

Virtually Dead: Digital Public Mortuary Archaeology


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Summary

Over recent decades, the ethics, politics and public engagements of mortuary archaeology have received sustained scrutiny, including how we handle, write about and display the archaeological dead. Yet the burgeoning use of digital media to engage different audiences in the archaeology of death and burial have so far escaped attention. This article explores categories and strategies by which digital media create virtual communities engaging with mortuary archaeology. Considering digital public mortuary archaeology (DPMA) as a distinctive theme linking archaeology, mortality and material culture, we discuss blogs, vlogs and Twitter as case studies to illustrate the variety of strategies by which digital media can promote, educate and engage public audiences with archaeological projects and research relating to death and the dead in the human past. The article then explores a selection of key critical concerns regarding how the digital dead are currently portrayed, identifying the need for further investigation and critical reflection on DPMA's aims, objectives and aspired outcomes.

List of Figures

[Figure 1](#): Graph displaying the relative search interest over time for the term 'crossrail' from January 2009 to April 2015 in the UK: <http://goo.gl/G6SLLz> The graph is normalised relative to the highest peak for the term against all searches during this time, from 0–100

1. Introduction

The archaeology of death and burial is inherently public archaeology. This is not only because it is the archaeology of past people investigated through their remains, but because graves and memorials hold prominent places in the public imagination and in museum displays. Funerary archaeology also directly connects stories of past lives and past deaths with experiences and anxieties surrounding mortality and commemoration today. Engaging with the archaeology of death and burial is in part about exploring one's own mortality, and beliefs and perceptions about death and the dead. Confronting past mortality via archaeology therefore engages modern people with mortuary remains and contexts in terms of the human past, the human present, and our imagined, aspired and feared corporeal and spiritual futures (Williams and Williams [2007](#); Sayer [2010a](#); [2010b](#)).

Despite rapid changes in, and self-critical evaluations of, the legal and socio-political context of mortuary archaeology in recent years in the UK and globally (e.g. Giesen [2013](#); Jenkins [2011](#); Parker Pearson *et al.* [2013](#); Sayer [2010a](#); [2010b](#); Williams [2009](#); chapters in Williams and Giles [forthcoming](#)), much of the debate remains rooted in physical space and tangible materials. This applies as much to fieldwork sites, museums, laboratories and classrooms as it does to corporeal remains themselves, and includes how and when it is appropriate to display and study human remains, as well as debates over reburial and repatriation. Whether we are discussing the consultation process surrounding the request for reburial of human remains held in the Keiller Museum, Avebury (Thackray and Payne [2010](#)), or the discovery of remains identified as Richard III in Leicester (Buckley *et al.* [2013](#)), the physicality of mortuary remains, their location and context of discovery remain key to their power and significance in the contemporary world.

To date, digital dimensions to these debates are notable in their absence. The digital age has transformed how we communicate and access archaeology, including the creation of new and varied public engagements with the archaeological dead. A large fraction of the worldwide population could, if they wished, access and explore mortuary archaeology outside the dig, the museum and the monument. Increasingly, reports and images of the archaeological dead populate television, films, video games and a range of applications on computers and mobile devices, offering new and varied virtual worlds of mortuary archaeology for public consumption. Yet somewhat perversely, this shift has escaped detailed investigation by archaeologists themselves, despite the fact that digital technologies are fundamentally transforming how we conduct and communicate our research into death, burial and commemoration.

To date, there have been no dedicated studies of the range and character of archaeology's engagement with digital media – including both its factual and fictional dimensions – from the perspective of human mortality and the archaeology of death and burial. Archaeologists have not attempted to discuss and agree best practice in affording appropriate respect and professional conduct to mortuary archaeology online, let alone to query and criticise bad practice in how we write about and envision the digital dead (although see Meyers and Williams [2014](#); Meyers and Killgrove [2014](#); Meyers Emery and Killgrove [2015](#)). Furthermore, there has been no critical engagement regarding how we best actively promote public and community archaeologies using mortuary remains in virtual environments. This has led to a range of odd double-standards; we passionately debate how we display human remains in museums with sensitivity and respect for past communities and contemporary stakeholders, and yet millions of images and incalculable quantities of writing about human bodies and mortuary contexts from both the distant and recent past are freely available online. Moreover, only a fraction of these retain any discernible context

explaining the provenance, date and the historical and cultural significance of the remains and contexts depicted and discussed.

In a forthcoming paper, archaeologist Duncan Sayer and sociologist Tony Walter recognise and explore the vast potential of online media in revealing public attitudes to mortuary archaeology. Complementing their study, this article takes an alternative approach by briefly surveying the scope and variability of the online presence of the archaeological dead, before identifying ways of expanding and enhancing mortuary archaeology's public and community engagements through the development of a new specific subfield: 'digital public mortuary archaeology' (DPMA).

We outline the potential of DPMA to create new digital communities engaging with mortuary contexts and practices through archaeology. We identify some critical issues in this first statement on a topic that will hopefully become a long-running conversation and debate between archaeologists and the public. At the time of writing, we argue that the potential of DPMA has remained largely untapped and equally its many challenges and pitfalls are yet to be appraised.

2. Introducing Digital Public Mortuary Archaeology

DPMA is represented in a range of fora online. It includes popular summaries, synthetic reports, and in-depth detailed engagements with mortuary data, methods and ideas. Virtual environments online promote engagement with archaeological work in the field, laboratory, classroom and office. Moreover, DPMA need not focus on body-parts and fragments, but also graves, cemeteries, memorials, monuments and landscapes. DPMA includes media and resources designed for teaching the archaeology of death and burial: e-books and e-

journals, archives and databases, project and society websites, wikis, blogs, online newspapers and specialist archaeological magazines. Overarching all of these resources are social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. We might go further and explore various fictional mortuary environments created for video games, TV shows and films, all of which are increasingly accessed online.

A large component of DPMA constitutes virtual replications of analogue media. For example, the UK Archaeology Data Service (ADS) hosts [back-issues of journals, and Council for British Archaeology and English Heritage monographs](#). Yet many DPMA resources have no readily accessible analogue equivalent in either structure or content. The ADS again provides an example: it is the locus for hundreds of [grey literature reports](#) on cemeteries and burials, as well as [project digital archives](#).

Archaeologists have become aware of the potential of digital media to enhance engagement with funerary projects. Recent examples of effective engagement from the UK include [the University of Leicester's Richard III project website](#), which hosts a rich range of evidence surrounding the Leicester Greyfriars investigation and the discovery of remains interpreted as those of the last Plantagenet king of England (Buckley *et al.* [2013](#)). There are also outreach and schools resources and publications, and many YouTube video links. In addition to the project's extensive media profile (Sayer and Walter [forthcoming](#)), the Richard III project succeeded in creating a coherent, varied and versatile digital presence with a static website as its focal point.

A second prominent example of effective DPMA is the MOLA (Museum of London) Crossrail project in London. While not primarily a mortuary archaeology project, the excavations have received wide publicity because of the funerary component. The project has a website acting as an archaeological dissemination

hub to the public. A search using Google 'Trends' shows an increase in the search term 'crossrail' coinciding with the release of news stories with a mortuary archaeology focus (Figure 1). The archaeological excavations began in 2009; however, relative search interest increased steadily from early 2013, with [the discovery in Charterhouse Square of skeletal remains suspected to be Black Death victims](#). Relative search interest peaked again in March 2014 with [the Charterhouse Square DNA results confirming the Black Death link](#). Since the Charterhouse Square excavations there have been two further interest peaks. July 2014 saw the first peak, when [human skeletal remains were found at Liverpool Street Station](#), and a second occurred [in March 2015 with reports on the New Churchyard \('Bedlam'\) burial ground, Liverpool Street](#).

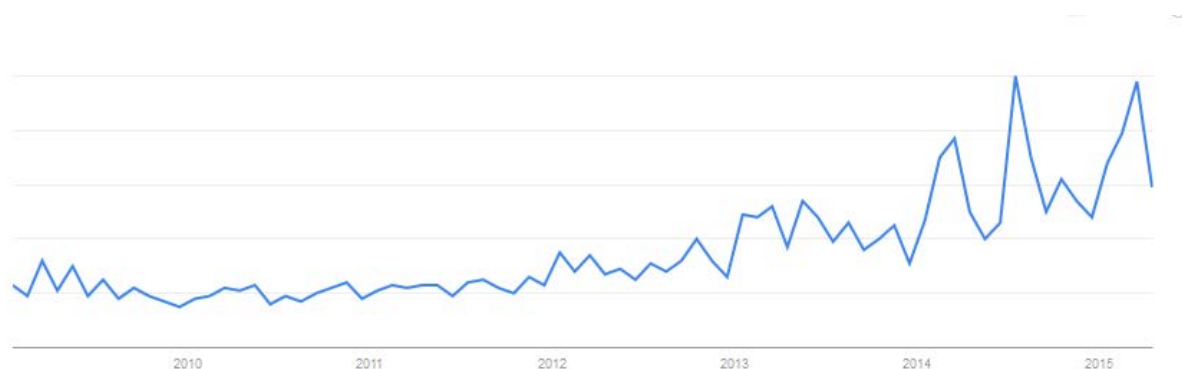


Figure 1: Graph displaying the relative search interest over time for the term 'crossrail' from January 2009 to April 2015 in the UK: <http://goo.gl/G6SLLz>. The graph is normalised relative to the highest peak for the term against all searches during this time, from 0–100

These case studies demonstrate the power of digital media in disseminating and engaging the public with mortuary archaeology, though very few mortuary projects have public digital engagement as planned parts of their development. This may reflect wider issues in analogue public archaeology, where 'heritage interpreters' are rarely embedded into fieldwork teams or the archaeological workflow, often becoming an afterthought when results must be disseminated to 'the public' in a passive fashion (Perry [2015](#)). Additionally, many other issues that arise in analogue public archaeology (such as audience diversity, collaboration with communities, and a lack of value afforded by professional

archaeologists) have followed through into our digital practices as well (Richardson [2014](#); Walker [2014](#)).

Even the University of Leicester's Richard III project and the MOLA Crossrail project have limitations in the specific attention to public engagement with mortuary archaeology. The projects have proven highly successful but were not in themselves geared to engaging the public with mortuary archaeology's broader parameters and approaches, current debates and ethics. Our aim is not to criticise these projects as such. Instead, we suggest potential categories and strategies for DPMA.

3. Blogs

Blogs represent an innovative and versatile medium for developing DPMA. In the world of archaeological blogging, there is plenty of effective and insightful reportage, and many blogs operate on a project- and discovery-orientated basis. However, there are others that draw the public into critical engagements with mortuary theory, method and its popular interpretation. The most prolific are dedicated to bioarchaeology, although others afford attention to other mortuary matters (Meyers and Killgrove [2014](#); Meyers Emery and Killgrove [2015](#)).

Examples include blogs by David Mennear ([These Bones of Mine](#)), Katy Meyers Emery ([Bones Don't Lie](#)) and Kristina Killgrove's ([Powered by Osteons](#)), as well as the blogs by the authors of this article, Alison Atkin ([Deathsplanation](#)) and Howard Williams ([Archaeodeath](#)). Other blogs touch on numerous and varied mortuary concerns alongside other topics; a good example of this is the blog of archaeologist and journalist Mike Pitts ([Digging Deeper](#)). Further, many blogs are not consciously archaeological at all and yet engage with a wide range of ancient and historic mortuary monuments (Caroline's [Flickering Lamps](#) and the collective [The Cemetery Club](#)).

Meyers Emery and Killgrove ([2015](#)) provide a review of the benefits of blogging not only as a means of outreach and public engagement but also for the author. They also suggest guidelines for best practice in blogging about archaeology and death. From our perspective, these blogs have considerable DPMA potential in aspiring to report on new studies *and* interpretations in mortuary archaeology. Blogs can also emphasise debates over interpretation and they place new mortuary research in a wider popular context. Often actively using images and sometimes videos, and composed in a variety of styles of popular writing, including humour in various guises, blogs allow readers to follow, add comments and explore mortuary archaeology online *beyond* discovery-focused news stories (Meyers and Williams [2014](#)). Furthermore, an explicit aim of these blogs is transdisciplinarity, connecting themes of death, disease and mortuary practices and commemoration with broader communities of those interested in a wide range of sciences, social sciences and the humanities online.

Blogging promises to become a mainstream conduit for open-access online research publication over the longer term in its own right (Meyers and Killgrove [2014](#), 24). Specific DPMA dimensions include engaging a wider audience in disciplinary self-critical issues and simplifying the most recent research from the latest scholarly publications for a popular audience (Meyers and Killgrove [2014](#); Meyers and Williams [2014](#); Meyers Emery and Killgrove [2015](#)), including popular perceptions of death in the human past and of mortuary archaeology in the public realm. This last element is exemplified by [Killgrove's ongoing critique of how mortuary remains are photographed and interpreted in the media](#).

Blogs can be rich, varied, visual and textual and can include project-focused websites. These can be promoted through a range of social media including Facebook and Twitter, making them available and accessible globally via the Internet. A good example is the use of social media to distribute information about archaeological excavations of cemeteries. In the UK, there are few public-

accessible excavations that involve human remains, though a notable exception is the Oakington Dig Project, which has adopted an overt strategy to open up the trenches to visitors and local volunteers. The discoveries, some hitting international headlines, as well as their methods and philosophy, are disseminated via social media, including a Facebook page and [blog](#) (Sayer and Sayer [forthcoming](#)).

4. Vlogs

The explicit use of vlogs (video-blogs) is noted by Meyers and Killgrove ([2014](#)) and Meyers Emery and Killgrove ([2015](#)) as rare but with considerable potential for development. They note how [Ask a Mortician](#) vlogs by Caitlin Doughty have gained widespread popularity in addressing a range of death-related issues, some with historical dimensions to them. With 40 videos over a three-year period, this vlog has acquired more than 45,000 subscribers and over 2.5 million views.

Similarly, Dr Lindsey Fitzharris, who blogs on [The Surgeon's Apprentice](#), has recently launched a vlog [Under the Knife](#). While this is largely focused on the history of medicine, it does cross over into DPMA (see Episode 6: Bodysnatchers vs Vampires) and in just over six months it has achieved nearly 6000 subscribers and more than 70,000 views.

The Brain Scoop vlog hosted by Emily Graslie from the Field Museum in Chicago provides 'behind the scenes' access to the museum's collections and is therefore for the most part focused on natural history subjects. However, the episode ['Mummy Brains'](#) crosses over into DPMA, with a discussion on mummification and funerary practices in Ancient Egypt and the role of modern investigative

methods. This video alone has had more than 50,000 views (while the entire vlog has over 250,000 subscribers and more than 10 million views).

The significant number of subscribers and video views for each of the examples above exceed the popularity of current public archaeology projects, mortuary or otherwise. They demonstrate that there is certainly a potential audience for more dedicated DMPA-focused vlogs. Furthermore, just as these vlogs cross over subject boundaries, DPMA vlogs also need to seek to connect with these audiences as much as those interested in stories of scientific discoveries about the distant human past.

Another example of vlogging with contrasting mortuary dimensions is [Project Eliseg](#) – a collaborative fieldwork project between Bangor and Chester universities. The fieldwork explored a prehistoric cairn later surmounted by a 9th-century AD stone cross, and subsequently subject to a long and complex afterlife of use, fragmentation, restoration and conservation (Edwards [2009](#); Williams [2011](#)). Outreach for the project took many forms and included a [project website](#), Twitter and Facebook. An additional and distinctive feature was the use of daily vlog posts on a dedicated YouTube channel during the 2011 and 2012 field seasons, although viewing figures are low compared with the vlogs mentioned above.

The aims of the Project Eliseg vlog were to extend the audience of a relatively inaccessible rural-based archaeology project, and to communicate the complex multi-phased archaeology. In other words, within the confines of a small-scale fieldwork project, the vlogs and other digital media of Project Eliseg attempted to move beyond reporting discoveries to debating wider theoretical and methodological issues, particularly the challenge of dealing with textual and cenotaphic, disturbed and fragmentary, mortuary contexts and remains (cf. Tong *et al.* [2015](#)).

5. Twitter

The use of the microblog Twitter by archaeologists has recently come under scrutiny by Richardson ([2014](#)) and Walker ([2014](#)) who identify its limitations and challenges in giving the impression of openness rather than engagement. Yet Atkin's use of Twitter during fieldwork at Poulton, Cheshire, in the summer of 2014 provides a mortuary case study of its potential. This was conducted using a personal Twitter account ([@alisonatkin](#)), but using a dedicated hashtag ([#PoultonProject](#)) for all tweets relating to the field season. The decision to utilise Twitter was a deliberate attempt to open up access to mortuary archaeology. For Poulton, the digital interaction allowed staff and students to engage with a larger audience, without limiting it to those able to travel to site in a rural location. Tweets not only detailed the processes involved in excavating archaeological human remains, but also gave a snap-shot of 'life' on site. Tweets enabled short and extremely regular reports on activities, occurring multiple times a day, often including photographs, and were accompanied by weekly summary blog posts via [the project website](#), which included more detail. These blog entries were then posted to the site's Facebook page and reblogged on Atkin's personal [Deathsplanation](#) blog in order to expand the potential audience for the site to include individuals not already interested in DPMA.

The only assessment of the effectiveness of this approach is anecdotal, but discussions with individuals both on-site and online suggest it achieved some of the goals to increase access. Volunteers appreciated staying up-to-date with the excavations while they were away from site. Students stated that it was useful in terms of knowing what to expect when arriving to participate in the field school. Members of the public and fellow archaeologists have mentioned that the tweets and blog posts provoked interest in either archaeological excavations in general

or the site more specifically. However, it is difficult to say whether there was an increase in interaction between archaeologists and the public or whether the engagement was unidirectional, with archaeologists 'informing' the public.

Poulton illustrates the potential of Twitter to report images and textual updates rapidly on actions and discoveries on site, but a case study on the issues regarding the ethics and sensitivities relating to sharing photographs of archaeological human remains via social media might be tackled. Before tweeting the first photo that included human remains, Atkin first consulted with osteo/archaeologist colleagues on their opinions over the 'appropriateness' of this action. None expressed any concerns and it was ultimately decided that photos which showed human remains being actively interacted with by the students (e.g. being excavated or recorded) would be suitable, as it was demonstrating mortuary archaeology in practice and not making a feature (or spectacle) of the human remains.

6. Critical Concerns With DPMA

So far, we might be taken as advocating a range of DPMA activities as an online panacea for communicating and engaging the wider public in mortuary archaeology's theories, methods and data. However, this needs balancing by identifying a series of interconnected criticisms regarding the current spectrum and emphases of digital engagements with mortuary archaeology. In this regard, we echo broader concerns regarding the uncritical use of the social web by archaeologists, recently reviewed by Perry and Beale ([2015](#)), as well as further specific dimensions related directly to mortuary archaeology.

6.1 The hegemony of cadavers and skeletons

Our first concern relates to the popular regard for corporeal mortuary archaeology: bodies and skeletons (e.g. Giles [2009](#)). Bioarchaeologists – particularly graduate students and early career scholars – have pioneered the development of digital engagement over other dimensions of mortuary archaeology (e.g. Meyers and Killgrove [2014](#)). Furthermore, public engagement with mortuary archaeology inevitably focuses on the more visually engaging and human-like traces of the dead in the human past. Hence fleshed cadavers and articulated skeletons take precedence over the widespread discovery of fragmented and disarticulated human remains, such as prehistoric cremation burials or medieval charnel deposits. Likewise, contexts where human remains are absent, including memorials, seem to receive far less attention than the detailed, even obsessive, attention afforded to the human corpse (see papers in Williams and Giles [forthcoming](#)).

Cadaver- and bone-focused DPMA affords little space to other aspects relating to death, including graffiti, memorials, transient monuments, cenotaphs and portable material cultures and artefacts. Yet these are among the many material dimensions of human experiences and responses to dying, death and the dead as important as human remains. In short, the use of DPMA could be encouraged to broaden and critically tackle the diversity of human remains and mortuary contexts encountered by archaeologists. In doing so, we can embrace a wider range of heritage sites and landscapes, and engage the public with their mortuary components – from prehistoric settlements to historic churchyards – as well as break away from a focus on human remains as the principal conduit of engagement with the archaeological dead.

6.2 Obsessions with mortuary 'celebrities' and 'freaks'

Even for cadavers and articulated skeletons, not all the dead are treated equally in the popular dissemination and consumption of mortuary archaeology. The focus on what might be called 'celebrity' and 'freak' corpses risk dominating DPMA. This is epitomised in the hunt for dead historical personages that, for the UK, is exemplified by the search for King Richard III (see [above](#)). The success of this project has seen a raft of other royal projects and proposals, including [the possible discovery of bones that once belonged to Alfred the Great, Henry I, King Stephen](#) and [Shakespeare](#). While past elites are an ubiquitous focus of archaeological narratives worldwide, it is important we counter attempts to write high-status histories and osteobiographies of individuals without paying attention to the wider communities in which they operated in life and death.

Further categories of human remains spark popular interest; for instance those perceived as transgressing social norms, as well as those disposed of as 'deviants', such as [the widely reported Eastern European vampire burials](#).

Assemblages of tombs, memorials and graves need to be envisioned and written about in innovative ways rather than focusing on isolated and exceptional graves. DPMA needs to ensure that past societies, their variability and changes through time, are not drowned in a sea of past celebrities and anecdotal oddities.

The converse situation is equally challenging, reducing all discoveries to examples of normative cultural practices relating to 'death in the Middle Ages' or death 'among the Romans'. In summary, DPMA needs to work harder to communicate its narratives about living and dying in the human past. It needs to strike a balance between the individual and the collective, between the exceptional and the commonplace. It might be justified to afford attention to striking and exceptional individual burials and sometimes to discuss entire

populations and communities. Yet the risks of taking each direction to extremes are clear. The former risks creating dead celebrity immortals outside of their contexts. The latter threatens to promote a misleading impression of cultural and social normativity over time and space in past mortuary practice in which individuality and variability is suppressed.

6.3 Valorising science and discovery

A further area of criticism is that digital engagements with mortuary archaeology currently tend to be discovery-orientated and science-focused. Despite the potential for debating ethical and socio-political aspects of mortuary archaeology, with the exception of some blogs discussed above, digital media is theory-light and empirical. This is not to denigrate innovative digital resources created for the scientific investigation of human remains and mortuary contexts. [Digitised Diseases](#) and apps such as [Dactyl](#), which create digital 3D objects/replicas of human remains, offer a striking and original use of digital media by osteologists. However, these are often not specifically designed to communicate 'mortuary archaeology' but rather provide a resource for those who study it, even though they can be accessed by anyone. One might also add that the focus here is upon bones, not the contexts in which they are discovered, so the popular audience is at least one step removed from mortuary interpretation. It remains the case that DPMA currently valorises discovery and scientific applications rather than wider multidisciplinary debates and contexts in which mortuary archaeology operates.

6.4 Museum and professional disengagement

A fundamental problem remaining with DPMA is professional and museological reticence. Ironically, the websites of museums seem far more reluctant to display the dead online. Given these institutions are the traditional public repositories for the human remains and associated material assemblages that

comprise the archaeological dead, this is a somewhat bizarre situation. Presumably this situation is in part the result of a retrenchment and re-evaluation of the role of the museum as a voice of authority and as custodians of the archaeological dead (Jenkins [2011](#)); many museums with online collections limit themselves to including mortuary objects, but not human remains. It might also relate to the fear of de-contextualising human remains (see below). This applies to major British museum collections, such as [those of Manchester Museum](#). Interestingly, while the online collection of Manchester Museum does not include human remains, there was an entire project by the associated University of Manchester (in partnership with the Natural History Museum) to do just that with the [Revisiting the Archaeological Survey of Nubia Project](#).

There is evidence that this is beginning to change, whether it is a review of museums' positions based on policies and guidelines or simply that the timeframes for such endeavours are now reaching a point where these accessioned objects are visible to the public online. The British Museum, for example, has recently begun including human remains in addition to other mortuary objects in their [online databases](#). However, as above, these projects too are primarily aimed at individuals conducting research on the collections rather than offering interpretations and engaging the non-specialist.

This problem is not restricted to museums but applies to other archaeological and heritage institutions. There seems to be a lack of DPMA by archaeologists, when compared with how much non-digital mortuary archaeology is fed into [the public arena](#). The blogs, social media and other digital resources are used by many to highlight public mortuary archaeology opportunities such as workshops or events, but more rarely are these same platforms used to engage digital audiences. Examples here include the on-going *Bones of Contention Project* by [MBArchaeology](#).

There are likely to be many reasons that institutions and individuals do not participate in DPMA engagement. In addition to issues related to time and money and the associated prioritisation of tasks, other issues common to all digital public archaeology may include (but are not limited to) perceived difficulty or lack of training in digital media skills, as well as a lack of visible or proven benefits (Richardson [2014](#)).

Among mortuary archaeologists and bioarchaeologists, there is also little formal discussion on the practice. As far as we are aware, the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists, the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology, the American Association of Physical Anthropologists and other leading UK and US organisations have no position statements on the digital dead, despite these organisations having ethical guidelines for the excavation, handling, and storage of human remains. Similarly, guidelines and protocols for the display of human remains in museums have yet to be updated for digital displays. Where formal discussion is lacking, there are examples of individuals adapting these guidelines for use in digital media (see Dactyl app, above).

In addition to the lack of guidance from professional organisations, archaeologists working under Ministry of Justice licenses frequently encounter a strange double standard with regard to the archaeological dead. Although licenses recommend that human remains under excavation are screened from public view, thus limiting digital and non-digital public mortuary archaeology, the proliferation of digital media, photographs and videos of the same individuals often end up in the public eye.

In all of the instances above, there is often mention of 'respect and dignity for the dead', but what this actually entails – either physically or digitally – is a matter of opinion. Legal and ethical concerns, as well as a fear of appearing

'morbidly curious', surely restrict governmental and institutional initiatives in DPMA. Likewise, there are real concerns over the potential misinterpretation and misuse of research and interpretations. Together it is likely they create a powerful force of inertia against using the social web for mortuary archaeology, especially for generations of researchers less confident in the use of the Internet for archaeological purposes. Exploring the motives for this is clearly a priority for future research. Therefore, DPMA seems to remain an academic and individual public activity, but one in which major archaeological and heritage organisations have little active involvement at present.

6.5 The curse of context

DPMA brings with it a new concern over the ethics of mortuary archaeology; we are no longer confining our debates to specific locales, but exposing the dead through the medium of the digital world for all to see, including people from a wide range of cultural and religious backgrounds, different ages and gender orientations. A simple Internet search will face you with thousands of images of contextless human remains, memorials and tombs from across the world and from throughout time. There are numerous narratives, not all factually accurate, filling the web relating to these images. Moreover, the very possibility of searches for images and key words fosters a dislocation of the dead from their contexts of discussion, an empowering but also potentially threatening dimension for archaeologists to communicate the dead in context. Freedom from context, linear narratives and restricting hierarchies of data can be attractive, and this unstructured and context-free distribution embraces calls for greater ceding of archaeological authority and the promise of multi-vocality in archaeological research (Richardson [2013](#); [2014](#)).

However, this situation can undermine attempts to afford historical and cultural context, respect and sensitivity to past people and contemporary stakeholders.

Moreover, the dislocation of mortuary remains from context threatens the ability of DPMA to choreograph powerful, potentially disturbing and emotive engagements with human mortality in a sensitive manner. The promise of more public participation and ownership of authority (see Richardson [2013](#), 5) may not be a necessary and constructive dimension in dealing with sensitive issues of human mortality.

6.6 Public participation

A major problem with digital archaeology generally, which certainly applies to DPMA at present, is that it remains the work of students, scholars and some professionals hoping to engage 'the public', but with little specific and clear direction and participation by the public themselves (see also Richardson [2013](#), 6–8). There are models that might be readily developed here. For example, there are websites that are set up by enthusiasts of particular dimensions of mortuary archaeology dedicated to support and disseminate interest in particular kinds of mortuary remains that might be enhanced. For example, the [Megalithic Portal](#) (see Richardson [2014](#)) and the [Modern Antiquarian](#) allow users to augment pages for archaeological sites with comments and images. While less open, the websites of societies can incorporate a range of detailed information about mortuary monuments. For example, the 'county guide' of [the Church Monuments Society](#) includes a wide range of churches and their memorials, described and interpreted by experts in their study and available open access.

To take another example, Victorian cemeteries provide a focus of complex mortuary heritage, and they are simultaneously listed as [Parks and Gardens in England](#). Yet many of them have detailed websites including histories of the cemeteries and the memorials, as with London's Kensal Green and [Highgate](#). Some have online records of memorials and burial registers, creating a versatile resource for those studying death, burial and commemoration, including family

and local historians as well as historians and archaeologists. For example, Chester's Victorian Overleigh cemetery has an online database provided by [Cheshire Archives and Local Studies](#), as well as details of notable graves available on a virtual tour by [local author and guide Steve Howe](#). The [2014 York 'Heritage Jam'](#) provides innovative examples of how digital technology might be utilised to explore these complex communities of the dead, giving attention to the living people behind the memorials, as well as new experiences of the commemorative environment itself. Therefore, DPMA initiatives have yet to become fully engaged with the range and character of mortuary archaeology projects and interpretations.

7. Conclusion

Sayer and Walter ([forthcoming](#)) rightly highlight the value of digital media for exploring public perceptions of archaeological activities. Yet the scope, standards, strategies and ethics of using digital media by archaeologists and heritage professionals require further investigation and critical reflection, *especially* for mortuary remains and contexts. DPMA has considerable potential for fostering the creation of new, virtual communities among the dead and about death, which can be situated in relation to tangible heritage sites and museums *and* the widespread intangibility of most mortuary sites in the contemporary landscape. This can be achieved by focusing not only on dead individuals and their osteobiographies, but also on wider corporeal and material communities revealed by assemblages of bones, graves, memorials, monuments and other spaces and material cultures. In so doing, DPMA can cultivate debate and engagement with human mortality using archaeological traces of mourning, mortality and commemoration in a variety of innovative fashions, giving mortuary contexts and remains a new lease of life as the 'virtual dead'. Likewise,

DPMA activities such as blogging and the use of social media have the potential to engage new audiences (in terms of ethnicity, age, gender and religious faiths) beyond those already engaged in archaeological research and discoveries, including many whose interests relate to the funerary industry, mourning, commemoration and death rather than the past *per se*.

At one level, all digital engagements with mortuary remains constitute a dimension of DPMA, and yet only certain digital media have attempted to engage the public directly in the theories, methods and data of mortuary archaeology. A focus on human remains predominates. Fewer archaeologists still have established themselves as vocal and critical public intellectuals via digital media to act and react to set and transform agendas in the study of mortuary archaeology (see Giles and Williams [forthcoming](#)). Even fewer again have allowed digital media to become a mechanism by which the public themselves can participate in, and direct the acquisition, analysis and interpretation of mortuary data. The institutional and professional, particularly museological, reticence towards using DPMA needs to be particularly overcome by recognising that legal and ethical concerns should not create an oppressive online silence regarding the archaeological dead. Challenging both the fetishising of celebrity and freak cadavers, and writing bland normative narratives about death and burial in past epochs, DPMA requires critical appraisal and experimentations in linking analogue and digital death.

It is clear that DPMA, working in tandem with traditional analogue means, has considerable untapped potential for fundamentally shifting the parameters of mortuary archaeology itself, and its public engagements. The digital world offers new ways of exploring the human past and considering mortality in the present and future in relation to the archaeological dead. By creating and fostering new communities about (or for) the dead online, alongside new and fluid

communities of the living, the future of mortuary archaeology is inextricably linked to the virtual dead.

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