

THINGS TO DO IN THE DIGITAL AFTERLIFE WHEN YOU'RE DEAD

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There are currently few procedures or public awareness about what happens to online digital identities after death. This paper discusses what happens with personal electronic information after death and looks to what is argued to be the rapidly approaching digital Afterlife. This afterlife of new emergent behaviour offers a challenge of almost unimaginable scope to the creative vision of Artists, Philosophers, Technologists and Cultural thinkers.

Introduction

As more people live increasing amounts of their lives online the issues associated with physical death in the digital realm are becoming pressingly visible. Year by year deceased users leave behind petabytes of seemingly 'immortal' data. Yet despite growing amounts of such legacy data there is currently little legal or cultural precedent as to how to treat the personal data of dead users.

"five billion images and counting on Flickr; hundreds of thousands of YouTube videos uploaded every day; oceans of content from 20 million bloggers and 500 million Facebook members; two billion tweets a month." [1]

"One and a half million Facebook users die each year. Twitter faces a similar mortality rate. It's a growing problem for the social-networking sites - and often even more so for the relatives left behind." [2]

"We feel comfortable saying that 375,000 US based Facebook users will die this year and nearly 1.5m will die worldwide. That's 3 per minute!" [3]

The industry giants have, it could be argued, largely ignored or evaded the discussion of how to deal with legacy data. An early indication of this may be the tragic case of L/Cpl Justin Ellsworth. A US Marine killed on active duty whose parents fought Yahoo! Inc. in Oakland County Court. Their fight was for the right to their son's correspondence whilst he was posted overseas. Yahoo! argued that their terms and conditions prevented transfer of any users account, even after death. The court ruled in favour of the Ellsworth family and Yahoo! were ordered to hand over all data. [4] [5]

Historical dealings with the issues of legacy, inheritance, privacy and ownership associated with personal data in the social media arena has been subdued at best. Many of the businesses involved have as their financial lifeblood the 'positive externalities' of users interactions with the, largely free, services and tools they provide. Tools that are eagerly consumed by billions of people across hundreds of nations.

In recent years, however, the issue of legacy data has become more visible in the public consciousness. Correspondingly there are a small but increasing number of tools and services, waiting to serve what can only be seen as a significant growth market. Tools helping people deal with the issues of legacy data online. From mydeathspace.com, amongst the first to gain public notoriety, to the recent entrant to the arena legacylocker.com. LegacyLocker, for a fee, will hold your digital passwords and essential documents in preparation for handing them over to your nominated executors after your demise. Their ser-

VICES even afford you the ability to send personalized messages after receiving confirmation of your corporeal end. Similarly, Entrustet.com offer a variety of services to the living to help manage their data after death including AccountGuardian and seemingly conversely AccountIncinerator. The latter delicately described to be useful so that;

“My family won't have to spend time deleting my online accounts after I pass away. I want my friends and family to remember me for me, not my Facebook profile” [6]

There are an increasing number of writers and commentators investigating the area of user death, legacy data and the persistence of our online expressions. The primary focus of many discussions, however, deals solely with concepts of legacy and inheritance. Whilst there are many significant issues to address regarding the peculiarities of data some experts argue that there may be ample social, cultural and legal precedents to deal with the issues of those that pass away, the people that survive them and how their effects, chattels and assets are dealt with. After thousands of years the legal and cultural framework for dealing with the inevitabilities of death are generally well defined. Though the issue of legacy data is new it may be that the current difficulties experienced by surviving friends and relatives of deceased users will be diminished as the legal establishment slowly moves to accommodate this new phase in social existence.

One amongst the new ‘Digital Legacy’ discourse is Digital Death Day. DDD is an annual celebration and discussion of all things digital and ‘end of life’ and this years conference in Europe is billed as;

“...primarily concerned with provoking discourse around the social, cultural and practical implications of Death in the Digital World. Thus stimulating a reconsideration of how death, mourning, memories and history are currently being augmented in our technologically mediated society.” [7]

and the suggested professionals that should attend include;

“Funeral Director, Data Systems Admin, Digital Designer, Grief Counselor, Solicitors and Barristers in Intellectual Property and Estate Law, and Clergy.” [8]

Previously a more unlikely attendee roster could scarcely be imagined.

Digital Death Day is one of several initiatives bringing public and academic questions together with business commentators. The objective, to create meaningful dialog and document good practice when dealing with the basic problem:

Users Die

When looking at the current state of discussion regarding issues of mortality and persistence of personal data there is a lag between the academic sphere and the general public discourse. Looking at issues associated with data persistence and legacy there is a proliferation of articles and opinions being expressed within mainstream media.

The nature of how, where and why this data is created captured and stored. Also the relationships that the public has with the, largely, monolithic organisations that started the trend of ubiquitous data capture are under review.

Understanding of 'personal data', its' complexity, its' persistence and its' inherent value in what is sometimes referred to as the 'attention economy' amongst the general public is increasing. [9]

Doc Searls from Harvard University argues further than this by making the distinction that there is a converse 'Intention Economy' when he writes;

"The Intention Economy grows around buyers, not sellers." [10]

Searls expands this idea in the area commonly referred to as VRM, Vendor Relationship Management. [11]

It can be argued that there is a burgeoning awareness of the nature of the hidden exchange that takes place with web service providers such as Google, Yahoo!, Facebook, Twitter et Al. The most dramatic illustration amongst the general users of online services surrounds that of ownership and administration of personal data. This is brought home most strongly with the situation of what to do with the digital expressions left by dead users.

Year by year as more of the general public begins to understand the depth and inherent value of their personal data there is an increasing impetus behind projects dealing with protection of personal data and the Portability and interoperability of personal data. This is both working alongside and a partial product of issues of privacy, estate and inheritance of personal legacy data.

VRM, Vendor Relationship Management is a natural counterpart to the ideas and practices of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) are beginning to reshape the argument around our relationship with service providers and our personal data. That the very data about our lives is no longer considered to be just 'a positive externality' for service providers of the interactions we have them but is something that is intrinsically valuable, both in a personal and commercial sense.

"VRM tools provide customers with the means to bear their share of the relationship burden with vendors and other organizations. They relieve CRM of the perceived need to "target," "capture," "acquire," "lock in," "direct," "own," "manage," and otherwise take the lead of relationships with customers. With VRM operating on the customer's side, Customers are also involved as participants, rather than as followers." [12]

"The primary theory behind ProjectVRM is that many market problems (including the widespread belief that customer lock-in is a 'best practice') can only be solved from the customer side: by making the customer a fully-empowered actor in the marketplace, rather than one whose power in many cases is dependent on exclusive relationships with vendors, by coerced agreement provided entirely by those vendors." [13]

The Berkman Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard University
(Harvard University, 2011)

Currently several projects and specialised areas of discourse are looking at aspects related to this area including, OpenID, OAuth, OpenSocial, VRM, (vendor relationship management), PDS (personal data spaces,) the Mine! Project, Identity Commons et al.

Approaches such as FOAF, Friend of a Friend, RDF, Resource Description Framework, and other related semantic technology approaches use data definitions to rigorously define relationships between pieces of information. With the goal of altering the outpouring of discrete pieces of digital content into a sea of congruent pearls of related, discernable, malleable information.

“FOAF is a project devoted to linking people and information using the Web. Regardless of whether information is in people's heads, in physical or digital documents, or in the form of factual data, it can be linked.” [14]

Though there is great hope for the future of the Semantic Web using technology approaches such as FOAF and RDF. There are critics of this technological approach to classifying everything with strictly defined taxonomies. Writers such as the American Cory Doctorow points out some basic realities that put a proverbial spanner in the works for an all encompassing semantic web particularly;

“When asking people to classify their own data –“People lie. People are lazy. People are stupid, know thyself is a tall order and people are notoriously poor at describing themselves and their own behaviour. Schemas aren't neutral. Metrics influence results. There's more than one way to describe something “ [15]

Next steps

When one looks at the state of legacy data, that is information and processes set in place by living users who have subsequently died, it is interesting to see this from the standpoint of the ‘post human condition’.

British writer Robert Pepperell in his 1995 publication ‘The Posthuman Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain’ argued the point that ‘Consciousness is not restricted to the brain.’ and that ‘Consciousness is the function of an organism, not an organ.’ [16]

From a PostHuman standpoint the ‘us’ of who we are is not contained within our skin, the concept of our identities is fuzzy at the edges and permeable. The ‘Who’ of who we are is a function of the expressions we make during our lives. For generations we have been extending the nature of our identities initially with simple tools and mechanical devices to extend our bodies and presence and latterly with ways to extend our minds. We can record and store our thoughts and memories externally for later retrieval with photography and text. With writing our presence can travel through time. We can even express simple decision making capabilities and behaviours that operate for us external to our bodies, in the digital realm.

It is this new ability to express capabilities and behaviours external to our bodies that is the one of the truly exciting new development of recent humanity.

It has been noted that we are entering an age of ‘Personal Automation’. Where simple cognitive and decision-making processes and functions are being externalised and automated; Using networked, digital technologies we are now able to offload parts of our behaviour to external subsystems.

Previous generations have lived on after their deaths through the extensions of their selves generated during their lives. People alive today have personal experience of William Shakespeare and have 'met' (albeit in a very small sense) Henry VIII, King of England in 16th Century. Part of who they were (corporeally) lives on through the expressions they made during their lives. We can still interact with something of them but just like the media they incorporated into themselves and their expressions thereof during their lifetimes, their ongoing presence is 'passive'.

DIGITAL IS NOT BY ITS' NATURE A PASSIVE MEDIUM.

As people express more and more of themselves in a digital, active medium I believe that there are direct, observable phenomena starting to occur within the digital realm. These phenomena point to what could be something radically new in human identity. Simple emergent behaviour is already happening as people begin leaving active digital expressions online after their deaths.

As Meredith Chin, Spokeswoman for Facebook says in her interview in Jenna Wortham's New York Times article "As Facebook users die, Ghosts reach out" [17]

"It's a very sensitive topic, and, of course, seeing deceased friends pop up can be painful." Given the site's size, "and people passing away every day, we're never going to be perfect at catching it"

James E. Katz, a Professor of Communications at Rutgers University, said the company was experiencing "a coming-of-age problem." "So many of Facebook's early users were young, and death was rare and unduly tragic," Katz said. "They don't want to be the bearer of bad tidings, but yet they are the keeper of those living memories," [18]

Perhaps it is these simple expressions of post corporeal identity that are so sensitive. Reflecting directly as they do in the living's memory of other physical beings now gone. Even in everyday colloquial parlance we are acknowledging this digital persistence and altered state of being. Lauren Laverne, a daytime DJ on 6music, a UK national radio station, talked recently of how she had been enjoying following Kurt Vonnegut on his twitter feed. Vonnegut died April 11th 2007.

Ironically on 21st August 2011 he/it tweeted "It is a very mixed blessing to be brought back from the dead"

Although these and other simple 'emergent behaviours' can be identified as basic processes I am convinced that they are a real and new as yet unquantified space & state of being identity. Exactly the issue that drives FB new policy of 'memorialisation' is the behaviour the points to evidence of an emerging 'afterlife'

THE EXCITEMENT IS IN THE POTENTIAL

The area I believe is directly related to these issues of legacy and inheritance stems directly from the problems that digital legacy seeks to address; that of persistence of our digital expressions and particularly with the 'active' nature of these digital expressions.

Stories of 'friending' suggestions for dead users on Facebook are legion, and parts of its recent policy on deceased users attempts to staunch the questions this raises. Tweets from the last.fm accounts of those no longer living or other similar behaviours from our surviving digital selves can arouse both confusion and alarm in equal parts from those still in a deceased users social circle whilst those online with no knowledge of the person's passing will initially see little difference in behaviour.

When looking from an evolutionary perspective perhaps this is v1.0 of what we might come to think of as a 'digital afterlife'. After a hundred years when we reach v75.0 we may see it as the embodiment of a real digital afterlife. Not one where people continue on as the same identity but rather as a transition phase in being with a relationship to the corporeal much like to a butterfly to a caterpillar.

This rapidly approaching digital Afterlife offers a challenge of almost unimaginable scope to the creative vision of Artists, Philosophers, Technologists and Cultural thinkers. This paper outlines some of the challenges and opportunities that are on the horizon in a current, near and far future context.

In our collective imaginations future ideas of a digital afterlife are ever-present. In art, religion, literature - seemingly all cultural arenas the question of 'what happens next' has been with us since time immemorial. In almost every aspect of 'future fiction' there is an element of persistence or even new existence after corporeal end. Ideas and concepts of 'the other' and post corporeal transcendence are deeply embedded in the human psyche. Perhaps this is the beginning of the realisation of some of these dreams and desires.

The current generation of digital natives have new and subtly altered perceptions of the personal, the social, the political, the economic and even the physical. Why not also the corporeal ?

References and Notes

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