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404 NOT FOUND: THE INTERNET AND THE AFTERLIFE

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> Skin has become inadequate in interfacing with reality. Technology has become the body's new membrane of existence.
>
> — *Nam June Paik*

> There is no rewind button on the BETAMAX of life.
>
> — *Nam June Paik*

> Sony Corp.'s Betamax video tape recorder . . . ,will finally be laid to rest after digital formats delivered a death blow to its prospects.
>
> — *Reuters News Service*

The media and the dead have been linked in our collective consciousness for decades, as Jeffrey Sconce has noted in his estimable history of electronic communication, *Haunted Media* (2000). Their linkage, as he states, has been in part technological: "Fantastic accounts of media presence . . . emphasized powers of the technology itself and suggested that its rational applications would eventually lead to crossing ever more incredible boundaries of time and space" (pp. 10-11), including, some have thought, crossing the boundaries between life and death. This type of connection, though, has been with us for only about the last 150 years, as Sconce shows, dating from the discovery of electricity and gaining momentum with the advent of electronic communication.

It has been for a much longer period that we have associated the media with the dead, in part because media are both means of communication and of memory, of remembrance. In oral cultures, news of death traveled by word of mouth: The dead, their words and deeds, were sometimes preserved in visual forms (cave paintings, drawings) but more often were memorialized (memory-alized) verbally in poetry and song.

While these memorials traveled relatively well with poets and singers, accuracy was variable. The advent of the written word and of printing improved accuracy but brought other changes. Print cultures depersonalized death, if only because it no longer had to be delivered by a human. News of it could come not only from any quarter but the messenger no longer had to be a person and could instead be an obituary in a newspaper or a death notice posted in a public place. The dead were in a sense setting down their memorials before death by fixing to a medium words they wrote in letters, journals, or books, and in late print culture in the photographs taken of them. And in practice, accuracy improved only insofar as editors, printers, or translators allowed the words to stand. Wholesale revision to a deceased's biography was just as possible in print as it was in speech.

The dead were also memorialized in early print culture by manner of inscription in stone, on grave markers—the medium traveled poorly but persists to this day due to its durability. Later print culture finds many attempting to achieve immortality by setting their thoughts down in writing, an activity that has been with us so long that it has become a cliché. Authors of writer's guides routinely begin their advice to prospective authors by noting that wanting to achieve immortality is a valid reason for wanting to write a book.

Publication in this sense trades the permanence of the gravestone for the dispersion of mass produced copies of a text. One is reminded of the divergent evolutionary paths of living things, some of which rely on dispersing their seed far and wide knowing that some few will survive, and some of which focus their efforts on rearing one or a few offspring to ensure survival. One might say that with the development of the media of mass communication, memorialization came to hinge more on industrialization and circulation and less on repetition. In some sense mediation, inasmuch as it transports messages through space and over time, took on some of the burden of memorialization—of memorizing, of perpetuating thought and memory—that humans once bore.

In an electronic culture like that of today, the media of communication continue to play a role in how we understand death, how we hear about it, cope with it, and how we remember the dead, and it is no surprise that new media like the Internet and other digital means of communication become part of our culture's rituals of death and dying. Some of those intersections seem to virtually provide for life after death: Digital media, as we learn from movies like "Forrest Gump" (and from numerous TV ads), are eminently manipulable—the dead can dance, provided we have their pixels.

The dead are memorialized today, however, much as they have been in print cultures, as the insightful essays in this issue of *Omega* show us. The reason we find little revolutionary change in the practices and rituals of grieving and remembering is not that there is nothing new or unique about the Internet and computer-mediated communication that print media cannot provide. Indeed, the contributors to this issue show us the many unique ways the Internet is used for grieving, informing, and memorializing. What is most interesting is that the rituals

we find on the Web are ones that could be done in print media, but they are not. Not only are print media generally more expensive for individuals than are means of online publishing, but print media follow proscribed formats, have stringent restrictions on length, and allow little graphic embellishment.

One can find much evidence of memorials on the Web, not the least of which, in addition to that examined by authors in this issue, is connected to the tragic events of 9/11 (Jones & Rainie, 2003; Rainie, Fox & Madden, 2002; Rainie & Kalsnes, 2001). Religion online is gaining in importance, too—seeking religious information online is quite common and online support groups are offering many ways of grieving and sharing thoughts (Larsen, 2001). There are even occasional stories about e-mail that arrives after its sender's death, as well as services like www.finalthoughts.com that exist to provide e-mail based testaments. From FinalThoughts.com's site:

> Through our revolutionary, e-mail service, FinalThoughts.com allows you to share your final wishes and personal feelings with your loved ones, after you have passed away. Our unique e-mail service puts YOU in control and assures that your personal objectives are communicated to your family and friends when the time is right.
>
> As a FinalThoughts.com member, you will have the ability to attach to your e-mail messages, at no additional charge, several online forms that can be completed and stored securely and confidentially with FinalThoughts.com until the right time. These forms, such as the Personal Property Allocator™, Pet Lover's Organizer™, and Final Arrangements Planner™ , assist you in thinking about important issues such as: how you want your personal property distributed, who will care for your pet, what type of funeral arrangements you want, etc., and enables you to share these decisions with your loved ones.

Some few claim further that cyberspace is considered "heavenly space" and that there are those who wish to become "cyber immortals" by leaving (at least traces of) their being online (Brasher, 2001; Wertheim, 1999).

But, despite the existence of these phenomena, there seems little advance, in terms of media history, in the links between media and the afterlife. We are not better able to save Web sites than handwritten letters and photographs, and indeed to some extent Web sites prove more difficult to save and to retrieve. In some ways we have not put the Internet any differently in service of remembrance, of grieving, than we had old media, although new media scale more easily. Getting support and attention by the bereaved, for example, is a common thing online, as is the construction of memorials. More people participate in these activities and use more varied means to do so than were able to participate using old media. It is therefore not so much that new media have nothing new to offer us (I am reminded of the numerous e-mail and voicemail messages left by those who died on 9/11 that are treasured by those who survive them, messages that only these new media would have been able to transmit and preserve). More likely is

that we are not very much in need of new means per se of remembering when it comes to the dead.

That is probably a good thing. Technology, too, dies, and no medium is immortal. Photographs fade, paper crumbles, tapes are erased, disks become unreadable. It is not that media die per se. (Perhaps in some sense they do, insofar as we cease to use them—e.g., 8-track tapes—and yet I know collectors who keep that torch lit.) It is technology that dies. Content can be "ported" (to borrow the term from computer science that means moving a program written for one type of computer to another) to new media (although the decision to port it is often based on a multitude of decisions, ones largely involving the marketplace and economics and, importantly, the belief in *progress,* that each new medium will be somehow better than the old). For example, when I moved in 1997, I took an entire shoebox full of floppy disks and copied them to a single CD-R. More recently I used a scanner to transfer 35mm slides, some 50 years old, to a computer, for presentation in electronic form. These are not difficult things to do. But they do not confer immortality. If anything, they require caretakers. (I am reminded of priests who are to tend to the pharaohs who rest in their pyramid.) The reel-to-reel master tapes that contained music I made in the 1980s were improperly manufactured by 3M (the adhesive that kept the iron oxide attached to the tape's backing disintegrated over time) as I discovered when I tried to copy them to a digital format some years ago. The first tape that I transferred quite literally shed its iron oxide particles, the very means of audio storage, onto the tape deck. The rest required that I bake them in an oven at a precise temperature for a specific period of time, then immediately play them back to make the transfer to a digital recording. The hundreds of slides I scanned required finding an easy to use image display software application and creation of an indexing system. And which technology will survive time longest, the slide carousel or the CD drive, computer, software, and operating system needed to now view my slides?

Nevertheless, it is entirely surprising that the consequences of new media that Sconce (2000) describes have not followed us into the realm of the Internet. He notes that we do tell stories about the Internet's power (pp. 3-4), but these stories are of media addiction rather than of the ability to "cross over." Why do we not tell more stories of this sort about the Internet or the Web? Are we so savvy about technology that we do not admit the possibilities that once so fired the popular imagination? Is it more difficult for us to believe that spirits may be able to exist in the glaringly technical realm of the Internet? One possibility is that the rapidly changing media landscape makes it easier to preserve our words and images, but perhaps renders them less valuable, as if their very presence causes us to find them less special. And though it may seem easy to preserve digital images, is the Web as permanent as many seem to believe? Large portions of it disappear and are not archived.

One might argue that the degree to which a medium is considered immortal can be discerned from the power of wonder conferred upon it by the public early in its development. Reading Sconce's *Haunted Media* (2000) or for that matter Carolyn Marvin's *When Old Technologies Were New* (1988) one can imagine an age in which new technology seemed entirely magical, perhaps even capable of communicating with the dead or even staving off death itself. Sconce gives numerous examples of fiction, films, newspaper accounts, that show the American public's ready belief in such possibilities. Since World War II, however, and the use of the atomic bomb, the marvel technology can create has been more strongly than ever counterbalanced by the horror it can also bring.

Our post-war sensibilities are shaped by that balance. We do not believe in being able to send e-mail or instant messages into the ether(net) in hopes of contacting the dead. Even in the realm of not-so-new media like the cell phone we do not find people claiming to have spoken with the dead—instead we are warned of the possibility of our own death while driving and talking on the phone, or when using the phone while filling our car with gas. But the technologies that bring us together via mediation are also ones recording our interactions, and we are coming increasingly to save those interactions, externalizing our memory and interactions with others, living or dead. Like the protagonist of "Minority Report" who relives a conversation with his deceased son, or like the families of victims of the 9/11 attacks who have recordings of last e-mails and phone conversations, we have at least increased the number of ways we have to maintain presence. As we move into newer media and experience still newer media technologies such as immersive virtual reality, we will no doubt increase the quantity of the means of presence, but our desire to remember and be remembered, and our need to grieve, have not, and will not, change.

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