Death now knocks in an increasingly digital age. When the time is nigh, whether from natural causes at a ripe age, or from accidents or illness when young, the word goes out through a range of technologies and then various communities gather offline and online. Digital ethnography in this “death” sphere has been growing in form and possibility over the past two decades as various platforms are designed and become occupied with the desires of the living and dying. Online funerals and commemorative activities are now often arranged alongside the perhaps more somber rites of burial or cremation (Boellstorff 2008, 128). Services such as LivesOn promise that we shall be able to ‘tweet’ beyond the grave; members of online communities encounter each other on commemorative online sites where they grieve for a shared friend but never meet each other ‘in person’; and it is predicted that soon there will be more Facebook profiles of the dead than of the living.

This phenomenon creates a myriad of new converging ideas, behaviors and capacities that raise many evocative questions in and around digital ethnography: What does it mean to die when we continue to be present and enlivened through such media? What responsibilities and rights do those left behind have to their loved ones’ posts, tweets, profiles, and avatars? How can we trace the relationships that gather
around the sphere of death when family ties, media platforms and online communications are so thoroughly entangled?

Just as the Internet is thoroughly implicated in changing customs and rituals of socializing in the developed and developing world, it is now clearly entwined with changing customs and rituals of death, memory and commemoration. Following the emergence of online memorials or so-called ‘virtual cemeteries’ in the 1990s, practices of online memorialization have diversified in form, spread across multiple platforms and become popularized, particularly through the re-purposing of social media profiles. Alongside these developments, scholars from a range of disciplines have become increasingly interested in the digital mediation of death, dying, and memorialization. Research has examined issues such as digital legacy management, how grief and social support take shape in online networks, and how the dead persist and continue to participate as social actors through the platforms and protocols of social networking sites.

Emerging from this corpus of research, this chapter provides an overview of digital ethnographic approaches to online commemoration, questions raised by the remediation of social practices, and possible future directions for research in this field. It draws on the case of Zyzz, an amateur body builder and online celebrity whose death in 2011 provoked a great deal of contested memorialization across Facebook, YouTube, and more targeted websites. It shows the ways that memorialization online can be a fragmented, controversial and complicated practice, and points to challenges that this practice poses for digital ethnographic research.

Within digital ethnography, scholars interested in death have researched topics including the memorialization of celebrities online (Garde-Hansen 2011), the use of mobile media applications such as Instagram to share photos from funerals (Gibbs et
al. 2015), and commemorative participation and memorialization in virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft* (Boellstorff 2008: 128; Gibbs et al. 2012). As increasing numbers of people with social media profiles die, the profiles that they leave behind and the way that their loved ones engage with them challenge researchers to account for changes in practices of commemoration, caring and communication.

Early research into online commemoration investigated the “digital cemeteries” of the World Wide Web. In the same way as cemeteries are spaces delineated from everyday life, early online memorials were standalone pages: dedicated to an individual, and unconnected to other pages around the Web. Knowledge of coding, a source of data hosting as well as uncertainty around etiquette were substantial barriers to online memorials in this period, making them uncommon and often unwieldy sites. Research describing and analyzing Web 1.0 digital cemeteries generally focused on these digital environments as entirely separate from, rather than embedded within, the physical world (Roberts and Vidal 2000).

As social media platforms such as MySpace and Facebook (‘Web 2.0’) have evolved in increasingly interconnected and interoperable ways, so too has digital commemoration and memorialization become threaded across multiple platforms and increasingly connected to ongoing social experiences in the physical world. Death Studies researchers with an interest in the ways digital technologies are effecting and affecting grieving, memorialization and commemoration have explored the layering of online commemoration within and alongside physical spaces (Hutchings 2012).

Commercial developers and design researchers have also experimented with the digital augmentation of physical artifacts of commemoration (such as gravestones, coffins, and urns). Many projects seek to bring people who encounter these objects online, so that they may interact with the dead in different ways. These continue a
lineage that has inserted photo frames and television screens in headstones, but they also change the nature of the relationship of mourners to the object of commemoration. QeepR, for example, marks gravestones with a QR code to allow visitors to a physical grave to access an online social network centered on the deceased person. In this way, traditionally isolated and demarcated spaces and objects are enabled to communicate, to connect and to converge with other forms of technology.

**Persistence and personhood through social media.**

One of the main threads of this research has been concerned with how the dead continue to persist and participate within the platforms and protocols of social media (Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Karppi 2013; Marwick and Ellison 2012; Stokes 2012). This includes the now all-too-familiar automated prompts on Facebook to get back in touch with deceased friends, questions around inheritance of media libraries through iTunes, Kindle or Steam, and orphaned profiles that are difficult for executors to identify, access and shut down (Carroll and Romano 2011; Gibbs et al. 2013).

These pragmatic questions are also connected to more abstract ideas about identity and personhood: the ways in which our selves are constituted through a variety of technological prostheses, through our relationships with other people, and through our posts to social media platforms. After death, the digital selves that survive us are assembled by many different authors, and distributed across many different servers and services. In particular, the polyvocal possibilities of online memorials have been seen in controversies around trolling and vandalism (Kohn et al. 2012; Phillips 2011), demonstrating the way in which etiquette around online memorials remains fluid. More generally, the persistent and scalable properties of social media
memorials raise questions about post-mortem identity curation, authorship and authenticity (Marwick and Ellison 2012). An additional concern is the durability or desirability of memorials tied to particular social media platforms; hosting memorials on a particular platform may unwittingly ‘lock out’ friends and family who are not members, or who quit the network (Fordyce and van Ryn 2014, 47-50). New technologies also affect experiences of mourning, and the ways in which social support may takes shape in online networks (Moss 2004; Veale 2004; Williams and Merten 2009).

Ethnographers who examine these many issues see, on the one hand, how the designs of new memorializing technologies in and of themselves readily reveal some of the ways people imagine, and then open up a path to, open-ended futures for themselves (Ingold 2012, 27). On the other hand, they also understand that the digital ethnography of death and commemoration is not isolatable from the non-digital. Digital ethnography is not a bounded method or technique but is a process that is inseparable from the materialities of life (Pink et al. 2015) and, we would add, death. A person may visit and interact with an online memorial site for a loved one over many years, but this does not mean she will not also physically tend to the body of the deceased and its final resting place and the material belongings and meaningful memorabilia left behind.

Another may express feelings of loss on a Facebook site that may not match the way they express that loss face-to-face. When Tom Boellstorff describes attending a funeral in SecondLife, he notes its resemblance to an “offline” funeral in the way the service is arranged, in the way attendees dress, and in the way they address each other (2008). Though many of the mourners did not know each other in a more traditional face-to-face way, nevertheless they came together to celebrate their friend.
Gatherings like the one Boellstorff describes are only really possible because of digital media, and need to be understood in terms of the way they interweave communities, technologies and rituals. Where the digital and material either seamlessly converge or rub up against one another is a fascinating and important site for research. Working with people who are planning for their own death or with the grieving families or publics left behind, as well as with people in death and technology industries who are working to meet people’s needs and desires, brings many methodological challenges. In the next section we consider some of these.

**How to study the dead online**

Studying online memorialization raises challenges for researchers (Bollmer 2013; Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Graham et al. 2015). These include (among many others) defining the field of enquiry, accessing informants or social media content, and conceptually grasping the large bodies of data regularly posted in public online. There are a number of entry points into any chosen field: through those who participate in digital commemoration practices via Facebook or purpose-built websites; through industry professionals; and through exploration of the platforms themselves.

For our current research project in this field, we began with a series of informal conversations (for example during participant observation at large industry events such as International Expos in the US, UK and Australia for people working in or providing for the funeral industry). These were then followed by semi-structured interviews with those working with new technologies in the funeral industry: funeral directors, funeral home owners, funeral celebrants, cemetery and crematorium workers, technology entrepreneurs and innovators, and activists wishing to subvert “death denial” in groups such as “Death Salon”. The interviews, mostly conducted “face to face” on Skype, sought to understand the changes in the professional and
industrial field, the values that professionals brought to bear in their dealings with technologies and memorialization, and the visions of the future that these entail.

A difficulty in conducting ethnographic enquiry in this space is that many of the actors involved are interested primarily in their own enterprise, and commercial interests may prevent conversation evolving beyond the sales pitch. Research informed by those with a self-interest, in this case in the virtues of a product or service, is perhaps more overt and sharply defined where one’s informants are drawn from industry sources, but in a broader sense the phenomenon is generic to all ethnographic work and all research work. All participants in research occupy a position from which they speak—a position in time, in space, and in relation to all others in the field at that time and in that space—and that position is of necessity partial. As Haraway observed (1988), there is no “God-trick”, no “God’s eye view” which sees a world complete as it is in itself, or sees a world that is not shaped by perspective or interest. All knowledge is situated, and in the sense that our industry informants were clear and plain in their interests in respect of memorial technologies and services, and thus overt in their partiality and perspective, our fieldwork was made easier.

Users of digital commemoration services provide another avenue to understanding what is at stake in online forms of memorialization and post-mortem sociality. A common methodological approach in this area has been data collection and analysis of public statements (such as posts on social media, and comments on websites), which we have similarly undertaken, though we have also begun interviewing people to explore in a different way how individuals reflect upon their experiences with digital commemoration, their motivations in using online memorials, and the ways that they maintain relationships with the deceased and the broader
community. Identifying and contacting the bereaved poses ethical questions about the risks of research participation, as well as disciplinary debates about how purposive such contact should be.

A more materially-oriented approach to ethnography, what Star (1999) refers to as an ethnography of infrastructure, approaches this space by attending to the intermediary role and affordances of the technological platforms for commemoration, whether these are purpose-built (in the case of HeavenAddress) or adapted from more mainstream uses (Facebook, Instagram). Spending time analyzing the ways people engage with the #funeral hashtag on Instagram offered a way of understanding the “platform vernacular”—how users work to make themselves present in discussions around death online (Gibbs et al. 2015). There is an abundance of material constantly being added to online commemorative spaces, which can be accessed and studied fairly unobtrusively. Such a method minimizes the disturbance to the bereaved, but can miss a sense of the way in which they make judgments about how and why to participate online. New media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram are also particularly available to the quantitative tools of “big data” approaches. Gathering large volumes of posts on a particular topic can aid researchers in isolating themes and assessing the expressed mood of various communities, even if they risk limiting their immersion in the material to a brief dip.

In the rest of the chapter, we illustrate the points made above by presenting an analysis of the social media commemoration of Zyzz, an amateur bodybuilder and minor celebrity whose sudden death was felt (and whose achievements in life were celebrated, questioned and contested) in different ways across a variety of online platforms, forums and communities (explored in greater detail in Nansen et al. 2015).
Social media commemoration: the case of Zyzz

Aziz Sergeyevich Shavershian, known as Zyzz, was an amateur bodybuilder who built a degree of celebrity on Facebook, YouTube and other social media. He had more than 50,000 followers on Facebook, and a branded protein supplement. He died suddenly in 2011, aged 22. Immediately following his death, online communities were filled with comments of grief, support, remembrance, and anger. Zyzz’s death was made the subject of an Australian national radio program discussing drug abuse and male body culture. The tone, focus, and sentiment of these comments varied greatly from platform to platform.

Through an iterative qualitative analysis of posts across six sites, we built an understanding of the themes around which discussion gravitated; the ways in which norms and polices were flouted or asserted; and the forms of address particular to each site. The analysis showed that digital memorialization is fragmented across different platforms, contested by speakers with different relationships to the deceased and with different relationships to drugs and bodybuilding, and difficult to unify into a coherent ‘grand’ narrative, but rather exists as a host of contested, polyvalent conversations.

Comparative analysis of different platforms

We undertook a comparative analysis of commemorative posts across a number of different platforms, from hobbyist or “passion-centric” (Ploderer et al. 2010) websites like bodybuilding.com and simplyshredding.com to tributes created on Facebook and YouTube. The large volume of posts to these different sites made a comprehensive analysis difficult; instead we engaged in digital observation and qualitative sampling across multiple sites and conversations to explore in detail the forms of expression,
the topics of conversation, the contested issues, and the modes of address that constituted and reconstituted the collective memory of Zyzz.

On niche bodybuilding websites—such as bodybuilding.com and simplyshredding.com—fans and friends of Zyzz left messages of admiration, and commitments to pursue their own fitness goals. These messages frequently featured subcultural jargon, and were policed heavily by moderators in order to maintain respect and support for Zyzz and bodybuilding in general. Drug use was generally either only implicit to or absent in these discussions; references to “bicycles” (cycles of anabolic steroid use) are an example of such knowing circumlocution. In these ways the theoretical openness of communication on the Internet is limited to certain permissible forms.

The affordances of Facebook for commemoration have changed over time, and vary from country to country. After Zyzz’s death, eight different tribute pages were launched. Such pages may be created and posted to by anyone, resulting in a more fragmented memorialization (Karppi 2013). These vary in their popularity, their focus, and their claims to authority (one was titled “official Zyzz RIP Facebook” despite all such pages on Facebook being unofficial in Facebook’s terms). As a result, the conversation was much more contested than on dedicated bodybuilding sites. These pages attracted posts from Facebook users with wildly different relationships to Zyzz, from family and friends to tourists and trolls. While these Facebook pages lacked the explicit insider focus of the niche websites, we still find revision and consensus-building through appeals to “respectful” behavior.

When we look at the YouTube video Zyzz – the Legacy, that Zyzz’s brother Said uploaded, the case is very different. The cacophonous comments repeat several themes found across the Facebook and bodybuilding site tributes. However, rather
than cohering around these themes they explode into an unmanageable, irrecuperable storm of differing opinion, tone, hostility and seriousness. Many of the comments undermine the dominant narrative of Zyzz as an athlete who passed away too soon, through accusations of steroid use, insults based on his congenital heart condition, and criticisms of his masculinity:

thank you zyzz for dieing. now we have one less steroid junkie on this earth and one less person to pass abysmal genes (mental and physical genes) to future offspring. RIP where you belong (Zyzz – The Legacy, YouTube)

The affordances, pleasures and values of YouTube vary greatly from other media platforms, and it is perhaps not surprising to see the most vitriolic comments appear on this site as opposed to Facebook, for example. Yet another forum for remembrance is worth mentioning here, which has its own unique place in the social media ecology: Squidoo. Before its purchase and closure by HubPages in 2014, this site allowed users, termed “lensmasters”, to aggregate content from around the web in a single page, or “lens”. Lensmasters earned revenue from embedded advertisements, of which Squidoo took a 50 per cent commission. A user created a lens called Zyzz RIP - The "YOU MIRIN" Memorial Gallery *UPDATED WITH ALL PICTURES EVER*, filled with images of Zyzz to attract traffic, motivate fans and monetize the memory of Zyzz through selling protein supplements.¹ The explicit commercialization of Zyzz’s image post-death was met with some resistance by visitors:

bahahaha.... after all those photos “buy whey protein”. If this website was accurate it would say “buy anabolic steroids” (Squidoo)
In this moment we see the tension between the contemporary web’s demand for traffic, the desire to pay tribute to friends, and the selling of miracle substances in pursuit of idealized bodies. Across these online platforms we see a contested, fragmented and polyvocal memorialization happening. Individuals seek to build group cohesion, express their sympathies, or debunk the figure of Zyzz. The legacy is subject to debate without resolving to a coherent picture; instead the conversation differs from platform to platform. The presentation of this legacy also changes over time, as social media algorithms seek to vary and refresh the content served, and as advertisements adapt to visitors’ own browsing history.

**Media, Death, Memory**

For hundreds of years there has been a tension between media technologies and memory; Aristotle famously worried that the new media technology of writing would weaken our skills of remembrance. The birth of photography also witnessed the rise in hauntings, especially in the form of ghostly auras (Linkman 2012). One of the first imagined use cases for the phonograph was the recording and playback of the voices of the deceased. Likewise, radio technology was often deployed in search of a means of communicating with the dead (Sconce 2000). While digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube extend the possibilities for memorialization through multimedia compositions, graphing social relationships and cloud storage, they simultaneously challenge that commemoration: through dispersing authorship among myriad users, through ranking contributions according to opaque algorithms, and through their mapping of social connections in a much more explicit way than has historically been possible.
Zyzz is remembered in different ways on different platforms, for different ends, by different publics, a phenomenon that digital ethnographer Penelope Papailias (2016) dissects with delicate perception in her study of vernacular and online commemorative practices in the wake of a terrible bus crash in Greece. In Papailias’ take, what we see in the case of digital memorialization is a form of “mediated witnessing” whereby the witnesses contribute a two-fold representation. In the case of Zyzz, people witness his biography and character-portrait while, at the same time, contributing to the shaping of normative responses to that biography. In this way, both the witnessing and the testimony of the witnesses are critical to the commemorative practices we observe.

As we have seen in the case of Zyzz, witnessing is attenuated across several platforms and through degrees of separation from Zyzz—some “first order” witnesses expressing a direct phenomenological connection to Zyzz and existential response to his death, and other “second order” witnesses connecting to Zyzz and his posthumous representation through testimony that reflects dialogically and dialectically on first order testimony. And so the mediatization of the materialization of Zyzz and the meaning that might be extracted from his life is informed by the logic of the database that attests to Zyzz. It achieves this through an assemblage of connotative modular factoids, and to the logic of the network and its reach through degrees of separation. These extend to intimates who knew him, to strangers who knew of him, to ethnographers who, through Zyzz’s database and the online testimony of attenuated witnesses, know of him and others who know of him.

On Facebook tributes Zyzz is remembered as an elite athlete and inspirational figure who sadly died at a young age. On YouTube his memory is constructed in terms of drug-fuelled excess and narcissism. Users of Squidoo sought to aggregate
images they had collected and drive traffic through their now-lost pages. These conflicting images of Zyzz are interwoven through users posting and commenting across platforms, through the interoperability of the social web and APIs (Application Programming Interfaces), and through the open questions about how we ought best to remember people in a time where so many of our thoughts seems destined to be shared online.

**Take-homes for digital ethnography**

Digital ethnography as a holistic practice (see Horst and Miller 2012, 15-18) is well placed to attend to a range of issues, in ways that interviews of individuals, surveys of populations, or analyses of datasets are unable to get at separately. Each of these techniques has something to add, but it is in attention to the interplay of various scales of commemoration elicited through different methodological means that we are best able to understand what is emerging in this space.

Indeed, digital ethnography reaches beyond its attention to research techniques (ethnographic methods) and beyond the production of rich descriptive and analytic texts (ethnographies). The field of digital ethnography is made up of multiple ontological layers, which mesh with each other in many ways. Social media does not just sit ‘on top’ of existing means of mourning and remembering the dead—rather, it appropriates, extends and transforms those practices. It makes little sense to speak of Zyzz’s online memorials as being “in addition to” various offline memorials for those who knew him best; the many different sites, pages and posts were made by people with wildly varying acquaintance with him, fighting over what his legacy ought to be, creating a controversy that continues to generate revenue for advertisers in a gesture analogous to Zyzz’s own self-promotion.
The “online commemoration” we research, then, is not simply exploring the ways in which the act of (offline) commemoration is translated into online forums. Rather, it explores how new technologies are radically remaking processes of memorialization. This remaking is ongoing as we go about our lives, releasing a digital pheromone trail in our movement across the web (Stiegler 2009). This occurs in the immediate aftermath of our death, as those around us negotiate and authorize our biographical narratives and what they mean, now, and into an imagined distant future, where our digital personas sit on a server farm, waiting, hoping, to be refreshed by the next passing visitor.

**Conclusion**
The emerging practices of online commemoration have a great deal to say about contemporary relationships with death. New technological advances have made it possible to maintain technologically mediated relationships with and through the dead, to mourn and memorialize people in virtual environments, and pass on rich digital legacies. These developments challenge traditional notions of personhood, sociality and inheritance, transforming rituals around death as they facilitate, extend and adapt them. Digital ethnography’s attention to the overlapping logics of communities, platforms, and algorithms is well suited to understanding what is at stake in these critical moments.

In the case of Zyzz, we find cacophonous voices leaving their note of support, claiming to see through Zyzz’s self-presentation, and making money for themselves through association, advertising and aggregation. These differing voices are filtered through each platform’s technological affordances, form of sociality and presentation of content; what a particular user may see on any given day may differ greatly from what they see on another day, or from what another user sees. The rich field of online
memorialization gives us clues about what it means to live and die at this point in time.

References


NOTES
We note here that this archive has not been accessible since HubPages acquired Squidoo. This highlights that, while online platforms promise the ability to store, share and scale our memories, they too are susceptible to loss when businesses change hands, data becomes corrupted, or new legislature is adopted.

---

1 We note here that this archive has not been accessible since HubPages acquired Squidoo. This highlights that, while online platforms promise the ability to store, share and scale our memories, they too are susceptible to loss when businesses change hands, data becomes corrupted, or new legislature is adopted.