‘Tech platforms haven’t been designed to think about death’: meet the expert on what happens online when we die

Publication Date: 2023-09-30

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Section: Technology

Tags: Technology, The Observer, Social media, Facebook, X, LinkedIn, features

Article URL: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/sep/30/technology-tamara-kneese-death-glitch-digital-afterlife-death-remains

Tamara Kneese studies how people experience technology. She is a senior researcher at New York-based nonprofit Data & Society Research Institute. Her new book, Death Glitch, examines what happens to our digital belongings when we die, and argues that tech companies need to improve how they deal with death on their platforms for the sake of all our digital posterity. The posthumous fate of our digital belongings seems a morbid topic. Why is it important? Not many people think about their digital legacy, but our digital belongings are accumulating. There are both pragmatic and sentimental reasons why your loved ones, after your death, might care about them. And preservation matters for historical, collective memory too. The problem is, there is no clear mechanism for passing digital belongings from one generation to the next. Our digital possessions are getting lost in the ether – not only because our loved ones might not even be aware of what accounts we have, but because tech platforms haven’t been designed to anticipate or think about death. What might our digital remains include? Blogs, email accounts and social media profiles are obvious examples. There are also all the photos and music playlists we keep in the cloud, mobile payment apps and digital avatars. And then all the data that our phones, wearable technologies and smart objects capture and collect. Where specifically are the tech companies coming unstuck? Something that a lot of mourners find disconcerting is when they receive automated prompts from social networking platforms telling them to friend somebody who has died, or connect with their dead spouse. Some platforms such as Twitter [now known as X] and TikTok lack a mechanism to treat a profile as being that of a dead person. Or, as in the case of LinkedIn, a mechanism exists but most people are not aware of it or don’t use it. And while most platforms do offer an ability to download your archive, which you can then bequeath, it is far from straightforward. Platforms can also delete dormant accounts, which can have repercussions. And there are also no guarantees how long any of the platforms we participate in will survive. That death hasn’t been baked into tech platforms to begin with is a sign of a particular kind of privilege: these products emanate from people who haven’t had to think too much about the messiness of human existence. Facebook, the largest social networking site, has a more well-known memorialisation mode for profiles, which allows for the person to be mourned and remembered. Doesn’t that solve the problem? Facebook has done a lot of work around how it handles death since it unintentionally became a place for mass mourning following the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007, and it deserves some credit for that. But because it is trying to enact a form of death care at such a scale, it is a one-size-fits-all solution. There is no room for different cultural

contexts or individuality. At a practical level there's a sea of bureaucracy that family members must wade through to get a profile memorialised or deleted. A more recent Facebook feature – appointing a legacy contact to be the guardian of your profile after you die – hasn't been popular. People don't want to think about dying, and who you want to steward your profile might change. Are there ramifications for platforms in accumulating the dead? It has been predicted that by 2070 the number of dead users on Facebook will outnumber the living… There is commercial value in memorialising dead users on a site: it helps keep family and friends coming back. But the commercial and perhaps even the sentimental value of a digital graveyard peters out at a point. Maintaining all dead users' data for ever is really not cost effective and has an environmental toll. Storage relies on massive energy-intensive datacentres and servers. Cost is part of the reason why companies have started quietly removing inactive accounts. Managing and maintaining the data of the dead is an act of love, but it also takes work on the part of survivors. What labour goes into preserving digital content? In the case of a Facebook profile, the built-in memorialisation mechanism can make it a little bit easier. But, say, if it is a personal blog – I looked at illness blogs – often the loved one will have to pay domain name and web-hosting fees to keep it going, and then they may also find they are maintaining relationships with readers; answering emails from new readers and keeping bonds going with a larger network. Other labour might involve updating formats and moving content either from one hard drive to another (external hard drives don't last for ever) or between cloud providers because one has gone bankrupt. Paper letters or physical photographs need care too, of course, but not the same degree of perpetual upkeep. Thanks to generative AI, chatbots and deepfakes are being presented as steps towards digital immortality. Companies promise to train chatbots ahead of our death or to replace loved ones. There are plans for digital assistants that manifest deepfake voices of dead relatives. Could this be a cheap way for us all to achieve some semblance of living for ever? The notion of creating a digital clone of yourself – a data double – feels possible, given the huge amounts of data that people collect about themselves in their everyday lives. But I wouldn't liken this form of preservation to immortality in any kind of real way. Even just on a practical level, who is going to maintain these systems over time? There are also ethical and emotional repercussions to consider. There's a problem of consent in terms of creating AI versions of people who have died. And bequeathing a chatbot version of yourself could make it hard for a loved one who is trying to move on. To what extent is passing on any digital legacy likely to just be a burden on the next generation? Might we be better just letting things go? The difficulty, of course, is you never really know what will be considered significant – either by loved ones or for collective purposes. But I don't think we should expect all the digital stuff we accumulate now, across a lifetime, to be passed on. There's a hubris involved with imagining that you can control your own digital immortality to that extent. You argue that smart objects may make for weird inheritances. How so? Smart objects are often programmed according to one person's specifications and preferences, so to inherit them can feel a bit like you are being haunted. I interviewed people who had been caretakers for different kinds of smart homes where somebody has either died or moved away. And what happened over time is that the perfectly planned systems started glitching and breaking down. An alarm system developed an uncanny bug, light schedules fell out of sync, reprogramming smart blinds remained unfathomable. It became a struggle for control. Digital estate-planning startups promise to organise people's online possessions and make plans on their death for disposal or bequeathment. How wary of them should we be? These first started appearing in the late 2000s, often backed up by Silicon Valley venture capital and many had a playful bent. For example, you could write emails to be sent to loved ones after your death so you could potentially get the last word in an argument or reveal secrets never spoken in life. Many of the earlier ones have gone out of business, though new ones keep replacing them. I would be wary about signing up for any service that promises to manage anything far into the future. Whether the larger platforms will stand the test of time is tenuous, let alone small startups. Can't you just pass on an account to a loved one by leaving them your password? Legally speaking, you are not supposed to. A platform creates a contract with one person, and when they die so does the contract. Also, passwords aren't reliable – people change them – and with something finance-related it might flag fraud detection systems that could end up making a loved one's lives more complicated. What would make the preservation of digital remains less precarious? First, I don't actually think companies should be responsible for people's entire digital afterlives and legacy. But we need companies to think about these things more carefully and put resources into doing that. Regulation that mandates companies to have a comprehensive way of dealing with digital remains may provide the most robust way forward. At the collective level we have the nonprofit Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, but that doesn't capture private social media profiles. We don't need to preserve everything, but it is alarming to think about all the archives that will be lost. How are you planning to handle your digital remains? I have yet to create a digital estate plan for myself, but there is a simple guide with an approach I like. It suggests starting by writing a list of your digital belongings and then thinking about whether you want to delete or preserve them, bearing in mind the significance to you and what you think it would be to the people you're leaving behind. Death Glitch: How Techno-Solutionism Fails Us in This Life and Beyond by Tamara Kneese is published by Yale University Press (£27.50). To support the Guardian and Observer order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply