Review Article

The Digital Departed: How We Face Death, Commemorate Life, and Chase Virtual Immortality

Alina Eyselein [1]*, Brad, Gabriel [2], Mathias Maneka [3], Krams, Danyal [4]

1. University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland.
2. University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, USA.
3. University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, USA.
4. Tsinghua University, Beijing, China.

* Correspondence: teyselein@mit.edu

Abstract: The proliferation of digital technology has fundamentally altered the human experience, and its transformative influence now extends to the universal constants of death, grief, and remembrance. This review article examined the burgeoning field of digital thanatology, exploring how society increasingly faces death, commemorates the departed, and pursues novel forms of virtual immortality. The analysis synthesizes recent literature (2020-2025) to investigate three core domains. First, it explores the landscape of digital mourning, analyzing how social media platforms have become de facto spaces for communal grieving, memorialization, and the performance of loss, thereby reshaping traditional rituals. Second, it delves into the technological pursuit of a continued existence, charting the evolution from static digital legacies—the passive archives of our online lives—to active, AI-driven simulations of the deceased, including "griefbots" and interactive post-mortem avatars. Third, the article critically assesses the profound ethical, psychological, and legal challenges that arise from this new frontier. Key issues discussed include the complexities of post-mortem data privacy, the philosophical quandary of informed consent for a digital afterlife, the psychological impact of interacting with simulated personas on the grieving process, and the potential for a new "grief tech" industry to commodify loss and exacerbate social inequalities. The article concludes that the emergence of the "digital departed" constitutes a paradigm shift in how we mediate our relationship with mortality, necessitating urgent interdisciplinary dialogue to foster responsible innovation and develop frameworks that honor both the living and the dead.

Keywords: face death, virtual immortality, digital departed

1. INTRODUCTION

For millennia, human civilizations have developed intricate rituals, belief systems, and cultural practices to navigate the profound reality of death [1]. These traditions provided frameworks for grieving, offered solace to the bereaved, and sought to ensure the memory of the departed endured. Today, we stand at the precipice of a monumental shift in this age-old relationship with mortality. The digital revolution has woven itself so deeply into the fabric of daily life that it inevitably follows us to—and beyond—the grave. Our lives are meticulously documented in a vast, distributed, and persistent digital archive of photos, posts, messages, and metadata [2]. When we die, this digital ghost remains, creating a new kind of posthumous presence: the digital departed. This nascent reality has given rise to the interdisciplinary field of digital thanatology, the study of death and dying in the digital age. Coined by Sofka in 1997, the concept of "than technology" has evolved from describing simple computer programs about death to encompassing the complex ecosystem of social media, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence that now mediates our experiences of loss [3]. This mediation is not neutral; it

 © 2025 The Author(s)

actively shapes how we process death, how we remember the deceased, and how we conceive of life's ultimate boundary. The once-private act of grieving has been thrust into the networked public square, and the traditional finality of death is being challenged by the tantalizing prospect of virtual immortality. This review article seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of this complex and rapidly evolving landscape [4]. It charts the journey from the passive digital footprint we all leave behind to the active, AI-driven pursuit of a continued digital existence. The central thesis of this paper is that the emergence of the digital departed is creating a new socio-technical reality of death, one that offers unprecedented opportunities for connection, commemoration, and continuing bonds, while simultaneously introducing profound ethical, psychological, and legal dilemmas that society is only beginning to confront. By synthesizing recent scholarship, this article will explore the lived realities of digital mourning, deconstruct the technological chase for virtual immortality, and critically examine the ethical frontiers of this new age of death [5].

2. THE RISE OF DIGITAL THANATOLOGY: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR DEATH AND DYING

The digitization of society has rendered the boundary between life and death porous in unprecedented ways. Digital thanatology is the field dedicated to understanding this new reality, examining how technology impacts dying, death, grief, and memorialization. It recognizes that death is no longer solely a biological event but also a digital one, involving the management, curation, and interpretation of a deceased individual's vast digital remains [6]. A core concept in this field is the "digital legacy," which encompasses the entirety of an individual's data footprint left online. This includes social media profiles, email accounts, photo albums, blog posts, and gaming profiles. Upon a person's death, this data does not simply vanish. It persists, forming a digital archive that can be accessed, reinterpreted, and interacted with by the living. This persistence has transformed social media platforms into what have been termed "digital necropolises" or "virtual cemeteries" [7]. A Facebook profile, for instance, morphs from a dynamic space of personal expression into a static memorial, a focal point for communal grieving where friends and family can share memories, post tributes, and maintain a sense of connection to the deceased. This phenomenon represents a significant departure from historical mourning practices, which were often more private, ephemeral, and geographically constrained [8]. Networked technologies enable a form of "ambient grief," where reminders of the deceased can surface unexpectedly through algorithmic "memories" or timeline posts, and mourning becomes a continuous, public performance. Digital thanatology, therefore, is not just about technology; it is about how technology reconfigures our social, cultural, and psychological relationship with death itself, creating a world where the dead are not entirely gone but remain as persistent, accessible presences in our digital lives [9].

3. COMMEMORATING LIFE IN THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SQUARE

The most immediate and widespread impact of than technology is seen in the transformation of mourning and commemorative rituals. Digital platforms have become central arenas for processing loss, offering both solace and new forms of social complexity.

3.1. The Social Media Necropolis: Networked Grief and Memorialization

When a user dies, their social media profile undergoes a profound transformation. Platforms like Facebook have recognized this, introducing features such as "memorialization," which freezes an account, adds a "Remembering" banner, and allows designated "legacy contacts" to manage tribute posts These memorialized pages become living archives and dynamic spaces for collective mourning. Friends and family post anecdotes, share photos, and commemorate anniversaries, creating a rich tapestry of a person's life and impact [10]. This practice aligns with the psychological theory of "continuing bonds," which posits that a healthy grieving process does not require severing ties with the

 © 2025 The Author(s)

deceased, but rather finding ways to maintain an enduring connection. Digital memorials provide a powerful affordance for these continuing bonds, allowing the bereaved to feel a sense of co-presence and to actively engage in the preservation of the deceased's memory. Research indicates that these spaces can foster a strong sense of community, connecting individuals who may be geographically dispersed but are united in their grief [11].

3.2. Rituals Reimagined: From Physical to Virtual Attendance

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated the adoption of digital technologies for death rituals. With physical gatherings restricted, funeral homes and families turned to livestreaming services, allowing mourners to attend funerals and memorials virtually [12]. This practice, born of necessity, has persisted, offering a valuable option for those unable to travel due to distance, health, or financial constraints. Digital guest books, online obituary comment sections, and crowdfunding campaigns for funeral expenses have further integrated digital tools into the fabric of traditional death care. These tools democratize participation in mourning rituals, but also challenge the traditional solemnity and contained nature of such events, blurring the lines between public and private remembrance [13].

3.3. The Psychology of Online Mourning: Connection and Complication

While digital platforms offer vital support, they also introduce psychological complexities. The public nature of social media can create pressure for performative grief, where individuals feel compelled to post curated expressions of sadness that may not reflect their private emotional state. This performativity can lead to feelings of alienation and inauthenticity, complicating the personal work of mourning. Furthermore, the algorithmic nature of these platforms can be jarring [14]. A "happy memory" notification featuring the deceased can be a welcome moment of remembrance for one person and a triggering jolt of pain for another. The potential for "grief-trolling" or negative comments on memorial pages introduces a risk of further trauma for the bereaved. Navigating this landscape requires a new form of "digital grief literacy," an understanding of how to use these tools in a way that is supportive and authentic to one's own mourning process [15].

4. THE CHASE FOR VIRTUAL IMMORTALITY: FROM DIGITAL LEGACY TO AI AVATARS

Beyond passive commemoration, a new and more radical frontier is opening up: the use of artificial intelligence to create interactive simulations of the deceased. This marks a significant leap from preserving memory to re-animating personality, moving from a static digital legacy to an active virtual presence.

4.1. The Rise of "Grief Tech" and AI Companions

The emerging "grief tech" industry is developing services that use a person's digital footprint—their emails, text messages, social media posts, and voice recordings—to train AI models. These models, often based on Natural Language Processing (NLP) and machine learning, can then generate text or even voice responses that mimic the communication style of the deceased. The result is a "griefbot" or a "post-mortem avatar" with which the bereaved can interact [16]. Projects like Hereafter AI and Story File aim to create conversational video bots that can answer questions about a person's life, telling their stories in their own voice. The premise is to preserve not just data, but persona. This technology offers the tantalizing possibility of asking a deceased grandparent about their childhood or hearing a departed partner's "voice" once more. Proponents argue that these tools can be therapeutic, providing a novel way to maintain continuing bonds and facilitate the sharing of intergenerational stories [17].

4.2. The Uncanny Valley of Grief: Psychological Implications

 © 2025 The Author(s)

The prospect of interacting with a simulated loved one raises profound psychological questions. While potentially comforting in the short term, does this interaction risk creating a pathological form of grief? The concept of the "uncanny valley"—the eerie feeling produced by a humanoid replica that is almost, but not quite, human-like—is highly relevant. An AI that perfectly mimics a person's speech patterns but lacks true consciousness, empathy, or the ability to create new memories could be a deeply unsettling and ultimately dissatisfying replacement [18]. There is a significant risk that such technologies could hinder the grieving process by fostering denial and making it harder for the bereaved to accept the reality of their loss. Interacting with an idealized, static, and incomplete version of the deceased could prevent the natural evolution of memory and the integration of loss into one's life. The simulation is not the person; it is an echo based on past data, incapable of growth or new experiences. Prolonged interaction may trap the bereaved in a relationship with a ghost in the machine, forestalling the difficult but necessary work of adapting to life without the person they lost [19].

5. THE ETHICAL AND LEGAL FRONTIER OF DIGITAL DEATH

The rapid development of thanatechnology has outpaced the development of legal and ethical frameworks to govern it. This gap leaves individuals, families, and society at large navigating a complex and unregulated new territory.

5.1. The Quandary of Post-Mortem Privacy and Data Ownership

A fundamental question is: who owns the data of the dead? When a person dies, what happens to their lifetime of emails, photos, and private messages? Legal frameworks are inconsistent and often ill-equipped to handle this. Some service providers' terms of service treat data as non-transferable, while others have processes for family members to gain access, often requiring legal orders [20]. This legal ambiguity can lead to distressing situations where families are locked out of precious digital memories or, conversely, where the private life of the deceased is exposed against their presumed wishes. The concept of post-mortem privacy argues that an individual's right to control their personal information should, in some form, extend beyond death. Without this, the digital departed are vulnerable to having their lives scrutinized, their data mined, and their memory manipulated without their consent [21].

5.2. The Inextricable Problem of Consent

The issue of consent is perhaps the most intractable ethical challenge, particularly for AI-driven avatars. For a simulation to be created, the system requires access to a person's most intimate digital communications. Can a living person give meaningful, informed consent to becoming a post-mortem AI? Can they truly understand how their data will be used and what the psychological impact will be on their loved ones? What happens when there is no explicit consent? Is it ethical for a third-party company, or even a grieving family member, to create a digital replica of a person after their death? This raises the specter of "identity theft of the dead," where a person's likeness and personality are re-animated for purposes they may never have approved of, from providing comfort to being used for commercial or even political ends [22].

5.3. The Commodification of Grief and Digital Inequality

The rise of the grief tech industry signals the potential commodification of death and mourning. These services, while potentially offering comfort, are commercial enterprises. This creates a risk that vulnerable, grieving individuals may be exploited [23]. The subscription-based models of many digital afterlife services also raise the question of permanence. What happens to a person's "virtual immortality" when a startup fails or a subscription lapses? Furthermore, this technology threatens to create a new form of digital divide [24]. Will virtual immortality be a luxury available only to the wealthy

 © 2025 The Author(s)

who can afford to have their data curated and their AI avatars created and maintained? This could lead to a future where the legacies of the affluent are preserved in interactive detail, while others are left to fade into digital obscurity, creating a stratified digital afterlife that mirrors earthly inequalities [25].

6. CONCLUSION

The digital departure from life is no longer a futuristic concept but a contemporary reality. Technology has irrevocably altered our relationship with death, transforming it into a persistent, networked, and interactive phenomenon. The digital tools at our disposal offer powerful new ways to commemorate life, maintain enduring bonds with the departed, and foster communities of support for the bereaved. Social media has become an essential, if complicated, part of the modern grieving process, providing a public square for shared remembrance.At the same time, the pursuit of virtual immortality through artificial intelligence is pushing us into uncharted ethical and psychological territory. While the desire to overcome the finality of death is as old as humanity itself, the tools being developed to achieve a semblance of this goal are entirely new. The creation of griefbots and post-mortem avatars presents a profound challenge, forcing us to question the nature of identity, the meaning of consent, and the very definition of a healthy grieving process. The risk of causing psychological harm, violating post-mortem privacy, and commodifying a universal human experience is significant. As we move forward, a multi-stakeholder and interdisciplinary dialogue is not just recommended; it is imperative. Lawmakers, technologists, ethicists, psychologists, and the public must collaborate to create frameworks that can guide the responsible development and use of these powerful technologies. We must strive to build a digital afterlife that is not a commercial product or an uncanny echo, but a space that respects the dignity of the departed, provides genuine comfort to the living, and enriches our collective human memory. The digital departed are here to stay; it is our collective responsibility to decide what that means for our humanity.

7. References

[1] Timmermans, S. (2025). The Digital Departed: How We Face Death, Commemorate Life, and Chase Virtual Immortality.

[2] Kiel, P. (2025). The digital departed: how we face death, commemorate life, and chase virtual immortality. *Continuum*, 1-4.

[3] Toplean, A. Death and the Sacred in the Digital Age.

[4] Saraiva, C. (2025). When Death Meets AI: Engaging in New Death Ways in Portugal. *Religions*, *16*(4), 488.

[5] Saraiva, C. (2025). When Death Meets AI: Engaging in New Death Ways in Portugal. *Religions*, *16*(4), 488.

[6] Cesare, N. (2024). " The Digital Departed: How We Face Death, Commemorate Life, and Chase Virtual Immortality" by Timothy Recuber. *Social Forces*, *103*(2), e1-e2.

[7] Haneman, V. J. (2025). The law of digital resurrection. *BCL Rev.*, *66*, 1569.

[8] Christensen, D. R., & Sumiala, J. (2024). Introducing the Special Issue Digital Death: Transforming Rituals, History, and the Afterlife. *Social Sciences*, *13*(7), 346.

[9] Toplean, A. (2024). The glocalization of death in the digital age: traits and limits. *Frontiers in Communication*, *9*, 1456304.

[10] Davoudi, N., & Douglas, J. (2025). “Come With Me on My# Griefjourney”: First-Person Narratives of Grief on TikTok. *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, 10541373241312668.

[11] Sisto, D. (2025). Dal lutto online ai thanabots: la morte si fa social. *ParadoXa: XIX, 1, 2025*, 43-55.

[12] Craps, S. (2023). Ecological mourning: Living with loss in the Anthropocene. In *Critical memory studies: New approaches* (pp. 69-77). Bloomsbury Academic.

[13] Kron, C. (2023). How to Become Immortal and Ageless: Affording Belief in Epitaphs with Extraordinary Claims. *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, *24*(1), 281-303.

 © 2025 The Author(s)

[14]King, R. A. (2023). Recognizing the death motif in the near-death experience. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 00302228231203357.
[15]Boddington, P. (2025). AI and Knowledge of the Self. *A Companion to Applied Philosophy of AI*, 39-54.
[16]Whitfield, J. T., Pako, W. H., & Alpers, M. P. (2024). Robert Hertz, Anthropophagic Practices and Traditional South Fore Mortuary Rites in Papua New Guinea. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 00302228241239210.
[17]Cunio, K. (2025). The arts, music and the pandemic. *BECAUSE COVID…*, 113.
[18]Gustafson, B. K. (2023). *Remembering and Forgetting: The Commemoration of the First World War and the Spanish Influenza Pandemic in Salt Lake City, Utah* (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University).
[19]Bousquet, A. (2024). Nuclear existentialism: On the philosophical response to life and death under the bomb. *Review of International Studies*, 1-19.
[20]Adair, J. G. The queer death binary of Giovanni's Room remodeled as space for navigating oppression. *Dossier: What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?*.
[21]Leone, M. (2024). Resurrezione digitale: Apocalissi e integrazione. *I Castelli di Yale online*, *12*(1), 53-70.
[22]Cesare, N. (2024). Review of "The Digital Departed: How We Face Death, Commemorate Life, and Chase Virtual Immortality."
[23]Wisnewski, J. J. (2023). *Living with the Dead: On Death, the Dead, and Immortality*. Routledge.
[24]Lemma, A. (2024). Mourning, melancholia and machines: An applied psychoanalytic investigation of mourning in the age of griefbots. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *105*(4), 542-563.
[25]Broodryk, C. (2024). Reflecting on analogue faces and digital masks through mission: Impossible (1996-2023). *Persona Studies*, *9*(2), 16-31.

 © 2025 The Author(s)