Death and the Internet

The grim reaper comes for us all eventually, but however we end -- slowly or swiftly, painfully or peacefully -- the entire process is often difficult and can be complicated for surviving caretakers, friends, relatives, and heirs. Yet with ever more of our modern lives taking place online, leaving them behind is becoming ever more complex, and it will likely become even more so in days to come.

Dying online

Of course, the internet was invented to share information among the living and so death was not much of a problem. Dead accounts would simply be closed and deleted. It was only after applications and data became so important that access had to be protected and mortality became a real complication.

Today, vital personal data and online identities are all **password protected**. More and more of it is also secured by **biometric** verification which requires a living body. This makes access to data increasingly difficult not only for relatives and colleagues but to institutions and employers with some stake in it.

Privacy concerns and how to protect that data, permitting access only to those with legitimate rights, and how to distribute or dispose of it are a big problem. **Digital assets** such as cryptocurrency and NFT holdings, are another inheritance problem so new no one has really begun to address them yet.

Not only that, but there are other needs of the living that must be sensitively addressed, such as memorializing the departed, dealing with grief among the survivors, archiving important records, and so on. This is one area where the **metaverse** might make a huge contribution. Labs are already working on **virtual replicas** of dead people, with realistic avatar chatbots that learn from their emails and posts so that one could visit, talk, and even touch them, creepy as it may seem.

In the meantime, death online is something that cannot safely be ignored. Automatic postings from social media accounts like birthday reminders, for instance, can cause confusion and reawaken grief if not stopped. Charges for unused services could accumulate. Inactive accounts may be hacked for all kinds of mischief, identities stolen, etc.

This is made even more complicated when users disguise their identities with **screen names**. But with no authority mandating procedures, every website, online forum, and service provider has had to devise policies of their own, often shaped by tragic events.

Facebook, for instance, deleted profiles of dead users automatically. But in late 2009, two years after the Virginia Tech shootings, they began turning deceased users' sites into "**memorial pages**" at the request of many of those survivors. In 2015, they allowed users to set up a "legacy contact" to manage such pages, or to have their own pages permanently deleted upon their deaths, if desired.

Google, on the other hand, in 2013 set up an "**Inactive Account Manager**" service which allows users to set up a way to transfer ownership and control of such sites to others.

Not having policies ensuring that users have only one account under their real name, Twitter has had a **real problem** from the start. Accounts may be made into memorials or deactivated. Since 2014, this includes an option to remove dead users' photos after trolls sent **photoshopped pictures** to the daughter of late comedian Robin Williams.

It's generally a whole lot easier with ISPs. Southwest Cyberport's policy is simply to usually request a copy of the death certificate and/or a Power of Attorney letter in order to turn over access to a deceased customer's account. What they do with email or websites is then left entirely up to the approved heirs.

Prepping for the end

Having legal access to a website is useless without passwords. One could write them down, but such documents can be lost, stolen, or become out-of-date. A **password manager** shared with partners is a better way to keep close people from being locked out. Websites such as **SecureSafe**, a Swiss cloud-based password manager and secure file storage service, provide options for digital inheritance that will even schedule social media account deactivation and cancel subscriptions.

But all too often, death online goes unannounced. Social media friends may notice a lack of fresh posts; websites may suddenly disappear; and often no one knows why. However there are **many services** available to post farewell messages when triggered by extended inactivity online, and many can help with memorials and digital assets, too.

The surest way to be certain that one's physical and **digital legacy** will be handled exactly according to one's wishes and the surviving family and pets are cared for is to write a **last will and testament**. Though not legally required, without a will these things may be determined by state law which generally gives all the community property and a quarter of the private goods to the spouse and the rest to descendants and nearest kin.

Wills in New Mexico should name an executor to perform the required tasks and it must have two witnesses and be notarized. Fortunately, wills can be easily done online as well as getting them legally notarized. Online notarization is quite new to our state, but it can be done with out-of-state services like **Notarize.com** via a Zoom session.

It's also a really good idea to have a **living will** or advanced directives in place to express one's health care wishes in case one becomes too sick or is otherwise disabled.

The afterlife online

Families and friends of deceased webmasters who had big sites to which they devoted their lives often leave them up as a memorial, sometimes for decades. Another option is to submit them to the **Internet Archive**, which already stores 650 million pages covering 25 years of web history for free.

Dedicated **memorial websites**, many of which charge for submissions, have been around since long before the pandemic, but its deadly sweep and the inability of survivors to mourn at funerals have greatly increased the need for them all around the world.

Unfortunately, most covid victim sites are backlogged and not very searchable. The best ones, like **Covituary**, are free and not only list the deceased, but include a photo, timeline, and brief tributes contributed by friends and relatives. The **National Cathedral** in Washington goes even further by including the dead in a monthly virtual prayer service.

Some people are not satisfied with an online memorial. They want nothing less than **digital immortality**, uploading their memories and experiences into a digital avatar of some kind. As mentioned earlier, work has already begun on how to transform a person's data into a working model of that human's personality and individual characteristics.

These would not just incorporate data, but the **emotional context** that gives it meaning. Some would go so far as to make the bots capable of learning and change, in effect, becoming conscious and living beings.

This creates deep philosophical problems, such as the "**Ship of Theseus**". The ancient Athenians kept Theseus' vessel intact for hundreds of years to please the gods. Every time a piece wore out it was replaced by an exact copy. So once everything was replaced, was that still the "same" ship used by the hero?

Our answer to such questions may shape the future in surprising ways but never forget the eternal truth that "all things must pass."