ALGORITHMIC AFTERLIVES: THE ETHICS OF REVIVING THE DEAD

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Reviews of the 2025 FireAid benefit concert in LA, held to raise money to help those affected by the January 2025 wildfires in Southern California, opened with the headline 'Nirvana reunites' (Singer, 2025; Moss, 2025). Kurt Cobain, the former lead singer who committed suicide in 1994, wasn't digitally recreated in hologram form, as was the case with members of ABBA who reunited as digital avatars for the ABBA Voyage digital concert residency in London. Instead, former bandmates Dave Grohl, Krist Novoselic and Pat Smear were joined on stage by a number of guest vocalists, including Grohl's daughter Violet who took the stage to sing All Apologies. But Cobain was nevertheless overjoyed by this, saying:

> "Oh, I think it's incredible! It's always heartwarming to see a new generation appreciating and carrying on the music that we created. Dave Grohl's daughter singing 'All Apologies' must have been a special moment for both of them. Music has a way of connecting people across time and generations, and it's beautiful to see that happening with our songs."

Cobain 'told' me this via PeopleAI, a website created in 2023 where users can "converse with and learn from some of the most influential and significant figures in human history" (PeopleAI, n.d.) from Socrates to Princess Diana.

Communing with the dead has long been a part of human existence. As Friedrich A. Kittler suggests "The realm of the dead is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a given culture" (1999, 13) and from oral storytelling traditions to Victorian seances we have long had the desire to connect with that realm and understand its stories. But as technology advances, our means of connecting with the past proliferate; as Kasket suggests "technology is [now] where the dead live" (2019, 7) and the dead

are increasingly online. Websites and apps like PeopleAI and MyHeritage's Deep Nostalgia utilise deep learning algorithms to evoke, re-frame, re-work and distort the past, and similar tools are now being introduced in cultural and heritage contexts. Indeed, as the capabilities of AI-enabled voice 'clones' and 'deepfake' technologies improve, working with algorithmic afterlives is fast becoming a mundane proposition. These practices however – in varied ways – expose deep ethical questions about consent, legacy, ownership and custodianship. How should we work with the digital human remains of public figures and cultural 'icons' (and when shouldn't we)? How does consent need to be (re)configured in the context of (remediated, and posthumous) algorithmic afterlives? How might permissions, and perhaps our regulatory frameworks, need to be (re)configured? How much control should the living have (or assume) over these potentials? What are the implications of the use of off the shelf chatbot creators like Chatbot Kit – the technology behind PeopleAI – by those in the heritage sector? And how might these approaches accelerate concerns about trust and mis/dis-information?

These questions are increasingly important in the context of concerns about disinformation and declining levels of trust in public institutions and the media (OECD 2024). Cultural institutions - and cultural professionals - continue to enjoy very high levels of trust and confidence (NMDC 2022) yet research has evidenced deep concerns within the sector about how increasing uses of AI might be undermining that trust, with questions about distortion, distrust and disinformation looming large (Kidd and Rees, 2021; Kidd and Nieto McAvoy, 2024). We have been working with the sector to better understand and respond to these concerns, in particular when it comes to the algorithmic 'revival' of historical figures for interactions with the public. In this paper we introduce and reflect upon our recent work - in collaboration with 19 UK cultural professionals and alongside creative studio yello brick – to co-design an innovative toolkit for museum/historic sites navigating the creation of 'AI afterlives'.

In 2024 we carried out a series of workshops in which we introduced a range of digital afterlife tools, such as MyHeritage's Deep Nostalgia, the Living Museum website and yello brick's Who Owns a Memory to cultural professionals and asked them to consider the opportunities and challenges posed by these tools as well as reflecting on the values and principles guiding their organisation. While common responses to the opportunities that digital tools suggest were similar to the claims that are made for digital approaches in more general terms, such as enhancing engagement, making marginalised voices heard and offering greater accessibility, challenges highlighted the unique position that cultural and heritage organisations occupy. Participants noted the fractures that these tools may introduce in and beyond the sector, such as distorting history, creating inaccurate or misleading representations, and perpetuating harmful stereotypes; narrowing the scope of inquiry and limiting the types of questions that visitors ask, thus restricting rather than encouraging critical thinking; and more broadly the issues in using AI tools that may not align with their organisations' values. Through this research we have identified that thinking about AI afterlives crystalises many of the concerns that people have been expressing more generally about how materials from the past are made use of in the present. The potential ruptures between past and present that arise in the context of AI and automation - including questions about how, what and who we remember; the ownership of the past; and the ethical implications of

cultural and heritage organisations using tools which have a negative effect on the environment – become more, or differently, complicated when thinking about museums and heritage in the digital environment. As a result of these workshops we are producing an online toolkit which encourages heritage professionals to reflect upon these practices through a series of innovative scenarios and interactive models. Following the launch of the toolkit in March 2025 we will be carrying out further user testing and evaluation, including a series of reflective interviews with participants in our co-design process, before scaling the project further, again in collaboration. This paper will discuss the key takeaways from this research, highlighting the main concerns that cultural professionals have around algorithmic revivals, the tensions at play between cultural organisations' values and ambitions, and the potential paths organisations and professionals can follow to address concerns around algorithmic revivals.

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