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## **Neither Practically Dead nor Exactly Alive: The Confusing State of Virtual Death**

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*Abstract: The meaning of cyber death might be confusing. Some social media users try to make sense of it through metaphors derived from comparable real-world events.*

*Keywords: alive, artificial-intelligence, cyberspace, dead, grieving, interaction, metaphor, robots*

Many years ago, a friend of mine invited me to a small group in a popular messaging app. This small circle shared and discussed pieces of literary value, either their own writings or passages they came across in their studies. One morning, a group member named Ali, the resident of a far-off city in southeastern Iran, wrote something about the strangeness of death, explaining the ebbs and flows of its violence as it approaches us. His piece ignited a short exchange between me and him on the immediacy of death, the surprise visit it pays to some of us, and if it's a good thing to know its estimated time of arrival.

Later that day, my friend, who had noticed the interaction, privately told me that Ali had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and his days were numbered. She also told me that we wouldn't speak directly of the fact in the group. Ali and I managed to keep the appearances of normal conversation in the group and our private exchanges, though it was anything but normal to me. Less than two months later, Ali passed away. Group members pooled their resources together to send a bouquet with a note of condolence to his funeral. That was it, or so I thought. The experience of losing an online friend was a disturbingly unprecedented one for me, the first of many to come. In every later instance, I've been reminded of Ali, and how difficult a time I had in making sense of his death.

That kind of experience, getting to know and becoming

close to someone on a purely online basis, only to have to deal with their actual or presumed death, has become more universal due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its universality, however, doesn't diminish its strangeness: Their deaths don't strike us quite like the death of an individual we know personally, partly because the virtual personhood we perceive of our fellow social media users is different from the personhood of people we know in person. Almost 10 years ago, when I had the opportunity to take a closer look at it, I interviewed 28 Iranian social media users who were more or less shocked by the death reports of their purely virtual friends. Despite their varying interpretations of such events, I noticed several common patterns in their dealings with them. Most importantly, it seemed that the unique characteristics of virtual personhood opened a space for reflective negotiation which, more often than not, led to justified denials, doubts, and confusions. To resolve such issues, they commonly resorted to metaphors derived from real-world experiences to make sense of the death of a virtual friend, recognizing what happened to them.

In ordinary circumstances, death means that the deceased ceases to be physically present in our spaces of daily life, even though traces of their past presence might be readily available in our surroundings. In other words, death makes us lose something concrete. Moreover, the act of removing the body from our daily life space, the burial, is an essential element of the grieving process to achieve some sense of closure, without which relatives can hardly begin to mourn the loss.

In cyberspace, however, the actual or presumed death of a user doesn't literally remove the deceased as we knew them from the space: the burial, to which we have grown accustomed, is non-existent in today's social media platforms—even though technical options are being developed for users to formulate a protocol for after-death events on their social media profiles. Examples could be deleting the profile upon the requests of certain friends or after a predefined period of inactivity. Another option is posting an obituary that may or may not further complicate the current situation, losing the possibility of further interaction due to the death of a virtual friend.

A vast majority of the subjects I interviewed said that their first action upon learning about the death of their online friend was to check the deceased's profile. For many of them, it was then and there that an irritating question posed itself; namely, what the virtu-

al profile of the deceased represented: the deceased themselves or their past effects in a life space?

Upon initiation into cyberspace, we may perceive it as a life space in which we can leave our mark: We introduce ourselves, share our thoughts and feelings, and recognize others' presence by liking what they have to say, commenting on their items, or redistributing their posts. But the medium, by its very definition, regulates our efforts at representing ourselves. Even worse, we occasionally become its partner in "crime" as we, despite our honest intentions, inevitably edit out certain parts of our lives and augment others. That's why, as sincerely as we might have started the journey, we may gradually come to practice creating our virtual selves in our favorite self-image, even if we only subconsciously favor that image, which ultimately finds a life of its own as we continue to occasionally add bits and pieces to this art form that is in the making. To the eyes of the beholder, who is only connected to us through that medium, we are the image we have created. That's why, in a certain, justified sense, the traces of our past presence are what define our personhood, or who we are, on social media.

Our virtual personhood (or character) is certainly somehow related to our actual selves, but it doesn't cease to exist even if we stop contributing to that image, whether due to, say, our leaving the medium for personal reasons, the medium being blocked by the government overnight (which is a common case in Iran), or our dying. All sorts of failures to further advance that image, including our death, seem alike to a fellow cyber user.

That's what complicates the reaction of social media users to the sudden disappearance of the driving force behind a virtual profile: There is much-justified room for denial. Maybe they forgot their password, had a family emergency, took a cyber-detoxification course in solitude, or, in more insidious cases, faked their death—which, unfortunately, is not without precedent.

Even if people believe that the above-mentioned disappearance is due to the user's actual or presumed death, they can't as easily ignore its outward similarity to the outcomes of many other causes, a similarity which may (and often does) give rise to higher levels of confusion, if not denial. In that light, according to one of my subjects, a virtual impression of the death of a user feels "as if their body is still here; it has just stopped moving." The user dies but his/her virtual personhood maintains its still life.

Others may still interact with the deceased user. According to a subject in my study:

I can mention him in a post. I can send him a private message. The only difference is that he doesn't answer. And sometimes this does not feel that different from the time he was among us. You know, he rarely answered me immediately. Sometimes it took him 24 hours to respond to my messages. So, if I send him a message, I know I should wait for at least 24 hours. And sometimes I send him a message, and find myself actually waiting for a response.

In that sense, the deceased are perceived as just managing to keep their fellow cyber users waiting forever for a response. In doing so, they might be described as arrogant, inattentive, or idiosyncratic. But dead? Not so sure.

This situation especially applied to another subject who didn't know her "unresponsive" cyber-friend had actually died. She kept sending her messages, all to no avail, which made her mad, calling him "really bad things." After a week or so, she learned about his death. "Why call him dead when I can still call him all those bad things or worse," she argued, adding that "I prefer to think of him as being impolitely alive than politely dead. The choice is inalienably mine."

The idea of unresponsiveness resonated in other ways for my subjects. One subject used "vegetative state of life" to compare the virtual impression of the death of a user to the current condition of his hospitalized grandfather. Another compared his deceased cyber friend to his father, who was captured as a prisoner-of-war by the enemy and whose fate was unknown to his family for a couple of years until he was finally released. In a related use of war as a frame of reference, a subject compared her deceased cyber friends to soldiers who went missing-in-action on the battlefield. Some later returned to their families, some were ultimately confirmed dead, and others' fates remained unknown. In a more theologically informed interpretation, one subject referred to Islamic teachings about martyrs to describe how he felt about a deceased user:

*Quran* 3:169 tells us that a martyr is not really gone, rather alive and present in a way that we can't comprehend. Here, in social media, he was working for the good of people and had godly intentions in mind. I find his death somehow resembling martyrdom.

In all such real-life cases, which are used as metaphors to make sense of virtual death, the person is indisposed in one way or another. But dead? Not so sure, again. Other metaphors such as “spirit,” “ghost,” and “not-known-to-us presence” were also used by subjects to describe the uncanny presence of deceased users in social media.

The line between dead and alive was even more blurred for one subject whose deceased friend, before his untimely death in a traffic accident, had buffered several tweets to be published later—a case which had interesting historical parallels in the old world, like that political refugee of the Second World War whose mother promised to send him frequent letters and, as she approached her death, entrusted several pre-written letters to a reliable friend to be dispatched to her son in a timely manner. “For almost 48 hours, I kept seeing his tweets in the stream and commenting on them without knowing that he had actually died,” the subject recalled. That specific user’s post-mortem tweeting stopped in 48 hours, but what if his tweets had kept coming forever?

That’s not a stretch since artificial intelligence-based bots can now mine your written words and produce texts that feel like they are actually from you. How would it feel, then, if someone with a deeply disturbing sense of irony deploys one such bot in their social media account, especially someone whose real identity is unknown to other users—due to, for example, using a pen name, which is a common practice among Iranian social media users for safety and security concerns? They could be construed as alive for all practical intents and purposes, enjoying an eternal cyber life because, in the words of one witty subject in my study, “the aliveness is in the eyes of the uninformed beholder.”

In making that statement, the subject was actually talking about recognizing lifelike sociable robots in a distance. That, however, is not a far-fetched metaphor either. After all, the new communication technologies have been turning us all into lifelike sociable robots interacting with each other from an allegedly safe distance.

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