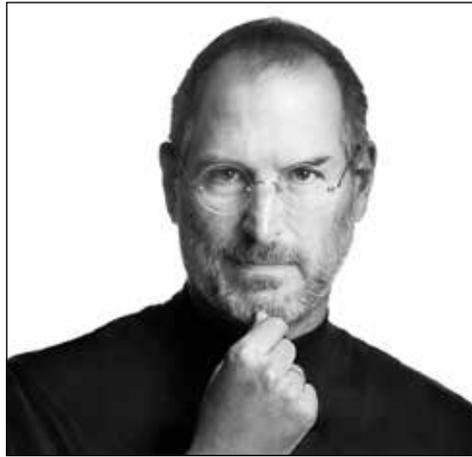
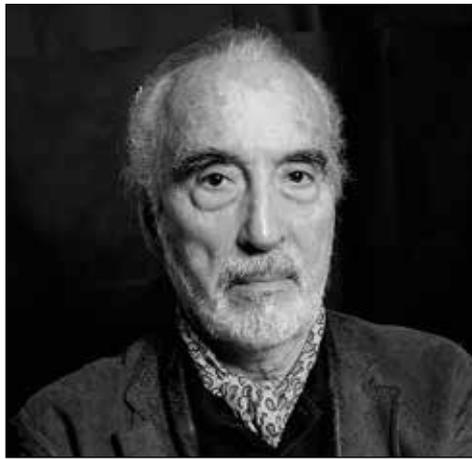
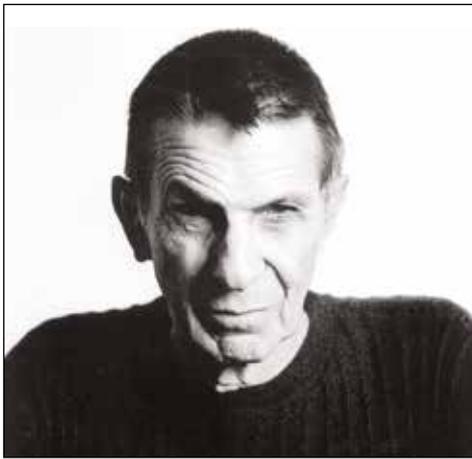
But what happens when someone has died and their online accounts are just sitting there, open to the world? I have had the thoroughly disconcerting experience of having LinkedIn suggest that I connect with someone whose funeral I had just attended. While upsetting, I knew it was also simply that LinkedIn's algorithms could see that we had people in common. However, according to an interesting bit of maths carried out by popular online comic *xkcd*, by 2065 the number of dead people on Facebook (assuming no data is ever deleted) will exceed the living. A sobering thought, but also a fascinating one when you start thinking about information and data management, something we librarians are all too familiar with.

Handling your online digital legacy

While my death research and social media teaching have been separated into personal/professional interests, that recently changed when I attended a free Digital Legacy conference run by DeadSocial. DeadSocial is a service that provides tools and advice for people looking to handle their digital legacies after they have gone and it has a hugely informative website. The overlap of death into my professional



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The online legacy of famous people, or the not-so-famous, could last many years after they have passed away. Many social media accounts are kept active either by the family estate, friends or for commercial purposes, while some are kept open simply as a memoriam.

life became quite pronounced when during the conference we discussed a wide range of topics that fed directly into my work as an information professional – research data management, online licences, intellectual property... the list goes on. It suddenly struck me that these are skills that we have as a profession and we could possibly offer support that our users could benefit from when going through some of the worst times of their lives.

While talking and thinking about death may seem morbid to some, being as fully prepared as possible for when the inevitability of it catches up with you means that the people left behind will have some comfort in knowing that everything is taken care of or at least accounted for. There is nothing worse (trust me, I know) than dealing with someone's estate when already

upset and realising that there is no will and a mountain of paperwork to decipher. While banks and other institutions can help out quite readily, online assets can make everything a lot more complicated.

Hearing from the various experts at the DeadSocial conference gave me a lot of ideas as to how I will ensure that my affairs are in order. Many of these ideas are things that we can all benefit from, not only as individuals, but also as professionals assisting our colleagues and users who may be trying to work through the quagmire of death and grief. It does not make the loss any less painful, but it does make it just that bit more bearable.

Getting access to social media

So, you may have a Twitter account, a Facebook account, emails and other bits and pieces

that hold huge amounts of your life in them. What do you do to ensure that people can get access to this once you are gone?

Thankfully, Facebook has been working on this problem for some time after a lot of pressure from users who were experiencing the additional loss of finding their loved one's profiles had been deleted without warning, taking with them photos and memories that were irretrievable. To avoid this happening, you can now nominate a Legacy Contact. This is a person who you trust to look after your Facebook profile once it has been 'memorialised' by adding pre-arranged messages, accepting friend requests and other such maintenance. Importantly, this contact cannot change any previous posts, read private messages or actually log in to your profile in any way. Google also offers a similar service, where

you can nominate a specific person to act as your 'inactive account manager' after you have gone.

The same cannot be said for other popular services. At the time of writing, Twitter will remove a person's account after proof of death has been provided, such as a death certificate, but they will not allow any form of access or memorialisation of a person's account. This practice is extremely common for most other online providers.

Nominating a digital executor

While not strictly a legally recognised concept in UK law (although that will hopefully change in the future), nominating a digital executor in your will should ensure that a trusted person will be able to gain access to your accounts and deactivate them if you wish. Ensuring that a list of your accounts and password details are in a safe place that your executor can access is a key part of this process, especially as this information cannot be given to your solicitor to be used due to complications with the Computer Misuse Act.

If you are not comfortable with the idea of handing over your passwords, then you can make an effort to back up the content that you have online as often as possible. With around 300 million photos uploaded onto Facebook every day, for many people that is the only place that these images exist and once they are gone, there is no way of getting them back. You can hand this media on to your loved ones in a form of an external hard drive or data transfer. Most importantly, document what you want to happen with your accounts. You might want to

actually leave your blog online for people to refer to if you have written about significant things, or if you simply want it to stay as a memory of you for others.

Backing up any music or film-based material is also advised as it is impossible to bequest your online library, such as through Apple, to anyone else. As is the case with those all too familiar e-books, you only purchase the licence to access the resource and not perpetual access. That licence is effectively terminated upon your death.

Intellectual property

Intellectual property is where things get really interesting. What are your digital assets? There is no clear legal definition. Online banking accounts are fairly easy to quantify as being a digital asset, but what about that Ebay account or that Dropbox account? Assets also have different values such as financial, social or sentimental. A good example of this is when J.G. Ballard died, he had a fair amount of unpublished work on his laptop which then had to be valued as intellectual property. An additional complication is if assets are stored on servers that are not based in the UK. PayPal is in Luxembourg and Yahoo! is in the USA. If they have a request for access to those assets from the UK, they do not necessarily have to honour it. This is why, as previously mentioned, backing up everything as much as possible is so important.

This feeds into our professional roles as many of us advise on good research data management practice. Imagine if a large, funded research project was underway

when one researcher died suddenly. They were the only one with the login details to the project's cloud storage space and so all of that research and funding is in jeopardy. Not only is this a good example of the over-reliance on one storage method but also the worrying ease with which this sort of thing could realistically happen. I am sure we can all recall a time where a panicked user has come to us in floods of tears because they have lost the USB stick that had all their work on it or their laptop has been stolen. This is no different a situation and one that we can advise on and assist with before anything goes too terribly wrong.

The intellectual property, and value of that property, stored on servers and drives around the world is immeasurable and the thought of it being lost because someone did not pass their login credentials on to someone else is a tragic loss of information.

Library legacies

I wanted to write this article to share ideas and viewpoints about death and social legacies to inspire and spark ideas. We deal with a wide range of people every day whether it's students and academics in university libraries, or teenagers and the elderly in public libraries. Regardless of our audiences, death touches all of our lives and through being informed and prepared, we can make it all just that little bit easier on ourselves and one another. Libraries can be a part of this process through offering training, support and resources to help people along the way. That is what we are there for after all. [U]

