Abstract
This paper addresses the ways in which our cultural understanding of death is changed by the digital afterlife and the affordances of the Internet. Since the advent of the digital age, we now interact, create and conduct business online leaving a digital footprint that remains even after we die; there is now a growing popular cultural awareness of this and online start-ups have been quick to capitalise on our need to make provision for our digital assets. Social platforms have allowed for Web memorialisation, emergence of new grieving practices and expansion of traditional mourning rituals, however, there are a number of issues related to digital assets and these online mourning practices. At present, there is no consensus as to how social media company policies on deceased user accounts are handled, an area that is further muddied by legal issues of ownership and privacy. Furthermore user interface design does not currently make provision for the death of users and the social processes around online mourning were found to be complex and at times damaging to the bereaved. The expansion of our digital lives, the end of ‘sequestered death’, new mourning practices and issues associated with these changes, have, this paper argues, expanded, changed, and irreversibly complicated our cultural understanding of death as mediated through the Internet and communication technologies.

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Introduction
Since the advent of the Internet and computing technologies, our lives have become increasingly digitized. We interact with others and create and share media online within our social networks constructing a new type of identity (Helmond, 2009). Our bank accounts, digital photo repositories, Web sites and online social media accounts all exist separately to our physical selves; this results in a digital footprint that remains even after we die. There is a growing popular cultural awareness of the implications of these digital traces evidenced by numerous news articles and blog posts addressing the need to make provision for what happens to our digital assets after death. In addition, new mourning practices around Web memorialisation that allow for public expressions of grief and interaction with other mourners are being rapidly embraced by the bereaved.

A number of issues relating to the ‘digital afterlife’ are only now coming to light. Providers of online services do not at present fully provide for the inevitable death of their users which can at times result in culturally dissonant experiences for the bereaved. Issues surrounding privacy and ownership of online content are complicated by the inflexible and disjointed company policies on what happens to deceased user accounts. Emerging online mourning practices can also have a ‘dark side’. RIP trolling and grief tourists can shock and disturb genuine mourners, and context collapse and a perceived need for impression management can cause some bereaved people to view a memorial profile as a burden.

There is no cohesive assessment in the literature of how online memorialisation and grieving behaviours, together with the practical considerations for the dispensing of our digital assets, changes how we experience people’s death in the digital age. By investigating online grieving practices, deceased user account policies and their legal implications, and the issues around providing for and being a recipient of a digital legacy, this article will argue that a continuing digital afterlife has an impact on our mourning practices and our cultural understanding of death.
The digital afterlife

The result of the digitization of our lives is that we have ‘largely removed the physical objects … [and are] left … with only the digital representations’ [1], and despite the fact that we may still possess the artifacts of photos and letters, for example, the very means of producing, experiencing and sharing them has been transformed. From a legal standpoint, it has now become imperative to accurately define our digital traces, otherwise know as ‘digital assets,’ in order to assist executors of deceased estates. Connor (2010) in his legal comment on digital assets attempts a definition describing them as ‘any digital file on a person’s computer as well as online accounts and memberships’, including ‘digital photos, digital videos, music on iTunes ... e-mail accounts, profiles on social networking sites ... online digital photo accounts, online banking and credit card accounts, and websites or domain names owned by a person, and any online subscription accounts’ [2]. Carroll and Romano argue that these digital artifacts are part of a growing personal collection that contains enough information to retell the stories of our lives. Whether or not this is so, at the very least, our online practices unavoidably leave digital traces that will remain even after we die: our digital remains.

Emerging news articles and blog posts discussing the implications of death and our digital remains indicates a growing cultural awareness of this relatively recent phenomenon. Emily Baxter (2013a) blogs about her 29-year-old brother killed whilst serving in Afghanistan. After the initial shock and adaptation to their loss, the family is now faced with ‘grappling’ with his digital estate including making decisions about his online memorial site and whether or not it should continue. Eisenberg (2013) writes in the New York Times of the importance of making provisions for our digital assets, outlining some of the services available, offering guidelines for management of online accounts and passwords and touching on the issues of privacy and ownership related to them. Kaleem’s (2013) Huffington Post article discusses a ‘growing range of online startups’ looking to help people manage their digital estates and also focuses on the benefits and drawbacks of these services through the lens of traditional funeral service providers and the clergy. These relatively recent articles represent a growing number addressing the themes of digital death, digital estate planning and a continuing digital presence after death, or a ‘digital afterlife’.

In response to this growing cultural awareness of the digital afterlife, a number of corporations and Internet startups have established new forms of online digital legacy services. These mainly fall into two categories, asset maintenance and posthumous scheduling. Asset maintenance services exist to help people prepare for and manage their digital assets ‘providing similar choices to those currently available when addressing material possessions in a formal will’ [3]. Examples of these services are Legacy Locker, Everplans and Planned Departure that allow users to store usernames and passwords and bequeath digital assets to specified persons. Posthumous scheduling services, such as Dead Social and If I Die, offer the ability to posthumously schedule social media posts. Taking this one step further, Lives On offers to continue a deceased person’s Twitter account posting updates based on an algorithm on how they have used Twitter while living (Leaver, 2013). These digital legacy services are testament to the perceived value of our online interactions and of our digital presence and represent an attempt to exert some control over what becomes of these after we die.

A unique aspect of the digital afterlife that is somewhat separate from digital estate planning is that of Web memorialisation. This can take the form of an online memorial site constructed after death such as ‘Web cemeteries’, or more recently the transformation of an online social media profile into a memorial profile, where the most prolific examples occur on Facebook. A number of authors have addressed the phenomenon of the Internet affording new ways of memorialisation and sharing of grief experiences. Gibson (2007) notes that the Internet has expanded the ways in which we access death imagery as well as facilitating communication and story telling about death and dying. The fact that we now have the ability to access more information and to interact with and communicate with online networks allows us to extend our engagement with death and mourning practices beyond the physical and local. Jones (2004) observes that the technology of the Internet has increased the ‘number of ways we have to maintain presence’ [4] which perhaps logically extends after death when that very presence persists. Roberts and Vidal (2000) carried out a study of Web memorial sites, otherwise known as Web memorials and observed how the bereaved are rapidly embracing this opportunity for remembering their dead [5] and are making use of the technology of the Internet in order to mark the ‘joy and loss that characterize human existence’ [6]. Through the use of computing technology and the Internet as a means to further express grief, the bereaved are extending their online practices of interacting online through social media networks and through the creating and sharing of data within those networks.

Facebook memorials in particular have gained attention due to their popularity and emerging practices around their use. In 2009, Facebook acknowledged the limitations of its then current policies on deceased person’s profiles by allowing the bereaved the choice of either deleting or memorialising the profile, with memorialising being the default option. By memorialising a profile it is changed so that contact information and status updates are removed. Also it no longer appears in interaction suggestions and only existing friends can search for and interact with the profile (Kelly, 2009). Because memorialized profiles are restricted in this way, users have turned to public memorial pages usually for high-profile deaths (Leaver, 2013). Both types of Facebook memorial spaces have become very popular. At the end of 2012, it was estimated that three million Facebook user profiles had become memorialized (Kaleem, 2012) which leads us to ask the question as to why this particular form of online mourning has been embraced.

Church (2013) analysed a number of Facebook memorial profiles all of which create ‘an aesthetic identity gravescape whereupon future members of the community may come to observe traces of that presence’ [7]. He deduces that the affordances of both the Internet and Facebook in particular, allow people the unique experience of appearing to commune with the deceased person directly, and because they are doing so publicly they are also ‘strengthen[ing] the communal experience’ [8]. Brubaker, et al. (2013) have also addressed Facebook in particular as a site that allows for expansion of public mourning. They found that social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook not only serve as ‘archives’ of the deceased but also serve as ‘social space[s] for the bereaved’ and that these new uses of SNS profiles has been largely ‘unanticipated’ [9]. By affording people the opportunity of paying their respects
in a public way they are not only mourning the deceased person but also forging bonds with others who are also grieving.

Issues to consider

With the growing number of services designed to assist with digital estate planning, and the perceived benefits of being able to express grief and mourning through online memorialisation, a number of issues related to these practices are emerging. Problems of user interface design, privacy and ownership, user account company policies, and the sometimes-problematic social processes around mourning online are becoming apparent. Within the field of human-computer interactions (HCI) Massimi and Charise (2009) recognize that modern computing technologies are 'are not yet designed to effectively acknowledge ... the inevitable death of their user' [10]. The dominant discourse in HCI design refers to users as 'static and eternal' [11] and even 'lifespan-oriented' development models have still not addressed death explicitly as an end-of-life stage.

Massimi, et al. (2011) also suggest that technology has the potential to complicate our experience of the death of others when, for example, the bereaved receive voice-mail messages from the deceased, or view the deceased person's 'likes' on a Facebook feed. When the bereaved are faced with a deceased person's personal computer they may feel obligated to begin the complicated task of sorting out which information is to be kept or discarded. Emily Baxter (2013b) writes about her mixed feelings of curiosity and reticence about accessing her deceased brother's laptop. The family decided on allowing an acquaintance that did not know him to make decisions about the content he would have most likely preferred to keep private, while they freely accessed the rest. Massimi, et al. (2011) ask the question of whether there may be better tools designed to help people contextualise their digital information for different groups of potential future beneficiaries allowing them to bequeath this information in 'more elegant and meaningful ways' [12]. The emerging work in HCI seeks to address how to better design systems aligned with the concept of 'thanatosensitivity', that is a sensitivity to the issues surrounding death and dying. Future HCI design needs to focus on systems that support and respect the bereaved, shed light on how technology is being used at the end of life, and how information about deceased persons is presented or used.

Another area of contention is the confused nature of privacy and legal ownership of digital assets and online user accounts. In Connor's (2010) legal comment on digital assets and estate planning, he discusses what online services are doing in regards to the accounts of their deceased patrons' [13]. He cites an example of a court case involving a deceased Unites States Marine whose father wished to access his Yahoo e-mail account. Yahoo declined the father's request on user privacy grounds but later the father was granted access by a Michigan court. At present, social media company policies on deceased person's accounts are problematic. As previously discussed, since 2009, Facebook offer the bereaved a choice of memorialising a deceased person's account (their 'policy' or preferred option) or deleting it completely. Memorialising the account requires submitting an online form including a link to an obituary or other form of 'proof' of death. Deleting the account completely involves submitting a birth and death certificate and legal proof of authority to administer the deceased person's estate (Facebook, 2013) although of course if a bereaved person is privy to the deceased person's log in details the process of deleting the account becomes much simpler. A memorialised Facebook profile can no longer be edited and no new connections can be made which Leaver (2013) explains is a shortcoming of Facebook's policy. He argues that Facebook is a 'platform for performing identities' and as such 'digital executors' should perhaps have the ability to 'clean up or otherwise edit the final, lasting profile of a deceased ... user' [14]. Presently, however, there exists no formal process for curating a memorialized Facebook profile.

In April 2013, Google launched their new 'Inactive Account Manager' designed to enable living users to designate what becomes of their Google accounts when they die. Users can designate a particular period of inactivity after which Google will attempt to contact the inactive user. If they receive no response, Google will then either delete the account and all its contents or distribute the account contents to up to 10 designated close contacts dependent on the previously stated wishes of the user (Google, 2013a; McCullough, 2013). However, if users have not set up their Inactive Account Manager preferences, bereaved family members must undergo a laborious process if they wish to gain access to a deceased person's account including provision of a death certificate and other forms of verification. Even if they proceed with the application, Google offers no guarantee that the applicants will gain access to the account (Google, 2013b). Twitter's policy is even more restrictive. They require a 'person authorized to act' for the deceased to provide a number of documents as well as a signed statement and a link to evidence that the user has died in order for Twitter to de-activate the account and there exists no policy for allowing bereaved family members to access it (Twitter, 2013). Google at present is the only social media and e-mail account provider willing to allow users to make nuanced decisions on how their account information will be handled after their death including bequeathing account access to a third party.

Blogs are another type of online account where the issues of ownership, privacy and copyright become complex. Connor (2010) explains that when a blog account holder dies their blog content is vulnerable to theft and generally the only way to prevent this would be to remove the content. Of course, this is only possible if the deceased person's family or the executor of their estate has access to the log in details, and by taking into consideration the deceased person's wishes regarding whether or not they wish their blog to remain online [15]. Both WordPress and Blogger state in their policies that they would only release personal information including log in information if required by law to do so in the interests of protecting their user's privacy. There is also the issue of who actually owns the content of the deceased person's or indeed any person's blog, with the Terms of Service of both WordPress and Blogger claiming the right to 'do whatever they want with the posted content' [16]. Even though a blogger may have
intellectual property rights over the content of their blog, they still have no absolute control over how that content can be used; a situation exacerbated after death if no provision has been made for executors to access their blog account and carry out their instructions concerning the content.

Clearly there is not yet a consensus on how Facebook, Google and other online account service providers handle deceased user accounts. Privacy is perhaps the most binding factor forming the basis of deceased user account policies, however, this concern may be misplaced. Connor (2010) makes the observation that ‘whilst the privacy of the account holder is often cited as a factor weighing against disclosure, privacy rights are generally considered to cease upon death’ [17]. From a legal standpoint, it can be argued that protecting the privacy of deceased users is not a legally valid concern. Bequeathing log in information to others after death allows for deceased user account policies to be largely circumvented, however, even if digital executors have access to online accounts, there are questions as to whether there exists a legal right to actually use the usernames and passwords and what form of ownership access to the accounts legally confers [18]. Additionally many online services merely grant users a license to access an online account that technically expires upon death leaving more questions about ownership of the content left behind after the user’s death.

One such question raised by Hodgetts (2013) is: who gains the ‘custody of research’ when an academic researcher dies? There is no mandate by universities or funding bodies about who gains access to a deceased researcher’s data that may need interpretation or partly written research papers. This is simply an extension of the general ownership concerns complicating how a person adequately plans for bequeathing their digital and intellectual property. Issues of ownership of digital assets are complex and obscure and it is unclear who legally has the power and control over deceased user accounts and their content. Even if privacy is not a legal requirement after death one cannot help but to ask the question: do users necessarily want family members going through their e–mail messages and social media accounts after they have died?

Another problematic area of concern around our digital remains is that of the social behaviours around Web memorial sites. Public Facebook memorial sites in particular are subject to ‘trolling’ activities in which people post abusive or offensive posts onto pages set up to memorialise a deceased person. Trolls may even go so far as to create fake mourning pages that attract genuine mourners, or even hate pages that openly mock the deceased, giving them control of the digital mourning space [19]. Phillips (2011) conducted an undercover investigation into ‘RIP trolling’ on Facebook when this activity peaked in 2010. She found that trolls use pseudonyms and are part of a networked culture identifiable by the pseudonyms they chose. Rather than an attack on the genuinely bereaved, Phillips found trolling activity to be more of an attack on the way the mainstream media glorify tragedy as well as those ‘grief tourists’ so tightly instep with the mainstream media’s hysterical reporting, and that the trolls and the media exist in ‘antipathetic symbiosis’ wherein the activities of one fuel those of the other [20]. Whatever their justifications for their activities, RIP trolls on Facebook are problematic and trolling activity causes ‘significant emotional damage’ [21]. Being confronted with disturbing, insensitive posts specifically designed to shock and offend can be a disturbing experience for anybody, more so for the bereaved.

Whilst noting the unique affordances of Facebook in allowing for public grieving, Marwick and Ellison (2012) also observed that Facebook memorial sites often attract trolls and grief tourists. Another phenomenon they noted is that of ‘context collapse’ as it applies to memorial sites, wherein social media ‘friends’ and other online acquaintances of the deceased make comments even on private memorial profiles that sometimes come as a shock to family and close friends coming as they do from the diverse natures of the relationships they may have had with the deceased. This can also lead to ‘impression management’ by bereaved family and friends, who may feel burdened to uphold a particular impression of the deceased person by replying or commenting on offending posts resulting in the bereaved sometimes finding Facebook memorial pages to be difficult to manage and ‘insincere’ [22]. In some cases, family members have been locked out of memorial profiles unable to be ‘added’ to the account as a friend whilst at the same time the profiles have been filled with clichéd messages from the deceased person’s distant social connections [23].

Problems associated with ‘online disinhibition’ as noted by Suler (2004) may play a part in the issues of trolling and context collapse as observed on Facebook and other online memorial sites. Suler’s psychological analysis of online behavior observes that people ‘self–disclose ... more ... intensely than they would in person’ [24] thus affording the kinds of interactions or comments that people would perhaps refrain from in face–to–face interactions. These issues with Facebook memorial pages and profiles again raise questions about power and ownership of our online content and even our identities. Who has the ‘right’ to manage what are appropriate posts and comments to make on a memorial profile for instance? Even the make up of what group of people constitutes ‘bereaved family and friends’ can at times be contentious in light of blended or estranged families or other complicated family structures.

**Our changed experience**

The impact of a continuing digital afterlife and the associated issues on our cultural understanding of death is particularly interesting. Gibson (2007) claims that because of our increased exposure to death imagery and storytelling about death, the modern era of ‘sequestered death’ [25], particularly within Western culture, is now passed. Furthermore, the bereaved can now mourn publicly on Web cemetery memorial sites and social media memorial profiles. Roberts and Vidal (2000) suggest that Web cemetery memorial sites for example represent opportunities for the bereaved that ‘are less available in classic post–death rituals’ [26] to be drawn into a new public space representing a ‘new form of post–death ritual’ [27]. The role of ritual is important in attributing meaning to death (Neimeyer, et al., 2002) and it can be argued that this expansion of mourning practices represents new forms of ritualized behavior concerning death that extend beyond traditional locally–based funereal practices.
There are those that warn that these changes are not positive. In writing about the public outpouring of expressions of grief on Twitter over the death of Peaches Geldof, Brendan O’Neill notes how ‘ingrained in our culture ersatz grief has become’ [28]. The ease with which one can post a comment on social media may perhaps have dulled the sincerity of these public expressions of grief. In addition, the almost perpetual nature of online memorialisation means that the mourning process may never come to a natural end. Limits on mourning practices that may exist in some cultures cannot be readily controlled in an online environment and the public grieving of others may cause dissonant experiences for those whose religious beliefs require the end to public expressions of grief. Long (in Kaleem, 2013) cautions that online grieving practices can ‘dilute the history of traditions that online sathy’ [29] and that Americans have gone ‘“ritually astray” from powerful traditions around death’ [30] as they seek to find meaning in death online. Whether or not these concerns are valid, the bereaved are largely embracing these new forms of ritual and the opportunity to grieve publicly and connect with other mourners in addition to the local and physical connections afforded by traditional mourning practices.

In an attempt to explain why online memorialisation is being embraced, Sherlock (2013) suggests that contemporary disenchantment with traditional religious and spiritual practices has left ‘many people with inadequate or unacceptable ways of understanding death and mourning’ [31]. Online memorialisation allows for a perception of ‘digital resurrection’ involving suspension of disbelief wherein the bereaved can continue a form of relationship with the deceased. Church (2013) and Odom, et al. (2010) agree that Web memorials allow mourners to connect not only with each other but also enable a form of continued communication with the deceased as mourners address posts and comments to them. Lingel (2013) observes that the ability for mourners to interact with a memorial profile allows for a ‘sense of continued presence’ of the deceased [32]. From a philosophical standpoint, it can be argued that these practices are beneficial to the bereaved. Attig (2004; 1991) summarizes current philosophical understandings of grief and mourning based on 30 years of research in the field. He posits that grieving is more than a passive activity of feeling the emotion of grief but that it is also an active process involving ‘finding a new way of relating to the one who died’ [33]. He suggests that whilst passionate grief in which the bereaved hopelessly longs for the deceased to come back to life leads to despair, an active grieving process, which involves ‘maintaining relationships with the dead in some form’ [34] leads to healing and a new understanding of life for the bereaved. New mourning practices of interacting with a deceased person’s profile on memorial sites can assist mourners with this process, affording them a further outlet for relating to the deceased and thus expanding the process of their active grieving.

Not all scholars agree that mourning practices have been largely changed due to the affordances of the Internet. Jones (2004) whilst admitting that it comes as no surprise that digital means of communication have ‘become a part of our culture’s rituals of death and dying’ asserts that there is nothing new about these practices that ‘print media cannot provide’ [35]. Jones’ observations however, were made before the advent of social media and may no longer be accurate. Although posts on memorial sites may resemble the traditional death notice in some respects, the sheer scale and global nature of Web memorialisation as afforded by social media, eclipses the limited and local nature of newspaper death notices. Furthermore posters of death notices have no ability to interact with and grieve with other mourners nor to revisit a perpetual and dynamic memorial in order to move forward within an active grieving process.

Although mourning practices have been expanded through Web memorialisation and online grieving practices, it can be argued that our experience of the death of others has also been complicated by the digital afterlife. As ‘age old biological, social and cultural events concerning death are being newly mediated by technological contexts’ [36], the bereaved are being affected in largely unanticipated ways. As previously discussed, this can lead to disturbing experiences for the bereaved as they encounter persistent social media profiles of the deceased and often uncomfortable situations in which personal boundaries are violated amid uncertainties around who is ‘entitled’ to identify themselves as bereaved (Massimi, et al., 2011). In addition, longstanding protocols of social hierarchy around communications about death are changed through social media networks. Metcalf and Huntington (1991) in their cross-cultural study of rituals surrounding death, describe the traditional social norms around mourning that is first told about the death of family which are dependent on the level of intimacy with the deceased. In contrast, on social media networks, news of a death can be shared online without recourse to traditional social hierarchies, potentially complicating social interactions between the bereaved immediately after the death of the deceased.

Our dealings with death are further complicated by the need to address our own digital legacies and how to effectively make provision for them. The lack of cohesiveness between online account deceased user policies together with the complexities of legal ownership of the contents of online accounts, means that at present users themselves need to be proactive in making plans to have their digital assets disposed of according to their wishes, especially if they are concerned about keeping details of their online activities private. This can be a somewhat laborious process requiring knowledge of the policies of different platforms. Even the common sense approach of leaving details of account usernames and passwords to digital estate executors is sometimes in breach of company user account policies (Bellamy, et al., 2013; Connor, 2010). Uniform laws that apply to all online deceased user account policies may go some way towards simplifying the issues surrounding digital legacies and may free companies from liability concerns that often underpin their sometimes inflexible approach to online account access (Hu, 2013). At present though the bequeathing of digital assets represents a further complication of the process of creating a will and planning for the dispensing of a deceased estate.

Inheriting a digital legacy can also complicate the experience of the death of a loved one. How they receive a digital inheritance and the resultant issues around what to do with the digital assets that have been left to them can be daunting. The meaning derived from a digital inheritance is dependent upon the person receiving it: some find it fosters a feeling of connection with the deceased while for others their grieving process is complicated (Massimi and Baecker, 2010). In addition as technology progresses, digital assets and keepsakes of the deceased (for example data on a mobile phone or an online account) may no longer be easily accessed and may require caretaking by the custodians of a digital estate in order for them to survive into the future (Jones, 2004). Clearly the mourning period for
beneficiaries of digital legacies is complicated by the need to make decisions about how to best handle the digital assets left to them.

Conclusion

It is clear that in the digital age, our cultural experience of death has changed in various ways. New ways of communicating online through social networks together with access to online news sources that amplify death imagery have brought an end to the modern era of sequestered death. Online mourning practices and web memorialisation have expanded traditional mourning practices and have been largely embraced, allowing for the formation of new rituals around death that extend beyond traditional locally-based rituals of funerals and wakes. Mourning rituals are changed and expanded not only in terms of how we grieve but also in scope due to the global scale of online mourning practices that is afforded by social networks and the architecture of the Internet.

In addition to the expansion of mourning practices and grieving rituals, the emergent issues around social behaviours online, context collapse and privacy and ownership concerns serve to complicate our experience of death as it occurs around us. Culturally dissonant experiences for the bereaved may occur when they are confronted by shortcomings in the design of computing technology and online services to adequately address the death of their users. In addition, the need to make provision for bequeathing our digital assets as well as the problems associated with the receiving of a digital legacy from the deceased further complicates our experience, and at present there are no cohesive legal structures in place to simplify deceased user account policies. The future of digital estate management is only now being addressed and may benefit from uniform laws to simplify the process of bequeathing our digital assets and to release companies from liability concerns. Legal issues aside, it is clear that our cultural understanding of death as mediated through the Internet and communication technologies has been expanded, complicated and irreversible changed.

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Notes

3. Leaver, 2013, paragraph 15.
5. Roberts and Vidal, 2000, p. 540.
7. Church, 2013, p. 188.
27. Roberts and Vidal, 2000, p. 542.

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