

Mortuary Walks. Sauntering and Mourning among Facebook's Dead

Niccolò Monti

Università degli Studi di Torino
niccolo.monti@unito.it

| abstract

This paper tackles the issues of death, dying and commemorating the dead in contemporary digital communities. Specifically, it does so through a perspective drawing both from recent research in the death studies field and from cultural semiotics. The focus of attention is Facebook's appropriation of the concept of death and the rituals of mourning surrounding it: we provide a description of Facebook's rhetorical devices employed in order to implement the experience of grief into its interface, further establishing its role as one of the major vectors of digital sociality. Then, we endeavour into a critical analysis of Facebook's treatment of death and mourners, trying to pinpoint the ideological biases that condition its approach to them and, in general, tackling Facebook's bond with pre-existing traditional practices of grieving and burial.

DOI 10.36158/97888929552579

Introduction

In this article we shall tackle the issues of death, dying and experiencing the dead within a digital environment. The theme has garnered a growing attention in the last twenty years: it has become a public phenomenon, and one of scientific interest as well. This is due to the fact that the translation, appropriation, and reuse of the culturally dense idea of death raises plenty of questions relating to how this idea is remodelled, how it evolves within a different social milieu. Particularly, what interests us is when all of these acts of appropriation, reuse, etc., are part of a general strategy, or are telling of a certain ideology that can be then attributed to the subjects – individual, collective, or impersonal – that use death as a tool in their rhetorical repertoire.

Facebook will be our main case study, because it presents the most enduring to date case of social networking site where the issue of dead users has been dealt with from the inside. Thus, we shall first attempt an introduction of the theme, with the specific aim to establish and clarify the semiotic and critical framework of our essay; then, in the second part, our focus will shift to Facebook, directly tackling the rhetorical strategies that dress death with the digital interface of the platform.

A Promenade among Dead Fields

The tombs in the Roman Non-Catholic cemetery offer a parallel display of ordinary and artistic lives, indiscernible were it not for the celebrity bestowed to some of them in afterlife: the likes of Keats, Gramsci, and, recently, Camilleri, to say but a few, rest there with less remembered lives than theirs. Nonetheless, all exist in that peculiar equal silence that only cemeteries have, with the names and stones still and exposed, futile if larger or smaller in dimensions: all are dead remnants, all are stranded under the shadows of the Pyramid of Cestius and of the cypresses adorning the vertical space.

A visitor, even without a dead relative or a friend buried there to commemorate, might enter anyway and freely form an aimless path around the tombs, perhaps reaching the higher levels of the cemetery, taking the stairs right in front of the entrance, and striking luck by discovering the sober gravestone where Carlo Emilio Gadda, the great Italian novelist, was buried; after that, they might insist further up the stairs and encounter the much more recognizable horizontal plaque dedicated to the poet Shelley, to then resume their random walking, promenading the graveyard.

The image of the promenade was not chosen by chance, nor did we intend to merely present a laud of an experience, as enthralling as it might be, like wandering through the Non-Catholic cemetery in Rome. On the contrary, all our preamble serves to create a contrast: it is important to have in mind what we mean when we talk about our traditional rituals and spaces dedicated to death, so that we can then confront it with what has become of death-related spaces within today's digitalized communities. The final aim is to investigate how these digital spaces act upon our way of conceptualizing and living through death.

Is promenading, even metaphorically, still possible when we consider digital profiles of dead people in social networks? Well, in a way, yes, but this requires explaining what it is meant here by promenade, and why this issue becomes interesting to a semiotic perspective. Specifically, to cultural semiotics, taken here as our general analytical framework, in an attempt to inquire into our evolving ideas of death and grieving and, moreover, our bond with the spaces where death is modelled, materialized, ritualized, and, ultimately, given meaning.

The act of walking through sculpted angels, cameos of the dead, marble vaults hosting what looks like a Wunderkammer of remembrance, is, at the same time, an almost incessant process of semiosis, that is, an interpretative process, where each sensorial experience of the material world can give raise to a second type of promenade: what Umberto Eco had termed *inferential walks*, which he described as chains of interpretative moves that are taken by a reader when going through the *fabula* of, usually, a narrative text.

We say “usually” because these categories are not bound to a literary application, and can be resorted to, with some adjustments, also when describing any sort of textual reception, or any sort of practical experience, that advances through expectations and anticipations provoked by the very structure of the received or experienced object; that is, through abductive inferences, distinguished from deductive and inductive ones¹. But

1. This tripartition Eco derived from Charles S. Peirce, though its formulation and theory varied greatly over time in the American philosopher's works. Briefly, we could explain them like so: a deduction is an argument which, starting from facts as its premiss, arrives at a conclusion necessarily already represented in them; an abduction is an argument that finds in its premiss a similarity with its conclusion, thus elaborating an hypothetical rule logically binding the two; and, lastly, an induction is an argument that, from a previous hypothesis (abductive) and from virtual predictions (deductive), arrives at a probable demonstration of that hypothesis by means of subsequent experiments and trials. For an insight on the topic, we refer to Bellucci's essay on Peirce's speculative grammar (cf. Bellucci, 2019, pp. 185 ss.).

this does not necessarily entail that inferential walks only occur if and because a reasoning subject produces them:

they are not mere whimsical initiatives on the part of the reader, but are elicited by discursive structures and foreseen by the whole textual strategy as indispensable components of the construction of the *fabula* (Eco, 1979, p. 32).

Furthermore, these inferential walks, originating from the encounter of a reader/receiver and a text's discursive and narrative structures – this encounter thus resulting from an interpretative cooperation between the two sides –, never arise in a vacuum: they are always conditioned by the cultural milieu in which they occur, from which derive the intertextual paths that are stimulated by a text, or by a practice. So, returning to our starting example, whereas a specific cemetery (in our case, one that is imbued with Italian, Christian, etc., values) might tend to elicit in its visitors a chain of meaning-making activities that is exclusive to this space's structure, other cemeteries – or even other architectures, material or digital, that similarly frame and model our idea of death – might trigger radically different walks.

As we said in the introduction, the case study we'd like to present is that of Facebook, which has been allowing and encouraging its users to make the platform, among its possible functions, also into a place to honour and remember the dead.

The blue social network – now rebranded as Meta – introduced the choice to elect a person (a *legacy contact*), either a relative or friend, as executor of one's own profile in case of death. The account, then, after the person has been confirmed to have died, can be either permanently deleted by the aforementioned contact, or it can be *memorialized*: following this, the word "Remembering" appears above the name of the profile, no friend requests can be sent to it, but pre-existing Facebook friends can interact with all the visible posts on that person's profile, commemorating their life, and so on. Delving into some of the motivations that were given by Facebook after this addition will help us to frame the company's (re)use of death, and how it interacts with previously standing beliefs and rituals regarding the passing of an individual. The latter can be equated with an intertextual net cast by Facebook, along which the reader is invited to move.

As Facebook Global Policy manager, Monika Bickert, said:

When people come to Facebook after suffering a loss, we want them to feel comfort, not pain, which is why we stop sending birthday reminders once we know someone has passed away, and why we try to make it easy for surviving family members to reach us (Bickert, 2017).

Her statement can be considered, on one hand and at straight face value, as a mere expression of Facebook's policy regarding the question of dead users, whose profiles need to be managed, repurposed to serve as places of remembrance and grief-easing; but, on the other hand, what these statements amount to is a manifesto of how the social network as a whole, as a structured cultural expression, conceives death and its role in relation to death.

First, it should be noted that thinking about dying users wasn't a major concern in the early days, when Facebook was just a social network for hooking up among college students. Gradually growing in size and ambitions, Facebook has become today such a social juggernaut that it has amassed more social functions than were previously thought or expected for it. What happens, what can we do, once our users start dying?,

they must have started wondering. A quick overview of the data relating to dead people on Facebook offers an answer to why this is a problem that the Menlo Park company could not avoid, and whose volume is expanding by the year.

Quantitative methods of analysis have been used to calculate and predict the number of dead users a massive social network like Facebook will have to deal with in the coming future. Even though dead profiles «do not show any signs of exceeding the living within this century», they «are likely to reach parity with the living in the first decades of the 22nd century» (Öhman & Watson, 2019, p. 7). This, supposing Facebook will survive the current century, means that new policies were required from within the company to tackle this issue. But, as with each policy decision and the rhetorical apparatus that comes with it, an ideology seeps into the discourse, permeates it. So, a cultural semiotics approach needs to account for any ideological posture that might inform and taint the message and the way it is presented.

In the case at hand, it means that we have to delve into Facebook's appropriation of death as a cultural construct, which wouldn't be of any interest, per se, if it didn't lead to the institution of a social practice – digital mourning – worthy of analysis².

The (Face)book of the Dead

Allow us once again to indulge in an introductory detour, this time towards a literary example of the interconnection between death and technology. Specifically, we turn back to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which provides us with a comical vignette regarding the survival of a dear one after their death through technological means. Among Leopold Bloom's imaginings during his day we encounter one where he muses about the possibility to record the voices of the dead and to listen back to them with the help of a gramophone:

Have a gramophone in every grave or keep it in the house. After dinner on a Sunday. Put on poor old greatgrandfather Kraahraark! Hellohellohello amawfullyglad kraark awfullyglada-seeragain hellohello amarawf kophthst (Joyce, 1922, 1990, p. 114).

Thanatologists – scholars of the concept and history of death – have often dealt with the use of technological tools and devices in grieving and mourning. Already back in 1997, at the dawn of internet culture, Carla Sofka spoke of thanatechnology: «technological resources [...] that can be used to gain information about topics in thanatology» (Sofka, 1997, p. 553), meaning by it mostly information that could be retrieved and used by specialists. The term caught up during the ensuing decades and, along with its rising adoption in the death studies community, its meaning gradually shifted and evolved, acquiring a nuance that mitigated its use as a concept only linked to clinical use or academic research, thus broadening its original scope.

In 2018, while referring the term to Sofka's paper, two researchers arrived at the following definition: «thanatechnology refers to the use of technological resources to support individuals and families coping with death, grief, and life-threatening illnesses» (Moyer &

2. Semiotics is, after all, itself a social practice: one, specifically, that has as its core objective to unmask the ideologies behind other social practices. As Anna Maria Lorusso reminds us, it was Eco, recovering in his work a critical tradition spanning from Marxism to structuralism, that «conceived semiotics as an *anti-ideological* force that works on culture and for culture, in order to unmask its presumptions and paralogia» (Lorusso 2015, p. 119).

Enck, 2018, p. 1). As it appears, thanatechnologies have shifted from being conceived as mere informative tools: they have now become synonymous with all those technological instruments that can be used, not just by professionals but also by patients or surviving relatives and friends, to palliate any type of death-related suffering. They have come to be related to “support” and “coping”.

So, given the latter definition and given the policies put in place by Facebook that we quoted in the previous chapter, it can be argued that Facebook itself aims more and more to integrate a thanatechnological function in its digital architecture. We could push it even further and state that Facebook itself has become a thanatechnology. Not only through the institution per se of memorialized accounts, but, most importantly, through all the narrative and discursive structure surrounding them, all the graphic and interface-related decisions that had to be made, all the new modes of use related to them, all the practices, the habits, that have been set in motion by their introduction within Facebook's social system, and, finally, through a new semantic of death that spurred around this new phenomenon. Given all of this, we may ask: what does Facebook do to and with death?

To memorialize an account is not that common a decision among Facebook's user-base (yet): there are plenty of examples of dead people whose profiles were not made into memorialized accounts. Those profiles just remain there, unmarked, and to be interacted with. Thus, the dead on Facebook reach beyond the limits of what has been and what can be memorialized, making the latter a functionality that doesn't have the presumption to be mandatory, nor it means that Facebook has achieved such a status and relevance yet that a material burial has to always be accompanied by a digital one.

There emerges a further point: memorial accounts usually, if ever, don't have a relation to the body of the dead, to the corpse; there is no wake to be held in front of an open casket, nor any photographic or video testimonies of the burial event need to be uploaded on the page of the deceased – this choice is, we think, left to the users' sensibility and taste, albeit Facebook's policies on the depiction of dead bodies or, in general, on sensitive content might not favour such a choice, were it to be taken by some user. Anyway, this could be seen as proof that, currently, memorialized accounts don't serve the purpose to substitute, or to be in any way analogous to, a physical grave.

After all, as Davide Sisto reminds us:

The presence of a deceased person's Facebook profile in the midst of the profiles of the living is a phenomenon that can in no way be compared to, for example, a visit to a grave (or other such memorial place) (Sisto, 2020, p. 2).

Yes, Facebook interacts with death – it provides an interaction *with* the dead, even though in a digital form –, but it doesn't offer anything in the form of the dedicated commemoration that we experience in front of a grave, nor of the aimless cemeterial *flânerie* that is an essential part of our aesthetic and existential experience of death. Promenading the digital burial grounds of the dead remains a speculative perspective, even in an age where talks of metaverses and simulated worlds are common and almost ubiquitous.

This might seem like a truism regarding the current state of the culture of death; but it isn't if we then derive from it a further consideration on the bond between different practices of death existing nowadays. Notwithstanding the fact that Facebook's proposal on how we might deal with death in a digital age «can in no way be compared to [...] a

visit to a grave» (*ibid.*), the near future might offer a completely different situation; even now, though incomparable in use or intensity with previous modes of grieving, Facebook has introduced what could be either an auxiliary, or an entirely substitutive practice.

Consequently, we can, on one hand, infer a general idea of how death and the practices related to it are evolving in today's cultural environment, death now appearing «fragmented in various processes sharing no intrinsic coordination and disjointed from one another» (Sisto, 2014, p. 33); and, on the other hand, we have to recognize Facebook's impact on death and grieving. Expressions of grief on the social network have grown over the years, to the point that researchers studying the topic have been able to describe a spectrum of modes of expression, identifying it as a fully complex digital practice, though still developing and prone to changes³.

Facebook provokes specific chains of connotation, it elicits an array of inferential walks, as we called them, in relation to death: it builds its own semantic of death. Therefore, a more precise formulation of our previous question could be the following: what is the semantic field traced by Facebook around death and what are the ideological cuts that it has operated on it?

We shall elect two interpretative keys to follow while trying to answer this question: survival and remembrance.

Survival

Studies on how death was reconceived, through digital social media (early virtual cemeteries, but also sites like Myspace, Tumblr, etc.), or even through internet forums and personal blogs, have often chosen to focus on the issues of identity, of personality, of survival after death. This is done by taking the point of view of the deceased and their personal identity as it had publicly appeared on their Facebook profile, and, moreover, as it continues to appear after their death. The central topic is still death, of course, but the perspective entails that a lesser importance is given to memorial practices and rituals:

What the Facebook profiles of the dead seem to suggest is that our social identities are not necessarily coextensive with the biological life of the individual human organism with which they are associated, and thus it is not the *memory* of the dead person that is being honoured and sustained through this form of memorialisation, but some dimension or extension of *the dead person themselves* (Stokes, 2012, p. 367).

In this case, center stage is given to the issue of continuation. If death is a discontinuity, if it is an event disrupting the otherwise unscathed integrity of the thinking and writing self, then a thanatechnology like Facebook has as its prime function that to offer a continuity after death; thus, only on a second degree it is related to the grieving reaction, to the memory, left behind by the death of a dear one: first and foremost, Facebook helps preserving the personal identity, the social inscriptions, of dead people. This is linked with the hypothesis that digital profiles are some sort of extension of our identities, even posthumously: «they genuinely do help the dead dwell among the living a little

3. There have been multiple studies dedicated on the topic of grieving on social networking sites, with plenty focusing on Facebook. We have chosen not to delve too much into this specific aspect of Facebook's framing of death and commemorative rituals, as it would have proven too lengthy an endeavour; for any insight, we refer back to the article by Blower and Sharman (2021).

longer than they perhaps might have done» (ivi, p. 378). Therefore, according to Stokes, Facebook's memorializing function exists above all in order to let the dead live longer, to extend their permanence in the world and to create a continuity beyond death.

It's like in Joyce's excerpt we quoted earlier: Facebook and other similar thanatechnologies are seen as instruments created not for the benefit of the living, of the bereaved, but in order to gratify the platitude of surviving in some form after death; in this way, the dead can always be available, as ever existing tokens, ever reproduced under the same light that last shone on them, and it is thanks to this ever shining light that they can try to survive oblivion. And, in fact, there are several services that have launched in the recent past with this precise purpose: posthumous messaging (Death Switch, GhostMemo, etc.), programs and apps that aim at recreating a user's style by mining the online presence they held (e.g., LivesOn applies it to Twitter feeds), or other projects like Eterni.me, developed by MIT researchers in 2014 but arrived today at a stall, that had the explicit goal of creating one as complete as possible human archive, with, associated to each client, a personal artificial biographer, who would have saved and archived every personal activity of theirs, offline and online⁴.

It seems, however, relevant to us to point out at least one limitation that similar perspectives are held back by (as in the case of Stokes; but see also Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008): these analyses bring forth a somewhat innocent vision of social media, where there are no algorithmic biases to be accounted for, and no ideological structures to be dissected; instead, for example, Facebook is compared to a personal diary, a biographical extension of oneself, where individual users possess complete control over their avatars.

But, after more than fifteen years of common everyday use and of scholar inquiry on the topic, we should be, if not suspicious, at least be more prone to take a critical stance towards digital platforms and their tendency to present themselves as naturalized extensions of human social activity and of personal identities.

Prey and Smit already exposed this point in a more succinct manner:

Instead of a diary that allows for the composition of the self, Facebook [...] increasingly composes the self *for us* through continuous selection, effacement, and re-presentation of our memories (Prey & Smit, 2019, p. 20).

As the authors later point out: «Technology and the subject are always engaged in a process of becoming» (ivi, p. 210). In one way, this could be seen as similar to what we were describing as a cooperative dialogue between a text and its receivers; if we then generalize this equation, and try to apply it to our specific case, it could even encompass the relation between a person and a technical object, where there isn't one side to be prioritized over the other, being both of them participant in a bifocal process of becoming.

So, like with any sort of technical object, Facebook too cannot be simply considered as a natural part of our experience, and thus the data we leave on it as a mere extension

4. The digital tendency to save data on data of ourselves, ranging from the simple sharing of a personal daily activity to the yet speculative project of uploading the human mind, is according to some an extension of the same desires that has driven humans, for centuries, in the quest of archiving our lives: «People have long planned for a social afterlife by writing autobiographies, leaving personal letters and diaries, curating and burying time-capsules, or compiling audio and video recordings to be used when dead» (Arnold et al., 2018, p. 125). This could, on one hand, be true; but, on the other, seeking some form of anthropological continuity with other human practices shouldn't divert us from analysing the novelty intrinsic in these new forms of digital archiving of personal information: especially since they are embedded into the structure of several social and economic institutions (like Facebook).

of our identities: first of all, Facebook acts upon us, on our social behaviours and habits, and, on a more strictly semiotic level, on our interpretative tendencies; secondly, and in a much denser way than simpler technical objects, Facebook hides its ideological structures behind its rhetorical surface. Therefore, when we tackle the question of the digital afterlife merely by wondering about what will happen to our online identities after death, we are limiting the scope and the ambition of our analyses, since we avoid interrogating the techniques and technologies involved in the digitalization of death. Facebook, in the end, is the only subject left unscathed.

The opposite position – that of remembrance –, we think, serves as a better point of entrance to Facebook’s ideology, and most importantly to its appropriation and reinvention of death-related practices. So, instead of dead dwelling among the living, we shall focus on the ways in which Facebook allows the dwelling of the living among the dead.

Remembrance

Facebook itself, when exposing its position towards memorializing dead people, seems to be more interested in who lives on to grieve, rather than in those that have already died and whose digital survival might be at stake.

Three textual sources can corroborate this: first, a policy description of memorialization that can be found among the pages of the Transparency Center on the main Meta website; second, the already mentioned blog post by Monika Bickert, tagged as part of the Hard Questions’ series, which started back in 2017 and was updated until August 2019; third and last, an April 2019 Newsroom article penned by Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s Chief Operating Officer, and titled “Making it easier to honor a loved one on Facebook after they pass away”.

In the policy page, we find this statement: «Once memorialized, the word “Remembering” appears above the name of the person’s profile so the account is now a memorial site» (Facebook, 2020 [online]). The choice of words indicates a practice that Facebook is trying to give a shape to: a memorialized account should function as a place of gathering, not a place where the identity of the individual can live on in the digital afterlife, but one of collective suffering. There seem to be no hint attempted by Facebook here, nor elsewhere, towards that wide contemporary current of beliefs, loosely associated with some transhumanist ideals, that envisions a future where humans will never have to die, thus giving the issue of digital survival center stage relevance in the discourse over our posthumous online legacy. Facebook’s emphasis, instead, seems to be on honouring and remembering, on commemoration, and, as Bickert clarifies in her article, on easing.

In this sense, Bickert’s and Sandberg’s articles should be read together, since they both come from the same emotional place and try to go in a similar direction, regarding the framing they create around Facebook’s memorializing functionality. We do not wish in any way to doubt the sincerity of the two authors’ assertions; on the contrary, their authenticity should be taken as an active component of Facebook’s narrative structure: the company needs sincere voices in order to show to its users that it can become a useful tool, a positive place, where death can be processed through the support of a community.

We say all of this because both Bickert and Sandberg have both been through personal losses, that is, they have both had the experience of becoming widows, and we’re far from intruding into the private lives of these people, since their biographical informa-

tion seeps into their discourses and informs Facebook's overall depiction of itself, in this specific case through its spokespersons. Moreover, one of them speaks openly of her loss in her article: indeed, of the two Bickert is the only one to directly speak about it, even naming her deceased husband and using her own life as an example of how «reminders of our loved ones don't have to be reminders of loss» (Bickert, 2017 [online]); hence Facebook's usefulness, since having our losses translated and filtered through social media, «rather than provoking pain, can ultimately ease our grief» (*ibid.*).

Bickert's article is the closest look we have of Facebook's idea of death and of its role in relation to it: Facebook exists to alleviate pain; this is why it describes itself more often as a community, than as a company, a place of gathering and hope rather than an institution profiting from the data that its users share on their timelines. This is because even a dead person's profile can become a site, on one hand, of memorial practice and sharing and, on the other, of economic gain for Facebook⁵.

Through the memorialization of dead people, Facebook inches one step closer to becoming isomorph to our social daily activities, from the most menial ones to those that trigger feelings of grief and suffering, which then become remediated in a digital environment.

Nowadays, we can still take a stroll through a cemetery and saunter around in silence; in it, we experience death through tombstones and grass, through the flowers and other tributes that are left there to commemorate the dead. A cemetery always reminds us that, under our feet, lie corpses in decay. We can roam the space above their graves and muse about their past lives, we can go on inferential walks, while the signs of death are all around us.

Facebook, as we said, does not allow walks: it is very hard to find the profiles of dead people we might not have known, there are no visitable places on the interface where all the dead are aggregated that are separated from the rest, like it happens in a real cemetery. Facebook, while describing itself like a communal space to express our grief in, tends to individualize death. On one hand, this makes sense if we put it in the context of the privacy of Facebook's users, even in the digital afterlife: here, only the people that you wished to be seen from, while you were alive, will be able to do so once you're dead. On the other hand, this has an effect on how death acquires meaning on Facebook. We have to return to the influence of technology on death and death rituals.

First of all, it should be noted that there's a discontinuity between material and digital rituals of mourning and grieving: «digital commemorations are not just traditional rituals transposed through technological means, but are intrinsically different» (Beaunoyer & Guitton, 2021, p. 2). Even before any memorialization takes place, the possibility to choose a legacy contact puts every living user in a weird position: they have to start planning, or at least wondering, about what they'd like to remain on their Facebook timeline were they to die. This possibility, whether it is taken or not, exacerbates the question of the physical heritage, the objects a person leaves behind.

In the 18th century, French poet Stéphane Mallarmé famously asked his wife to burn all of his incomplete manuscripts after his death; to the philologists' luck, she didn't, but in how many different lives it must have occurred, that a dying person asked his or her surviving relatives or friends to burn and destroy their possessions; or how many times

5. Indeed, it shouldn't be forgotten that several implicit reasons stand between memorialized profiles and Facebook's commercial incentive of maintaining them: «customer relations, retention of living users who do not wish to lock themselves out of the digital cemetery, and use of the deceased users' data for such purposes as market insights and training new models» (Kasket, 2020, p. 32).

the relatives of a deceased took the decision to either or get rid of most, if not all, of that person's possessions.

Archiving, saving, storing, is the tougher choice. But its meaningfulness depends on how it is performed, and Facebook's way of archiving risks to make the dead into static remnants; removed the ominous presence of the gravestone, the dead's legacy is entirely frozen in the timeline of content they accumulated on their profile. Near the unadulterated original timeline lies the recently added Tributes section (figure 1), whose presentation was actually one of the purposes of Sandberg's article (2019).

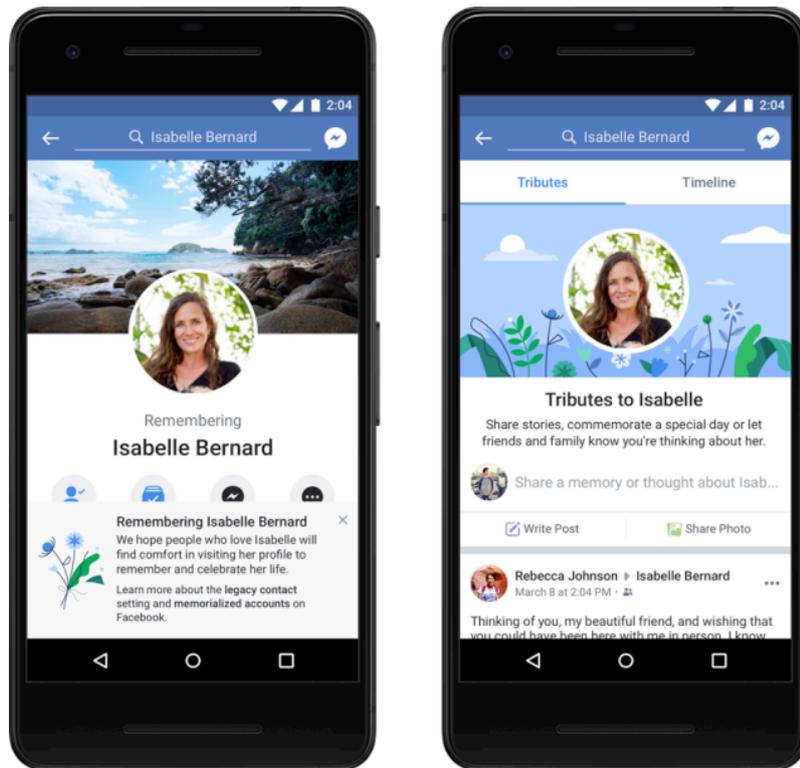


Figure 1. A memorialized account on Facebook's current user interface (Sandberg, 2019).

If there's any analogy we could make between Facebook's memorialization and our known, traditional experience of death, it could be this: Facebook is creating cenotaphs, memorial sites that honour someone, reminding us of their legacy, of their lives, but containing nothing else, meaning that the corpse is absent from the grave.

The interpretative chain that is produced by the experience of walking through a graveyard is inseparable from the thought of there being dead bodies upon dead bodies buried below our feet. This, in turn, creates a unique, certainly crude, grotesque, but intense image of ourselves with respect to the death of others and, in addition, to our own mortality. Instead, there is no *memento mori* in Facebook's memorials, there are no incitements towards reflecting upon what our own fate will be: the version here presented of remembering and tributing aspires at eluding any form of suffering and fear that might derive from thinking too long about death.

Furthermore, there is the question of the iconographic representation of death, again eluded by Facebook, but it would be too lengthy and tortuous to delve into it now. Although, it should be at least noted that, in the continuously evolving visual culture of death, Facebook situates itself in a category where there seems to be no death, as it

avoids inserting any iconic or verbal allusion that might make us think of physical death itself, completely excising it from the interface.

Therefore, what kind of death, what kind of commemoration of death, is Facebook trying to establish here? One preliminary, general distinction is that between natural and violent death. If violent death, as the name hints, «is conceived as an enemy coming from the outside, marked by irrationality and inclined to contaminate a life originally pure» (Sisto, 2014, p. 33), natural death, instead, presents a more complex situation, where three, at times contradictory, definitions can be given of it:

a) death from old age [...]; b) irreversible biological end, namely an incident or event immanent to life itself and resulting from states of illness that belong to the category of spontaneous death [...]; c) death caused by external pathogenic agents (e.g. infectious diseases), or death caused by hazard and associated unpredictability (ivi, p. 34).

Regarding this conceptual split, Facebook has, without a doubt, taken notice of it, or has at least made decisions that implicitly presuppose it. Before 2007, it used to delete the accounts of dead users; then, the Virginia Tech shooting occurred and, ensuing several requests by parents of the victims, in 2009 Facebook first stopped deleting dead profiles and then introduced what are now called memorialized accounts. There should be no underestimate of the fact that the event causing the shift in Facebook's policy was one of multiple violent deaths. Genealogically, this leaves a mark on how the very concept of death exists within and is produced by Facebook: death tends to be perceived and discussed as if it were something external, sudden, irrupting in an otherwise serene and natural stream of life. It follows that the two main discursive strategies, related to remembrance, championed by Facebook are *easing* – the platform is a place of relief from pain and suffering, as if death were an intruder in the tranquil life of people –, and *hiding* – like we said, Facebook tends not to use explicit verbal or figurative elements connected with death, often eluding even the word itself.

Facebook ends up being an extremely polished book of the dead; or, rather, it could even be described as a new *encyclopedia of the dead* (cf. Sisto, 2021, § 2), an archival site where all the data relating to dead people is stored and preserved, at least until their material architecture – the physical servers where Facebook stores its massive amounts of data – won't decay⁶. The metaphor of the encyclopedia activates, like the one of walking, a parallelism with how certain branches of semiotics have been creating epistemological models to describe how knowledge and culture are organized. Again, it was Eco who introduced the term of encyclopedia as a more encompassing representation of the semantic world, that is, of human culture as it is conceived through semiosis, than that of the dictionary.

Eco expounds his metaphor by resorting to a sister metaphor, that of the labyrinth: culture is an encyclopedic labyrinth, «structured according to a *network of interpretants*» (Eco, 1986, p. 83), potentially infinite, and varying from culture to culture, since every culture, any “local” system of knowledge, produces its interpretations and discourses regarding a specific fact, thus amplifying the possible nodes of the “general” encyclopedic model. But, whenever a local interpretation is recognized as universally valid, there emerges “an *ideological bias*” (ivi, p. 84).

6. Cultural semiotics tends here towards a more specific semiotics of the archive, where questions related to the issue of mnemonic traces, the materiality of archives, the modes of enunciation and remediation implied therein, are probed in a more detailed and dedicated manner (cf. Lucatti & Treleani, 2013).

Facebook, being hypertextual like much of digital infrastructures, offers itself to be represented in a similar manner: in the form of a net of interpretants where, at every corner, a virtual chain of inferential activities can lead us from node to node, following the paths laid by Facebook's semantic architecture. The concept of death is a microcosm within this vaster digital realm, but a rather dense one, which ends up being simplified by how the platform accounts for it. This is what we meant to uncover when we set out to analyse Facebook's ideological position regarding death, its biases, the latencies it creates around it: first, death is never allowed a proper treatment as an experience in and of itself, but it becomes necessarily mediated and suffocated by layers of static commemoration, the only thing allowed by the social network. Consequently, death becomes absent, a stone guest to its own party.

As Sisto reminds us, though, a paradoxical absence is an essential element of our Western concept of death:

If an irrevocable absence – a presence that vanishes forever – are the first consequences of a person's death, the status of the dead is nevertheless defined by a particular paradox: once the funeral rites are observed, the dead become the “incarnation of an absent presence.” They are absent but present, or rather are *present in the absence*. They depart yet, at the same time, remain as a permanent remnant (Sisto, 2020, p. 18).

Facebook certainly reinforces this feeling of permanency – of uninterrupted continuity – of a person's (online) life. But, as we pointed out, since it is not a matter of survival, not at least if we account for Facebook's own discourse around its memorialization policies, the relevance given to the act of remembering the dead should mean that Facebook tries to alleviate the phantasmatic weight of this absence, by offering a site where the living can always reencounter their dead.

However, and we've reached here our conclusion, this raises many questions regarding a pedagogy of death, regarding how we come to understand our own mortality through digital spaces. This does not wish to be a wholly pessimistic and critical outlook at Facebook's treatment of death: it is nonetheless important to point out the limitations intrinsic to their approach, and possibly even the damages it is doing in presenting a sanitized, polished version of dying and being dead. In a sense that we tried to capture using some tools derived from cultural semiotics, we could argue, finally, that Facebook tends to limit and interrupt our semiosis activity surrounding death: in its digital plateaus and fora we cannot randomly walk around, taking the risk to encounter what might cause us to suffer, and provoke anxiety and dread, or even, on the other side, a feeling of consolation, of abandonment almost, to what is the thing that equates all the living. Facebook, through its memorial sites, covers our eyes, and leads our steps back, refrains us from a too direct and painful confrontation with death.

References

- Arnold, M., Gibbs, M., Kohn, T., Meese, J., & Nansen, B. (2018). *Death and Digital Media*. Routledge.
- Beaunoyer, E., & Guitton, M. J. (2021). Cyberthanatology: Death and Beyond in the Digital Age. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 122, 1-9.
- Bellucci, F. (2019). *Peirce's Speculative Grammar. Logic as Semiotics*. Routledge.

- Bickert, M. (2017). Hard Questions: What Should Happen to People's Online Identity When They Die? *Meta*. <https://about.fb.com/news/2017/08/what-should-happen-to-online-identity>.
- Blower, J., & Sharman, R. (2021). To Grieve or not to Grieve (Online)? Interactions with Deceased Facebook Friends. *Death Studies*, 45(3), 167-181.
- Eco, U. (1979). *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Indiana University Press.
- Eco, U. (1986). *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. Indiana University Press.
- Facebook. (2020). Memorialization. <https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/memorialization>.
- Joyce, J. (1922). *Ulysses*. Shakespeare & Company.
- Kasket, E. (2020). Social Media and Digital Afterlife. In M. Savin-Baden, & V. Mason-Robbie (Eds.), *Digital Afterlife. Death Matters in a Digital Age* (pp. 27-38). CRC.
- Lorusso, A. M. (2015). *Cultural Semiotics. For a Cultural Perspective in Semiotics*. Palgrave.
- Moyer, L. M., & Enck, S. (2018). Is my Grief too Public for You? The Digitalization of Grief on Facebook™. *Death Studies*, 44(2), 89-97.
- Öhman, C. J., & Watson, D. (2019): Are the Dead Taking over Facebook? A Big Data Approach to the Future of Death Online. *Big Data & Society*, 1-13.
- Prey, R., & Smit, R. (2019). From Personal to Personalized Memory: Social Media as Mnemotechnology. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A Networked Self and Birth, Life, Death* (pp. 209-223). Routledge.
- Sandberg, S. (2019). Making It Easier to Honor a Loved One on Facebook After They Pass Away. *Meta*. <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/04/updates-to-memorialization>.
- Sisto, D. (2014). Moral Evil or Sculptor of the Living? Death and the Identity of the Subject. In G. Chiurazzi, D. Sisto, & S. Tinning (Eds.), *Tinning Philosophical Paths in the Public Sphere* (pp. 31-46) LIT Verlag.
- Sisto, D. (2020). *Online Afterlives. Immortality, Memory, and Grief in Digital Culture* (en. tr. Bonnie McClellan-Broussard). MIT.
- Sisto, D. (2021). *Remember Me. Memory and Forgetting in the Digital Age* (en. tr. Alice Kilgarrieff). Polity.
- Sofka, C. (1997). "Internetworks," Caskets for Sale, and More: Thanatology and the Information Superhighway. *Death Studies*, 21(6), 553-574. [doi:10.1080/074811897201778](https://doi.org/10.1080/074811897201778).
- Stokes, P. (2012). Ghosts in the Machine: Do the Dead Live on in Facebook? *Philosophy & Technology*, 25, 363-379.
- Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., & Martin, J. (2008). Identity Construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in Anchored Relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24, 1816-1836.



