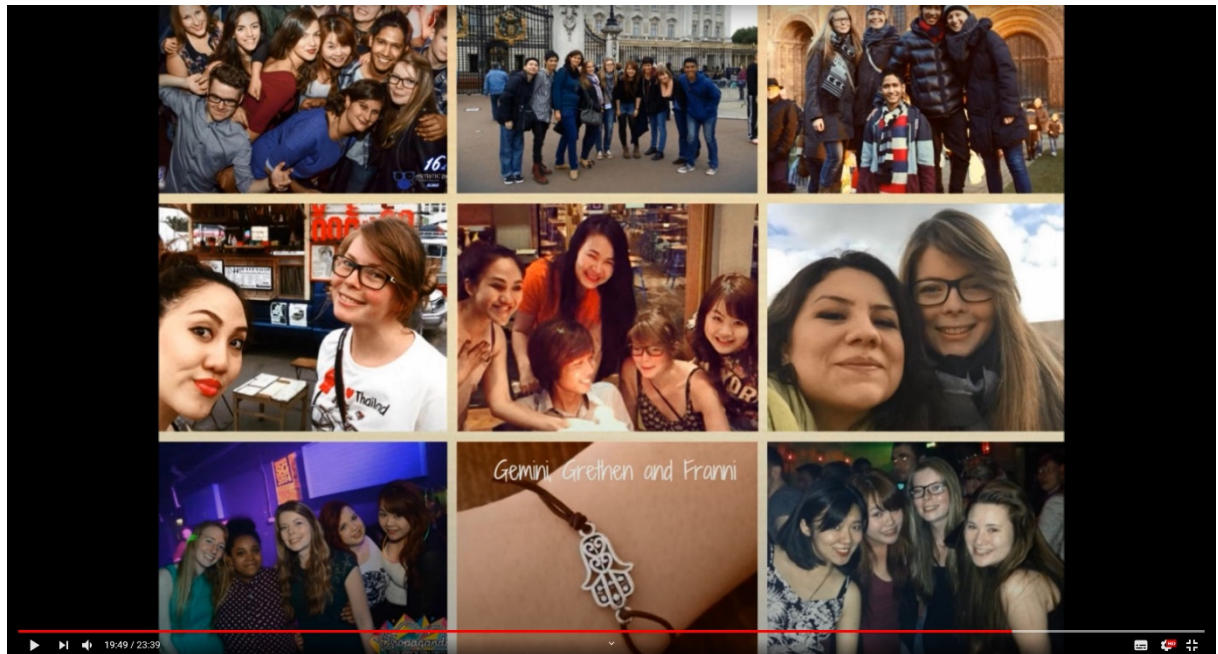


“There is something left for eternity”

The digital legacy and its significance for mourning and remembrance

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*A father's memorial film, in which voice messages and photos from his daughter's digital legacies were integrated.
The film can be watched here: bit.ly/inmemorian*

In recent years, the digital legacy has received increased media attention. Legal aspects and what to take care of in the event of death are being addressed. However, problems and potentials of digital legacies for mourning and remembrance work are rarely discussed.

This perspective guides my doctoral thesis in the field of visual sociology. Mourning and memory in the digital time is not a new subject for sociology, but empirical studies are rare. This article is an insight into so far 15 interviews with bereaved people, who inherited digital legacies.

Intimate data

With smartphone photos, voice messages, messenger histories, emails, or profiles in social media, the digital legacies can be an intimate record of the lived life. Some of these data is shared or published on the Internet in one's lifetime, but most of the data remain private. For bereaved persons, the question arises whether they will use the digital records for mourning and remembering.

Yeah, that was just one of those things, [...] just because he's dead now, it's still his own. So, his privacy. Of course, you have a kind of curiosity, [...] especially about what was going on shortly before. [...] did he somehow more often called doctors or did he somehow made a long journey, [...] but at the end of the day, it's just none of my business.

Here a daughter reaffirms the privacy of her deceased father - she has only partially and fleetingly looked at his digital legacies. This is different to a father who is cautiously yet deeply engaged with his daughter's digital legacies:

I say that she had fun there, that was great for her, [...] in these twenty-three years that she has had, I am happy about every beautiful moment that I can discover, where she had fun, where she had joy, where she experienced something.

The digital legacies pose archival questions to dependants, questions of privacy and are a possible resource for mourning and remembrance work.

Virtual candles

Digital mourning and remembrance practices complement traditional practices. Funerals are live-streamed, candles are lit virtually, shared remembrance takes place independently of time and place in messengers or in online mourning groups, photos are always at hand on the smartphone, and digital techniques make it easier than ever before to print books or create and publish memorial films.

The digital legacies of my daughter, well, I have used parts of them [...] for videos and for myself as well, that I have worked through something. [...] And I also know that when I have finished a video like this, I will feel really good afterwards.

Because of these possibilities, sociologist Andreas Reckwitz calls the digital a "cultural machine". While mourning remains the same, new techniques extend its forms of expression.

Valuable snapshots

Especially memories of everyday life are treasured, as one participant describes:

And these everyday pictures, they showed me quite often, [...] how {name of the deceased partner} saw the world, what was important to her.

Photographs that are posed are less important to him, says a father about his daughter's photographic legacy, but he appreciates photographs that show her character:

So these are all pictures, these are from her. But they show a little bit what she liked [...], how she was, [...] lovingly wrapping things, or [...] with her friends, or such details here, she liked to bake and so on.



Valuable Snapshots – a father's memorial book with photos from his deceased daughter's smartphone and her Facebook profile

Especially what is often rejected as banal, selfies or Facebook posts about everyday life, seems to be valuable as a memory. The digital legacies are often perceived as consoling, as long as they can assure that the deceased had a good life. A daughter about her deceased father:

Well, it just helped me to see, [...] that he's been happy lately. Well, that would have hurt me more if I had somehow discovered, okay, he has been suffering badly for the last month. But just to see, okay, he was happy and content. There was no big drama in his life, he just lived his life and so on, it was just normal days before, like always.

Living with the deceased

With the term "continuing bonds" Klass, Silverman, and Nickman described in 1996 how we remain in contact with our deceased. Today, the smartphone that the deceased often held in his or her hand is an important connection, the photo wall is supplemented by the portrait of the deceased on the home screen, and most of my participants chat privately with the deceased. A mother, exchanging with her deceased son via WhatsApp:

I don't know how, yes, I wouldn't know how, if I wouldn't have that, where I would be now. I gotta say, this is really helping me a lot. To exchange with him like that.

Digital practices make it possible to stay in touch with the deceased and can thus also fulfil spiritual functions.

The fight against forgetting

There is something left for eternity – so says one father about his daughter's Facebook profile. Digital immortality is a popular topic in the media and academia. However, specialised memory portals, virtual realities, or utopian ideas of copying the deceased with the help of artificial intelligence do not play a role for my participants. They mourn and remember where they have lived with the deceased. In social media or in WhatsApp groups, the deceased remain present. Nevertheless the Internet, partly with religious connotations, is conceived as a place for eternity. One participant says about backing up the data of her deceased husband:

So I didn't know how to do all this, [...] in the Apple store they kindly set up this cloud for me, but what is a cloud like that, I still don't really know. But I found it to be an appropriate place.

Whether the Internet actually makes people unforgettable, or ages digitally and forgets, is not decisive for the bereaved. This is what a father says about his daughter's Facebook profile:

Whether or not anyone else is watching this is another story. But [...] there remains a remnant of someone who is no longer here, but who might be found again by chance someday.

The fight against forgetting is often particularly important for parents who have lost a child. Digital media can keep the deceased present and give hope for everlasting remembrance.

No one-fits-all solution

These initial research results show that the impetus towards individualisation in the digital society is also expanding opportunities for mourning and remembrance. Whether these are perceived as valuable and utilised is a subjective matter. So says one participant:

There is definitively no blanket recipe either, no one can tell you what is important for you now, which step is important.

It may be helpful for mourners to learn how others face the problems and potentials of digital legacies. Besides an academic interest, this is the intention I follow with my PhD.

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