

Digital Immortality: The Implications, Practicality, and Democratization of Digital Archival of
Social Media Post-Mortem

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In the age of digitalization, the concept of immortality has transcended traditional notions and entered the realm of digital existence. This research paper explores the implications, practicality, and democratization of digital archival of social media post-mortem, shedding light on this phenomenon's ethical, social, and technological dimensions. By examining the potential benefits and challenges, as well as the democratizing potential of such practices, this essay aims to contribute to the discourse surrounding digital immortality. In the digital age, immortality has taken on new dimensions by preserving an individual's digital identity after death. This essay delves into the implications, practicality, and democratization of digital archival of social media post-mortem, focusing on privacy, data security, the grieving process, the practicality of current memorialization processes, and the democratization of access and control over personal data after death. By critically examining these aspects, this essay aims to provide insights into digital immortality's ethical, social, and technological dimensions.

The proliferation of social media platforms has revolutionized human communication, shaping how individuals interact, share information, and construct their identities. Archival researchers Lina Bountouria and Georgios Giannakopoulos state how "Social Media [is] a tool that has been widely used the last years by the cultural heritage institutions."¹ With the exponential growth of digital data, questions regarding the preservation and legacy of online presence have become increasingly pertinent.² Digital immortality, defined as preserving and perpetuating an individual's digital identity after death, presents both opportunities and

¹ Lina Bountouri and Georgios Giannakopoulos, "The Use of Social Media in Archives," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 147 (August 2014): 510–17, 510.

² Lizhou Fan et al., "Using Machine Learning to Enhance Archival Processing of Social Media Archives," *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage* 15, no. 3 (November 10, 2020), 1–3; Tony Horava, "Challenges and Possibilities for Collection Management in a Digital Age," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 54, no. 3 (July 1, 2010): 142–52, 142; Serkan Savk, "How Social Media Platforms Replace Film Archives When There Are No Archives," in *Exploring Past Images in a Digital Age: Reinventing the Archive*, ed. Nezih Erdogan and Ebru Kayaalp (Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 57–76.

challenges in the contemporary digital landscape. In the digitalization era, preserving an individual's digital presence after death has become a topic of increasing significance. Social media platforms serve as repositories of personal memories, interactions, and relationships, raising questions about the implications, practicality, and democratization of digital archival post-mortem.³

The Concept of Digital Immortality

“Digital immortality,” that is, encompasses the idea of perpetuating an individual's digital presence beyond physical death, thereby transcending the limitations of mortality. The concept of digital immortality, albeit not in literal name, has gained traction recently, driven by technological advances and evolving attitudes towards death and legacy.⁴ By archiving social media content post-mortem, individuals seek to preserve their memories, experiences, and relationships digitally, ensuring their continued existence in cyberspace.⁵ Digital immortality preserves a person's online presence after their physical death, allowing their digital self to continue to exist and interact with others.⁶ This can take many forms, from simple social media accounts left open as a memorial to more advanced services that use artificial intelligence to simulate an individual's personality and communication style.⁷ Digital immortality raises several ethical and philosophical questions, such as who owns our digital data after we die and how

³ Ben Jacobsen and David Beer, *Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory* (Policy Press, 2021), 1–2, 8, 14.

⁴ The term “digital inheritance” has been used predominately; however, its scope reflects the legal designation of digital assets passed down to beneficiaries and does not mention archival practices.

⁵ Amelia Acker and Jed R Brubaker, “Death, Memorialization, and Social Media: A Platform Perspective for Personal Archives,” *Archivaria* 77 (May 23, 2014): 1–23, 2; Kylie Veale, “Online Memorialisation: The Web as a Collective Memorial Landscape for Remembering the Dead,” *DOAJ (DOAJ: Directory of Open Access Journals)*, no. 3 (January 1, 2004).

⁶ Veale, “Online Memorialisation: The Web as a Collective Memorial Landscape for Remembering the Dead.”

⁷ Ben Jacobsen and David Beer, *Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory* (Policy Press, 2021), 26, 30.

future generations should preserve and interact with our digital selves. In addition, digital immortality challenges traditional notions of death and legacy, blurring the lines between the physical and digital realms.

Implications and Considerations of Digital Immortality

The post-mortem digital archiving of social media users raises ethical and legal questions about data privacy and security. Concerns arise over the perpetual existence of social media accounts and online presence after an individual's death, including questions about access and usage by others. For example, should family members have the right to access a deceased loved one's private messages and photos on social media? What measures are in place to protect this sensitive data from being misused or breached by malicious actors?

The implications of digital immortality through the archival of social media post-mortem raise ethical concerns regarding privacy, consent, and control over an individual's digital legacy.⁸ The permanence of online presence after death blurs the boundaries between the deceased's autonomy and the rights of their loved ones or even corporations.⁹ Moreover, the practicality of maintaining and curating these digital archives poses challenges regarding data security, reliability, and sustainability over time.¹⁰ As technology advances rapidly, ensuring the long-term accessibility and integrity of such archives becomes a daunting task. The democratization of this process also remains questionable, as access to digital immortality may

⁸ Brianna H Marshall, *The Complete Guide to Personal Digital Archiving* (Chicago: Ala Editions, an Imprint of the American Library Association, 2018), 38, 70.

⁹ Anna Puzio, "When the Digital Continues after Death. Ethical Perspectives on Death Tech and the Digital Afterlife," *Communicatio Socialis* 56, no. 3 (2023): 427–36, 430–31.

¹⁰ Zinaida Manžuch, "Ethical Issues in Digitization of Cultural Heritage," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 4 (2017), 7–9.

be limited by socioeconomic factors, creating disparities in who can preserve their online identity for future generations; however, this will be addressed later on.

Another implication of digital archiving after post-mortem is the impact on the grieving process of loved ones. While some may find comfort in revisiting their loved one's social media profiles and engaging with their memories online, others may find it distressing or intrusive.¹¹ The ever-present digital footprint of a deceased individual can serve as a poignant and unyielding reminder of their passing. For some, this can make it challenging to come to terms with their loss and navigate the grieving process. It is essential to consider the emotional and psychological impact of digital immortality on bereaved individuals and to provide resources and support for those who may be struggling with the continued presence of their loved ones online. Tying to an empirical scope, another implication of digital archival of social media post-mortem is how it allows for a more comprehensive and personal understanding of an individual's life.¹² Social media posts serve as a digital footprint of a person's thoughts, feelings, and experiences, providing a unique insight into their personality and relationships. By preserving these posts after their death, loved ones can reflect on and remember the deceased more intimately, offering comfort and closure during the grieving process.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical dimensions of digital immortality are multifaceted, raising questions about consent, privacy, and the sanctity of memory. While some argue that individuals have the right to

¹¹ Amelia Acker and Jed R Brubaker, "Death, Memorialization, and Social Media: A Platform Perspective for Personal Archives," *Archivaria* 77 (May 23, 2014): 1–23, 12; Anna Puzio, "When the Digital Continues after Death. Ethical Perspectives on Death Tech and the Digital Afterlife," *Communicatio Socialis* 56, no. 3 (2023): 427–36, 434.

¹² Ben Jacobsen and David Beer, *Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory* (Policy Press, 2021), 17.

control their digital legacies, others caution against the potential misuse and exploitation of post-mortem data.¹³ Moreover, concerns regarding perpetuating false narratives and manipulating digital personas underscore the need for ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks.¹⁴

Social Implications

The digitization of death and mourning has profound social implications, reshaping cultural practices and rituals surrounding mortality. The ability to interact with deceased individuals through their digital avatars blurs the boundaries between life and death, challenging traditional notions of bereavement and closure.¹⁵ Furthermore, digital immortality has the potential to democratize access to memory and history, enabling marginalized voices to preserve their narratives and challenge dominant narratives.¹⁶

Technological Feasibility

The practicality of digital archival of social media post-mortem hinges on technological advancements in data storage, artificial intelligence, and digital preservation. As traditional “regular knowledge-based archival techniques depend on the archivist’s understanding of the medium, arrangement and structure of the records, as well as knowledge about the record creators and major topics discussed,” emerging technologies such as blockchain and machine

¹³ Anna Puzio, “When the Digital Continues after Death. Ethical Perspectives on Death Tech and the Digital Afterlife,” *Communicatio Socialis* 56, no. 3 (2023): 427–36, 431–32; Ashlyn Velte, “Ethical Challenges and Current Practices in Activist Social Media Archives,” *The American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (March 2018): 112–34, 119–20.

¹⁴ Zinaida Manžuch, “Ethical Issues in Digitization of Cultural Heritage,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 4 (2017), 7.

¹⁵ Kylie Veale, “Online Memorialisation: The Web as a Collective Memorial Landscape for Remembering the Dead,” *DOAJ (DOAJ: Directory of Open Access Journals)*, no. 3 (January 1, 2004).

¹⁶ Zinaida Manžuch, “Ethical Issues in Digitization of Cultural Heritage,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 4 (2017), 3–4.

learning offer promising solutions.¹⁷ However, data ownership, interoperability, and sustainability challenges remain significant barriers to widespread adoption.¹⁸ From a practical perspective, digital archival of social media post-mortem presents several challenges and considerations that must be addressed. One of the primary concerns is privacy and consent—who has the right to access and preserve an individual’s social media posts after their death? Without clear guidelines and permissions, there is a risk of violating the deceased’s privacy and causing distress to their loved ones. Additionally, the sheer volume of social media posts that individuals generate over their lifetime can make it challenging to organize and archive this information meaningfully. Developing practical tools and strategies for managing and preserving this data is essential for ensuring its long-term utility and accessibility.

Practicality of Memorializing Social Media Accounts

The current process of memorializing social media accounts varies across platforms and is often fraught with practical challenges. While some platforms offer options for legacy contacts to manage accounts post-mortem, others lack clear procedures or mechanisms for account preservation.¹⁹ Improvements such as standardized protocols, user-friendly interfaces, and proactive communication with users and their families can enhance the practicality and effectiveness of memorialization processes, providing more significant support to grieving

¹⁷ Lizhou Fan et al., “Using Machine Learning to Enhance Archival Processing of Social Media Archives,” *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage* 15, no. 3 (November 10, 2020), 3, 9–15; Patrick Panos, “Technotes,” *Journal of Social Work Education* 39, no. 2 (April 2003): 343–47, 344, 346.

¹⁸ Ashlyn Velte, “Ethical Challenges and Current Practices in Activist Social Media Archives,” *The American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (March 2018): 112–34, 115; Wolfgang Ernst and Jussi Parikka, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis, Mn; London: University of Minnesota Press, Cop, 2013), 199.

¹⁹ Lina Bountouri and Georgios Giannakopoulos, “The Use of Social Media in Archives,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 147 (August 2014): 510–17, 512–14.

families and friends.²⁰ In practice, the current process of memorializing social media accounts can be cumbersome and impersonal, lacking the empathy and sensitivity that is needed when dealing with the loss of a loved one. Family members may struggle to navigate the bureaucratic requirements and technicalities involved in gaining access to the deceased user's account, leading to frustration and distress.²¹

To better serve the needs of the deceased user's family and friends, several improvements can be implemented in the memorialization process. As Amelia Acker and Jed R. Brubaker offer a solution, stating, "with a *platform perspective*, we emphasize the co-constitutive role of a system's affordances and its underlying infrastructure in the creation, maintenance, and structure of an individual's social media data."²² These include enhanced communication and support from social media platforms, more explicit guidelines for legacy contacts, and increased flexibility in managing post-mortem accounts. Additionally, integrating advanced features such as digital legacy planning tools and customizable memorials can empower users to curate their digital legacies according to their preferences, thereby facilitating the grieving process for their loved ones.

The current process of memorializing social media accounts after a post-mortem varies across platforms and may not always align with the needs and preferences of the deceased user's family and friends. In many cases, notifying social media companies of a user's death can be cumbersome and bureaucratic, requiring proof of death and legal documentation to verify the

²⁰ Amelia Acker and Jed R. Brubaker, "Death, Memorialization, and Social Media: A Platform Perspective for Personal Archives," *Archivaria* 77 (May 23, 2014): 1–23, 4.

²¹ Tony Horava, "Challenges and Possibilities for Collection Management in a Digital Age," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 54, no. 3 (July 1, 2010): 142–52, 147–48.

²² Amelia Acker and Jed R. Brubaker, "Death, Memorialization, and Social Media: A Platform Perspective for Personal Archives," *Archivaria* 77 (May 23, 2014): 1–23, 4.

deceased's identity. This can be stressful and time-consuming for grieving family members, who may be unfamiliar with the intricacies of digital estate planning and management.

Additionally, the options available for memorializing a social media account are limited and may only partially meet the needs of those left behind.²³ For example, some platforms allow an account to be frozen or turned into a memorial page, while others may delete the account entirely after a certain period of inactivity. There is also the issue of digital legacy planning, where individuals may wish to specify how they want their social media profiles to be managed after their death. The need for standardized protocols and guidelines for digital estate planning can make it challenging for users to ensure their wishes are fulfilled post-mortem.

Democratization of Digital Immortality

The democratization of digital immortality entails ensuring equitable access to post-mortem digital archives, regardless of socioeconomic status or cultural background. The web, much like social media, “reflects public identity and memory through the diverse practice of online memorialization.”²⁴ By empowering individuals to control their digital legacies and preserving diverse narratives, digital immortality has the potential to challenge hegemonic power structures and amplify marginalized voices.²⁵ One of the key challenges of digital immortality is ensuring that these services are accessible to everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status or technical literacy. In order to democratize the digital archival of social media post-mortem, it

²³ Ben Jacobsen and David Beer, *Social Media and the Automatic Production of Memory* (Policy Press, 2021), 44–46.

²⁴ Kylie Veale, “Online Memorialisation: The Web as a Collective Memorial Landscape for Remembering the Dead,” *DOAJ (DOAJ: Directory of Open Access Journals)*, no. 3 (January 1, 2004).

²⁵ Shaila M. Miranda, Amber Young, and Emre Yetgin, “Are Social Media Emancipatory or Hegemonic? Societal Effects of Mass Media Digitization in the Case of the SOPA Discourse,” *MIS Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (February 2, 2016): 303–29, 318–20.

is essential to raise awareness about these services, educate the public about their options, and advocate for policies that protect the privacy and security of our online data. Initiatives aimed at democratizing access to digital archives, such as open-source platforms and community-driven projects, are crucial in realizing this vision.²⁶ The democratization of digital archiving of social media users is a crucial consideration for ensuring access and control over personal data after death. The ability to manage a deceased loved one's social media accounts and online presence is primarily determined by the policies and procedures of individual platforms, which may vary in terms of user rights and protections. To achieve true democratization of digital archiving, there is a need for standardized protocols and regulations that prioritize the interests of the deceased user and their family and friends.

One way to democratize the digital archiving of social media users is to establish legal frameworks that enshrine the rights of individuals to control and manage their digital legacy post-mortem.²⁷ This could include legislation granting users the right to designate a digital executor or legacy contact who can access and manage their online accounts after their death, as well as guidelines for how personal data should be stored, shared, and deleted per the deceased's wishes. By codifying these rights and responsibilities, policymakers can provide clarity and certainty for individuals seeking to plan for their digital afterlife. Another way to democratize digital archiving is to promote transparency and accountability among social media companies, encouraging them to adopt the best digital estate planning and management practices.²⁸ This

²⁶ Cassie Findlay, "Archival Activism," *Archives and Manuscripts* 44, no. 3 (September 2016): 155–59, 156–58.

²⁷ UNESCO, *The Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation*, ed. Luciana Duranti and Elizabeth Shaffer (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: United Nations Education, Scientific & Cultural Organization, 2012), 559–62.

²⁸ Amelia Acker and Jed R Brubaker, "Death, Memorialization, and Social Media: A Platform Perspective for Personal Archives," *Archivaria* 77 (May 23, 2014): 1–23, 14–15.

could involve collaborating with industry stakeholders, legal experts, and consumer advocates to develop standards and guidelines for how social media platforms should handle the accounts of deceased users, ensuring that user data is protected and privacy is respected.²⁹ By fostering greater cooperation and collaboration within the tech industry, user-archivists and other stakeholders can create a more equitable and user-centric approach to digital archiving that prioritizes the rights and interests of the deceased and their loved ones.

The democratization of digital archiving is vital to ensuring that individuals have equal access and control over their personal data even after they pass away. Achieving this objective requires addressing several critical data ownership, consent, and interoperability issues.³⁰ These issues necessitate the promotion of transparency and accountability in digital preservation practices. In essence, democratizing digital archiving entails creating a level playing field that enables everyone to access and manage their data fairly and equitably. This objective can only be achieved through a concerted effort by all stakeholders to promote policies that respect individual privacy rights and empower them to control their digital legacy.

Conclusion

Digital immortality represents a paradigm shift in conceptualizing memory, identity, and mortality in the digital age. Digital immortality is a complex and multifaceted issue that raises important questions about privacy, data security, and the grieving process of loved ones. By

²⁹ Wolfgang Ernst and Jussi Parikka, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis, Mn ; London: University of Minnesota Press, Cop, 2013), 45, 48, 58–59.

³⁰ Shaila M. Miranda, Amber Young, and Emre Yetgin, “Are Social Media Emancipatory or Hegemonic? Societal Effects of Mass Media Digitization in the Case of the SOPA Discourse,” *MIS Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (February 2, 2016): 303–29, 308; Wolfgang Ernst and Jussi Parikka, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis, Mn ; London: University of Minnesota Press, Cop, 2013), 17, 199–20.

examining the implications, practicality, and democratization of digital archival of social media post-mortem, this essay has highlighted the complex interplay between ethics, society, and technology. The implications of digital archiving of social media users after post-mortem are significant, requiring careful consideration of the ethical, legal, and emotional dimensions of preserving an individual's online presence beyond death. The practicality of the current process of memorializing social media accounts may be lacking, but improvements can be made to better serve the needs of the deceased user's family and friends. Finally, the democratization of digital archiving is crucial for ensuring access and control over personal data after death, and efforts should be made to promote transparency, accountability, and user rights in the management of digital legacies. As we navigate the challenges and opportunities of digital immortality, we must remain mindful of the ethical imperatives and societal implications inherent in preserving and perpetuating our digital selves beyond death.

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