

# Bereavement in the Digital Age: The Challenges of Online Sharing and Digital Memory Preservation

*Francesca Santi, Davide Bianchi*

Department of Mental Health, ASL4, Liguria, Italy

**Abstract.** The advent of digital networks and social networks has significantly affected, not only social behavior and daily life, but also the traditional ways of managing pain, mourning, and commemoration of the deceased. If, in the (recent) past, the presence of the deceased was limited to the memories of people who had known him, or to private photographic images that crystallized his moments of life, in the current technological context the deceased, from being “absent”, remains subject “present” in the online spaces that people use every day. Death, pain, and mourning are aspects of fundamental importance for human existence and today, thanks to the development of virtual environments accessible to all, death is brought back into the daily life of individuals. At the same time, digital technologies have given rise to new ways of expressing grief and expressing grief that transcend the traditional notions of mourning “of letting go”, to continue their journey, soliciting multiple emotionally and culturally complex questions, involving different disciplines: morality, religion, philosophy, law, and sociology. The authors intend to make some reflections on the most important digital transformations underway concerning the end of life, immortality, the elaboration of mourning and memory, and which seem to outline on the horizon a new idea of approaching and understanding death, rethought and adapted for the digital age.

**Keywords** Selfies, funeral, social media, death, ritual, mourning, technology, funerary rituals, bereavement

## Introduction: Socio-relational dynamics and digital platforms

With the advent of the digital age, we are witnessing a revolution in space and in the way in which everyday life and, also, the end of life is faced, to the point that physical death no longer coincides with digital death, allowing, the permanence of the individual in the virtual space.

According to statistics about Twitch, one of the most important live streaming platforms, there are 15 million active users per day and 1.4 million users online at any time. The majority of users are male (81.5%) and, of them, 55% are between the ages of 18 and 34, with an average age of 21 years (1, 2). The population involved therefore involves an age group in which the transition from adolescence to the adult world takes place and an evolutionary phase that involves impor-

tant and delicate changes in life and identity definition (3). Furthermore, stressful events that affect every age of life, such as divorce, mourning, or job loss, can favor the development of an experience of loneliness which can be one of the factors underlying the onset of anxiety, stress, or depression which lead to greater use of digital platforms (4).

Hilvert-Bruce et al. have also highlighted how the lack of a social network favors greater use of digital platforms, thanks also to the possibility of technology to use online communities which allows to recreate a virtual place for sharing ideas, opinions, and advice (5).

The continuous development of social platforms offers new and increasingly sophisticated tools and applications to improve online interaction between various users. Every single aspect of individual and collective life is digitized: everyday life, leisure, work,

and convivial moments. Death is the last frontier of this natural process of development of online existence in the post-modern era which also triggers new behaviors of expression of pain and expression of grief.

### Funeral selfies

Funeral selfies are a growing phenomenon that consists of the practice of taking a picture of oneself in cemeteries, funeral parlors, or next to coffins during funeral ceremonies, and sharing them on social media (6).

The relationship between photography and funerary environments has a very ancient history that developed for very different reasons than those underlying the photographs taken today.

The photograph of the deceased was, as early as the late 1800s, the most common tool for crystallizing on a tangible medium the image of a person whose life photographs were not available, due to the lack of widespread use of such technology at the time. The difficulty for most of the population to be able to commission canvas portraits of dead people whose memory they would want to celebrate in the future made the photograph of the deceased the only way to remember the person (7).

Photography sought to “eternally preserve” and “immortalize” the essence of an individual through the art of capturing their image, ensuring their memory would endure for all time.

Postmortem photographs from the Victorian era provide us with interesting details: an attempt was made to depict the deceased in such a way that he or she appeared alive and, usually, in the company of a living person.

Special tricks were applied to make the appearance of the deceased more pleasing: opening and making up the eyes, moving the bodies from the coffins to more “convivial” domestic settings, and using pedestals or other supports to make the deceased appear standing or sitting composed and with a raised head, although the visual impact of such photographs is, perhaps, more intense than most of the cemetery selfies spread on social networks (7).

The personalization of death as a private fact, typical of 20th-century culture, and the possibility of taking photographs of the subject even in life, gradually made interest in this genre of photography wane.

Roberto Cotroneo, in his essay on photography and its history “The Reversed Gaze,” clearly distinguishes the nature of the selfie in the current era of social networks from that of tradition (8).

The origins of the funerary selfie typical of digitized culture can be traced back to the growing popularity of social media and the spread of smartphones and digital cameras (9). This combination of technology and online sharing has created an ideal environment for the spread of this phenomenon (10).

In 2013, journalist Jason Feifer created an Internet section dedicated to “Selfies at Funerals,” which quickly went viral (11, 12). The blog, which used photos drawn from Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, depicting young people filming themselves, via cell phone, during the funeral ceremony, provoked reactions of bewilderment and discussion.

It is certainly necessary to consider how digital has brought about an essential change in the role of photography. From being, previously, an element that essentially allowed the persistence of memory, today photography builds its centrality in defining an identity, in its communicative capacity or artistic expression.

The funeral selfie can, therefore, be understood as a form of “attending” and an attempt to share mourning with a wider social network, beyond the sharp and delimitable spatial and temporal boundaries (13). The digital photo is, therefore, repurposed as a form of communication rather than representation (14).

The motivations behind funeral selfies can be understood through various psychological and sociological theories. Among them, social identity theory suggests that people take selfies to express belonging and solidarity with a group or community (15). In addition, self-presentation theory suggests that funeral selfies can be used to show others an idealized version of themselves, emphasizing sensitivity and empathy (16, 17). Sharing a funeral selfie on social media can, in addition, be a way for people to communicate their grief and seek emotional support from their network of friends and relatives. This practice can also serve as a grieving ritual and help relatives and friends per-

petuate the memory of a loved one through new and evolved tools. Finally, funeral selfies can be taken to immortalize the moment and create a tangible memory of the experience (18). In this context, the funeral selfie serves as a visual document of the funeral and the grieving process, helping people remember the deceased and reflect on the meaning of loss.

The phenomenon of funeral selfies raises multiple questions involving a plurality of disciplines (ethics, philosophy, religion, and sociology). For example, the practice could be perceived as a lack of respect for the deceased and their family members, or an expression of superficiality, narcissism, and insensitivity to grief, as a characteristic trait of today's society (19, 20). The possibility of "containing" death, in a cell phone or tablet, could also prompt the loss of the gravity and emotional impact that such an event necessarily entails in common human feeling. Moreover, the sharing of funeral selfies could foster a more superficial, technology-mediated processing of grief. The practice would, therefore, constitute a reflection of the current Western culture that is increasingly secularized and disengaged with death. Moreover, the sharing of such images on social media could contribute to the commercialization of death and the further weakening of traditional rituals (6).

However, it has also been recognized that social media such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are increasingly integrated into the everyday personal and professional lives of many people, constituting "natural" avenues for personal expressions of grief (20).

As has been noted, sharing these images on social media can contribute to greater visibility of death, making mourning a more public and, consequently, more shared experience (6).

Although they can be seen as an expression of belonging and solidarity, however, the various implications underlying the dissemination of funeral selfies cannot be ignored. Analyzing the motivations behind this practice can, therefore, help to better understand how people cope with grief and death and help to promote a constructive debate on the management of its use in an increasingly connected society. The emergence of selfies at funerals provides further reason for reflection on the legitimacy of emerging practices associated with social media.

## Management of deceased users

Digital death is a new frontier in today's society that poses many complex ethical, anthropological, psychological, cultural, and legal questions (21). Digital death bears direct witness to the dissociation between a person's biological existence and his or her "electronic identity." The latter does not disappear with death but, completely without boundaries, remains online, fragmented and stored in virtual places and different devices, and used by an indeterminate number of people (22). All of our information, our data, our images, our stories, and our thoughts, once recorded within the digital environment, remain present, active and operational online well after death. As noted, the amount and ubiquity of data that have gradually accumulated over time are capable of creating an alter ego of the person concerned that has increasingly taken the form of an electronic body and that grows and develops in tandem with "physical" activities (23).

In some digital platforms, people are allowed to consider in advance whether their account, after death, should be deleted, turned into a memorial, or delegate its management to a trusted person. People must understand the consequences of digital immortality and reflect on their digital legacy and, in particular, the effects of physical death on digital assets. Relevant authorities (including social network platform providers and cloud space providers) should also consider digital death as an issue that has significant implications and provide regulations and guidelines on the management of the digital data of the deceased, confronting the unprecedented meaning that the concept of "immortality" takes on about both the individual and personal digital objects and information.

The concept of digital immortality does not end merely in the mere persistence of memory, even after a person's physical disappearance, but extends to the opportunity to convert parts of oneself into data to be digitized, overcoming human temporal, cognitive, bodily, and spatial limits even to reconstruct and make virtually accessible complexes of historical elements from the distant past (24). Digital immortality refers, then, to the possible immortality made possible through the persistence of digital.

There are several ways in which this may be feasible such as online data preservation, the creation of chatbots, digital avatars, and the preservation of biological data.

Generally, we can define a chatbot as a meticulously crafted computer program that aims to actively engage users in simulated dialogues, enabling seamless interaction and effective communication. A chatbot of a dead person could be programmed to replicate the behavior and responses of the deceased person using artificial intelligence and digital data collected and then based on the processing of his or her conversations produced in life. Several companies are offering the creation of dead-person chatbots, but their creation is not without implications of a different nature. The ability to maintain relationships with the deceased through digital technologies could, for example, alter the normal grieving and detachment process, which are considered an integral part of the process of accepting death. However, the ability to preserve and harness a deceased person's legacy through technology could be an important resource, if used with the right support. For example, video and audio recordings can be used to create a kind of "digital memorial" to help the affective circle preserve the memory of the deceased.

However, it is important to consider the psychological and cultural implications of such technologies and to strike a balance between memory preservation and the detachment necessary for the grieving process.

### **Replika: My AI Friend**

Replika was created by a company called Luka, founded in 2015 in San Francisco, and developed as a tool that could help people remember and connect with their loved ones even after they are gone (25). Replika is a chatbot that uses artificial intelligence to learn about the user and replicate both physical and phonological characteristics. It is possible to choose the name, gender, clothing, and environment where the avatar lives, while also being able to configure the type of room decor and places of interest frequented by the deceased.

The software is designed to provide emotional support to its users and can be particularly useful for

the bereaved. It can ask users questions about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences and provide empathetic answers and suggestions on how to cope with more difficult times. Replika is also able to learn from interactions with users, so its answers can become increasingly personalized over time. However, many aspects of an individual's personality are influenced by interactions with the world around them, making it difficult to imagine how a program can fully replicate the complexity and facets of being human. In this sense, it is unlikely that digital automatism can completely replace the experience of a psychophysical person. It, therefore, can be interpreted as a kind of extension of that person, rather than a perfect replica.

Excessive or inappropriate use of the Replika app could result in less social interaction with decreased capacity for grieving and an increased risk of developing emotional dependence on the app. Replika cannot provide the same empathy and support as a real person and may not be suitable for all bereaved people, especially if the user has a history of mental health problems, making it necessary to seek professional help.

### **The right to be forgotten**

The growing awareness that the memory of the Internet makes easily accessible information that, before the digital age would have gradually lapsed from memory, has led to the emergence of a new right of forgetting. This is certainly a subject with still uncertain contours that, however, urges the need to make people aware that the fact that everything produced online is recorded forever.

Specifically, the EU General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR), in Article 17, specifies that the right to be forgotten applies to the personal data of deceased persons and their family members or heirs for the removal of information if it is deemed obsolete, inaccurate or no longer relevant, or if it violates the privacy rights of the deceased person.

Memory and forgetting are fundamental aspects in defining and constructing not only individual but also collective identity by enabling the transmission of culture and history (26). However, it is important to

understand the influence and possible distorting effects of social mechanisms on memory and forgetting to counter their occurrence.

According to jurist Stefano Rodotà, “freeing oneself from the oppression of memories, from a past that continues to heavily mortgage the present, becomes a goal of freedom. The right to oblivion presents itself as the right to govern one’s memory, to restore to each person the possibility of reinventing oneself, of building personality and identity by freeing oneself from the tyranny of cages in which a ubiquitous and total memory wants to lock everyone up. The past cannot be turned into a condemnation that excludes all redemption” (27).

More radical theories emphasize the opposition of the indestructibility of memory on the Net to the natural decay of human memory by calling for measures to erase online information, perhaps by affixing an expiration date to it.

## Conclusions

Death as known is the great repressed of contemporary society, an arcane component of a dark fate, impossible to evade, where the only certainty is that it is “the equalizer” that “numbers the graves” (28, 29).

In this context, studded with ambiguities and contradictions, the digital, by bringing the deceased back into the mental and even physical space of the living, seems to bring society closer to death. If the isolation of the dead persists in a space within cemeteries, distant and distinct from the places in which we live daily, Facebook has become the world’s largest digital cemetery in which to find their traces visible, offering an unprecedented opportunity to overcome the social and cultural removal of death. Messages, photographs, thoughts, and notifications of the birthday of those who are gone force us to think about death, to reflect on its role and internal presence in life.

This new and pervasive context, with its high amplification capacity, can help relatives and friends perpetuate the memory of a loved one and enable new forms of expressing condolences, which complement traditional behaviors, capable of connecting distant people and activating dialogues, beyond isolation and

individualism. Recalling the thought of Remo Bodei who, in his essay “Limit,” recalls how all civilizations and religions have elaborated cults and rituals to approach death, give it an essence, deal with it, and exorcise it, we can identify in these digital modes innovative forms of rituality typical of technological civilization (30).

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By approaching such technologies without prejudice, one could identify the use of technologies as another way than the familiar ones to overcome obstacles, grief, and difficult times and try to get better. The success that has been seen around websites or online support forums for people with serious illnesses, who have the possibility of constant access to a supportive environment where they can dialogue, confront each other, and share fears and doubts can be testimony to this possibility. Certainly, the boundaries between genuine commemoration and narcissistic display of vanity, attention-seeking, or, even, pathological manifestations can be blurred. The world of social networking is so diverse and heterogeneous that it is not possible to make precise assessments or draw definite results.

Nor is it easy to give unambiguous and absolute answers as to how to interpret this rethinking of the idea of death, and all that it entails, in the age of social networking.

Death has come out of the protective box into which society had always tried to relegate it and has entered the everyday. The era of pre-technological modernity had accustomed us to relegating and confining death and mourning to “other”, distant places, designed specifically in a distant space so as not to interfere with the normal flow of modern life.

The advent of digital society and social networks has radically changed this framework and this idea. Death has seamlessly and very visibly become part of this connected society. The dead or the sick in the terminal phase of their illness are reclaiming their place in the online society that has begun to include them in a process of integration that has brought them protagonists on screens, and social and digital platforms.



In the difficulty of correctly interpreting what it means to build, maintain and lose relationships and identities that are formed in the virtual, however, it seems necessary to maintain a broad gaze, capable of looking without preconceptions at the ongoing change that is changing the way the younger generations, but not only them, now relate to the idea of death. At the same time, there is an urgent need for effective integration between Death Education, which aims to encourage reflection on death as a natural consequence of life, and digital culture so that the constant presence of the dead in the online world and on social networks is interpreted correctly and does not become a tool for distancing oneself from the reality of death, making us perceive it as a fiction and thus making its removal even more pathological.

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### Corresponding author:

Francesca Santi

Department of Mental Health, ASL4, Liguria, Italy

E-mail: fra.santi@hotmail.it