SUNSETS AND MEMORIES: HOW WE BURY AND MOURN DEAD PLATFORMS

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Media have become vital to constructing individual and collective memory, an ongoing process of making sense of one's life (Humphreys 2018; van Dijck 2007). On social media, people create media traces when they post photos, text, and links. These media traces form what Martin Hand (2016) calls a 'living archive', as they form a dynamic collection of actions, often spread across many platforms.

These traces are meaningful for those who create, share, and look back on them. They also provide important evidence for how people engage with social media over time. For example, Brady Robards and Siân Lincoln have conducted a research project in which participants scrolled back through their own Facebook timeline and reflected upon the life narratives contained within the platform (Robards & Lincoln 2016; Lincoln & Robards 2016).

Although we trust that these platforms are designed as memory machines, to keep track of our actions (and even, in the case of Facebook, serve them back to us year by year as reminders), what happens when these media traces disappear? Persistence is a key affordance of social media (boyd 2014), and there is a perception that once something is on the internet, it remains there forever (Bossewitch & Sinnreich 2013). But not all platforms stay active. Some are, to borrow a business term, 'sunsetted': they are shut down by their owners, or simply expire.

This paper investigates how social media platforms end, and how people remember them after they are gone. Situated within a wider field of scholarship around digital memory, remembering, archiving, and nostalgia, this research project combines a thematic analysis of the final posts made about platforms with a survey of social media users who remember a platform that no longer exists.

I analysed sunset posts from 20 social media platforms, including anonymous confession app Secret, bulletin board Imzy, and location-based social networking website Gowalla. I found sunset posts to be a specific genre: they were most often signed off by the CEO of the company that ran the platform, and drew on intimacy strategies like framing their platform in terms of nostalgia, using emotive language, and calling its users a 'community'. My thematic analysis of sunset posts revealed them to be formulaic: they usually comprised one or more of ten distinct elements, including a summary of the platform's notable accomplishments, an announcement that it was closing, a reason for this, expressions of gratitude and regret, and a gesture towards the future for the company or its employees.

These sunset posts are designed to spark a sense of loss, as they are marking the end of the platform's existence. They also aim to engender trust, as the people involved in running the platform often move on to new ventures, and want the users of the sunsetted platform to join them. In appealing to users invested in the platform, sunset posts ask people to remember them.

Platform sunsets would have been considered a positive aspect of internet culture by Viktor Mayer-Schönberger (2009), for whom forgetting is an important human experience. He argues that digital technologies have shifted the norm from forgetting to remembering, as these technologies can capture and store so much information. He suggests it may be beneficial if digital information had expiry dates. Another perspective comes from videogame studies. Mia Consalvo and Jason Begy (2015) documented the sunset of the Massively Multiplayer Online Game *Faunasphere*, which was closed despite the anger and sadness of many players, who attempted to preserve aspects of the game and its network of players by taking screenshots of gameplay and forming Facebook groups to keep in touch. Consalvo and Begy raise an important point about how platform owners conceive of them: most platforms do not have final plans, as they are designed to be persistent.

All this leaves a gap in our knowledge: How do users of sunsetted social media platforms remember them? Do people actively take steps to preserve some of their media traces, or do they let them get deleted along with the platform? Are some platforms more important as memory machines than others? This paper will also present the second phase of this project: a survey of people who used a platform that no longer exists. Responses will undergo a thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns in terms of remembering, nostalgia, archiving, and forgetting.

As social media platforms are a relatively new form of media, this research project aims to gain an understanding of how people shift from platform to platform, and how media traces and platforms are remembered and forgotten.

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