Introduction to the Special Issue on the Death, Afterlife, and Immortality of Bodies and Data

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This special issue poses questions concerning death, afterlife and immortality in the age of the Internet. It extends previous work by examining current and emerging practices of grieving and memorializing supported by new media. It suggests that people’s lives today are extended, prolonged, and ultimately transformed through the new circulations, repetitions, and recontextualizations on the Internet and other platforms. It also shows that publics are being formed and connected with in new ways, and new practices and rituals are emerging, as the traditional notions of the body are being challenged. We argue that these developments have implications for how people will be discovered and conceived of in the future.

Keywords (after-)death, the Internet, hybridization, publics, rituals, historicization

What is death in an era of ubiquitous and encroaching digital life? What is afterlife in an age of mass digital production and consumption? What is immortality in a time of the digital celebrity and the digital mob? In this special issue, contributing authors engage with such questions, and their analysis suggests that new technologies, specifically the Internet, change the way death and after-death are experienced, performed, and discovered.

The existing research has focused heavily on online memorials, in particular on the content of these sites (e.g., de Vries and Rutherford 2004; Jones 2004; Foot et al. 2005) and the grieving processes of their users (e.g., Sofka 1997; Veale 2003). More recently, attention has turned to social network sites with particular focus on the practices and meanings of online memorializing by teenagers (Carroll and Landry 2010; Williams and Merten 2009). In general this research has tended to be connected with a wider literature in the social sciences that examines death, grieving, and memorialization (e.g., Hallam and Hockey 2001; Hockey, Woodthorpe, and Komaromy 2010; Metcalf and Huntington 1991).

The articles in this special issue advance work on the concept of (after-)death through a series of contrasting analyses of current and emerging practices of grieving and memorializing online. They show that, even after death, people’s lives are extended, prolonged, and ultimately changed in the present, future, and in history through new circulations, repetitions, and recontextualizations to the variously constituted publics (Warner 2002, 66) “that
come into being only in relation to texts and their circulation.” These findings are discussed in the following in terms of bodies and hybridization, constituting publics, new practices and rituals, and excavation and historicization.

**BODIES AND HYBRIDIZATION**

From the beginning, discourse in popular media steered us toward a growing sense of an other self, a notion of a self that is digitally distributed across text messages, Web pages, social networking sites, blog comments, and so on: a digital self. Around the time that the proposal was conceived, in *Time* magazine Faure (2009) suggested that the capacity of information and communication technologies (ICTs) raised important questions regarding legacy and curation: “As people spend more time at keyboards, there’s less being stored away in dusty attics for family and friends to hang on to” (online). But Faure went further than simply describing concerns about archiving and storage to ask a question that suggested some anxiety and even resentment about a burgeoning and enduring self: “The pieces of our lives that we put online can feel as eternal as the Internet itself, but what happens to our virtual identity after we die?” (online). Bollmer (2013), in this issue, suggests that this tension between this anticipated decoupling between the body and data is indeed a source of anxiety in our lives.

This digital self can be variously termed as virtual identity, digital effigy, or Internet doppelganger. The term identity suggests a structure that has a particular presence. The term effigy suggests a roughly if intentionally constructed form that can be mass produced, and this form has a ritual associated with it. Doppelganger suggests both something more sinister and with greater resemblance and persistence: a lurking, high-fidelity ghost of the dead. These different terms illuminate aspects of composition and substance, fidelity and resemblance, reach and persistence, whether comforting or disquieting. In this special issue, Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish (2013), Church (2013), and Lingel (2013) all tacitly acknowledge the importance of the form of the dead with their focus on Facebook profiles. The issues of fidelity and resemblance are also a focus for Bollmer (2013), Bainbridge (2013), and Sherlock (2013). For all, the notion of the digital self is important, as is the extended temporal availability of self that the digital offers.

However, such definitions, although analytically useful, suggest a particular ontology that may in fact be faulty because they artificially segregate the physical body and an Internet presence, appealing to an unnecessary dualism. The call for articles for this issue suggested that the source of this faultiness could be found in the lingering “shards of ourselves” that dwell on and support a larger set of connections beyond the immediate, what was termed as “ecologies of interests and exchanges where rules and customs are still evolving.” Therefore, the reference to a virtual identity, digital effigy, or Internet doppelganger as unified, distinct bodily entity, as a kind of metaphor for the physical body, if it reflects the ontology of the physical realm, presents the readers with the fallacy of a physical construct retransferred to the digital realm in toto. We wanted to shift focus toward the idea of multiple presences (as well as their connections to the physical body) that are increasingly hybridized or spread across various dwellings, some physical and material, some digital and semiotic. This has consequences for how people are consumed, worked with, and viewed after death. It also alters people’s (ideas of) bodily being.

This hybridization of the body, as Bollmer (2013) suggests in this issue, is not merely an analytical point. We suggest it also changes how we view ourselves and that it is a process secured through “delegation” across materials and “multiplicity” (Law 2003). We are because of our multiple places of dwelling. Differently put, (after-)death shows us how we now emerge from a complex network of material stuff, stuff that is bought and carried, owned and placed, cherished and loved, denigrated and discarded. In this view the digital and material are both distinct and complementary. On the one hand, different presences (both physical and digital) are, of course, subject to a different set of vagaries and forces and vary in their obduracy. For example, the material deteriorates and breaks yet can be preserved and maintained; information can be endlessly reproduced, yet can be easily lost or become unreadable. On the other hand, different presences help to make up and comprise people today. This view of hybridization binds people closely to both their material and digital selves.

How physical bodies and the material are different is illuminated by Urry’s (2000) theory of mobilities, which places movement at the center of modern life. He distinguishes between the movement of bodies—the corporeal travel of people for work, leisure, family life, pleasure, migration and escape, organized in terms of contrasting time-space modalities (from daily commuting to once-in-a-lifetime exile)” (Urry 2007, 47)—and the movement of objects—the physical movement of objects to producers, consumers and retailers; as well as the sending and receiving of presents and souvenirs” (Urry 2007, 47). Although relations (e.g., personal, institutional) and networks (e.g., road, trade) are important for both bodies and objects, his theory makes plain how, for the body, the qualities and experience of time and space in movement are particularly important. This is in contrast to the more economic and functional treatment of objects. Urry’s theory also distinguishes two other forms of mobility—communicative travel and virtual travel, suggesting that certain forms of travel involve the physical body more than others.
The overall point is that the modern self emerges from movement through and across different places of dwelling and through relationships with various material objects.

As Urry’s theory and our own appeal to hybridization suggest, the distinction made between the digital and the material (both animate and inanimate) is largely creating a false dichotomy with regard to the body and technologies such as the Internet. This dichotomy risks positing the human as fragmented or, worse still, in a vacuum, an ontological existence based on a concept of human essence either as arbitrary and never fixed or as integer and never evolving (Harper 2010, 262–63). Instead, the hybridization of the body and therefore the necessity to distinguish and analyze between different forms of entanglement across digital and material lends itself to a shift to an exploration of key relevant dependencies and can be useful for making sense of death, afterlife, and immortality: (after-)death. The digital, although ultimately dependent on the material because it is hosted (an interesting term in itself) through hard drives, fiber-optic cables, and people, and although, like the body, it is liable to breakdown and loss, is also capable of rapid, high-fidelity replication, circulation, and storage. Thus, we suggest that there is a disparity between the digital and the material in terms of longevity, malleability, and durability.

The impacts of this disparity are far-reaching, and have even been unwittingly commented on by an Australian Prime Minister, who in May 2011 made a direct and public appeal to end the Internet craze of planking following the death of a young Australian who fell from a high-rise balcony while planking.⁵ What is precarious and foolhardy for the material form in a material world becomes a spectacle in the digital realm because of what the digital realm affords. This tragedy points to problems and challenges confronting us—if we uncritically suggest that we are hybridized across different dwellings and to the value of recognizing the nature of and interdependencies among the environments and materials through which we emerge. It also points to a deliberateness with which people return themselves to an audience, as with a manager’s strategy in the context of organizations, and the need to submit and engage in a “logic of returns” (Law 2003). This deliberateness, as the case just mentioned illustrates, can ignore the realities of being and dwelling due to the seemingly pressing need to report and can thus critically and devastatingly impinge upon lives (and deaths). Finally, and as we discuss in the following, it suggests that such a disparity is a practical, social concern for policymakers and citizens alike. The digital, at times, imposes and reaches in.

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Thus, technologies of the post-Internet world⁴ question and inform the nature, durability, and dwelling place(s) of the body. They also, through the synchronicity, replication, and circulation they afford, are increasingly sensitive to every moment, rapidly projecting and propagating to multiple, differently instantiated publics (Warner 2002). Such publics, or groups “that come into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (Warner 2002, 66), are at once formed through real-time connections to the moment, supported through new technologies of circulation, and are distanced, in time or space, from such moments through these same technologies. Urry captures this idea of distant proximity through his description of the impact of such devices as the mobile phone that are described as “inhabiting machines” through which “connections are crucially transformed, with others being uncannily present and absent, here and there, near and distant, home and away, proximate and distant” (Urry 2004, 35).

Cheryl Jones, a British mother, recently found out about the tragic death of her daughter, not through a face-to-face meeting or even through a phone call, but through a Facebook post, a technology coupled with ongoing physical life and particularly configured publics that often places peer groups and friends above family.⁵ Thus, it seems, the digital reaches out, at times blabbing indiscreetly through its multicast. It can, of course, be argued that people live through the Internet as they do anywhere else and that this dwelling brings desirable and undesirable consequences. However, as with any place of dwelling, the Internet has particular exposures to different publics, exposures that, as the notion of publics and this example suggest, are not always easily controlled or aligned. The exposures of Internet services such as Facebook often emphasize particular aspects of the user to particular publics: namely, the user’s permanence and durability that is driven by a notion of existence and of the digital self as youthful and full of vital presence, not by a notion of the digital self as aging and fading, suffused with mortality and dwindling presence.

The issue here is centered on how publics are formed and connected with through different technologies as much as which publics are created and networked in an era of a “transnational audience,” many of whom are “plugged into the 24-hour cable and online news cycle” (Phillips 2011). In Harper’s (2010, 181) terms, the choice of certain technologies brings with it a certain sense of the who, how, and where of communication: “We are not just what we say but also how we say it and where we say it.” This is not a simple matter in an era of rapidly constituting, evolving, and dissipating publics. Mutually understood norms around these choices are now evolving across global publics, on a grand scale that exceeds their once local instantiations. For example, even very local etiquette over mobile phone use in Japan (Ito 2005) is consumed and understood by global publics.

The articles focusing on social networking platforms (SNPs) in this collection (Brubacker, Hayes, and Dourish
2013; Church 2013; Lingel 2013) illustrate the densely connected, if liquid, world of strong and weak ties SNPs have created and that they continue to sustain (Harper 2010). They also show that the transformations associated with death ripple through these networks and suggest that associated actions and rituals, along with understandings of accepted and expected behaviors, are being worked out. The attention of these authors is on the different forms of “work,” such as the “sentimental work” (Strauss et al. 1985, 129), occurring around and through pages belonging to the recently deceased, which is afforded and constrained by this woven “mesh” of strong and weak ties. However, the object of study here, and the object around which publics are constituted, as Brubacker et al. (2013) and Church (2013) also suggest, is both “alive, sentient and reacting—present” (Strauss et al. 1985, 129)—an interconnected public experiencing the death—and no longer present—the dead themselves. The feelings expressed in circulated text, although publicly displayed, seem lived and felt, suggesting once again the immediacy and expressiveness supported by SNPs, as well as their “personal translucence” (Graham, Rouncefield, and Satchell 2009).

The notion of “personal translucense” draws attention to emotions of after-death along with the ongoing process of the different feelings associated with death and their management (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005).

**NEW PRACTICES AND RITUALS**

Notions of the body and how publics are formed and connected with are, of course, both deeply connected to practices and rituals and vice versa. Saito (2007, 31) remarks how Western ontology privileges “Being over Becoming,” a particular product or experience over a process, and how this impacts how art has traditionally been regarded and consumed. Saito suggests that practices associated with aesthetic engagement are linked to the way the World is seen as being carved up. We argue that new and evolving contemporary experiences and practices associated with digital (after-)death can be particularly revealing regarding how the digital and “the material” are related and interdependent. Particularly important are the emerging practices associated with grieving, commemorating, and memorializing and debates regarding the acceptability of such “rituals” in a burgeoning, and increasingly secular, digital universe of specialist memorial Websites, blogs, and social networking sites.

The thesis we explore in this special issue is that increasing hybridization may be shaping the rituals and practices around (after-)death and vice versa. Rituals, such as gift-giving, have of course been called on before in studies of ICTs to explain practices around mobile phone use, SMS (short message service) exchange in particular (e.g., Taylor and Harper 2003). Harper (2010, 133) notes how such “ritual” practices involve “the making of things into objects or processes that have special value.” Kearl (1989, 27) describes how death rituals connect the individual and society at large, helping to internalize “the moral values and ideals of a culture.” Thus, ritual captures notions of special, formalized actions, generally acknowledged personal transformation, particular sets of values and beliefs, and, more broadly, sets of relations between individuals, groups, and society. The field of research of examining new “rituals” of (after-)death such as online memorialization may well be relatively new and, at least to date, has largely deployed a framework that focuses on the psychology and sociology of grief and support. However, a significant finding across much recent work is a reversal of the post-Victorian sequestration of death and (after-)death (Walter et al. 2011): Death and (after-)death are, once again, becoming more public and everyday. This is borne out by the articles of Brubacker et al. (2013), Church (2013), and Lingel (2013).

This thesis was also informed by the belief that new rituals and norms were emerging in certain digital environments, such as virtual worlds, that elsewhere might be labeled profane and sacrilegious. The seemingly sacrilegious “trashing” of an online World of Warcraft funeral (Davies 2006) reinforced this belief (Gibbs 2010). Such breaks from norms have continued with the recent mass circulation of offensive remarks about two murdered policemen in the UK (BBC News UK 2012). Such trolling behavior is confronted differently by different legal systems. In this case an arrest was made under the 2003 Communications Act that criminalizes the sending of “a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character” (United Kingdom 2003, 120). The evolution of legislative attempts and manuals for digital behaviors to control and shape such phenomena has not been methodical, harmonious, disinterested, or measured; this evolution resembles more a fractious debate about a whole series of broader sociopolitical issues such as crime, privacy, security, and rights confronting policymakers, re-raising previously seen problems of national and international Internet regulation, administration and law (Kohn et al. 2012). Lingel points to such difficulties through her analysis of Facebook policies for dead members’ pages.

However, rituals are not just (im)moral practices but connect deeply to specific beliefs. Bainbridge (2013) and Sherlock (2013) gesture to some new directions here, in a context of the secularization of society in parts of the world. Both point to a fascination with the digital that borders on religion and spirituality. Kera’s (2013) article moves from how publics consume and relate to the reanimated dead toward how approaching death as a design space to explore—from instances of the extremely sacred to the extremities of the profane, from initial
envisagement to unexpected ongoing use—can help us think differently about it, and the life that precedes it. She suggests that such “morbid design” questions the permanence of our human state except in terms of a persistent network of which the kind of “mesh” that Brubaker et al. (2013), Church (2013), and Lingel (2013) allude to is but a part. Kera (2013), like Emerson (cited in Peters, 1999), posits that love for the dead is unselfish and unconditional, a “reaching out” with no expectation of return. Such observations suggest an emerging online religion as a kind of secular godlessness and a return to heathenism or animism as suggested in the practice of avatar construction based on ancestors (see Bainbridge 2013).

**EXCAVATION AND HISTORICIZATION**

Issues of mortality and immortality are the fourth thematic that emerges from the interplay between new ontology, publics, and ritual. Our hybridized lives and deaths challenge our perspectives on our bodies, our experience, our society, our perceived futures, and even our history. (After-)death in the contemporary, digital world reminds us of our place in mundane ecologies comprising billions of enduring animate and inanimate things, a myriad of other persistent sentient and near-sentient entities. Our immortality amid technologies of production, aggregation, and propagation is perhaps only possible through the mesh of the Internet. However, people also become leveled by (after-)death and are reminded of their anonymity, fragility, and fleeting importance in an era of the “mediating frame” of ubiquitous, momentary celebrity (Drake and Miah 2010, 62) and collectively sentient, instantaneous mobs (Rheingold 2003).

The articles of Bollmer (2013) and Sherlock (2013) mark a greater attention to ongoing archiving and preservation that impacts the self while alive, not just when dead: one’s persistence online. This contrasts with the more immediate response to and consumption of death in the papers focusing on SNPs: The perspective on time here is less one of “simultaneity” (Jaureguiberry 2000) than one that is glacial (Urry 2000, 159), focusing on the longer term impacts of death online when “people feel the weight of history, of those memories and practices within that very particular place, and . . . believe that it can and will still be there in its essence in many generations’ time.” For Bollmer this implies anxiety, a lurking digital self or doppelganger that needs to be managed while alive as well as dead—going beyond the notion of digital legacy. For Sherlock, the digital remnants of the living are more bodily-like, provoking a fascination that is magical and spiritual in nature. For Bainbridge this becomes active creation and ongoing remembering because of the virtual world’s support of semi-autonomous, lingering, somewhat bodily proxies. Social networking platforms may support the spread of celebrity culture (Drake and Miah 2010), but this has implications beyond the fascination with images of selves, suggesting new rituals governing engagement with the dead, where life is reenacted via digital forms.

Sherlock and Bainbridge suggest that the experience of excavating the dead is almost spiritual. This considerably extends the theme of the dead’s data management and “dealing with the digital remnants of the once living” in the original call for papers. It again alludes to how technologies of communication reach out into space and time. These two articles, along with Bollmer’s, start to probe the possible extension of “being-in-the-world” through the hybridization of once living, sentient beings with other entities, although these entities are less robotic than representational: hybridization cannot change a reference to real anatomic body (Barthes 1981/2000). Collectively they consider how new life can spring from death, as a photograph destroys a moment (Barthes 1981/2000) and its circulation reanimates it. In these papers there is a strong focus on different visions of the self and society through digital preservation, afterlife, and immortality and the coupling of the digital and the self/body. The notions of excavation and historicization pointed to in Kera’s article are important because they challenge the narcissistic, hedonistic self-importance of Digital 2.0, an era of production and mass circulation of text and images centered on the permanent existence of the self, an era when association with celebrity has become increasingly connected to “our sense of identity and belonging” (Drake and Miah 2010, 63). They present an alternative for humanity to the “simultaneity” that the digital brings: the prospect of being continually fossilized or preserved in an expansive digital morass to be discovered by unknown and unborn digital archaeologists of the future (Shanks 2007) who will help constitute new publics (Warner 2002) for the consumption of the dead. Thus, Kera’s article is a reminder that the idea of ending can help with understanding and reflecting on new ICTs and their connection to people’s lives. This idea can also support the generation of questions concerning what future publics will consume the dead and how they will do so, forcing reflection once again on the consequences of hybridization.

**FURTHER WORK**

This special issue, as it offers a very particular perspective on the digital self and how people live and die in a post-Internet era, also invites new questions and possible research opportunities and directions. For example, while this special issue mainly explores death, afterlife, and immortality from the perspective of those living and enduring, the concepts of withdrawal of the dying and of the absence of the dead from life are less considered. Walter et al. (2011, 277) have also pointed to the relative
lack of research in this area: “There is very little research specifically about online practices in relation to dying.” The absence of the perspective of the dying and the dead is of course understandable: the dying are likely too busy living to spend time on thinking about dying, and the dead are beyond dialogue. And as importantly, is it possible through technology today or in the near future, as it was asked many times in the past (Peters 1999), to reach out and explore a new set of questions for the dead (and receive an answer)?

Bollmer and Kera describe current digital design responses to death, often in the form of art projects. However, unsurprisingly the mundane practicalities of disposal through such services are less well articulated, specifically dealing with a doppelganger's persistence or multiple effigies, although several articles acknowledge this as a concern (e.g., Bollmer, Lingel, and Kera). Lingel addresses problems and responses to Facebook policy, but no one article seriously works through the policy and legal issues that have an enduring virtual identity confront us with. How are the dead's digital estate, their legacy, and even their reputation managed? On one extreme, preservation and inheritance could be supported, and on the other, complete obliteration. How do we manage and protect such stuff of memories? What kind of value does this stuff have (e.g., sentimental)? These questions point to the problems caused by the immortality of certain parts of our recently hybridized selves, questions that have already been taken up by other researchers (e.g., Banks, Kirk, and Sellen 2012).

Sherlock alludes to Masahiro Mori's (1970/2012) work on the “uncanny valley” that captures the gulf between what is experienced as “real” and what is experienced as “fake.” This is, in many ways, a design problem, for robotics as well as television and film-related industries, technology companies producing recording and playback equipment and service providers for social networking platforms and virtual worlds (Gibbs et al. 2012). Bollmer (and much science fiction) suggests a tendency for antagonism between the “real” and the “fake,” the “physical” and the “digital,” and that antagonism increases the closer these two become. However, Bollmer and Kera suggest that this is not just an issue for design but of how people see themselves and that any crossing of an “uncanny valley” (Mori 1970/2012) is a shifting seam between “physical” and “digital.” However, how can these findings be further reconciled with notions of digital self? How do we respond to our increasing hybridization and the fidelity of our increasingly uncanny presence across different dwellings in a post-Internet digital world?

This special issue has largely skirted the sacrilegious and profane in relation to (after-)death in the post-Internet era. What can be made of the trashings of an online funeral in the immersive world of World of Warcraft (Gibbs 2010)? How are the post-Internet era and digital technology in particular re-informing what is regarded as respectful and appropriate with relation to (after-)death? What does Phillips’s (2011) observation regarding Facebook’s affordance for making trolling “a fundamentally social activity” suggest for the design of new technologies and services and the redesign of old ones? How is deviant behavior actually shaped by new services such as Facebook and YouTube? How should particular parties be held accountable in these circumstances (Kohn et al. 2012)? YouTube seems to positively fuel the morbid fascination with death through the digital and the disconnection this might bring. This acknowledgment and critique of death voyeurism, particularly with regard to different populations of the dead themselves and those associated with them, is absent from the analysis of most of the articles here. Yet the same kind of voyeurism has been studied in film theory and among photo lurkers (Khalid and Dix 2010). Khalid and Dix (2010) have analyzed the lurkers, and the lurked upon, focusing on a community of expatriate Malaysians, while Phillips (2011) has analyzed trolls, noting that they are mostly male and that there seems to be a global fetish for grieving over “cute white dead girls.”

In the moral condemnation, disquiet, and sentimental reaction to events depicted in graphic detail online, people sometimes forget that we are somewhat fascinated by the depiction of death. The repetition and circulation of images and video has the power to evoke particular feelings of outrage and suffering (Rose 2010, 98). The digital thus becomes a constituted focus, decoupled from its physical counterpart that receives specific treatment: burial, cremation, and so on. This repetition and circulation also creates and engages with an orchestrated public of moral condemnation, and ultimately, like Arbus’s photographs, disconnects this public from the reality of the death (Sontag 1979). These kinds of tragedies are subject to trolling that confronts the body, its destruction, and personal fears precisely because of the commodification of death through “the 24-hour cable and online news cycle” (Phillips 2011). It seems useful to reflect on and ask questions about such supposed deviance in terms of confronting “an established media narrative” (Phillips 2011) or, in the terms of The Situationalists, The Spectacle (Debord 1967/1994).

The link between the Internet and suicide and desecration remains unexplored. What can be made of this in terms of the Internet as a technology imbued with a certain set of moral principles regarding freedom of speech, information, and action (including the action of doing harm to oneself)? Particular methods of suicide have been spread through the Internet in Japan (Arai 2008). Death among young men in Maori communities has been connected to changes in the “nature of human interaction and modes of communication” (Hirini and Collings 2005,
11). The suggestive and influential nature of the Internet over the desire to end one’s life has not been discussed here. There is an appeal to the idea of “deleting oneself” in this special issue—Bollmer (2013) and Kera (2013)—but this appeal is not really worked through with regard to design and policy. As the digital age can be problematic for encouraging damage of existence through the nature of communication, so it also interrupts a natural process of forgetting, as discussed by Mayer-Schönberger (2009). People endure in new ways in a digital age, ways that may not be healthy for their “real” lives.

SNPs are a global phenomenon, yet all the articles here are either not explicit about their publics or focused on publics in the Global North. The discourse around the digital is also clearly a discourse of the developed world, a world with always-on infrastructure and access to the latest services. For example, what about the impact of growth of SNPs, especially Facebook, in countries like Brazil and India, both of which experienced rapid growth of Facebook use from 2010 to 2011? How is Facebook impacting rituals around (after-)death in these countries, if at all? For every article in the collection, questions can be asked about what extent the observations and insights apply outside the developed North, among specifically comprised populations, as our earlier notes on deviance suggest. Although the Internet and the post-Internet era are global, this collection makes only limited acknowledgment of this. Thus, we suggest that the theme that was identified as important in the call concerning intercultural issues with dying, death, afterlife, and technology needs some serious attention.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this editorial it is perhaps dutiful that the editors speculate about expected futures with regard to the death, afterlife, and immortality of bodies and data and suggest a number of questions worthy of consideration. As editors, we suggest that, in the future, people will have more clues from/cues for the ones we lose: new means and technologies supporting excavation and historicization will likely be available. Equally, people will leave substantially more of themselves behind, perhaps almost enough to make another version of themselves, a version that will likely have the potential to become as hybridized and spread as their originator. To suggest that all memories will be captured and reproduced, like the vision of Caprica (2010), where people are downloadable and infinitely replicable, which Bollmer (2013) and Mayer-Schönberger (2009) critique and Bell and Gemmell (2009) celebrate, is surely to commit a fundamental ontological error concerning the digital self, an error carefully illuminated and discussed in this editorial. However, in a not unforeseeable future all of us will likely be more messily hybridized than ever across software and hardware, to the point that some of us cannot be truly known without reference to the digital. An important discussion concerning the pressures and obligations that this will bring regarding the management of digital selves, alive and dead, and of an accompanying slew of issues regarding privacy, security, and rights, has been started in this special issue and editorial through leveraging notions of publics, practices, and rituals largely in the context of friendship networks and family connections. This leaves the editors pondering two questions about a possible future. How will these emerging cities of the dead—the cities of server farms and emergent worlds alike—be maintained and even governed? How can this somewhat alluring and threatening vision of cities of the dead be rationalized and designed for? In the future, the (after-)death of increasingly hybridized citizens promises to pose as many problems to lawmakers, multinational corporations, and governments around the world as it does currently to individuals and their families.

NOTES

1. The term “(after-)death” is used to describe the period following death. It includes considerations of afterlife and immortality. Death is primarily approached here as a recently experienced trauma. (After-)death is approached as a lingering sense of connection, presence, and responsibility for the living, a sense that social media like Facebook can prolong, whether or not it is welcomed by the aggrieved. Even when approached in terms of online selfhood (Bollmer 2013) and resurrection (Sherlock 2013), (after-)death is largely examined from the point of view of those healthy and alive.

2. This notion of the ghostly presence of the dead sustained through different media is explored by John Durham Peters (1999).

3. Acton Beale, aged 20, died after falling from a balcony while having a photograph of him taken by a friend. Planking “entails people lying face down on their stomach in unusual locations and posting photographs of their act on social media websites” (Gabbatt 2011, online).

4. Our thanks to Gregory Clancey, a historian of science and technology, for this term that illuminates the dramatic impact of the creation and proliferation of the Internet on our lives and our deaths.

5. “Cheryl Jones, 49, from Tredegar, Blaenau Gwent, saw a post on the social networking site which said: ‘She’s died. RIP Karla’. Karla James, 30, had died at her home nearby at 20:17 BST on July 23 but Ms Jones was not informed until 23:38 BST” (BBC News South East Wales 2012).

6. “An ingredient in any kind of work where the object being worked on is alive, sentient and reacting–present either because it is deemed necessary to get the work done efficiently or because of humanistic consideration” (Strauss et al. 1985, 129).

7. Consider that the tragic public death of a small child in China was nonchalantly ignored by passers-by when it happened but is viewed again and again by an amorphous public on YouTube (Wines 2011).

8. This was a growth of 92% (7 million to 11.4 million) and 49% (14.9 million to 22.1 million) active users in Brazil and India respectively from October 2010 to February 2011 (Kallis 2012).
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