


Researching the Ends of Identity: Birth and Death on Social Media

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Abstract

This paper argues that expanding the scope of social media studies to examine birth and early life at one end, and death and memorialisation at the other, demonstrates that social media is never just about an individual, but also the way individuals are always already joined together as families, groups, communities and more. Mapping these ends of identity also reveals more of the nuances of everyday social media use and its impact.

Keywords

social media, digital death, birth, childhood

While communal by definition, social media is most often researched in terms of the way individuals use the tools and platforms, or the way those individuals form groups of various types. Joining a social media platform, or downloading and using a social media app, is situated legally as a relationship between a company and an individual user. And challenges in terms of the way social media data are created, collected, aggregated, and commercialized are most often addressed by suggesting individual users should be empowered with more agency, better privacy, and more robust digital literacies. However, as social media studies mature, questions about social media traces that precede an individual's entry into the world, and persist after their death, are increasingly important.

Digital communication and mobile media, including a range of apps and platforms, are an increasingly integral part of the way most families interact, in a variety of different ways (Clark, 2013). Indeed, a social media presence often begins before birth. The sharing of fetal ultrasound images on social media is now a common ritual for announcing the immanent birth of a baby (Lupton, 2013), and a range of apps allow parents to track the progress of a pregnancy and then quantify and measure a baby's early routines—sleeping, eating, weight, height—and development (Rettberg, 2014). Early photos on Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, and elsewhere often depict the joys of early childhood, ensuring family and friends across the globe can share the highs and lows of parenting. Yet, while early uses of the Internet by young people have been the focus of scholarship for some years (see Livingstone, 2009 for example), research about the way parents and others create or publish children into being online is largely absent.

On Instagram alone, every month, thousands of fetal images are shared and publicly tagged as ultrasounds. Often, these images capture the metadata visible on the ultrasound screen, which might include the mother's name, the current date, the location of the scan, the expected delivery date, and other personal information. For many young people, this type of sharing will be their first mention on social media, the beginning of a long and likely loving record published by their parents, guardians, and loved ones. Indeed, reinvigorating the term publishing to describe the creation of social media traces may serve as a useful reminder that these are digital traces about a person but obviously not created by that person. Scholars researching how these early identity traces circulate and what they mean will have to look beyond individual agency, rather, at the very least, situating identity formation and publishing on social media as a group activity centered initially on the family. Moreover, as young people grow and start to use social media themselves, fashioning their own identities, they will not be writing on an empty slate, but will have to negotiate the way they are represented in light of the traces and stories about them already available.

At the other end of life, the question of what happens to a person's social media presence after they die raises similar issues. The emerging field of digital death studies (Giaccardi, 2012; Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015;

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Leaver, 2013; Moreman & Lewis, 2014) has begun to wrestle with questions of mourning and memorials when the social media presences of the deceased persist. Similarly, in response to public outcry, companies such as Facebook now offer the ability to memorialize the accounts of people who have passed away. Yet, most social media apps and platforms lack a policy or answer as what happens when a user dies. And those that have an answer rely on their Terms of Use—a contract with the deceased individual—often refusing to release control of an account, or at times its content, to loved ones or estate managers. The question of digital legacies similarly point out that social media cannot just be framed in terms of individual agency. Partners, loved ones, families, estates, business partners, and many others may have a vested interest in the digital traces left behind after someone dies. Those traces may have archival or historical value. Yet, few clear mechanisms exist for managing digital legacies, and questions remain whether these are even part of an individual's estate.

The normalization of digital communication and ubiquity of mobile devices mean that the role of social media in everyday life continues to expand. As scholarship addresses this growing terrain, examining birth, early life, and death can expand our understanding of what social media means and how it relates to individuals, groups, and identities. Broadening the scope of social media studies in this manner may expand the focus from not just the way that individuals form communities and publics of various types but also how the amalgams that are communities and groups of various kinds create and publish individuals into being (see Hartley & Potts, 2014).

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