



Online life after death

Amanda Aitken

BA PGCE DipCouns
Counsellor, Torbay Social
Services, Devon, UK

An interesting article, 'Whose data is it anyway?' by Jeffrey Selingo, can be found in the *New York Times* archives (www.nytimes.com – create a password and username to gain free access to this site). The article, which discusses in detail the implications for relatives and lawyers of the increasing use of home computers to store important financial records, points out that most of us don't put much thought into what might happen to our online data after we die. Nor, it appears, do many websites. In fact it could be said that websites are failing their users by failing to create sound policies to deal with the data of the deceased, leaving intimate details open to abuse. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the world of social networking sites.

The moment my teenage sons, aged 15 and 18, return home from school or college they make a beeline for the computer. For the next hour or so homework and coursework can wait as they busily scour their Facebook and Bebo profiles. They, like millions of other teenagers and young adults around the world, use these vast social networking sites to post comments about their day, catch up with their friends and organise their busy social lives. But what becomes of the profiles of those many young people whose lives end prematurely?

Over the past few years a growing number of articles have appeared asking this same question and expressing concerns about the answer. In an article in *The Guardian* in August 2008, 'There's life after death if you're online', Dave Lee states: 'In almost every case, profiles of the dead are left suspended in mid-air, open to unmoderated comments, spam and even pornography' (to access, enter Social networking Dave Lee on the search bar at www.guardian.co.uk).

An informative iPaper by Douglas McMahon, 'Death - the web difference', can be found at www.scribd.com (again, set up a free account to access). McMahon has conducted a rough survey of a number of extremely popular websites to ascertain how each would deal with the death of a site user. His survey includes Facebook, MySpace and Bebo, as well as Blogger, Flickr, and Last.fm. To ascertain their current policies, McMahon emailed his questions to the sites' support services or forums. He has set out the responses he received in an easy-to-read table. From

this, it is clear that each website has differing policies and that some are a lot more accommodating than others when faced with enquiries from the bereaved who may wish to access or close an account. Bebo appears the most flexible, offering to close the account, make the profile private or change it to read 'In Memory Of ...'. In contrast, Facebook will only keep a profile active under a special memorialised status for a period of time dictated by the website, to allow family and friends to post and view comments before the site deletes it entirely.

As McMahon points out, there is little money to be made in managing a dead person's account and potentially having to respond to abuse reports, hence the rather mercenary response of such sites. Indeed the music website www.Last.fm seems to positively refuse to remove the accounts of dead users, presenting a rather callous attitude towards requests made by the bereaved. McMahon feels that this, in part, is influenced by the fact that of all websites reviewed, this site can make the most use of the dead user's data. *Flickr* is one of the internet's largest photo and video hosting websites and, as McMahon points out, it could be particularly disappointing for the bereaved to find that such an account has been deleted as photographs tend to hold a lot of sentimental value and, as he says, '...the prospect of losing them or not being able to control them after a loved one's death is quite disturbing.' The site seems to have an open policy deleting an account but it is unclear how far they will go to help transfer ownership of the account into the hands of the bereaved.

Without clear policies on how to deal with and protect the profiles and accounts of the dead, these are open to manipulation by others, to inappropriate adverts, phishing and often obscene and offensive comments. Indeed, an entire website many would say is entirely inappropriate is www.MyDeathspace.com created by Michael Patterson in 2006 to archive the details of dead MySpace users although in no way affiliated to MySpace itself. In my opinion this tasteless site invades the privacy of the dead and their families. Here, for example, I found the profile of a man who recently hung himself, together with details that included his home address and a direct link to his

MySpace profile. There is no indication who submitted these details to DeathSpace and what was, no doubt, a very private act of desperation is now offered up for all to read, together with the opportunity to post comments. This tacky site includes celebrity deaths and, with its cartoon images of gravestones and skull and crossbones, one feels the subject of death is at best trivialised and at worst exhibited as a voyeuristic feast. Certainly the site's creator seems to relish controversy and has included on the home page a link to a number of news and chat show video clips that openly criticise the site.

On a positive note, the families and friends of the deceased have turned many profiles on social networking sites into touching virtual memorials. Although there are websites where the bereaved can purchase and create more formal online memorials, there is something far more personal and immediate, perhaps, in being able to view and post comments on a profile that was actually created by your loved one. As Warren St John states in his article 'Rituals of grief go online' at www.nytimes.com: 'Web pages on social networking sites are more personal, the online equivalent of someone's room...'

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Some teenage site users appear to visit the profiles of dead friends on a daily basis, especially initially following the death. Several articles mention the tendency of these mourners to write messages to the dead as if they can still read them and this seems to bring great comfort, as does the normalising process of seeing other site users going through similar stages of grief. As Amanda Lenhart, a researcher at the Pew Internet and American Life Project, commented: 'It's only natural that as the internet becomes a bigger part

of people's everyday lives, and in the case of some young people, the hub of their social network, it will also become the place they go to grieve' (Purvis). In some cases, she says, the anonymity of the internet allows people to pay their last respects with a privacy not afforded by a traditional funeral. For some grieving parents these profiles have offered a way to gain greater insight into their children's' lives and personalities and has offered a practical way to keep in contact with their dead child's friends.

There is no doubt that the online data of the deceased can, with sensitive and appropriate handling, bring the bereaved great comfort. At present, however, websites are not taking enough responsibility in managing this data and changes need to be made. In conclusion I would thoroughly agree with many of the guidelines for good practice suggested by McMahon.

- All websites should create a clear policy on what they will do with the data of deceased site users.
- These policies should operate by default on all websites.
- Some flexibility must be built into the default so that the bereaved can have some choice as to what happens to the data.
- The policy needs to be clearly published on the website, possibly in the site's terms and conditions.
- In the case of social networking sites, the profile should remain online in memorial status for a given period of time clearly stated by the site, and during this time it should be protected by settings that prevent spam and inconsiderate messages. A balance needs to be struck between the websites' lack of interest in hosting dormant accounts and the needs of the bereaved, and this balance should be weighted in favour of the latter.
- In the case of blogging and photo-hosting services, accounts should be preserved indefinitely unless this goes against the wishes of the bereaved. ■

Purvis B. Speaking to the dead digitally. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. Available from: www.jsonline.com (available on subscription).