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## Death, after-death and the human in the Internet era: Remembering, not forgetting Professor Michael C. Kearl (1949-2015)

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**ABSTRACT** *Today, humans have remains that are other than physical, generated within and supported by new information communications technologies (ICTs). As with human remains of the past, these are variously attended to or ignored. In this article, which serves as the introduction to this special issue, we examine the reality, meaning and use of enduring digital remains of humans. We are specifically interested in the evolving practices of remembering and forgetting associated with them. These previously posited considerations of ‘human remains’ and ‘what remains of the human’ are useful for exploring the relationship between the Internet, the body, remembering and forgetting. This article is a first step towards understanding how new technological developments are shaping and revealing our contemporary view of life, death and what it means to be human.*

**KEYWORDS:** death; memory; the human; technology

### Introduction: The human

The telephone rang outside startlingly, and as Daisy shook her head decisively at Tom the subject of the stables, in fact all subjects, vanished into the air ... I couldn't guess what Daisy and Tom were thinking, but I doubt if even Miss Baker, who seemed to have mastered a certain hardy scepticism, was able utterly to put this fifth guest's shrill metallic urgency out of mind. (Fitzgerald, 2006, pp. 20–21)

Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby' often presents the then recently domesticated technology of the telephone as disruptive. In this extract, the telephone introduces an unwelcome, ghostly guest. It was tempting for Victorians to believe that the telephone and the radio were devices for spiritual communication (Peters, 1999): one connecting point-to-point, the other broadcasting to (and perhaps receiving from) an unknown many. Both involve inherent uncertainty and are 'space-binding' technologies (Peters, 1999), analogue and digital. They make both present and absent at least one additional guest.

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This might seem a strange starting point for a special issue on death, after-death and the human in the Internet era. However, these two technologies are the foundation for much Internet and cellular technology today. Both require certain basic infrastructure to work and both are somewhat uncanny, supporting a decoupling of consciousness from physical presence, complicating notions of audience. They are penetrated and conditioned by the material conditions, rituals and politics of the people consuming and broadcasting through them. Mobile and smart phone technologies are certainly beginning to take their place in assemblages of politics, ritual and culture, as demonstrated by their recent use to coordinate sociopolitical activities in the Middle East, East Asia and elsewhere.

One uncanny aspect of these technologies (and the starting point for this special issue) is the disjuncture between projection and reception. Sounds and 'voices' – considered broadly – from both can appear more dead than alive, more ghostly than human, tethered loosely to the real, effecting a separation of the message from the body. This 'separation' is moderated by the fidelity, extent and simultaneity (Jauréguiberry, 2000) of new Internet technology such as high-speed connections, data compression and social media services.

These capacities and devices may produce an unhealthy preoccupation with projecting oneself (or versions of oneself), submitting to the necessity or desire to be carefully, manifestly and synchronously seen, and consumed. The modern hyperconnected self (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2005) can almost appear too alive to ever be dead, surviving as parts of the self, even doppelgangers, with the potential to drift through and inhabit Internet societies, much as spirits lurked for early human civilisation.<sup>1</sup> Such voices and selves are animated through practices and durable material – the plastic, glass, silicon and metal that comprises them. Thus, these technologies that preserve sounds and selves also problematise notions of living and life, dying and death because their 'source material' can be thought of as both alive and dead. They are both absent and present (Urry, 2004), ghostly and real.

In the Neolithic period, as humans began to live in proximity to one another for extended periods, burying the dead became an important practical concern, and a means of marking and protecting land (Taylor, 2002). The bodies of the dead became connected to enduring identities as representations of certain lineages. Today, humans have remains that are other than physical, and these remains are variously attended to or ignored. This is another starting point for this special issue, one that centres on the reality, meaning and use of the enduring digital remains of humans,<sup>2</sup> specifically the evolving practices and the remembering and forgetting associated with them.

In the last issue of 'Mortality', Walter (2015) skilfully traced the evolution of communications technologies from the birth of speech to the spawning of the Internet, from the Stone Age to the contemporary, arguing that 'the dead and social institutions' (Walter, 2015, p. 229) shape communications technologies and vice versa. Along this trajectory communication, technologies have afforded not only a certain presence for the dead amongst the living, but have also

legitimised particular living collectives based on kinship, tribalism, religion and celebrity. We opine that technological developments are also shaping and revealing our contemporary view of humans. Richard Harper has suggested (Harper, 2010) that certain conceptions of humans as bodies have motivated and shaped the development of technologies such as video conferencing and database technologies, and that the relationship between innovation in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and metaphysics is reciprocal. In this direction, we deploy a notion of the human that is tentative and contingent, one that, following Montoya (2012), is neither stable nor ideal. Foucault (1971) discusses the figure of Man which emerged in the sixteenth century in the last few pages of ‘the order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences’:

... man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area – European culture since the sixteenth century – none can be certain that man is a recent invention within it. It is not around him and his secrets that knowledge prowled for so long in the darkness ... As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.

Considering Man as both recent and temporary in terms of the history and emergence of *homo sapiens* may seem familiar for some. But in a self-focused age this is an unfamiliar narrative. Phillips (2011) suggests this ‘self-focus’ is propagated by the very architecture of social networking platforms.

... Facebook’s basic architecture, which positions the user as the subject of every sentence he or she utters, indeed as the center of his particular – and therefore the – social universe. Self-involvement, in other words, is built into the code; one is primed to take things personally.

Phillips suggests that technology today is hard to distinguish from the human. Such technology’s support for mass and rapid dispersal has for some meant new configurations of the human. For Virilio this meant the emergence of a particular configuration of the human, the ‘terminal citizen’ (Virilio, 1997, p. 21), which he links to the ‘[r]edundancy of man’s muscular strength in favour of the “machine tool”’ since the Industrial Revolution (Virilio, 1997, p. 19).

We suggest in this issue that the present is a key moment for the human and the figure of The Human. The human alludes to sentient beings, bipeds capable of higher level thought, speech and tool creation that emerged approximately 150,000 years ago, when we gained our ‘anatomical “modernity”’ (Taylor, 2002, p. 23). The Human refers to that more recent creature, in Montoya’s (2012, p. 562) terms ‘a global, rights-, risk-, and responsibilities-bearing individual’, the Human evoked in such overutilised and underanalysed terms as ‘human rights’. The progression across these definitions suggests a shift in our understanding of ourselves, an understanding that is deeply

connected to Internet technologies. Virilio (1997, p. 20) suggests something tragic about the shift towards velocity and the remote real-timeness of the human in urban spaces, describing

the catastrophic figure of an individual who has lost the capacity for immediate intervention along with natural motricity and who abandons himself, for want of anything better, to the capacities of captors, sensors and other remote control scanners that turn him into a being controlled by the machine with which, they say, he talks

However, we do not assume a ‘catastrophe’ or complete submission to mediating technologies. The essays collected here instead broadly explore the human in the current moment and begin to probe its relationship with more recent formations of this same figure, such as *The Human*.

Mayer-Schönberger (2009) examines the problem of curating and managing durable, malleable, persistent and highly accessible external memory. This form of memory is becoming increasingly available. Mayer-Schönberger suggests an emerging type of panopticon generated by such a cheap, widely available and durable form of remembering.

Since the beginning of time, for us humans, forgetting has been the norm and remembering the exception. Because of digital technology and global networks, however, this balance has shifted. Today, with the help of widespread technology, forgetting has become the exception, and remembering the default.

His exploration of the value of forgetting prompts us to ask what the trajectories of remembering and forgetting in a post-Internet era inhabited by corporate and personal search tools, cataloguing mechanisms and active archiving are. Given how the Internet privileges the visual, and collapses public and private spaces, how then do these trajectories of remembering and forgetting affect how we now consume death? Mayer-Schönberger suggests something ethically and legally important about forgetting, and something disciplinary and regulatory about remembering, attributing a value to forgetting inextricably linked to his concerns about privacy and data use.

Human behaviour is changing in relation to ICTs, these mechanisms conditioning how the residue and memory of individuals are treated, remembered and forgotten. This issue seeks to provide insight into configurations of the human in the recent past, the present and perhaps the near future. Kearl (1989, p. 22) argues that death is learned, and examining behaviours, symbols and traditions associated with death is deeply informative about a culture’s worldview, including how people in that culture see themselves. This issue examines how death is represented and consumed within the context of the more public culture of the Internet, towards understanding the relationship between the human and its abstractions. Our contributors pose tentative responses to the question of what we are, or say we are, today.

## **The Internet era**

In this special issue, we critically examine the status of the human in the era of the Internet through reflecting on death and after-death, meaning, respectively, ‘the period following death’, and ‘considerations of afterlife and immortality’ (Graham, Gibbs, & Aceti, 2013) and the memorialisation of dead people. We focus on the claimed societal shift towards remembering in life and after-death (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009) facilitated through an expanding constellation of ICTs. Collectively remembering death, and mass-death in particular, is unavoidable given a twentieth century punctuated by holocausts and World Wars. Death, and particularly mass or unnatural death, is at its core deeply connected to technologies of memory. Corpses, monuments and even particular architectures fade with time, but the memories of mass or unnatural death and its physicality remain through photographs, stories and the like. Such remains are both malleable and problematic.

At the second international workshop on afterlife and death in a digital age held in 2011, Gregory Clancey coined the term ‘the post-Internet era’. Other periods have been similarly marked and defined by particular technologies, such as the steam and electricity eras. These innovations had dramatic impact on movement, communication and social relations. In the post-Internet era, the tension between forgetting and remembering, past and present, is a profoundly moral, political, social and historical question, that involves taking theoretical positions, regarding, for example, how we view ‘progress’. It is a question mediated and remediated by new ICTs that represent both past and possible futures with increasing fidelity and durability, a remembering and forgetting that are purposeful, not accidental.

Clancey suggested that there was something significant about the post-1993 period, after the release of the Mosaic browser, for death, after-death and memory. In 1995, the Internet acquired a formal definition from the Federal networking council as ‘the global information system’ that ‘provides, uses or makes accessible, either publicly or privately, high level services layered on the communications and related infrastructure described herein’.<sup>3</sup> The World Wide Web became synonymous with the Internet, and its use and popularity increased exponentially through the 1990s. ‘Internet technologies’, for our purposes, include the material objects as much as the electronic services and networks that now infest many people’s lives. We attend to the materiality of the Internet alongside its semiotic aspects.

The question, in this context, is always what to remember, how to remember and to what end? And how does this remembering transform the human, past, present and future? In the papers of this collection, the human emerges as at once vain and heroic, frail and resilient, fleeting and enduring.

Pushing certain cyber-romantic visions (e.g. Bell & Gemmill, 2009) and science fiction fantasies (e.g. Caprica, Aubuchon, & Moore, 2010) to the extreme, what of a society where more is remembered than forgotten, where the possibility of complete replication – body and memory – exists?

Ontologically and metaphysically we might resist such visions and fantasies, but, in the Internet era, they provoke questions about the relationship between bodies, selves and the digital, including our approaches to the end of life. Specifically, how have changes to remembering and forgetting affected our conceptions of death and after-death? How have these affected our notion of what we are, or what being human is, today? What are the limitations, today, of our ethics? How are online ritual, memorial and funerary practices embedded in everyday life? We suggest that these questions are central concerns in an era where life and death frequently also happen online.

### **The Internet and human remains**

As of 2011 over half the world's population lives in cities (Glaeser, 2012), urbanism promoting dense networks of remembering and forgetting. Cities collect and connect humans in networks for commercial, ritual, artisanal, governmental, bureaucratic, architectural, organisational, security and communications purposes. Human beings, their bodies and the materials they dwell amongst rest in a physical world of geography and architecture, and are subject to placemaking, movement and flows (Castells, 2004). The relationship between these spaces becomes strained approaching, at and after death. Dwelling and even disappearance are managed through certain ritual practices and processes. For the archaeologist, preserved human physical remains provide insight into the network of which these materials were a part. Considerations of 'human remains' and 'what remains of the human' are useful for exploring the relationship between the Internet, the body, remembering and forgetting. Certain metaphors help illuminate the reality, meaning and use of these relationships.

A city of the dead, sustained and created through technologies, is one metaphor for the present, not least because such a city entails bodies, materials and architectures, all of which have corollaries in the digital. In the 'records of the grand historian' (trans. Burton Watson) Sima Qian suggests the importance of the physicality of architecture for the dead by describing the first emperor of China's mausoleum:

Replicas of palaces, scenic towers, and the hundred officials, as well as rare utensils and wonderful objects, were brought to fill up the tomb. Craftsmen were ordered to set up crossbows and arrows, rigged so they would immediately shoot down anyone attempting to break in. Mercury was used to fashion imitations of the hundred rivers, the Yellow River and the Yangtze, and the seas, constructed in such a way that they seem to flow. Above were representations of the heavenly bodies, below, the features of the earth. (Qian, 1993)

However, such a metaphor of pristine replication and memory, complete with weapons, traps and canals, is not completely fitting for how the digital remains of the human are treated today. A more fitting metaphor might eschew complete replication to include, also decline and decay, indicating that forgetting and remembering are intertwined.

The Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong, a notorious slum, was torn down in the 1990s and converted into a park. Part of the slum was preserved in commemoration of its dangerously wild, criminally exuberant, living and lively past incarnation. Similarly, Hashima Island in Nagasaki Prefecture, Japan was once a coal-mining town, and one of the most densely populated towns in Japan until it was abandoned in the late twentieth century and fell into ruin. It has been recently converted into a tourist destination, and served as a Bond villain's cinematic hideout. These sites, like the remains of the human we mark and track, are palimpsests bearing traces of the original, fragments that have been reconstituted, remediated and reanimated to serve new purposes, bespeaking the past, bearing relation to it. Such preservation, commemoration and conversion is purposeful, reflecting choices concerning what is to be preserved and what eradicated, what is remembered and what is forgotten. This opens a space for the consideration of the treatment of such remains through rituals of opening and closing, and the question of how these remains engage others and become a spectacle in death.

Yet, another metaphor for the contemporary remains of the human that, like the ruined/reanimated city, reaches towards immortality, is that of a preserved cadaver on public display. Taylor (2002) describes how the treatment of Lenin's body after his death in 1924 'fits well with the anthropological model of funeral rites' (Taylor, 2002, p. 136). He argues that such a body is yet to pass through liminality (Van Gennep, 1960), is not fully incorporated into 'the next world', but is instead a ghostly presence in a state of transition. Lenin's preserved body functioned as a mechanism for control in the Soviet Union, hovering over the living, generating 'a sense of posthumous ubiquity', creating a 'myth ... that he was intact, complete, spiritually omniscient, and untouchable' (Taylor, 2002, p. 143).

How the remains of the human are treated and made public tell us much about how the human is conceived and consumed. This special issue considers the implications of such persistence and ongoing legibility.

The rise and spread of the consumption of, and participation in, celebrity culture in tandem with advancements in Internet technology and changing norms and taboos mean that 'the end' can be transversed, reached beyond, and selectively rewritten and adjusted, not just for the famous few, but for the many. Virtually unlimited reproduction is a condition of the Internet. This reproduction continually confronts us with that which is gone, the dead and death itself. Virilio's (1997) suggestion, reminiscent of Murakami's (1989) mirror, is that such reproduction is now happening at the speed of light.

I wasn't seeing my mirror-flat mirror-image. It wasn't myself I was seeing; on the contrary, it was as if I were a reflection of the mirror and this flat-me-of-an-image were seeing the real me. I brought my right hand up in front of my face and wiped my mouth. The me through the looking glass went through the same motions. But maybe it was only me copying what the mirror had done. I couldn't be certain I'd wiped my mouth out of my own free will. (Murakami, 1989, pp. 182–183)



Mirrors, however, reflect in real time; something that is often absent from, if sometimes present in, the Internet. Likewise, mirrored images lack the persistence of the Internet. The flows and circuits of the Internet, their simultaneity and speed, their asynchrony and their maintenance of form and content, support ongoing persistence and lingering as they support ongoing 'life'.

ICTs and the visibilities they afford, have begun to effect, reflect and even condition the contemporary human, such that they are part of what constitutes the human today. Modern ICTs have become as deeply connected to our deaths as they are to our lives. Such technologies potentially support the reproduction and repetition of death as much as they do life. Forms of death once mysterious, final and only experienced once, are regularly enacted and performed, viewed and consumed.

The consequences of this are far-reaching. Death, as much as life, is mass-produced and subject to mass consumption. The ephemeral has become phenomenal. As more and more Internet citizens die, the lingering of the physically absent dead through the Internet is becoming as common as the loitering of the living without co-presence through the Internet. As it does, death becomes, what it has always been, only moreso; at once strange and uncanny, kitsch and ironic, and somewhat out of place. Death's meanings are transformed as it becomes both hyper-real, even iconic and not real enough.

### **The essays**

We present seven papers from six different countries and universities. They focus on global, Asian and inter-Asian settings, bringing together work on China, Japan, Vietnam, Europe and Australia. It features scholars working in digital art, cultural and media studies, anthropology, information systems and philosophy. Their common theme is the way remembering, forgetting and being human are increasingly mediated and remediated in profound ways by ICTs.

The collection begins with a consideration of the idea of 'having two bodies' – one physical and one digital – that perpetuate differently after death, in Masato Fukushima's 'Corpus Mysticum Digitale? On the Notion of Two Bodies in the Era of Digital Technology'. Fukushima discusses an anthropological (Needham, 1980) and historical (Kantorowicz, 1957) analysis of kingship, alongside philosophical reflections on the urban body by a Japanese architect (Ito, 2000). He combines this with recent work on memory, death and immortality (Bell & Gemmell, 2009; Mayer-Schönberger, 2009). Fukushima's corpus mysticum digitale is a powerful concept for exploring the augmentation of the natural body, the ephemerality of form, digitality as flow, and new forms of continuity, laying bare the institutions and values that resulted in conceptions of 'having two bodies', questioning the real relevance of this notion to the politics of the human in modern, secular societies.

In 'Eternally Present and Eternally Absent: The Cultural Politics of a Thanatophobic Internet and its Visual Representations of Artificial Existences' Lanfranco Aceti considers our production of rafts of increasingly rich and layered digital

data, services and environments focused on preserving the external, enduring memory of the self. He suggests that the consumption of visual media by a mass public, as with public funeral rites, denies death. For Aceti, the digital allows for the generation of an enduring simulacrum that lingers and is not forgotten. Aceti problematises this shift towards the forgetting of death, in terms of a 'devalued society' where death, like the human is measured in primarily economic terms.

Alfred Montoya discusses the circulation of images of suffering, dead and dying bodies for humanitarian purposes, and the politics of remembering and forgetting in 'Digital Relics of the Saints of Affliction: HIV/AIDS, Digital Images and the Neoliberalisation of Health Humanitarianism in Contemporary Vietnam'. The circulated, 'flattened' and gazed-upon digital images of suffering bodies are deployed within a neoliberalised global health humanitarianism, drawing on common visual tropes associated with death and suffering; global cultural forms, that evoke feeling and preclude questioning. Montoya argues that the ascribed meanings and uses of these images make them like Western religious relics. Within a humanitarian economy that prioritises indicators of performance, these deathly images of the ill, abandoned and poor are taken and put to work amongst distant actors as assurances of efficient financial management and proof of 'doing good'.

The implications of photography are further discussed in 'The Photograph Reaches Out: Uses of Photographs of the Dead in China'. Connor Graham analyses the shift from studio to digital photography in the context of modern China. He suggests that photographs, far from being 'heavy, motionless and stubborn' (Barthes, 1982), in fact reach out to express a 'this-ness', drawing on a whole set of present relations in the ways they are placed and talked about. He argues, in line with Peters (1999), that photographs are not simply a time-binding technology but also, through their material form, extend the dead in space, where they reach outward in invisible, sentimental, séance-like dialogues.

Jo Bell, David Kennedy and Louis Bailey, draw on interviews with individuals who have managed online memorial sites for loved ones who died by suicide. They argue that such practices enable the deceased to be an on-going active presence in the lives of the bereaved, identifying social networking sites as emerging avenues for the continuation of online identities and bonds, identities and bonds that evolve after death. They show how Facebook provides the bereaved with new ways to experience, and negotiate death by suicide, highlighting the positive impact for survivors' mental health.

Gregory Clancey analyses the rapid population of cyberspace by the dead, in searchable databases, enabling the dead to be found, categorised, memorialised and returned home through what he calls 'the eerie magic of digitalization'. He traces a genealogy from nineteenth and early twentieth century garden cemeteries and statuary to the twenty-first century websites where can be found lists 'of People from x'. What he terms 'the return of the dead' is modifying older patterns of local memorialisation, community memory and community life. For Clancey, this works to reinforce nostalgia for place and for 'home', creating 'virtual diasporas' of the dead, while expanding and deepening real physical communities.

Finally, James Meese, Bjorn Nansen, Tamara Kohn and Martin Gibbs examine digital applications and services that offer individuals posthumous social presence and agency, keeping online accounts active after the death of the account holder, or attempting to build interactive online avatars, enabling loved ones to communicate with the deceased. The authors argue that these developments raise significant temporal and ontological issues for personhood within and beyond digital environments, and that such services challenge and reshape our existing understandings of the boundaries between life and death.

### **Remembering and forgetting in the post-Internet era**

The essays in this collection argue that persistent, accessible external memory is transformative, that we are living within a reduced private sphere and an increased visibility of the self, amongst increasingly dense networks of remembering. However, these essays also show that such persistence and availability can humanise and benefit as much as it can dehumanise and harm. Even death is no longer a guarantee that one's story is over. Instruments of memory ignite the umbra of forgetting, but not always as one would have it. Mayer-Schönberger (2009) has underestimated how such 'persistent memory' can be crafted, constructed, circulated on one hand and obliterated, neglected, glossed or simply forgotten on the other.

What is also clear is that death is now highly produced and consumed by (re)constituted publics, and that it (happily or unhappily) inhabits different, variously populated places of dwelling; specific urban spaces, social media platforms and even specialist death-oriented Internet services. This is a marked departure from the steady decline of public encounters with death that characterised much of the twentieth century in the West. Death, for all intents and purposes, had been sequestered. This departure has been remarked upon by Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides (2011, p. 295).

First, twenty-first century media have the capacity to desequester the dying, death, and mourning of personally known individuals. SNSs bring death back into everyday life – from both the private and the public sphere – in a way that older media such as television and even virtual cemeteries were largely unable to. If late twentieth century mass media enabled grief to become more public (to the dismay of some members of the public), twenty-first century Facebook enables grief to become more communal, that is, shared within the deceased's social net-works – something very different.

Aceti, Montoya and Bell et al. suggest that death is now being recorded, broadcast and watched by those outside a socially and geographically 'closed' circle of mourners. We suggest that death for those on the periphery of networks associated with the deceased is more performed than felt, supporting subtle sequestration as a form of forgetting. So what do we make of such forms of sequestration?

The notion of 'gaze' helps us here. Foucault (1976) historicised the emergence of the medical gaze through the clinic, and Urry and Larsen (2011)

considered the emergence of the tourist gaze through mass travel and other mobilities. Drawing on Warner's notions of publics and counterpublics, we suggest that a new, public gaze has emerged through the Internet technologies described above and the visibilities they support. Publics cluster around (Warner, 2002), fragment and dissipate the circulation of an increasing number of instances of bodily death. During the early Victorian era in England, death was highly visible: the life expectancy of labourers and their families in London was only 22, and 57% of children died before they were 5 years old in Manchester (Kearl, 1989, p. 45). Death by starvation, exposure or disease was widespread. Those gazing on death would have seen it as real, threatening, immediate and unmediated. Today, death is forgotten and sequestered through spatial distribution (e.g. hospitals, cemeteries) and even professions. Yet, insulation is often matched by fascination. As the human is shielded from the realities of bodily death, opportunities to consume the visceral aspects of death via mediation and remediation proliferate: films and computer games readily and regularly depict violent and visceral death.

Today, publics both condemn and celebrate death. In some instances, like the mobs of other eras, today's publics emerge as judgmental and strangely voyeuristic, at once moral and entranced by the spectacle (Debord, 1994), with their own emergent sentience and limited, rude intelligence (Rheingold, 2003). So, while we can easily find a video entitled 'Saddam Hussein's Execution – Uncut until after he dies' on YouTube, we can also find the comment:

It is appalling that society would find this type of images interesting or even remotely entertaining. It is a sad world in which we live when civilized men and women accept murder disguised as 'justice'. These images clearly demonstrate how far we are yet to travel to really call ourselves 'civilized'.

Voyeurism is encouraged by the Internet's seemingly reduced technological, social, ethical and legal barriers to mass circulation and consumption. Permission to engage as 'an artful voyeur' (Heaney, 1975) is secured through a sense that this is a simulacrum, subject to endless editing, revision and retraction.<sup>4</sup> Death is increasingly ubiquitous, and as in Victorian times and other eras, is no longer sequestered. It is on display. Ironically, death's availability and reproducibility may evacuate it of its familiar meanings, emptying its significance.

The contributors to this special issue show that boundaries are not clear-cut: notions of life and death in one dwelling can inform, colonise and define notions of life and death in others. That Mayer-Schönberger (2009) can argue for the moral and legal need for an automated, pre-determined online suicide through digital expiration dates has its source in his anxiety over the diminished capacity of individuals to exert control over their digital selves, the practical possibility of online termination, and the fact that the digital body is still ill-formed and unable to truly represent the human with fidelity. Calls for limited online life-spans may be based on the notion that people also want to eventually forget the dead, or at least have some control over their remembrance. It is

anxiety-provoking to some that an individual can be excavated from the digital (Shanks, 2007), even if that excavation is incomplete.

Which challenges us more? Destruction, whether profane or sacred (terms that themselves are historical and contingent) or immortality, whether challenging or confirming an ethos? For the dead, we have developed mechanisms to support ongoing social relations with them. Extending social relations between the dead and the living causes us discomfort, a discomfort born from how profoundly we privilege the material over the digital, the physical over the online. These problems challenge nothing less than notions of death, the corpus and category of the dead, our conceptions of the relationship between life and death, and the possibility of reconfigured life.

### **The human revisited**

Fukushima and Montoya point to the confused metaphysics of the placelessness of supermodernity, characterised by a shift to representation decoupled from the body and, because of this, a continuation of multiple memorials and a fragmentary representation of the deceased. New Internet technologies threaten both remembering and forgetting through the mass production and consumption of death. What emerges are not only concerns about the human being forgotten and facing oblivion, but concerns about being remembered ‘correctly’, an old concern related to a broader desire to control death. In the case of digital remains, control lies not only with the state and corporations, but also individuals and Internet service providers.

For Kearl (1989), death and its associated practices are informative about ethos. So what is the death ethos in the Internet era? The answer is not straightforward. What these essays point to is a globalisation of liminal continuity and a variety of co-existing practices associated with death. For Aceti, Montoya and Graham these practices involve the production, circulation and consumption of versions of the individual, put to work to extend moments of pleasure, sympathy or suffering. These practices are, at once, driven by individual need and the collective public gazing upon and consuming death. Aceti problematises this, Montoya and Graham rationalise it. For Fukushima, practices connected to the disposal of digital remains are still evolving, with no clear ritual for the individual or the collective despite the persistence of an enduring gaze on the dead. Practices are layered because the human is now part of increasingly sensitive and various networks that are both individual and collective and grounded in the ‘space of places’ and the ‘space of flows’ (Castells, 2004).

There is still a mystical element to after-death that is sustained through rituals, material things and technologies associated with the Internet age. Certain populations live in areas with advanced wireless telecommunications networks that overlay a largely pre-modern and agrarian society.<sup>5</sup> ‘Modern’ technologies co-exist and co-evolve with pre-modern rituals. In Singapore, an archetypal modern city, for example, relationships with the dead are mediated by burning paper models of present technologies – money, cars and even laptops (Kay, 2010). Burning these models spirits them into the afterlife,

providing for dead relatives in need. This example directs us both to the limits of the Internet and its profound connections to other places of dwelling: physical, online and imagined. In addition, the kinds of connections and mobilities that the Internet supports are being aped, reframed and understood in terms of the material, and through the rituals and beliefs that have preceded it. We assert that as much as death is shaped by the Internet, death is also shaping the Internet across both online and material worlds.

As Clancey and Meese et al. suggest, digital remains are significant as a form of continuing presence. Ancient and modern peoples developed technologies whose sole purpose was to memorialise the deceased; from funerary tablets, monuments and epic poems dealing with the exploits of kings and heroes, to the more quotidian rise of obituaries in the eighteenth century. Ariès (1983) describes how the trend to have visible memorials for the dead only began in the nineteenth century, having disappeared during the fifth century. Prior to the nineteenth century, having visible memorials at all was unusual, even for the rich, with little requirement to place physical remains of the body close to any such memorials. During the middle ages only the bodies (or fragments) of saints were venerated at particular sites of commemoration. Today, the Internet takes its place amongst the suite of memorialisation technologies humans have crafted to negotiate remembering and forgetting.

This presence is lurking and the memory uncanny because of the dramatic increase in the fidelity and new temporality that the Internet supports. Like Murakami's mirror, these provoke questions concerning being; the nature of the relationship between us and our supposed 'versions'. This resonates with (Kittler, 1999) musings on the relationship between people and technology:

What remains of people is what media can store and communicate. What counts are not the messages or the content with which they equip so-called souls for the duration of the technological era, but rather (and in strict accordance to McLuhan) their circuits, the very schematism of their perceptibility.

Thus, the digital remains are, paradoxically, *both real and a simulation*, and *mediation has been superseded by circulation and consumption*. Movement and mobility signify, and in many ways are, life. In the Internet era, it is the extent and rapidity of that circulation that both challenges death and confronts life with new problems and possibilities. Somewhat perversely, immortality is guaranteed through certain treatments of digital remains which suspend the deceased in a liminal state, even as their increasing fidelity makes them ghostly and uncanny in their resemblance to those alive.

From these musings, we posit two broader concepts from these essays, framed for an Internet era and centred on the configuration of the human today. The paradox of real simulation, when increasing online representation means both increasing fidelity and fakeness, provokes questions about the relationship between our parts and whole, our multiple forms, and the tension between representation and circulation. The existential ambiguity of persis-

tence, when continuation via online representation after death, suggests uncertainty regarding existence, forces us to consider how the Internet technologies shape views of death and are shaped by views of death. This ambiguity also confronts us with the need to examine the strength and necessity of the relationship between ourselves and the dwellings which we inhabit, dwellings comprising others, things, landscapes and even versions of ourselves, dwellings that we suggest do not privilege the physical over the online.

These essays show quite clearly that contemporary ICTs facilitate people inhabiting different places of dwelling, places in which they are invested. Our contributors show how the Internet technologies and their individual, collective and corporate nature have created layered death practices, founded on an ethos that assumes presence on the Internet is part of the deceased and requires veneration, a dwelling place of its own and, in contrast to the physical body, visibility to support a potentially global public gaze. The practices we examine suggest two things: that death practices are differently evolved, with different meaning, references and structure, across different places of dwelling and that digital remains are not yet subject to the same rites of passage that are marked through ritual as key moments in the life of the human. These ‘remains’ and their treatment may soon better delimit the sphere of influence of the contemporary formation we are here calling *The Human* in terms such as their persistence and disposal.

Human beings have always developed new technologies to bridge gaps and transcend their limitations, including their mortality. Speech, song, drawing/writing, architecture, city-making and the like all sought, and seek, to extend the reach of human beings and human memory through time and space, to bind and make worlds, to leave (or obliterate) human traces after death. ICTs have also, now, been put to this use, joining and extending these other mechanisms as platforms for the launching and leaving of signs of human passing. If the task of philosophy, following Foucault following Kant (Foucault, 1996), is to tell us what today is, and what we are today, then through tracking how these new technologies might be reordering the field of the visible and articulable, of remembrance and forgetting, vis-à-vis death, we might better understand the limits of the human and its abstractions today. What is more, doing so with careful attention to emerging formations of ritual, politics and economics, may indicate to us what world we might inhabit, and who we might become, tomorrow.

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## Notes

- [1] Quan-Haase and Wellman, after noting the wide variation in the definitions of the term ‘hyperconnected’ returned with a Google search, noted: ‘None of the uses that we are aware of have applied the term to refer to physical work settings where workers are always on, available for communication anywhere and anytime’ (Quan-Haase and Wellman, 2005, p. 223). Here, we suggest that the term also includes non-work settings.
- [2] Lingel (2013) defines ‘digital’ remains as ‘online content on dead users’.
- [3] [http://web.archive.org/web/19971210230056/http://www.fnc.gov/Internet\\_res.html](http://web.archive.org/web/19971210230056/http://www.fnc.gov/Internet_res.html).
- [4] The reference to Heaney’s poem ‘Punishment’ is quite deliberate. This poem responds to the discovery of the remarkably preserved bodies of ritually murdered individuals discovered in bogs.
- [5] When cellular networks are taken into account the disparity between developing regions and others shrinks dramatically: Africa’s penetration rate increases to 63% and Asia and Pacific to 89% (<http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2013.pdf>). With network convergence to support multiple services, it is not unreasonable to imagine almost global access to at least some Internet services in the near future.

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