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DIGITAL AFTERLIVES: IMAGINING EFFECTIVE POLICIES AND REGULATIONS FOR DIGITAL REMAINS (Lightning Talk)

Abstract or Résumé:

The digital platforms we engage with daily are brimming with the digital traces of the dead. These *digital remains* – or the photos, videos, and text messages left behind by deceased users (Lingel 2013), have given rise to the *digital death industry* – an umbrella term for online platforms that offer services such as online memorialisations, virtual funerals, and graves, and interactions with avatars of the deceased through chatbots and virtual reality (Öhman and Floridi 2017). Mourners turn to these digital infrastructures to express their grief and experience the continued presence of the deceased through their digital remains (Kasket 2020). Yet the presence of digital remains and the digital death industry presents several policy concerns related to privacy, digital dignity, the question of access and ownership, and the potential for commodifying deceased user data (Kasket, 2019). Without effective policies and regulations that provide guidelines for service providers and internet users, the dead are not afforded privacy rights nor considerations for their digital dignity and protections for their postmortem data. Left exposed and with no legal safeguards in place, digital remains are vulnerable to offences with tremendous emotional implications for the bereaved.

Guided by information ethics as a theoretical framework exploring questions related to creating, accessing, and collecting digital data (Bruneault et al., 2023), my lightning talk asks us to imagine constructing potential policies and regulations that serve to protect our posthumous digital footprint.

References

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Öhman, C., & Floridi, L. (2017). The Political Economy of Death in the Age of Information: A Critical Approach to the Digital Afterlife Industry. *Minds and Machines*, 27(4), 639–662. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-017-9445-2>