Death and the Social Network

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iLife Speaker Series
Dept. of Communication
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Abstract: After we die, our online accounts live on. The mass adoption of social networking sites has resulted in an increasing number of profiles representing deceased individuals. By one estimate, over 580,000 US Facebook users will die in 2012 alone. However, the death of a user does not necessarily result in the elimination of his or her account nor it’s place inside a network of “friends.” This leaves friends and families with both the opportunity and struggle of incorporating these identity spaces into their practices of grief and mourning. In this talk, I describe how social media platforms are changing our experiences of death, grief, and memorialization. I detail long-term patterns of engagement with profiles via “post-mortem social networking” practices, the varied and conflicting experiences with death reported by survivors, and the technological challenges death presents for user generated content-based systems.

Jed Brubaker is a PhD candidate in Informatics at UC Irvine. His research considers how our identities are represented within technological systems through studies in the areas of digital identity, social media, and human centered computing. His dissertation work considers how social media platforms are changing our experiences of death, grief, and memorialization. His work aims to understand how people interact with identity-based technologies, demonstrate limitations of current limitations, and in turn, improve the ability technological systems to support the entirety of our lives -- including when those lives come to an end. Brubaker previously earned his M.A. at Georgetown University in Communication, Culture and Technology, and his B.S. at the University of Utah in Psychology.

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