FACEBOOKING TOWARD DEATH: HOW DIGITAL LEGACY IMPACTS CURATION IN ONLINE SETTINGS

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Introduction

The complex and meaningful ways that we present ourselves both offline (Goffman, 1959) and online (Papacharissi, 2010; Bergman, et al., 2010; boyd, 2008; Farquhar, 2012) are often conceived of as immediate, temporally-based social interactions. And of course, the ephemerality of sites like Twitter and Snapchat, where most activity – comments, shares, and likes – takes place within the first hour of posting (Silverman, 2015a), can make it seem like such identity performances are fleeting. However, these social broadcasts are not just communications, but data, records, and archives that eventually will, in sum, make up our digital legacy (Carroll & Romano, 2011). Often a look at the press's coverage of someone's death will show the ways online identity is mined for clues as to who a person was, what they valued, or even what their "last words" and pictures were.

This paper asks whether increased attention to notions of online legacy or digital afterlife could impact social media management and other online behavior. Put another way, if networked technologies are imagined as an opportunity for not just identity performance, but identity preservation, would online activity show signs of curation?

Curation of Self, Legacy and the Digital Afterlife

Noting the sometimes illusory nature of online interactions isn't to say that online identity isn't a carefully crafted, thoughtful endeavor. Scholars like Hearn (2008) and Marwick (2013) even show how selves can be conceived of as brands. Jacob Silverman (2015b) writes, "Placing [anything] on your blog or in your Twitter stream acts as a form of identification – a signal of your aesthetics, a reflection of your background, an avatar of your desires." However, deliberate identity work with legacy in mind may look different than these neo-liberal constructions.

Curating in traditional settings, like art museums, entails selecting, organizing, presenting and looking after items. In digital fields, any mention of curation often has to do with the maintenance and storage of large-scale data. Elsewhere it remains under-

theorized, especially given the emphasis on symbolic interactionism by many scholars, as noted above.

While not always labeled as such, some researchers have noted facets of curation in online phenomena like personal archiving (Garde-Hansen, 2009; Cox, 2009), virtual memories (Czerwinski, et al., 2006) and digital artifacts (Gulotta, et al., 2013). Katie Day Good (2012) conceptualized social media, like its scrapbook predecessor, as sites of personal media assemblages and personal media archives, pointing to the dual social and archival dimensions of the platforms.

Preliminary Methodology & Discussion

There is a tension that exists in attempting to document one's life while simultaneously living it. Thoreau more eloquently put it: "My life has been the poem I would have writ, But I could not both live and utter it." However, what Heidegger (1962) called being-toward-death, or an orientation that acknowledges and accepts death, opens possibilities for living in a purposeful, authentic way, even online.

This paper proposes to build on the aforementioned body of work by exploring whether users take into account their digital afterlife and if this leads to a curation of the self, distinct from other forms of identity work. The study will employ interviews and case studies in exploring the different ways users might curate information or orient themselves toward digital legacy, and whether or not they see it in those terms. By considering Heidegger's being-toward-death in matters of digital identity and online social interaction, we might get a sense of some of the values or standards by which users choose to curate their online identity.

Questions like this are quite timely as technology companies and software designers grapple with digital legacy and online mourning. In fact, a recent Facebook policy change stating users could name digital heirs to manage their accounts posthumously received substantial media coverage and user discussion. Digital legacy is certainly being incorporated into our collective imagining of the internet and will likely have consequences for the ways in which users present and share content.

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