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Static Glow

Static Glow refers to the phenomenon by which data persists in the network long after the person it relates to is dead. Such as the so-called Facebook 'ghost profiles'; accounts owned by the deceased that continue to appear in 'Friends', 'Suggestions', and somewhat more disturbingly, 'Birthday reminders'.

Example: Her *static glow* still lingers after 4 years.

Static Glow became notorious with the quintessential scene that presages horror in *Poltergeist*; a TV set hisses while the black and white flickering static glows in the dark room. The juxtaposition of stasis (static) and movement (glow), reflects the tension between the desire to remember and the necessity to forget that underlines the eeriness of encounters with our "undead media" (Chun 2011: 134).

Ghost profiles became a phenomenon in the early MySpace days, when the mediated violent murders of teenage girls in the US brought strangers to comment on the profiles of the tragically deceased, and even sometimes to create RIP tribute profiles. Nowadays the infamous Facebook algorithms generate ghostly encounters with Birthday Reminders or timely placements of photographs of the deceased in our Timeline Memories. These and similar phenomena are the object of what has been called digital death, digital afterlife, or death online studies, which consider the particular interaction and identity construction engendered by lingering data in the context of mourning (Gibson 2007; Walter et al. 2011; Maciel & Carvalho Pereira 2013; Gotved 2014; Klastrup 2014; Lagerkvist 2016). The notion of the abandoned site is embedded in the inception of the WWW. The growing cemetery has been indexed by the Internet Archive since 1996, and already inscribed within historicities of "digital folklore" (Lialina, Espenschied 2009).

Media afterlife. An inherent aspect of media history

The history of media technology is deeply entangled with the attribution of supernatural power to communicate with or to represent the dead. The notion of emanation that manifests after excitation accounts for much of what has historically haunted media (Sconce 2000). *Static Glow* is also inspired from the afterglow produced by phosphorescence that emanates from a CRT screen after the television is turned off. Such examples go as far back as the Shroud of Turin and Veronica's Veil, and has bloomed since the development of new technologies in the late 19th century.¹ Media's ghosts are epitomised by the practices of Spirit Photography and Spiritualism, both explicitly linking the afterlife through the *medium* of the emerging technology of the time. Spirits were communicated

1 Jeffrey Sconce gives a comprehensive overview in *Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*.

with through the spiritual telegraph and *captured* on gelatin silver print.² The experience of looking at a photograph or watching a film is described as watching and being watched by spectres (Barthes 1980; Derrida, Stiegler 1996). Media are perceived as a means to communicate with the opposite bank of the river Styx. The tradition continues in networked computation with "computer-based discarnate entities" or cyber-spirits (Collins 2004, N/A). The multiple data traces every user leaves behind further augments this ghostly anthropomorphisation. The question might not be if humans are perpetuated through networked data archives, but *how* that data is reused.

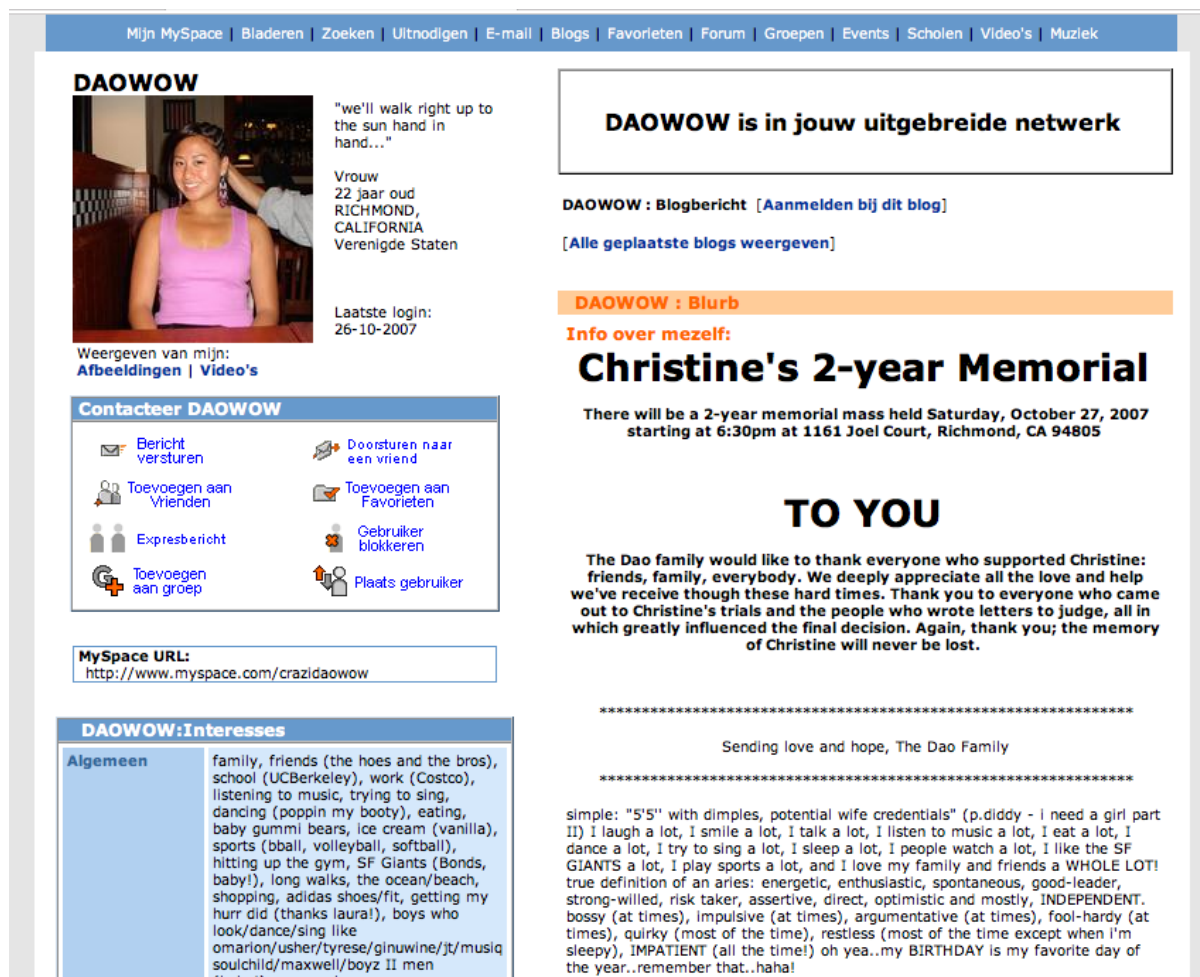


figure 1 -Screenshot of Christine's MySpace profile (circa 2007)

The profile of a dead person can be forgotten but remains in the database may be integrated into new identity and re-branding models. A ghost's allure for example, may change with web fashion re-design trends. Christine's MySpace profile lives on, ten years after she was killed by a drunk

2 These practices were described in an early American spiritualistic journal (circa 1850), *The Spiritual Telegraph*, and compiled in volumes under the title of *The Telegraph Papers*.

driver.³ In the years following her death, the site was periodically active with mourning comments, and generally used as a memorial by her parents (see figure 1). Ten years later, MySpace has completely redesigned its interface, and consequently, the face of Christine's online posthumous presence (see figure 2). The result is an uncanny presence, patches of fossilised content with a slick new interface bearing the recognizable default settings. Christine Dao's static glow is ten years strong at the time of writing.

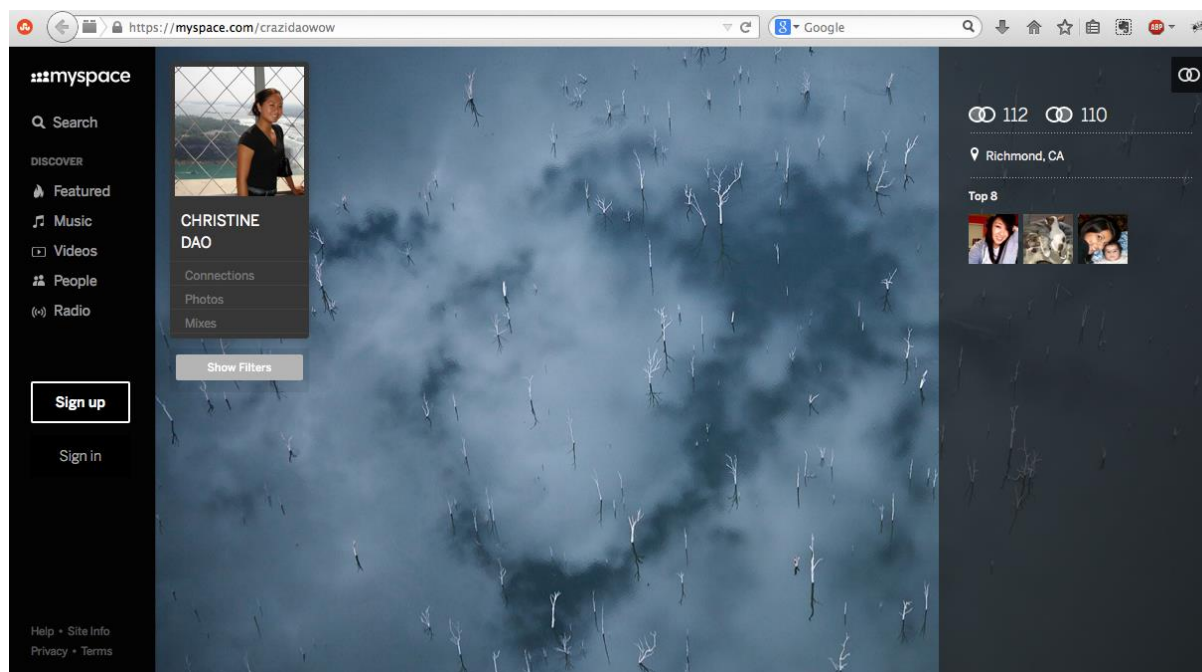


Figure 2 -Screenshot of Christine's MySpace profile (circa 2015)

Static glow as commodity

For commercial providers an abandoned profile is at best an inactive profile; however, when the amount of inactive profiles affect the possibility to sell space for targeted advertising, platform providers will attempt to close inactive accounts. At worst, a deceased person's profile becomes a liability when the platform provider uses the user generated content for advertising campaigns and risks becoming exposed by using images of a deceased person, or when the profile is vandalized by users who are aware of the death of the person. Reason enough to start regulating the digital estate.

As our lives started to play out online, platforms became a growing archive for our life events. From teenage partying over our first love to the birth of our children, the passing of our parents and friends, these documents became archives of highly personal value. This value is being monetized by companies providing services to preserve our online life, luring us with a notion of immortal memento and promising to posthumously let us keep our place in the social graph of our life. Pioneer

3 Christine died on Oct 27, 2005. Her mydeathspace profile:
<http://www.mydeathspace.com/article/2006/02/01/Christine_Dao_%2821%29_died_in_a_fatal_car_accident_in_West_Berkeley>.

vendors such as LIVESON, Eternime, and ETER9, paved the way for continuous presence through virtual immortality.

If static glow is an indication of popularity, the highest form of emanation could be the posthumous hologram, such as those developed by Hologram US for Patsy Cline, Liberace, and Whitney Houston.⁴ Occasionally, these are developed 'prehumously' for such personalities as rapper Chief Keef and Julian Assange as a means to circumvent territorially bound laws.⁵ Rosi Braidotti has expanded Mmembe's definition of necropolitics to an "opportunistic exploitation of the life of you" (2013: 123). This exploitation now continues after death, as posthumous data is also subject to commodification. From the Holy Grail to Tupac Shakur's patented hologram onstage appearance, immortality is a hot commodity.

With social networking sites projected to include more dead users than live ones in the not too distant future,⁶ could humans be anomalies in a web of ghosts? In addition to these increasing posthumous-agents, most profile or account activity seems to follow the infamous 80/20 rule, or the Pareto Principle. That is to say, around 80% of profiles or accounts on the WWW are inactive. These may be owned by dead people, though usually they are created by people who have set up an account once and never returned, or *bots*. For example, what surfaced through the Ashley Madison data-leak,⁷ (an online dating service for married people), is how many of the online 'engagers' were actually bots, programmed to engage with heterosexual men.⁸

Not only do our traces live on after we die in databases associated with our profiles and desisted accounts, more and more data is being created and capitalised upon from interactions with bots, bots interacting with dead data, the recycling of our data for new identities and interactions, and the outsourcing of our communication to software applications. We also increasingly use bots to help us with our e-mail conversations, or responses to comments in our social media profiles. These bots continue the conversations posthumously on our behalf.⁹

4 See <<http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-34249920>>.

5 A Chief Keef hologram performance was shut down by police in Chicago. See <<http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-33679847>>.

6 See *XKCD* for a projection of future numbers concerning Facebook: <<https://what-if.xkcd.com/69/>>.

7 Links were made available to download the data on several torrent sites. The Reddit link containing sources: <https://www.reddit.com/r/AnythingGoesNews/comments/3h71ar/we_are_the_impact_team_we_are_releasing_the/>.

8 See <http://gizmodo.com/ashley-madison-code-shows-more-women-and-more-bots-1727613924>. Findings indicated that a majority of the conversations on Ashley Madison unfolded between bots and humans. Annalee Newitz who analysed the data also shows how the later was an integral part of Ashley Madison's business model.

9 Examples are the algorithmic assistants, using data-mining and machine-learning to assist largely autonomous in e-mail conversations, scheduling of appointments, providing information etc. See for example Crystal <<https://www.crystalknows.com/>> or Google Now <<https://www.google.com/landing/now/>>.

“Necro-financialisation” and the desire for immortality could prove to be a strong motivation for such cannibalism (Samson 2015). Technological infrastructure embedded within commercial ecologies also facilitates various forms of static glow. The Internet’s infrastructure of redundancy and its propagation-oriented code also contribute to static glow. Videos, images and texts generated by or about the user are copied, stored and re-distributed beyond the user’s editorial control. There are so many ways in which traces can be archived, shared, re-used, corrupted, sold, re-hashed and ultimately given new *life*. Inevitably, *necro-financiers* will render calculable the capacity in which static glow posthumously emanates over time.

Measuring static glow

Static glow could be calculated by using a formula for exponential decline (“Forgetting curve”, Ebbinghaus 1885). However, while unattended memory does fade exponentially or gradually into oblivion, the calculation must include variables for incidents of activating or refreshing memory (e.g. anniversaries). Additionally, static glow is affected by the social graph of a person. Fans, committed friends or a professional network might affect the static glow in the long run as the strength of the memory is stronger in this group. It is also affected by the contributions a person made during her life, as they can also trigger the activation of memory. A book might be re-issued, works might be referenced, exhibited or presented in other contexts.

To calculate the static glow (SG) over time (t), the relation of the common group of people (α) multiplied by the exponential decline of memory (e) with the occasional attention from the closer group of fans, friends and family $(1-\alpha)e^{-t/t^2}$ plus the occasional stimulation of memory (Stim) or by the activity of bots (B). The entire calculation could be executed as this:

$$S(t) = SG(0) \left(\alpha e^{-\frac{t}{S_{\text{common}}}} + (1-\alpha) e^{-\frac{t}{S_{\text{fan}}}} \right) + Stim(t) + B$$

Figure 3 – Static Glow formula

where S_{common} and S_{fan} are the respective strengths of the memory in the common and fan group. A stronger memory in this context leads to a slower fade of the static glow.

Referring to Georg Franck's notion of the attention economy, we can state that the static glow marks its expansion and measurability into the period after a person has died (1999). The static glow becomes the measurement for memory as it is still kept alive on various web platforms. Social graphs, and data generated over a lifetime online, such as achievements and contact lists, are the basis for the commodification of our social life beyond the end of our biological one. As Michel Serres foresaw, with these technologies death is domesticated, it has become *cultural* (2001). The formula above might serve as the calculating model that determines the value of a person’s afterlife and answer the foreboding question: How long will *my* static glow linger?

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Audrey Samson is an artist and researcher. She is a lecturer in Digital Media and Web Programming at the University of the West of England. Samson holds a Ph.D. from the School of Creative Media in Hong Kong. Her performative installations explore how memory and technical objects are both co-determined and transformed in the context of networked data archiving. Samson uses erasure of data as a performative strategy to examine the relationship between network materiality and forgetting. In works such as *Chéri, ne me quitte pas* and *Goodnight Sweetheart*, erasure is achieved by visceral chemical degradation and embalming procedures. Her artistic approach, informed by the cultural context of technology, is ethnographical and rooted in software studies. Samson's work has been presented at festivals and galleries throughout the Asia Pacific, Europe, and Canada.

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¹ We would like to thank Gerhard Blab for his valuable advice on how to formulate Static Glow as an equation.