

* Look at the stars,
look how they
shine for you. *

- Coldplay

GRIEVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

IN THE DIGITAL AGE, *grief has never been so COMPLICATED. The Internet allows us to LIVE FOREVER in an iCloud – but do we really WANT to?* As writer AMY MOLLOY discovered when her HUSBAND died, a DIGITAL footprint can be both a COMFORT and a curse. Who will INHERIT your assets?

As I scrolled through my Facebook friends, clicking on those to invite to my housewarming party, one photo leapt off the computer screen and slapped me. It's a person I haven't spoken to in seven years, someone I should probably 'de-friend' but haven't had the courage. Because this isn't your average Facebook blast from the past... it's my husband who died three weeks after our wedding day. While part of me cursed Facebook for the reminder and for pressing an old bruise, I'm also grateful that he lives on in some form.

In the days before the Internet, widows would weep over letters mistakenly addressed to their spouses. But modern mourners have social media

ghosts to contend with, from birthday reminders popping up on Facebook to last words on Twitter and online tributes created on websites such as Gone Too Soon. As technology advances it seems we can live forever 'in the Clouds', but is this a good or a bad thing? Have you thought about who will inherit your digital assets when you're no longer here to manage them, and what impact your Internet immortality will have on relatives left behind?

Many people assume it won't be an issue as a loved one could probably just guess your password and then handle your social media accounts as they see fit. However, most company's 'terms of service' agreements prohibit anyone from accessing an account that isn't theirs, which means they could technically be committing a crime.

Under its terms and conditions, Apple states, "Any rights to your Apple ID or content within your account terminate upon your death". In March of this year, the company was accused of "an utter lack of understanding and discretion in a time of great personal sadness" by the two sons of Anthea Grant, who died of breast cancer two months before.

Josh and Patrick Grant had requested access to their mother's iPad, but were told by Apple they'd need to supply a copy of the death certificate, a copy of her will, a letter from a solicitor and finally a court order allowing them access.

"Unfortunately in her dying days [my mother] didn't think to tell us her Apple ID password," wrote Josh on his blog. "Funnily enough I think she had bigger things to worry about." >

After media attention, Apple did unlock the device, but only after restoring it to blank, factory settings.

Facebook in particular is incredibly strict on its privacy laws and, even after the death of a user, they won't allow next-of-kin to take control of a page. In a rare court case in June 2013, Helen and Jay Stassen, parents from Wisconsin in the US, obtained a court order to access their 21-year-old son Benjamin's Facebook account when he committed suicide, as they wanted access to sentimental property such as videos and photographs. After a lengthy court battle, Facebook agreed – only after they signed a confidentiality agreement.

In the US, the Uniform Law Commission, which is a committee of government-appointed lawyers, are close to passing an act that will allow a next-of-kin to access a deceased person's digital accounts unless otherwise specified in a will. Last year Google launched a service offering 'online wills'. At your request, if a Gmail or YouTube account is inactive for three months or more it will be deleted or control will be passed to a next-of-kin.

Whilst critics argue that it could be a breach of privacy, supporters say automatic digital inheritance is necessary, not only from a sentimental but also from a practical standing. If a death is sudden, then access to an email account can help to settle financial issues. Think about it: our email accounts are the modern version of a filing cabinet, as most banks, telephone companies and government services have swapped from paper to e-correspondence.

There's also the matter of spreading the sad news. While it may feel inappropriate to inform people of a death via Facebook, for some it may be the only option if a mobile phone is missing.

How many of us keep an 'old-fashioned' address book with a list of our loved ones contact details anymore?

While Twitter and Instagram will de-activate accounts if contacted by a close family member, Facebook is instead creating a sort of digital cemetery.

When it learns of a user's death, they 'memorialise' their page – this means they tighten privacy settings so that only confirmed friends can locate the account in a search. The page then becomes a shrine where friends and family can share memories.

Grief can be a complex matter and many want their digital footprint to last forever. It has become normal to



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commemorate life's milestones on social media, from births to marriage proposals, so you could argue that a death is equally newfeed-worthy.

According to Skype, an increasing number of grieving relatives are using the video service to live-stream funerals for long-distance relatives who can't be there in person.

In February 2013, hundreds of strangers attended the funeral of British veteran James McConnell, after a clergyman, worried because the 70-year-

old had no family, posted a message on Facebook asking members of the public to attend his ceremony.

The Internet has also become a way to verbalise sadness. The website, Modern Loss, is "a place to share the unspeakable taboo, unbelievably hilarious and unexpectedly beautiful terrain of navigating your life after a death". Its co-founders were inspired to create the online community after first-hand experience.

Rebecca Soffer became an "adult orphan" at age 34 after her mother was

to create a safe space where they didn't have to tiptoe around how they felt.

This mentality is replicated on the Modern Loss website, where blog posts range from "Mourning the dad who walked out on me" to "What mum would have thought of the Kardashian clan".

It's a Gen Y approach to grief, which has a very different tone to traditional self-help books. This isn't the only example of the Internet being used to bring comfort to mourners.

In July 2014, an American father, whose six-week-old daughter died of a liver condition, posted a plea on Reddit asking if anyone could Photoshop a photograph of his little girl.

"Since she was in hospital her whole life we were never able to get a photograph of her without her tubes," wrote Nathan Steffel. "Can anyone remove the tubes from the photo for us?"

After just two days the post had received more than 2500 comments and Nathan had received hundreds of Photoshopped versions of the picture, with the tubes removed and different backgrounds. Many people also reached out to share their stories.

"I went through a similar situation," wrote one Reddit user.

"My daughter passed away five hours after birth. Not a day goes by that I don't think about her. You've got my support if you ever need it."

To some people, such 'PDGs' (public displays of grief) might not seem appropriate, but we undeniably live in a culture that revolves around technology



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and have been conditioned to use it to create lasting memories.

The day my husband died, he first fell into a coma after a brain tumor caused him to have a stroke

during the night.

As I lay beside him in his hospital bed, I pulled out my iPhone and took a selfie of us, cheek to cheek.

It might seem like an odd thing to do, but I wanted to remember that even in those final moments he still had a smile on his face.

I haven't looked at that photograph in years and I would never post it on social media, but I know that it's in my digital memory bank if I ever need reassurance that we had something special.

There's an argument that part of the grieving process is the natural fading of memories and that such digital evidence could stop those left behind from moving on and healing.

GHOST WRITERS

A range of controversial services allow users to post from beyond the grave.

IF I DIE: This 'digital afterlife' Facebook application allows users to save a video of their last words that will be posted to their wall if the worst happens.

LIVES ON: Will tweet posthumously on your behalf, even mimicking your tone and favourite topics by looking at trends in your posting history.

YAHOO ENDINGS: This service, currently only available to Japanese customers, will send a pre-written goodbye email to up to 200 contacts and will also automatically delete your documents, photographs and subscriptions after a user passes.

We may only know the ramifications in future generations of being able to live forever in an iCloud. 📱

