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## **Virtually Dead: The Extension of Social Agency to Corpses and the Dead on Facebook**

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*VIRTUALLY DEAD: THE EXTENSION OF SOCIAL AGENCY TO CORPSES*

*AND THE DEAD ON FACEBOOK*

AN HONORS THESIS

College of St. Benedict | St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for All College Honors

and Distinction

in the Department of Communication

by

*Adam Tucker*

April 2014

Project Title: Virtually Dead: The Extension of Social Agency to Corpses and the Dead on Facebook

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## **Abstract**

Since its invention in 2004, millions of users of Facebook have died, leaving durable profiles subject to the site's changing regulatory policies and socially present for the network's living users as well. Because of their ability to enmesh, mutate, and engage with the social interactions of the living—as well as their durability as a site of continuing bonds—Facebook profiles retain social agency consistent with the theories of agency of Alfred Gell (1998) and Bruno Latour (2005). Close textual examination of the styles of communication, the durability of communication over time, the profile layout and composition, and the continuing nature of social contexts and content of the pages of dead users demonstrate that living users memorialize and grant social agency and distributed personhood to the profiles—creating a new sense of social agency for Facebook profiles whether living or dead, and the possibility of a virtual social afterlife.

“For as we know from dreams it is so hard  
To speak to our dear dead! They disregard  
Our apprehension, queasiness and shame—  
The awful sense that they’re not quite the same.”  
—Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (p. 55)

“And what the dead had speech for, when living  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.  
-T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

Scholars in fields as diverse as communication studies and anthropology predominantly treat the dead body as a vessel, not pregnant with meaning, waiting to be rearranged throughout history to fit different meanings in different historical contexts. The corpse itself is inert. Death, however, remains one of the last prominent taboos, exerting a seemingly autonomous symbolic power. Death is the only certitude in human life, and the cessation of life proves to be a powerful symbolic and communicative tool used by human cultures through history.

The study of the “corpse” and how death itself in Western culture has undergone a prolific expansion since the field came into initial prominence with the scholarship of Phillip Ariès. Recently, scholars have explored thanatology, or the study of death, in the context of technology and begun to examine death as a social experience beyond a mere event, as assumed by those who study death from a biological and medical perspective. Spearheaded by Katherine Verdery’s (1999) *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, thanatology and deathwork scholarship began to examine corpses in a new way, as having the ability to act in symbolic and ideological manners—as an objects with agency to change a social network, an actor capable of making meaning. This idea challenges the fundamental basis of agency as an embodied function only available to the living.

This new scholarship is responding to the rise of social networking technology and the role that technology plays in the communication of death. Not only are users of Facebook and other social technologies more visible in their identity and self-construction in life, they leave behind a virtual legacy that complicates notions of what it means to die, how the dead body is treated, and what death actually means to the living. Elaine Kasket (2012a) writes that for members of a generation with unprecedented exposure to the bodies of others through Facebook, it makes “intuitive sense that the predominance of social networking is having a significant

impact on how we live, how we interact with the living, how we die, how we interact with the dead, and less intuitively, what we are after we die” (p. 62). Traditional theories of agency have considered the human body as the container of volition and agency; but, in an increasingly social age of durable virtual representations of distributed personhood, new formulations of agency are required. Gell’s theory and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) appreciates the profound impact these technologies have on the meaning and rhetorical nature of death and agency. Gell postulates that the objects belonging to human beings, after their death, are seen to acquire agency and the ability to stand for the person as a whole; Facebook profiles, for example, create digital graveyards that represent a change and threat to dominant paradigms of death, death studies, and the communicative analysis of the death process. In the durability of the Facebook profile we find the extension of continuing bonds, the acquisition of agency, the communal social interaction—all of which, until now, have been exclusively reserved for the living. Facebook has changed the way we live, and the way we now die.

The intention of this thesis is to combine scholarship in the areas of communication studies, death studies, thanatology and anthropology and apply these to an area of relatively new examination: the impact of modern social networking websites like Facebook on the meaning, understanding and nature of death and the corpse.

I argue that the definition and meaning of the iconic corpse in America and the meaning of death itself is under pressure and change; and, that this pressure and change is the result of new technologies that offer the chances for corpses to maintain a new durability and sense of social agency through a virtual durability (K. D. O'Neill, 2008) that does not decay with time and exists beyond the hands of funerary and deathwork professionals. By changing the meaning the

interaction the living establish with the dead, services like Facebook have given the dead a new agency and form of virtual life that changes both what it means to live, and to die.

I begin with a brief history of the scholarship that studies the corpse and its anthropological, communicative, and symbolic meanings in American culture. Second, I interrogate contemporary theories of agency. Last, I analyze concrete iterations of “virtual” death on Facebook to demonstrate how social networking shapes the rhetoric of life and death.

### **Literatures of Death: bodies, power, and politics**

Death is the only guarantee in the human experience and thus the areas of scholarship that engage this certitude are varied and deep. Scholars have examined death from anthropological and communication studies perspectives, from dead body politics to geography and even literary theory. The study of death itself, thanatology, has been a burgeoning area of academic scholarship since the 1950’s that proves the modern fascination and abhorrence with death is as pervasive as it is controversial and divisive. Principle in the debate concerning death and its study is the view of the dead body itself as an object devoid of meaning, of death itself devoid of meaning, or of death and corpses pregnant with meaning and arranged according to contexts for the uses of the living.

Thanatology rose to prominence following the scholarship of writers like Phillip Ariès, whose book *Western Attitudes on Death* became the field’s most prominent text and foundation for further writings. In the text, Ariès, one of the first scholars to consider death beyond the biological event, writes on the evolution and eventual displacement of death from the home—where it historically was an event close to family and in public view—to hospitals and nursing homes with the rise of modern medicine (1975). Ariès further expounds about the progression of the historical understanding of death as a process rather than a single biological event. From out

of Ariès' *Western Attitudes on Death* and *At The Hour of Our Death*, the field's most prominent early texts, thanatology exploded to examine the meaning and utility of the corpse in multiple contexts and disciplines. Death has then become the object of study not simply as a single biological event, but a process with communicative and societal-cultural implications.

Since Ariès, the dead body has been theorized in a number of registers. Once merely an object stripped of agency through the process of death, the dead body has since earned agency in the capacity to enact change (*The Matter of Death*, 2010). As a portent of decay (Featherstone 1991), a place of information (Prior 1989), the subject of poetry's highest goal (Fuss 2003, as a metaphor (Kirmayer, 1992), as forensic evidence (Crossland, 2009) and importantly as a symbol of political order or action (Verdery, 1999) (Mbembe and Meintjes 2003). The corpse has been a signifier and symbol (Hallam & Miller, 2001) the object of action needing discipline (K. O'Neill, 1999), a commodity (Sharp, 2001), and a presence with social agency (Sørensen, 2009). Most important to this topic is the scholarship of Verdery, Hallam and Hockey, and Sørensen — scholars who have blazed a trail for considering the corpse not (as traditionally seen) as an agentless object, but a symbol *n+1*. Under this understanding, corpses “though lacking intentionality, nevertheless possess social and mnemonic agency...are elements of assemblages of embodied practice and material culture that form a distributed personhood of the dead” (Young & Light, 2013, p. 145). Rather than simply becoming an object as a result of a biological event, corpses should be seen, as Howard Williams (2011) writes of them as agents able to disturb and interact through social contexts:

“How might we consider the dead as having agency when, by definition, they cannot seemingly act or think on their behalf? The key lies in the frequently observed evidence

that, for many cultures, the social, symbolic and mnemonic significance of the dead body does not end with the extinguishing of vital signs” (p. 265).

Thomas Laqueur (2011) writes that the importance of the corpse in human culture has and always will be tantamount to society and act as a potent symbol for the living: “it matters because almost always, the living need the dead more than the dead need the living. The dead body has always been enchanted at the same time as it is known to be rubbish: powerful, dangerous, a thing to be reckoned with” (p. 799).

Sheila Harper (2010) writes “that the dead body is not a uniform entity but one that can hold a multiplicity of meanings and therefore *be* different things, we move towards the concept of the dead body as a social agent” (p. 311). Verdery (1999) in *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* complements this understanding, writing that the dead body has a “capacity to evoke a variety of understandings” and Howarth (2001) writes that the corpse has a “destabilizing effect on social order”.<sup>i</sup> This trend represents a trend in death literature. Increasingly, scholars are theorizing on the public nature of death due to technology, and the increasing publicity of the corpse. In order to establish a firmer grasp on the specialized fields of scholarship within communication and thanatology on the nature of the corpse as possessing agency, we turn to recent scholarship of death, rhetoric, and social networking—in addition to the historical approaches to dead in culture.

The corpse is a difficult object to define. Its physical characteristics change little from person to person; in fact, dead human beings share far more in common from corpse to corpse than living humans do. After the cessation of the heartbeat and neurological activity, lividity and rigor mortis set in, making limbs and extremities difficult to move (Quigley, 1996). Shortly thereafter, decay ensues approximately 72 hours following death—though human bodies can

take more than 50 years to decompose—and even longer if the corpse is protected from the elements. The physical corpse is a highly complex and durable object, though perhaps not as durable as stones or many natural organic compounds. By definitions of the embodied nature of action (Bruun & Langlais, 2003), corpses should be considered objects, as they do not contain the physical or psychological processes that would differentiate a human from other materiality, though we might see them as objects *n+1* as a corpse is an object, because it is formerly a human being. This will complicate the communicative, semiotic, and representative agency of the object of a corpse—though at least to this point, as established by ANT theory, a corpse can be seen to “make or promote a difference” in human social relations—whether that corpse is the physical corpse of Stalin or the virtual corpse of a Facebook friend.

The corpse is a potent object as Verdery (1999) points out in her history of the corpse’s use as a political symbol; and, the corpse as an object under ANT theory can be seen to make differences in the social relations of living humans. It is unimaginable that a corpse dumped onto a busy suburban street would fail to make a great impression on the social world of that street, just as it is not difficult to imagine the potency of a virtual, durable online corpse of one’s spouse that remains only a click of the mouse away.

#### *Bodies in anthropological funeral practice*

A history of the study of death and corpse and their interaction and significance with humanity has until the 1950s been predominantly the discipline of anthropologists, many of whom are reluctant to touch upon the subject at all out of respect for a society’s treatment of their dead and mourning process. Rather, anthropologists have concerned themselves with examining the process of funeral practices in cultures throughout history and from these practices have divined useful hypotheses that are important to consider when examining the

modern conception of the corpse. Kaufman and Morgan (2005) write that “scholars have become increasingly concerned with how the boundaries of life and death are asserted and negotiated, and with the identity categories that such boundaries construct, protect, and redefine” (p. 318).

The American corpse and corpses examined across the industrialized world by anthropologists—though treated differently in specific traditions and practices—generally maintain a specific stable appearance and identity at the funeral and afterward. The corpse at the funeral is one that assures the living of a peaceful death that maintains their influence over the living present, displayed in the casket not as a corpse but as the person that corpse represents. Kevin O’Neill (2008) writes that “if the dead body can be transformed into an icon, that is, in a representation of the once-living person that has predictable symbolic features that do not vary from corpse to corpse, some of death’s wildness might be tamed” (p. 175). Anthropologists see this iconic corpse as the product of a culture that has been both capitalistic (allowing for the creation of a deathwork industry with for-profit works such as morticians) and with a high fear of death<sup>1</sup> but limit themselves to examining funeral practices (cremation, embalming, mediator work).

Anthropology has also examined the corpse throughout history and in human culture as a site of memorial or cultural learning (Linke, 2005), as a part of the world’s natural structure and cycle (Roberts, 2008), as an indicator of cultural semiotics (Barley, 1983). However, funerary practices as indicative of a larger society’s attitudes on death has been the chief focus of anthropological scholarship on death (T. Laqueur, 2008). Americans rarely see a corpse that is not constructed and framed in this idealized state. This corpse is the corpse on display at funerals: pale, hands folded, the product of the deathwork practitioners such as morticians that

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<sup>1</sup> Individualistic cultures like the U.S. and the U.K. represent the countries with the highest fear of death.

has been disciplined and separated from being identical to the human being it once was. Anthropologists see this process as “one that privileged ‘beautiful’ corpses and equally beautiful surroundings...the embalmed body had a single pose, just as the military cemetery had a single sort of headstone. In both cases the dead grew more remote by being cast into a single mold that always symbolizes death” (K. O'Neill, 1999, p. 228). It is this mold through which the living view their deceased friends on Facebook—the imagined iconic corpse is inseparable from the American cultural conception of the dead body today—however, technologies like Facebook have challenged this traditional, remote conception of death by reattributed a social agency to corpses.

#### *Political uses of corpses and corpses as objects*

Another method of studying American corpses and corpses in relationship to agency at large was forwarded and influenced greatly by Katherine Verdery in her book *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. Verdery argues that not only do corpses serve as a powerful political symbol, they actually *retain political agency* through their ability to enact change (1999). The power of the dead body as a symbol for a variety of causes and meanings gives it tremendous political pliability. Famous corpses and their depictions in images have the ability to frame political issues with tremendous potency, from Emmitt Till to John F. Kennedy, to the streets of Chicago in the heat wave of 1995 (Harold & DeLuca, 2005; Klinenberg, 2001). In all of these historical scenes, the corpse became a political tool of overwhelming power and efficacy. Yet, in the political realm, the “social nature of death, in disaster as well as normal conditions, escapes the categories and classifications of modern states and societies;” or, that is, political bodies rarely recognize the potency of death as a symbol

outside the context of official deathwork professions (morticians, autopsy professionals) until the body count is high enough to enact real change (Klinenberg, 2001).

Law and political economy has throughout human history been involved in regulating different elements of the death process, such as ownership of the remains and certification of death. Legal discourses and ownership in politics regarding death centers on “the memorializing function of law...legal disputes concerning the dead are an attempt to offer the living a ‘usable’ past” (McEvoy & Conway, 2004, p. 562).

Corpses and the treatment of the dead within political and power structures of a society is often indicative of predominant societal concerns and composition; for example, in the United States, a high fear of death—the result of a highly individualistic culture—manifests itself in a political and societal power structure that attempts to push death from the everyday lives of its citizens.

Scholarship on the corpse has recognized since the advent of modern theories of power and agency that power is an essentially bodily experience. This bodily view of power relations began with the advent of Foucault’s (1977; Schuster, 1997) hypothesis on structures and power as defined as *biopower*. Achille Mbembe (2003) describes biopower as “that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (p. 12). It stems from this scholarship that the power of death and the manipulation of dead bodies—mostly clearly representative of ultimate biopower (indicating one has the right to sovereignty over life and death)—shows the importance of scholarship on the nature of corpses in the construction of modern power relations. And, in nations and communities like modern America that have developed highly sophisticated deathwork industries as a result of capitalistic and individualistic cultures (Walter, 2005) that all but shield

dead bodies completely from the general public, the biopower rests with the structures that create and support these industries (capitalism).

### *Media representations of corpses*

A comprehensive examination of the corpse must take into consideration the cultural and media representation of corpses and death, which largely determines how any society constructs death, agency and identity. Because of the modern evolution of the dying process away from the family home into hospice, hospitals, and other deathwork centers, the society has become less frequently exposed to the corpse during the last several decades (Sappol, 2002). People no longer die in homes surrounded by loved ones—only to be buried just outside the home itself—but rather behind banks of medical machines or in a center devoted to distancing the living from the dying. It is because of this taboo and isolation of the dying process that some scholars have referred to the “pornogafication of death,” the dead body has become a object of voyeurism and fetishism fed further and faster in the age of modern media and information technology. For example, an entire subreddit, or online community, of popular social networking community site Reddit is “Morbid Reality”—and with more than 153,000 regularly subscribed users, the community is devoted to videos of suicide bombings, images of school shootings, dead corpses displayed on the internet for the voyeuristic enjoyment of the site’s users.<sup>ii</sup> In no other area is this fetishism surrounding the dead body more prevalent than in online social networking technology and portrayals of dead bodies in the media.

Studies conducted by scholars on the prevalence of representations of dead bodies in the media have found that Americans have access to the least corpses in their news—despite the high rate of coverage devoted to homicides, suicides, and coverage of the dead. The media’s importance in the coverage of death and dead bodies “can show us the end of human life and

confront us with a reality that words often cannot" ("The visibility of disaster deaths in news images: A comparison of newspapers from 15 countries," 2012, p. 656). Death in the news and the portrayal and prevalence of dead bodies relies on a cultural understanding of the location of the source, as "there is no one representation of death in the news, and cultural contexts may play a large role in the variances" ("The visibility of disaster deaths in news images: A comparison of newspapers from 15 countries," 2012, p. 667).<sup>iii</sup> Comprehensive studies show that in the United States, death in the mainstream media industry largely confines itself to "implied" death or images and corpse representations of "about-to-die" (Duwe, 2000; Hanusch, 2008).

Death and corpses are not readily available to be viewed in media sources by the American public, which in large part contributes to the continued fetishism of the corpse when it is seen. The power of images containing the dead is recognized by scholars to be extremely potent and the regulation of these images is subject to the rules and meanings of death in particular societal contexts. David Campbell (2004) writes that such images of death in media representations can "mean different things at different times because of different concerns...the dominant social understandings existing at the moment of production are more important than form and content of the image" (p. 71). It is important that the same contexts and social understandings regarding images of death will mediate the understandings and impact of the Facebook agency of a deceased user. Hypotheses in these studies contribute the prevalence or lack thereof corpse images in news media to various factors in that country, from religiosity to individualism.

Countless examples of the media and public construction of power can be found throughout American history, where the creation and display of a corpse is loaded with semiotic indicators to reveal societal power structures. Perhaps none is better known than the brutal

lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 in Money, Mississippi, when “the photographic image of Emmett Till’s corpse put a shocking and monstrous face on the most brutal extremes of American racial injustice” (Harold & DeLuca, 2005, p. 265). Described as a “seminal moment in our nation’s civil-rights movement” that would reach its pinnacle less than a decade later, photographs of Till’s corpse indicates the powerful and semiotic nature of the corpse and representations of the “body in peril” (2005). The descriptions of the corpse are revolting and plentiful: “there was an eyeball hanging down, resting on that cheek...it was that light hazel brown that everyone always thought was so pretty” (p. 264). Scholars often cite Till’s corpse and the accompanying representations of his corpse in photographs as serving as a catalyst for the civil rights movement which profoundly changed the structure and nature of power in the United States.

Media representations of corpses, especially photography in newspapers during wars and from major crimes, have also been theorized as shaping societal views on violence and the concept of “the other.” Susan Sontag (2003) theorized the dominant paradigms of how the photographic and media representations of the dead are seen, writing “mainstream media are not in the business of making people feel queasy about the struggles for which they are being mobilized, much less of disseminating propaganda against waging war...one can gaze at these faces for a long time and not come to the end of the mystery, and the indecency, of such co-spectatorship” (p. 60). Sontag was the first to theorize the fascination with pictures of the dead that displays the fetishism and voyeurism of corpses—which is now aided by the proliferation of images of the death available through modern social networks.

### **The Online Graveyard: Death and social networking scholarship**

Both communication studies and anthropologists have begun to develop theories on the impact of social networks, or Internet-based communities and spaces, on the definition and impact of death. The definitions of a social network are typically reserved to large social Internet communities such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit—I will primarily be confined to Facebook, as at 71 percent of the online adult networking space, the dominance results in the ability to make judgments for the remaining networks.<sup>iv</sup> And, with a number of monthly active users (MAUs) on Facebook in 2013 reported in a company release as 1.19 billion—an 18 percent increase over the previous year and approximately a seventh of the world’s population—the social muscle of these networks and their ability to influence social and cultural definitions is undeniable. According to estimates calculated by Entrustet, an online data agency now owned by SecureSafe, using data supplied by Facebook and the United States Centers for Disease Control, an estimated 2.8 million Facebook users will die in 2012.<sup>v</sup> Nearly three million virtual and durable corpses will remain socially relevant and situated to interact with the living even as their physical bodies and locational memorials begin the eventual process of decay.

Despite this increased attention, scholarship on the changing face of social networking death is still relatively novel, as Facebook was only created in February 2004. For a social force to rise with the speed and power that Facebook has, however, indicates the need for further study on its inevitable social impact on death. Kevin O’Neill in his essay *Death, Lives and Video Screens* (2008) examines the impact of technologies like video and YouTube to extend the “life” of the dead and their social proximity and relevance. Natalie Pennington (2013) calls for more study on the impact of Facebook on death studies in her *You Don’t Defriend the Dead* in which she writes, “this unwillingness to ‘de-friend the dead’ is a reminder that inherent in the grieving process is a continued presence of the deceased. This presence may increase or decrease over

time but it is always there if needed; in the case of Facebook, with just a click of a button or a typing of a name, that deceased becomes available again to the Facebook friend—through both text and images we can remember them, our relationship” (p. 632). The online corpse and graveyard have both a durability and accessibility that makes the traditional grave and deathwork process obsolete and will change the definition and understanding of death and what it means to die.

A key aspect of the effect of Facebook on the death is digital durability, which unlike cemeteries or non-digital mementos of death do not decay, thus prolonging the possibility of the agency of a corpse and the bereavement of the living. Death studies scholar Elaine Kasket (2012b) of London Metropolitan University writes “there is every reason to expect that this evolution will continue, that increasing numbers of people will leave behind digital durable biographies when they die, and that technologically facilitated mourning will become more widespread” (p. 68). Much of similar death work scholarship focuses on the prolonged nature of the grieving process defined as continuing bonds theory (Klass, 2006; Mitchell, Stephenson, Cadell, & Macdonald, 2012; Pennington, 2013; Stokes, 2012).

In his research into the relationship of the phenomenology of the digital-being, or the online body, Patrick Stokes (2012) writes:

“What 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 honored and sustained through this form of memorialization, but some dimension or extension of *the dead person themselves*” (p. 367).

Yet, as Stokes and scholars who view the interaction between death and Facebook argue that social networking profiles construct a durable re-embodiment that is inseparable from the physical corporeality of that organism's body and their social relationships, death is poised to remain a more social event than has been recognized in communication studies scholarship (Pearson, 2009; Sessions, 2009). The corporeality of a Facebook profile is constructed through a selective performance of a physical identity, from the pictures selected by the user to be prominent to the very appearance and content of the page. And as a result of interaction with this social performance that is mediated by social networks, living users have increasing access to interaction with users who are not. Many argue that online profiles are projections or "disembodied" representations of users (including those who are dead), but because such profiles are socially and selectively constructed by the user and their body during life, and as a result of the persistence of the profile after their death, memorialized profiles can now "give a sense of *continued* presence after death" (Stokes, 2012, p. 367).

#### *Distinction between physical and virtual corpse*

In this paper, there will be much discussion on the distinction and permeability between two conceptions of the corpse: the physical corpse—a collections of billions of cells, bones, nerves and tissues that compose the human body that, following the cessation of the heart (and in some legal definitions the active functioning of the brain), begins the process of decomposition; and, the virtual corpse, a body of digital composition. The virtual corpse is constructed of images, text, and videos, any bytes of information about a human being stored in a virtual space intended to represent that person, and their body, in the online cyberspace. Joohan Kim (2001) writes that this virtual corpse, a specific type of a "digital-being", is "another reason that we may consider digital-being as a kind of 'thing' with quasi-bodily presence: a digital-being is not

always a sign. In other words, digital-beings exist not only as a sign for other things, but they also exist themselves” (p. 92).

A Facebook profile is a digital-being, as it is a collection of bytes or information stored online that form the representation of a person. However, as Kim acknowledges, digital-beings in certain cases—certainly in the case of a human being—are not simply relegated to functioning as a sign. Extending through Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory and Alfred Gell’s theory of agency, in a manner similar to the metaphysical theories of object-oriented ontology, Facebook profiles are not simply signs, as Kim writes, but also exist themselves: Facebook profiles come to be inseparable from the body they represent, which becomes complicated when the physical human body functions under temporal constraints that the virtual body does not. Because these profiles are self-curated by the physical body during its life, and attributed with the assumed and distributed “you” when being addressed by other users, there can be seen to be no distinction between the virtual body and the physical one. Facebook profiles become extended, virtually durable bodies—corpses that do not die but continue to function socially through modern online networks—vastly complicating arguments and ideas on death, representation, and embodied agency.

#### *The Virtual Corpse and Implied Body: Continuing Bonds*

Death and the virtual representations of dead human beings are being examined under the dominant death in communication studies hypothesis that modern technologies prolong and mutate the amount of grief the living feels for the dead, a branch of theory defined as continuing bonds theory. Continuing bonds theory does fall short, however, of recognizing the true power of the virtual corpse: as a social symbol able to retain agency. A virtual Facebook representation of a human being does not retreat or decay as the physical body does, it maintains the same social

presence it did while the user was living. The frequency of posts and original content—but not the presence of the profile itself—is the only change from living body to virtual corpse. Death studies scholarship incorporating online elements examine death in the context of this prolonged grief, which by extension acknowledges a prolonged relationship with the dead. Ever-changing social technologies like Facebook have also been theorized as able to pick up and continue where death and death workers such as morticians leave off, and even to take over the role of the death medium (Kasket, 2012b; Stokes, 2012). For these scholars like Kasket (2012b), Facebook and similar social networks have “rapidly evolved into extensions of our human bodies, opening up new possibilities for us to be with one another in the digital world” (p. 66).<sup>vi</sup> Key to understanding both continuing bonds theory and Facebook as a digital death medium is the recognition that these digital profiles transcend bytes of information on a computer server and become real—and in some sense living—extensions of the human body who curates, or curated, them.

The evolution of computers and Internet technology has not removed the bodily implications and performance of identity, but rather amplified it, for behind every profile and website page devoted to a user, there is an implied body with agency. Kathleen Irwin (2011) writes on this calling it “the idea that, whether virtually or materially, there is no performed representation without the implication of the human body, which both defines and exceeds the limits of technology” (p. 56). Facebook profiles, by this understanding, are merely the extended representation of a human body—through the implied nature and presence of that body—an implied nature that, like the profile, does not cease upon the death and decay of the physical corpse.

Facebook and social technologies are creating a digital-being body that carries a distributed personhood of the human being the profile represents, and which can be seen to have both materiality and social potency. Hallam et al. write that “even after their disposal, bodies still require some form of management as well as the capacity to evoke powerful emotional responses” (*The Matter of Death*, 2010, p. 9). It is this potency and distributed personhood—along with virtual durability and the theories of Bruno Latour and Alfred Gell—that provide evidence that Facebook profiles, even of dead users, retain social agency.

### **Corpses, Bodies and Agency**

Agency in human affairs has been theorized in different ways. Life and the physical human body are considered the grounds of agency, or the ability to impose will on experience in the world. Bruun and Langlais (2003) write that “the most fundamental level of embodied agency is that of life itself...action is *embodied* in the sense that certain psychological processes are internal in relation to it” (p. 32). Agency is living and thinking, in short, and by this definition agency would cease with the heartbeat.

Many theorists operate under the assumption that agency is an embodied action that accompanies embodied thoughts. However, other scholars have argued that in addition to bodily agency, there is an agency that relies on the causal and inferred in social situations, that “theories of embodiment...need to consider inferential clues to agency alongside biomechanical mechanisms” (Taylor, Lord, & Bond, 2009). Theorists using this definition rely on agency as a sense of physical action rather than affect, even more than just physical power achieving physical result,” Bruun & Langlais (2003) write that “*agency* refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capacity of doing those things in the first place” (p. 33).<sup>vii</sup>

By definition, a corpse is no longer a living human being. A heartbeat has ceased, mental activity no longer occurs, death has removed that individual's ability to think, to move, to change things. However, agency is theorized as more than simply belonging to the embodied or even the potentiality of action—it can be seen in models and objects of distributed personhood.

Distributed personhood is the concept that humans see objects and non-living items as social elements that represent and stand for the living beings who own or are represented by them.

While only living humans can accomplish actions and thought, agency can be theorized to belong to objects that—in themselves—change, mutate or influence that thought as a result of being socially potent.

Facebook profiles are these type of ‘social others’ that Gell writes about, that while not retaining the agency embodied in the beating heart and cells of the living human body, do represent the distributed personhood of their users and stand—whether the profile operator is alive or dead because of their ability to mutate and interact with the agency of the living—as a virtually durable ‘social other.’ Essentially, a Facebook profile remains as a social other with attributed agency even when its user dies, and remains a social force long after the decay of the physical corpse that once operated it.

Facebook profiles and other social networks serve not only as an extension of the social form of the corpse but also as the maintenance of agency of the living body of the human being the profile has come to represent—a fundamental element of death which has been, until now, the loss of agency. Death transfers the body from a human being to an object (T. W. Laqueur, 2011). Heidegger himself postulated that a corpse was more than simply lifeless or without agency, but actually *un-alive*—the experience of the death of the Other was incomprehensible to the living (Heidegger, 1962).

Agency theorists like Bruno Latour and Alfred Gell—whose theories provide a more comprehensive understanding of agency in light of the rise of new social networking sites and models of distributed personhood—answer that to not recognize the agency of objects in the social world of human beings, when objects so clearly mutate that social world, is missing a large portion of the actual agency of reality.

### *Continuing bonds with the dead as agency*

Predominant scholarship on the idea of the “virtual corpse”—or the social network as an extension of the body of the dead—usually is placed in the context of continuing bonds of bereavement communication theory (Klass, 2006; Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011). Further virtual corpse scholarship has identified the changing roles of death professionals and cemeteries in an increasingly technological and social networked world (K. D. O'Neill, 2008; Walter, 2005). The geographical location of the corpse is no longer as viable or popular when a virtual corpse and site of remembrance can be recalled by a user with a touch of a button or stroke of the keyboard. Continuing bonds theory is relevant to the discussion of the virtual corpse as an extension and indistinguishable object from the ‘real’ corpse as it begins to examine the corpse as a social agency. A theory of continuing bonds is not entirely the framework in which to properly examine the role of the virtual corpse as an object with agency because it does not properly establish the relationship between the profile and the living—but it does at least acknowledge the virtual body as acting on the living.

The abduction of agency from the body in death is the result of bodily theories of agency: once the heart has ceased to beat, thought processes and synapses silenced and prevented from conscious action, agency as the ability to act upon the world and a body’s surroundings is seen to cease as well (Bruun & Langlais, 2003). Death in this case is seen as the cessation of any sense

of agency, as agency is “constitutionally dependent on various material factors, ranging from neurological processes in our body and the services of our ecosystems” (p. 32). This sense of agency could more simply be defined as “agency as life.” Scholars who conceptualize agency as inherent to the living processes of the human body do not distinguish between the human body and the human object; that is, agency cannot belong to an object because agency does not simply rest on an *action or affect*, but in intention. Under this paradigm, an object such as a ball rolling down a hill does not have agency to affect the surface of that hill because the ball did not actively choose that process, the ball was not alive to consciously exert itself, or to not, upon the world—it simply rolled down a hill. The distinction between affect and agency—with regard to the human body—is murky depending on the parameters of whether or not agency is seen to involve intention or volition. The essential issue in the debate distinguishes between whether agency is about consciousness and choice, psychological and physical characteristics that are exclusive to living organisms, or about the affect and changed environment of some outcome, which would grant agency to objects that can be seen to possess this ability. The first definition of agency as restricted to the living fails to engage the complexity of forces acting on the human experience, and fails to recognize the corpse as the symbolic social agent that it has been throughout human history and society; thus, I am concerned with developing and calling for further research into a more expansive definition of objects as having agency as articulated in the new arena of online corpse interactions.

#### *Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and corpses*

A radically new definition of agency contrasting a more historically favored definition of embodied agency was theorized by Bruno Latour in 2005 as “actor-network theory” which enhances and moves beyond the subject-object, or human-object, theory of agency in favor of

a potential object-agency view. Traditional theories of agency restrict themselves to human as subject hypotheses of embodied thought and action: *without a living body and mind, there could and would be no agency*. Under this sense of agency, it is clear that a dead body would become an object at the moment of life's cessation and would lose the agency it had possessed a moment before. Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) began as a redefinition of the way social scientists study intention and the social relationship between humans, and ended with an expansion of agency to objects as a useful way to redefine what we mean by "the social"—which had until this point been the exclusive property of the study of humans in social science.

Latour (2005) writes in his book *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*:

"The main reason why objects had no chance to play any role before was not only due to the definition of the social used by sociologists, but also to the very definition of actors and agencies most often chosen. If action is limited a priori to what 'intentional', 'meaningful' humans do, it is hard to see how a hammer, a basket, a door closer, a cat, a rug, a mug, a list, or a tag could act... Thus, the questions to ask about any agent are simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent's action or not?... The rather common sense answer should be a resounding 'yes'" (p. 71).

Latour's project is to redefine what social scientists discuss when they distinguish between the social relations of humans and their relations with the material world, or objects—which have not to this point been regarded as active in the social process. Actor-network theory instead argues that if the definition of agency is reserved to actors which by very definition act upon the lives and courses of other actors, agency could be reserved, or at least should not be abducted from, objects that function in a similar fashion. Latour (2005) writes that social

scientists incorrectly consider “the question is obviously closed and that objects do nothing, at least nothing comparable or even connectable to human social action...they cannot be the origin of social activity” (2005, p. 72). Though frequently mistaken for crediting objects with mystical or psychological powers, Latour instead argues that to restrict views of agency from object-actors—like boulders, mugs, cats, rugs, and even corpses—is to ignore a massive amount of the ‘social’ interaction of human existence that is directed, oriented in, and created by these objects. ANT theory is primarily focused on its appellative function: actors, whether human or non-human, engaging in social exchange.

Corpses as an object under ANT theory, as Latour would argue, contain an agency that is “the result of a long process of negotiation between the material world, historical associations and people—who give things names and relationships” (Martin, 2005, p. 284). Objects have agency in their ability to affect the social relations of living humans, that agency is granted to objects *by living humans* as a historical and social process. Latour and ANT theory are not without their share of dissenting opinion and controversy, but argument that human social interaction should take into regard *all* the actors that affect relationships is difficult to refute. A more adroit summary of the importance of ANT when considering agency and objects is provided by Edwin Sayes (2014), who writes “nonhumans do not have agency by themselves, if only because they are never by themselves” (p. 135).<sup>2</sup>

Latour and subsequent scholarship on ANT postulates complicated but powerful conception of agency for objects, one that “catches every entity that makes or promotes a difference in another entity or in a network” (Sayes, 2014, p. 141). It is certainly easy to accept how the corpse of a loved one, friend, or even a complete stranger makes or promotes a social

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<sup>2</sup> Sayes points out that ANT is primarily designed to be a methodology designed to explicate the link between humans and objects, rather than to hypothesize or theorize on that link’s extent.

difference in a network, whether that corpse is present in front of one at the moment of death or months later online on a social network.

#### *Gell's theory of agency*

Human beings, according to Alfred Gell's (1998) theories of agency, attribute agency *externally* to other living humans because “we attribute ‘agency’, ‘intentional psychology’—the possession of a mind, consciousness, etc. to ‘social others’...an idol (or object) who does not respond actively (by moving or speaking) is none the less ‘active’ as a patient with respect to the agency of other...they exhibit ‘passive agency’, the kind of agency attributable to social others” (p. 129).

In the *The Social Agency of Dead Bodies*, Sheila Harper (2010) first applied Alfred Gell's (1998) theory of agency to the dead body as an object—a theory that formerly had been relegated to works of art as objects with agency. Gell's theory offers a framework much like ANT theory that grants agency to objects that disturb or create a net change in the communication of the network to which they belong or interact as a part of. Gell pushes the definition of agency to objects and the environment in which humans live, as these too, under his argument, affect the lives of humans—intentionality goes by the wayside. For Gell and similar theorists, “objects constitute potential resources for distributed personhood, a model of the individual which transcends the boundaries of the body” (*The Matter of Death*, 2010, p. 10). Yet Gell only attributes a type of secondary agency to objects and reserves the first level to the individual, remaining in line with most traditional definitions of agency as embodied and defined by life, but all the same suggests that the “second-class agency which artifacts acquire once they become enmeshed in a texture of social relationships” gives objects real agency (Gell, 1998, p. 17). Objects such as the Facebook profile of a person should be classified as an object or as an

extension of the person's body itself under the model of distributed personhood and object-oriented agency.

The foundational text of this framework of agency was Gell's (1998) *Art and Agency: towards a new anthropological theory* in which he writes: "agency is attributed to those persons and things who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events cause by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events...the kinds of agency which are attributed to art (sic) object emerges only in very specific social contexts...social agency can be exercised by 'things'" (p. 16). Gell acknowledges in his text that granting objects agency seems to dilute the possibility of agency as a specific matter of intention and will; but, Gell writes that the social context to which that object is attached—for example, the profile of a deceased loved one is mired in countless social contexts such as familial love, relationships, lived experience—it is this context that grants an object, representing action in those contexts, as having agency. Gell combats this oversimplification by declaring actions with intention, reserved only to the living human world, as what he describes as "primary" agents, while objects are denoted as "secondary" agents. Gell writes that:

"Therefore, 'things' with their thing-ly causal properties are as essential to the exercise of agency as states of mind. In fact, it is only because the causal milieu in the vicinity of an agent assumes a certain configuration, from which an intention may be abducted, that we recognize the presence of another agent. We recognize agency, *ex post facto*, in the anomalous configuration of the causal milieu—but we cannot detect it in advance, that is, we cannot tell that someone is an agent before they act as an agent, before they disturb the causal milieu in such a way as can only be attributed to their agency. Because the attribution of agency rests on the detection of the effects of agency in the causal milieu,

rather than unmediated intuition, *it is not paradoxical to understand agency as a factor of the ambience as a whole, a global characteristic of the world of people and things in which we live*, rather than as an attribute of the human psych, exclusively” (Gell, 1998, p. 20).<sup>viii</sup>

Objects and tools in Gell’s theory are seen not as an independent actor but as a socially potent force that results in change and mutation in the social world in which human beings live. To say a swastika has social agency is realistic under the framework of Gell’s understanding of social agency—as the meanings and ideas, the very social identities and contexts in which that swastika is manifested and the meanings it creates when displayed—are as much of human persons as fingerprints or synapses.

Under Gell’s theory of agency as attributed to objects enmeshed into “social contexts” that “constitute distributed personhood,” a Facebook profile is both clearly object and clearly distributed personhood: while a profile is not a person—under the definitions of embodied physical agency—a profile both a non-sentient object, and one that acts as a self-selected, distributed personhood.

### **Friends with the dead: Facebook and current death practices**

The link between social network profiles and identity has been one of fascination for scholars since the rise of dominant sites like MySpace and Facebook in the early 2000s. The site functions as a constructed place of relationship between users, allowing each to self-select and represent their own personalities and bodies with images and text in an ever-mutable and changing process. Heidegger, who wrote that our being-in-the-world was a temporal and fleeting with our relationship with others popularized the social nature of existence as an “existential given”, of which death is the opposite. Identity as a socially articulated and jointly constructed

Being—as Heidegger wrote—is evident in a user’s Facebook profile curating: the user’s identity is both selected and presented by the self, and in through interaction and that identity working with the identities of other users on the site. Just as being-in-the-world is a social venture and inevitable, so to is a Facebook profile and the construction of an extension of identity. The user becomes inseparable from the profile as a physical being and a virtual construction, because the process of selection and identity construction works to change that social profile into an *extension* of the physical being, a virtual body, *a virtual corpse*.

The processes Facebook engages when a user dies are simple and have not evolved greatly since the site’s 2004 creation. When Facebook is informed of the death, the user’s profile is converted to a ‘memorial’ profile—a change that does not, as I will later demonstrate, change much of the social interaction the profile can engage in. Other users can still browse photos and posts made by the dead user during their life; leave messages and interact with other users about the deceased (such as holidays, birthdays, or just to memorialize a memory); and, while no new “friends” or social posts are made by the profile, the user remains durable and visible at its user’s moment of death, their corpse, forever. If requested by an immediate family member or executor through a form entitled “Special Request for a Deceased Person’s Account,” Facebook will remove the account.<sup>ix</sup> In an ironic acknowledgement that proves the potency of a profile—even in the event of a user death—the same page contains a sentence that reads “to protect the privacy of people on Facebook, we cannot provide anyone with login information for accounts.” On Facebook even the dead have the eternal right to privacy.

#### *Profile Memorialization*

The most official communication from Facebook regarding its standard order of procedure with the profiles of the dead came in the form of a 2009 blog post on the company’s

page titled “Memories of Friends Departed Endure on Facebook.”<sup>3</sup> In the post, author Max Kelly writes “when someone leaves us, they don’t leave our memories or our social *network*.” In the same post, Kelly writes that the process of memorialization results in several formatting changes to a person’s profile: the profile is removed from Suggestions interactions, adding new friends and logging in is locked, and past posts are restricted only to confirmed friends. Essentially, the profile is reduced from future action by a physical living human being—and steps are taken to prevent the profile accidentally interacting with another profile via the Suggestions function the site uses to remind users to interact with distant friends and acquaintances. According to the Facebook Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) website page, Facebook will remove the profile only at the request of an immediate member of the family—a stringent requirement that has threatened to embroil technology companies and family members in legal disputes over privacy law.

A memorial profile requires a friend or family member of the deceased user to approach Facebook via an online form in order to report that user as dead—without such, the profile will continue to exist as a living entity, interacting with the website and friends through Suggestions, Invitations—it will, in essence, remain a living corpse. Without notification the profile will continue to cycle through the automatic interaction processes living profiles do. For example, if a Facebook user has not interacted with the (unknowingly) deceased user, without a memorialized profile, the deceased person’s profile may reach out to suggest they interact—without the person knowing the user of that page is no longer alive. The profile can receive game and application requests and other users can continue to interact with that person’s profile with little knowledge that they are interacting with the dead; though, there may not be a physical response with the

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<sup>3</sup> Accessed 1/30/14. Italics emphasis added.

profile user. It is, however, that profiles are so similar to the self-selected identity of their user, that an argument can be made there is little differentiation between the two.

### *Changing and on-going Facebook death practices*

Facebook announced in a press release entitled “Remembering Our Loved Ones,” written by two “Community Relations Officers” on February 21, 2014 that the practices of memorialization would continue—though visibility and access to profiles of the deceased would be greatly relaxed. As of February 2014, the profile of a deceased user—*even when memorialized*—will not be locked by visibility only to current friends, but *will maintain* “the visibility of a person’s content as-is” (Price & DiSclafani, 2014). Additionally, Facebook is instituting the function of “Look Back” videos for deceased users, which allow living users to construct and view custom videos created from the photos and moments posted to the network during the user’s life. These videos are made *by Facebook upon request of a user*, and as of Feb. 2014, would not require the consent of the deceased user to be displayed on their profile—a radical policy change in the way Facebook sees the ever-changing and controversial battle of handling digital legacy.

In the press release, Facebook clarifies the reason for the changes to their policy on deceased users that had become standard for the first ten years of its existence: “Starting today, we will maintain the visibility of a person’s content as-is. This will allow people to see memorialized profiles in a manner consistent with the deceased person’s expectations of privacy. We are respecting the choices a person made in life while giving their extended community of family and friends ongoing visibility to the same content they could always see” (Price & DiSclafani, 2014).

The importance of these changing practices may be lost on the average user of Facebook. In a sweeping move, Facebook has changed the definition of online death: the estimated 2.89 million users that died on Facebook in 2012 (Lustig, 2012) will remain accessible to the 901 million MUAs reported in Facebook's April 23, 2012 prospectus filed with the United States Securities Exchange Commission (Facebook, 2012). And the profiles of deceased users will retain the privacy settings their users maintained during their life—rather than locking to current friends only—allowing other users to essentially interact with a deceased profile as if no change has occurred. Furthermore, at the request of another living user, Facebook can create a displayed video titled “Look Back” using images and items grafted from the deceased’s profile, reanimating that person’s body for all users to see. This is obviously done without the permission of the deceased user, as is the maintenance of their virtual corpse at the same security level that was curated during life. As discussed previously, the policy of removing a profile of a deceased user has remained static for the first ten years of Facebook’s existence: an immediate member of the deceased’s family must *specifically request* that the profile be removed. Otherwise, as of February 2014, that profile will continue to exist—and in cases like the new “Look Back” videos—continue to interact and socially proliferate with the users around them on the social network, remaining both a site of mourning and virtual durability as well as virtual and social agency.

#### *Materiality of a Facebook Page*

In order for something to be considered an object, there must be a concrete characteristic about it; Facebook profiles are not composed of concrete structures but of abstract bytes of data stored on servers across the world. There is not a specific physical materiality to a Facebook profile page, however, that does not reserve it from function has an object would in the cases of

specific contexts, and through the close relationships these profiles enjoy to the people they represent. Joohan Kim (2001) writes on the Facebook profile as a digital-being, describing it as “not exactly a thing, because it does not belong to objective time and space. Due to its perfect duplicability, a digital-being can exist at multiple locations simultaneously...With digital-beings on the Internet, we can establish intercorporeal relationships” (p. 87). The establishment of the relationship and a digital-being, or profile, is not reliant on objective time and space in social networks, human beings maintain relationships with profiles in a manner typical of human interaction with objects, though the objects are also one and the same with other humans. The materiality of a Facebook profile is both the implied body of the user on the other end of the profile, and as a newly theorized “digital-being.” Though a Facebook profile may not contain a specific physical materiality—which allows both durability and duplicability—we as living biological organisms can form relationships with a profile, even if the user of that profile is deceased, sometimes even for months and years.

#### *Public Figures and Public Figure Memorial Pages*

There is a distinction in the form of the Facebook profile of the death between the profile of an individual private user and a fan page made for public interaction, which are typically made for celebrities and public figures. A private user’s profile will become memorialized by Facebook when a notice of death is received which prevents further expansion—though not interaction—of that user’s social network. A public figure memorial or fan page profile is not subject to memorialization, and can serve as a digital corpse extension of that figure without being limited in scope. The distinction between the two profile types is merely a functional electronic difference, but one that results in differences in the ways the profile interacts and impacts its social network following the death of the user.

A public “page” is one that is open to be “liked” and thus subscribed to and impacted by any user. In a prospectus filing with the Securities Exchange Commission in 2012 just before Facebook became a publicly traded company, a report estimates that there are more than 42 million pages on Facebook with more than ten active “likes”—some of which are celebrity figures with millions of followers who see every post the individual page makes.<sup>4</sup> For example, actor Vin Diesel has over 66 million “likes” on Facebook, more than the generic page for “music” which has 44 million. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has since announced that only four million of the 42 million are business entities, the remainder of which is largely pages for entertainment and cultural figures and organizations. It is clear that the amount of influence a well-liked page can have—Diesel’s posts are rarely “liked” by less than a million people, and are seen by millions more through Facebook’s social sharing mechanisms. If Diesel’s page were a country, it would fall between Thailand and France as the world’s twenty-second largest nation, ahead of populations like the United Kingdom and Italy.<sup>5</sup> Obviously these are users from around the world—and 66 million out of a world population of more than 7 billion does not seem to be extraordinary—but the social potency of these public pages, both before and after the demise of the figure that page is focused on, is extreme.

The role of the Internet and social networks to support public figures after their death, often referred to as “the afterlife effect” on which Danowski & Park (2009) write that “the internet supports discussions about the dead person better than broadcast or print...findings show that dead public intellectuals have a social ‘afterlife’, a socialmorphic quality that continues in cyberspace and not in other media” (p. 337). This effect shows that death is *not a significant*

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<sup>4</sup> A distinction here is made that the actual celebrity does not have to construct the page, as in posts made following their death—but the page is still their virtual corpse representation.

<sup>5</sup> World population based on Central Intelligence Agency website estimate on February 16, 2014.

*factor* in the ongoing sharing of discussions, writing and thought created during that public figure's life. With the advent of social networking and the Internet, in essence, dying does not represent the cessation of popularity of public figures. For example, celebrity actor Paul Walker, who died in a car crash on Nov. 30, 2013, is represented by a Facebook page with more than 26 million likes, many of whom continue to leave memorial comments, 'like' photos, and interact with the page after his death and physical decay.

#### *Public profiles vs. individual profiles*

The reason for distinguishing between public celebrity fan pages and individual user profiles of Facebook is the amount of interaction and social context created around that page, which under conceptions of these objects as possessing a type of social agency is an important difference to recognize. A deceased individual user's page constructs and interacts in the social circle and context its user did while alive; while a public profile, though still an extension of distributed personhood and agency that human being possessed while alive, is open to more people, and thus more rhetorical and social contexts.

#### *Methods of research and observation*

To minimize the invasion of privacy yet maintain a comprehensive evidential source of interactions from Facebook profiles, the primary profiles used in the individual profile sections will be the profiles of deceased individuals made public to MyDeathSpace.com—the world's largest repository of death online social network profiles available to the public as submitted by living users. Names will be redacted in the individual user study section to protect the identities and families of the deceased, which in itself is evidence of the potent meanings that surround the durable virtual legacy and meanings in these pages. Research and observation is divided into four sections for both the private and public profiles—in which I will examine public figure and

recently deceased actor Paul Walker's Facebook page: styles of communication and user interaction, profile composition and layout, durability and user interaction over time, and nature of continuing social contexts and content. Walker was selected as his profile best fits the description of a popular, recently deceased public figure. One public profile and one private profile will be observed during this examination of primary texts, along with the four primary themes and important methods of observation applicable to those profiles.

### **Public Profile Observation: Paul Walker**

Actor Paul Walker, known for roles in television shows like *The Young and the Restless* and film franchises like the *Fast and the Furious* was killed in an automobile accident on Nov. 30, 2013—three years after joining the Facebook community via a public page on Sept. 30, 2010.<sup>x</sup> Paul's profile quickly became popular due to the frequent and implied realism of his page, where posts would often greet fans regarding a variety of subjects in colloquial and conversational language, signed by the author himself. For example, a post written on October 5, 2010: “wish I had time to give shout outs to each and every one of u that asked... u all deserve it and I appreciate everyone’s support!” Posts not written by the actor are signed “—Team PW,” but during the first three years of the page’s existence, these non-actor posted statuses were rare. When the page began in 2010, posts such as the Oct. 5 status would receive only several hundred interactions on Facebook—as defined by “likes” and “shares.” By late 2012, posts were received well above 40,000 interactions at every post—mostly posts of photos of Paul (visible and implied personhood and body). The post on the page, duly noted by the “Team PW” signature” relaying the actor’s death on November 30, 2013 received more than 2 million interactions, and the page has since climbed to 26 million followers.<sup>xi</sup>

### *Styles of communication*

The nature of the public profile on Facebook, or more colloquially, the ‘fan page’ is exactly as it sounds, for those who appreciate an individual to find a common forum, a place for public and social interaction with that individual, to find that person’s virtual body in the method closest accessible to them. This communal and permissive nature obviously shapes the rhetorical style of discourse present on any public profile, as the communicators involved will typically already publically appreciate Walker’s body of work. Much of the discourse resembles what fans would tell the physical body of a celebrity—for example, screaming it at a concert or an awards ceremony’s red carpet—but has now transitioned into a more accessible and durable public venue, where other actors and agents can interact with individual content in a peer-mediated setting.

The styles of communication on Paul Walker’s content are roughly similar in nature: laudatory and adoring—frequently begging the actor to interact with them online. Fans interact with Walker sequentially and in response to the content posted, varying from wishing the actor well on his birthday to admiring praise on photos the actor posts of his car collection. Some examples of the social responses:

“*You are so amazing Paul, when you smile I inside!!! Love you!!!* – Oct. 8, 2010

“*You are beautiful*” – Oct. 8, 2010

“*i really miss u alot :-( deepest condolence for the peace of soul*” – Dec. 1, 2013

It is important to note that the final message contains the rhetoric we will examine closely, comments that both attribute physical agency to the profile of the person—as inseparable from their body—and that function in line with continuing bonds theory.

### *Profile Composition and layout*



**Figure 2: The composition of a typical public profile contains similar social interaction options to the private profile of an individual user.**

Physically, public profiles and private profiles vary only slightly in the nature of their composition and layout, as well as the production of the page content.

According to Facebook, public pages differ from private profiles only in that “unlike your profile,

Facebook Pages are visible to everyone on the Internet by default.”<sup>xii</sup> The physical composition of a

public page of Paul Walker is not unlike the private profile of an individual user, it is merely the following of 26 million that distinguishes the profile in terms of accessibility. For both public fan pages and private profiles on Facebook are composed to emphasize the connection to the physical body and person they represent, to function clearly as an object of that person’s electronically distributed body. The public page is constructed to stand for the physical body of Paul Walker, which complicates ideas of self-representation and the durability of the body through death.

### *Durability and user interaction over time*

Durability and user interaction over time is a key metric for continued study on the relationship between changing understandings of death and dying through social networks. Durability of users and posts over time indicates both the continued bond relationship a living user is manifesting through attributing the deceased person’s personhood to that profile, or “brings dying and grieving out of both the private *and* public realms and into the every day life social networks beyond the immediate family, and provide an audience for the once private communications with the dead” (Walter et al., 2011, p. 275). The durability of users over time indicates—in a now-public fashion what was once only possible at the site of the grave and in

private—and provides evidence for the profile’s existence as distributed personhood, virtual durability, and as a site of memorial. It is the durability of a profile over time that suggests its importance both as a site of memorial and as actually coming to represent the deceased’s body.

The public profile of a user is also different from a private profile given durability of time as a team of public relations professionals or any user in charge of the profile can continue to post from the profile, even following that user’s death—as Paul Walker’s page has continued to do; in essence, public profiles on Facebook cannot in effect be memorialized, instead remaining durable sites of communal memorial, identity attribution, and even product promotion. The following is the text of a post on Walker’s page on January 26, 2014, nearly two months *after* his death, promoting his latest movie: “Paul Walker plays a man desperately trying to save his daughter in Hours—available on DVD March 4th. Learn more about the emotional film in Fandango’s behind the scenes interviews with Paul and the cast and crew.” The post is signed by the ubiquitous “Team PW” to indicate the post is not by the actor, who is in fact dead, but the construction of the post and its durability over time is problematic: the post is driven with a picture of Walker, on Walker’s page, it is, in essence, a post promoting Walker’s work *using Walker’s dead body* to animate it. But, true durability over time for a public profile can be measured in the user content and interaction since the death of the user, in this case, Nov. 30, 2013. The following are lists of the top community posts on the page’s content with accompanying dates:<sup>6</sup>

“Even a death can’t stop him.” – Feb. 12, 2014

“I still miss you Bro...Fast Forever” – Feb. 1, 2014

“Fast and the Furious will never be the same without you, I love you.” – Dec. 1, 2013

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<sup>6</sup> As measured by “likes” from other users, which cause the comments to rise on the page.

*“Instantly brought tears to my eyes. U should still be with us.” – March 2, 2014*

*“You will always be in our hearts, we miss you.” – March 3, 2014*

The use of the pronoun “you” in most of the page’s content is clear evidence of Walker’s profile as evidence for the continuing bonds theory of death and social networking: fans are maintaining a relationship through the page to Walker’s implied body, even in death. The profile has come to “stand in” for Walker’s own corpse, which has since decayed and no longer retains any living agency. However, the durability and persistence of these posts over time—beginning on Nov. 30 itself through the most current dates—show both a continued bond but also a social agency: people visit the page to leave their feelings about the actor, other peoples are privy to this mourning and can even “like” or comment on it, the profile has become enmeshed in the social context of Walker’s death and life’s work. Walker’s socially curated identity has, over time, become the site of mourners and those who share a bond to Walker’s body, and through Gell’s theory of agency, has having an “effect on the causal milieu” in certain social contexts—as possessing and owning a type of agency.

#### *Nature of continuing social content and contexts*

Walker’s profile can be seen to possess agency under Gell’s understanding of agency as a characteristic of certain objects that interact and function in certain contexts, as the social network profile can be seen to do through continued posts after Walker’s death and as a site of memorial for continued bonds. Walker’s profile can be seen to have significant effect on the courses of other actors, the living users who continued to interact with the profile and change as a result of their interaction with the profile and its content, it can certainly be said that Walker’s Facebook profile—and profiles in general—“promote a difference in a social entity or network” (Sayes, 2014, p. 141). The continuing nature of social content posted on the public profiles on

Facebook like Walker's, as well as the contexts and effects the pages evoke for different living social actors and their networks (seen publically as never before in the mourning process) are both evidence of Gell's and actor-network (ANT) theories, and evidence for the social agency of Facebook profiles, as well as their importance as sites of continued, though altered, mourning and a changing of death due to social networks.

### **Private Profile Observation**

The name of the profile involved in this individual, private user's rhetorical and compositional analysis has been redacted to protect the privacy of family members and sensitive Facebook information in keeping with the user's privacy settings when the user was living. Under current Facebook procedural policy, this individual user's profile would remain locked to the privacy settings the user selected during life; however, like many profiles of dead users on Facebook, the profile under examination has *not* been memorialized. This will not affect the process or content of the examination, nor of its function within the social context of the user's death and its potency within networks. The person in question was a 21 year-old Caucasian white male who committed suicide in October 2013, though the remainder of his identity can be constructed through examining the interaction of his friends with his Facebook profile.

#### *Styles of communication*

When compared to a public profile such as Walker's, there is a tremendous variance and disparity between the two communication styles on the profiles following the users' deaths: in Walker's, the many, less-socially connected fans who regularly interact with the social network of the page left generally less personal textual mementos, often nothing more than "RIP." But, on the individual private user's profile, messages were long, personal, and of a highly emotional nature, often accompanied of photos of the living and the deceased and recited memories. This

difference in these styles of communication can be attributed to the level of intimacy the user enjoyed with the deceased, much as mourning has worked in the course of human history—with the closely impacted, such as the family, presiding over the death rites and funeral memorials.

The key importance of these different styles of communication is that they indicate that social network sites like Facebook has not removed the intensely emotional and disturbing nature of death; however, public Facebook profiles also allow people with no personal connection to the user to engage in the memorial and death practice with unprecedented access, without any seemingly mitigated sense of grief. Access and involvement in the grief of death in the modern world of social networking is more available and accessible than ever before, which itself is changing and mutating how users will understand what death means, and what it means to die, in the future.

#### *Durability and user interaction over time*

As important as the durability of posts over time is for the multitudes who post on a public profile like Walker's, it is even more important to examine in a smaller social context like that of a deceased private user. It is important to distinguish that a smaller pool of social contacts interacting with a private user's page does not mitigate the grief or emotional milieu involved on that page. Rather, it is this durability over time that suggests two important elements of social network profile's relevance to the death process: the de facto site of memorial, and the notion of virtual distributed personhood—both of which create elements of lasting social agency.

The following are texts of memorials given on the selected private user's profile following the user's death in Oct. 2013:

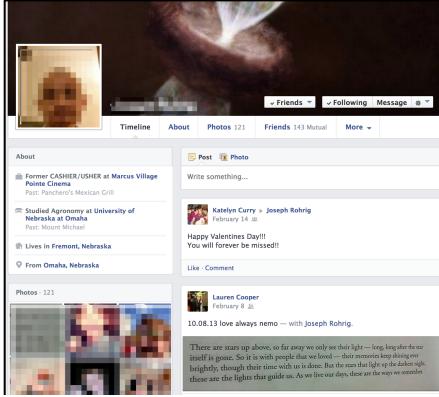
*"Happy Valentine's Day!!! You will forever be missed" – Feb. 14, 2014*

*“10.08.13 love always nemo” – Feb. 8, 2014*<sup>7</sup>

*“Merry Christmas (name redacted)” – Dec. 24, 2013*

*“Happy Thanksgiving plus a day (redacted). I love you and miss you so much!” – Nov. 29, 2013*

*“You’re never over” – Nov. 19, 2013*



**Figure 3: The composition of the private user’s profile under examination, which varies little from a public profile in layout.**

*“Figured people would like these.” – Oct. 21, 2013<sup>8</sup>*

The theory that Facebook pages function as a site of memorial for the living users to interact with deceased users can base their evidence from the delay of postings from friends spanning the considerable length of time from the date of death to the current, showing that posts—while they may recede with time—remain a popular and durable memorial function. The span of time between posts and the

public nature of the posts allows deceased users to enjoy a period of extended reanimation that extends beyond the decay of their material body and is inherently social in nature.

The rhetorical consequence of a post like “You’re never over” is the re-attribution of life to the profile and to the person—and body—implied through that profile; the person is given agency by the poster, an agency that is both granted because of its social and public nature, but also one that is granted by the assumed nature of the distributed personhood within the profile itself. Once again, the profile has come to assume personhood, the assumption of that person’s body and agency beyond merely as a site of remembrance or memorial. A phrase like “You’re never over” and “I love you” are communally visible, a public attribution of the agency of the

<sup>7</sup> The note is a reference to the user’s date of death and included a picture of a quote on the subject of love, including many references to remembering and memories.

<sup>8</sup> Multiple posts from different users accompanied this title along with photos from the user’s past. Indicates evidence of the changing communal and social nature of mourning.

profile that has, as Hockey et al (*The Matter of Death*, 2010) describe it, come “to stand for the person in their entirety.” The newly durable virtual corpse of the user has become both the site of tribute for living visitors but also *the real corpse itself*—the natural biological corpse has decayed and made way for a virtual one, which is as the user describes, “never over.”

#### *Profile composition and layout*

The physical composition of an individual user as opposed to a public figure’s page in terms of layout vary little: both have profile and cover photos, areas for personal description, and posts by public and private users appear roughly similar. Accessibility, privacy, and the size of the audience in the social context, or as we refer to the sum of social interactions around the page, are the major inconsistencies between the page types.

Arguments that Facebook is the extension of the person’s body into the virtual realm can be aided by an examination of the aesthetic of a profile: in this case, a prominent profile shot and description of the user’s predominant social activities convincingly represent his implied body in the online world. It is this implied self-representation and embodied virtual body created by the self that Irwin (2011) writes that “the presentation and performance of self through the creation and uploading into the virtual theatre of a personal website...have created significant alternatives to existing narrative modes forms of representation...the virtual actor, the avatar may be brought into existence and may walk upon entirely new space and within a completely new re-visioned scenography of performance” (p. 55)<sup>xiii</sup>. The body of the user is not only clearly present in the architecture of the physical webpage, through the use of photos and identifying materials that construct a virtual body, but also communally created in a social sphere, where all mourning and interaction with the dead user is available for the public to see, shape, and construct. Identity on Facebook is self-curated and community-acknowledged during life, just as the process of

mourning and social interaction with the profile of the deceased is a communal event for the user's social friends.

#### *Continued social content and contexts*

The profile of this specific user has not decayed in the amount of time (Quigley, 1996) describes possible for the decomposition of the human body following the point of death, but will remain, whether memorialized or not, to exist, function within the sites and social contexts and evoke changes in the networks and actors enmeshed with it. The public nature of the profile and the nature of its materiality as a site of distributed personhood, combined with our understanding of Gell's theory of agency and Actor-Network theory, it is evident that Facebook profiles retain a social agency that is virtually durable over extended periods of time, communicatively potent, and replacing traditional methods of grieving as a new manner of communication at its point of articulation to death.

Bruno Latour and ANT postulates that agency resides in the ability to agitate actors and networks. Alfred Gell's theory of agency defines agency as belonging to objects in certain social contexts, enmeshed in the meanings and social nature of that object's surroundings. Yet both of these theories require a consistency to the social contexts—an extension of that object in the realm of the social—and it is the durability of the Facebook profile, even through the death of a user, that provides the social agency to a profile even when its user's heartbeat has ceased. By continuing to be enshrined in a durable and social network, Facebook profiles of the dead function as objects oriented with social agency and as sites of memorial potent enough to represent a threat to traditional paradigms of embodied agency, deathwork, and grieving.

### **Discussion**

Social networks serve as a literal bodily extension of that person's body on the Internet—just as in the past a gravestone or mementos left by the grave have served to remind the living of their dead. Scholarship on social networks has largely concluded that social networks like Facebook have a real impact on the self-image, self-esteem, and identity construction and production of their users, that on Facebook “people are more aware that the images they are presenting on social networks are being observed by their close friends” (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013). The identity of the user as portrayed by their Facebook profile page is a curated one. Rather than mitigate the performance of identity, it is that performance of distributed personhood—so integral and inseparable from the living human being—that gives a profile both social agency and materiality, an extended physicality of the implied body in virtual space. It is this extended physicality that Eric E. Peterson discusses when he writes that “certainly my body inhabits or lies in an imaginary space, but this is not a new function brought about by computer technology and telecommunications. My body does not become transparent or disappear in weblog storytelling. Rather, weblogs draw attention to the *imaginary inherent and lived by a body* that is both seeing and visible” (2008).<sup>xiv</sup> The lived body seeing its life experience as both performer and audience, as Peterson describes a reader on the Internet functions, does not cease with the durability of the Facebook profile post-mortem—rather it becomes the implied corpse, actively retaining the agency granted through a socially object-oriented nature, available to be mourned, to be communicated with, and to be visited for both.

Figure 4 is a diagram of randomly selected profiles archived by San Francisco-based MyDeathSpace.com, the largest community supported effort to catalogue the dead users of social networks. Users submit the links to profiles of the dead along with the text of the obituary, and

over 17,000 profiles have been archived so far; though, this is clearly far lower than the actual number of dead profiles on Facebook by several orders of magnitude.

1	Age	Location	Death date	Cause of death	Number of Facebook Friends	Posts during month of death	Posts since death	Time elapsed since death
2	21	Defiance, OH	Feb. 26, 2011	suicide	139	16	24	3 years, 1 month
3	14	Eastville, VA	Jan. 30, 2012	asthma	420	16	24	2 years, 2 months
4	44	Sarasota, FL	Dec. 3, 2013	cancer	N/A	7	10	3 months
5	30	Natchez, MI	Mar. 6, 2013	cancer	795	40	64	1 year (24/year)
6	25	Fort Wayne, IA	Mar. 10, 2012	car accident	N/A	19	69	2 years

**Figure 4: A diagram of randomly selected profiles with privacy settings adjusted to allow for observation by those not “friends” with the profile.**  
The chart shows the clear social and communicative durability of a Facebook profile despite the death of its user.

In this chart, profiles like those described in rows 5 and 6 clearly are socially potent long after the death of their users: in the case of the car accident victim in Fort Wayne, the user has been dead for two years and still enjoys approximately thirty posts a year from other users—not including birthday wishes which by default continue even after death. These profiles show the key metric of the durability of Facebook profiles over time and the relationship between that time endured and social relevancy: for example, in two years, profile 6 has captured almost 70 individual content interactions from living users—a number that indicates a modicum, at least, of social relevance and durability.

There are three clear implications of the new social agency of Facebook profiles and their durability through the death of their user: implications for traditional sites and contexts of death, for traditional theories and conceptions of agency, and for understandings of death and the reality of the virtual afterlife. Key rhetoric from the profiles observed invokes the implied body or distributed personhood digital-being that endures death through the profile: “*You’re never over*” and “*Even death can’t stop him*” represent a change in the communication that surrounds death—it is not carried out in the traditional graveside manner, but rather publically and electronically in a durable format accessible to others. Such posts also show a shift in the conception of the attribution of embodied agency and social agency itself. Profiles are seen to

stand for the embodied and implied corpse of the human being. The living who shape it see it as having both social agency and the ability to evoke changes in the living (“*I miss you so much*”). Finally, communication on the Facebook pages of the deceased users examined herein show the true reality of a virtual afterlife that has been examined by other scholarship, that profiles function as more than a site of memorial by coming to maintain the social agency of their user under Gell’s and Actor-Network theories in a virtually durable, immutable afterlife.

#### *Implications for traditional sites and contexts of death mourning*

The cemetery and the funeral are the sites of traditional mourning throughout history. When people wished to visit the corpse, to leave tokens of remembrance and recite memorial rituals, the graveside was the physical location necessary for that articulation. Mementos would be physical objects, funerals were temporal events, and mourning was rooted in a locational and temporal process. With the virtual accessibility and durability of the Facebook profile, the dead are only the tap of a screen or keystroke away from the living, and afford higher convenience and durability of mementos like “*You will forever be missed*” and “*U should still be with us.*” This accessibility threatens those who financially depend on the death industry such as traditional cemeteries, as the site of the grave has been reduced in importance as a result of the ability to call up a virtual site of memorial, a continuing bond with a human being not rooted geographically. Kevin O’Neill (2008) writes “the iconic corpse is at risk. The future of representations of the dead might lie in video (or online) representations, in the hands of ordinary people rather than experts” (p. 184). Lisa Mitchell et al. (2012) write “that virtual memorials blur the boundaries between the living and the dead, enabling relationships to continue after death...and that deceased individuals achieve an online immortality, visible and accessible globally, and these surviving digital selves are managed in important ways by others” (p. 416). Those who wish to

visit the dead no longer need to travel to the site of the physical memorial; and the dead have a new, unrestricted access to continue to socialize and interact with the living through a virtual afterlife in which death is not a defining limit to social life. And the application of the pronoun “you” is enough to evidence that the profile has assumed the agency of the person, as an object, and now stands for them as a whole.

#### *Implications for agency and traditional understandings of embodied agency*

Theorists and scholars who consider agency to only belong to the realm of the embodied and the product of volition will increasingly be pressured to realize the communicative potency maintained by these profiles, who are treated as the distributed personhood of the deceased from posts like “*will never be the same without you.*” Profiles also retain agency as demonstrated by the theories of Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network theory and Alfred Gell’s ideas on agency—and traditional embodied theories cannot explain, as these theories do, why Facebook profiles are altering the process of death and how the dead interact with the living. Agency cannot belong only to the living if the living attribute agency to the profile of dead friends. By asking the question that Latour poses to determine agency “does the object make a change in the course of action for another actor?” concerning Facebook profiles leads to their conclusive retention of agency, if months after death users are still communing, visiting, and recalling the profiles of the dearly deceased. Just as the nature of living social networks and the presence of living profiles on Facebook shapes the course of actors on that network, so too does the presence of dead profiles and the deceased they act for. Additionally, if objects like hammers and swastikas can be seen to retain agency through the social implications and meanings that surround them, the object that carries large portions of distributed personhood (pictures, individual-specific text, posts and

layout constructed during their life) certainly stands for their constitutive meanings following the cessation of vital signs.

### *Implications for virtual afterlife*

James A. Danowski and David W. Park (2009) theorized on the idea of the virtual afterlife, in this case specifically for public intellectuals, in which Internet-based technology will provide the ideas, work, and thoughts of humans to survive their death. They write, “only for internet measures do the values (of social popularity) for the living not exceed those for the dead...and hence appear to have an internet afterlife that is as rich as the ‘cyberlife’ of the living” (p. 352). With the rise of Internet social networks like Facebook, the dead can enjoy the same social life as the living—the social nature of which grants them agency under Gell’s theories and actor-network theory. Death is not of significance in terms of social popularity for major public figures like Paul Walker, whose page continues to interact with his fans and maintain high degrees of ritual mourning, praise, and even promote his still-circulating products. Before Facebook, Paul Walker would have died and slowly disappeared from public view; now, Paul Walker died and continues to regularly reach 26 million people, promote his upcoming movies, serve as a site of memorial and community, and enjoy a virtual afterlife. Now, as a result of a virtual afterlife, death is simply another factor—and not a very influential one—that affects the proliferation of a person’s thoughts, dreams, works, and body in a social world.

### *Suggestions for further research and study*

Further study and research should be undertaken and jointly studied cooperatively with Facebook in order to advise the social network on both the tremendous power their treatment of dead user’s profiles represents, and how to properly manage the ever-growing virtual graveyards that exist across the Internet landscape. Research should continue to investigate in order to

determine the approximate duration of average continued bonds on Facebook and measure how long a durable profile of an individual deceased user remains socially potent and relevant to their extended social network. In this analysis, it has been shown that the individual user can remain socially active as a site of mourning and as a function of distributed personhood and social agency for months following their death—in some cases, even years. Additionally, during research it was shown that applications that function through Facebook that are given permission to post on behalf of the user during their life—such as games like Farmville or applications like Horoscopes—continue to post on the walls and in the networks of the deceased users after their death as a result of application permissions granted while alive. Though the user has since deceased, these applications post as a surrogate assuming the identity of the person, presenting challenges to the issue of embodied agency and sites of personal representation. Further study into the effects of these applications on the maintenance of social agency and the application to actor-network theory is necessary.

## **Conclusion**

Corpses and the profiled corpse as nearly inseparable objects reserve a social agency as demonstrated by ANT theory and Alfred Gell's theory of agency and can enact change in the social networks of the living, whether through the prolonged stage of mourning (continuing bonds) or through acting as a virtually durable corpse—one that may even reach out to the living. The most adroit way of analyzing and gathering evidence of the social agency and potency of the Facebook profiles of deceased users is through analyzing four elements of that profile: styles of communication, durability and user interaction over time, profile composition and layout, and nature of continuing social content and contexts.

On Facebook, the dead continue to be a part of the social networks of the living, their decay is not just delayed, it is prevented. As a site of continued mourning, a profile of the dead is a symbolic object that engages the complicated rhetorical and communicative value of that person's living body did. It is, in a sense, *their digitized body*. Scholars have frequently acknowledged the link between Gell's theory of agency in objects and the corpse as an object (Harper, 2010; *The Matter of Death*, 2010). However, as of yet, scholars have neglected to extend this theory of object agency to the virtual world and the virtual corpse found on modern social networks like Facebook. Hockey et al (*The Matter of Death*, 2010) write that "appreciating agency in terms of effect therefore allows us to recognize human beings and their environments as co-producers of meaning, a stance that leads us to consider the agency not only of individuals but also the hospitals, coroner's courts, funeral homes, cemeteries and domestic environments in which they die and grieve" (p. 9).

The environment in which a human being lives and dies, including the sum of elements and physical objects through which they construct their identity, are granted—under Latour's and Gell's theories—a type of secondary social agency as they come to stand for that individual; to act, as such, as distributed elements of personhood inseparable from the real body or corpse. Hockey et al (*The Matter of Death*, 2010) acknowledge the importance of these theories on death, though they have not considered its importance on death and social networks, writing that "their (the dead) belongings not only constitute part of their personhood, but also, once they have died, assume enhanced agency as residual fragments which can stand for that individual in entirety" (p. 10). And there is no more residual, personal fragment that so clearly reflects the distributed personhood of a deceased physical body than his or her Facebook and social network

profiles, which are self-curated during life, contain essential images and resemblances to the corpse, and remain virtually and durably entrenched in social situations and contexts.

It is these profiles that have now contested traditional locations and roles of grieving for the living through continuing bonds. Social networks have assumed massive power, even a type of Foucault's biopower, that now decides both how people live—how they are represented while alive—and how they die, and how they are represented in death. Many recognize the power of social networks like Facebook to shape the discourse and social functions of living users, but few realize that not only do the dead not die on Facebook, they retain the same agency and affect the social networks of the living with the same effectiveness as while the hearts of their users still beat.

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## **Acknowledgements**

In order to thank the many people during the process of my education that have contributed to my intellectual abilities would require a separate paper of equal length. First, a great deal of thanks is due to my thesis adviser Aric Putnam, and my two readers Karyl Daughters and Kelly Berg—their efforts have been invaluable in allowing to plod through the murky forests. I would also like to thank my parents, my high school English teacher John Gathje, and the many other educators who have had a formative influence on me over the years. It is my greatest hope that I may extend such a gift to another human in the future as they have to me.

## **Biographical Note**

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