

What happens to your Facebook and Twitter accounts after you die?

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When someone you love dies, sure, their spirit endures—but so does their social media. And when their photos, memories or posts surface unexpectedly, it can be a jarring purgatory for those still healing from

the loss.

Managing the digital afterlife is "something that people should think about but don't," says Jed Brubaker, a professor at the University of Colorado Boulder, who specializes on the topic. "There's a whole societal infrastructure—(coroners, cemeteries, funeral directors)—for how we think about death," he says. "For the most part, that has not extended very well to digital content broadly and [social media](#) specifically."

That can lead to some painful situations.

You may have braced for that birthday reminder, for instance, but then Facebook unexpectedly surfaces an "on this day" memory that just hits you in the gut. LinkedIn nudges you to congratulate a colleague on a work anniversary just a few days after a fatal heart attack took them. Not just awkward, but ouch. That hurts.

Gone, but not forgotten or erased

It's not that we necessarily want all social records and reminders to go away. Just recently, Twitter pulled an about-face following a backlash when it announced plans to purge some inactive accounts. Folks didn't want to lose tweets from loved ones who had passed away.

"We've heard you on the impact that this would have on the accounts of the deceased," the company tweeted. "This was a miss on our part. We will not be removing any inactive accounts until we create a new way for people to memorialize accounts."

And LinkedIn is also working on a plan to memorialize accounts, expected to be ready in the new year.

"This is understandably one of the most sensitive topics for our members, and we want to make sure the account of any member who has passed away is treated with respect," says LinkedIn spokesperson Suzi Owens.

You can ask LinkedIn to remove the profile of a dead colleague, classmate or family member by explaining your relationship to the person, and among other requested information, supplying the date of death, obituary, and the company the person most recently worked at.

The social network graveyard

For sure, our virtual, digital lives will inevitably outlast our physical ones.

In fact, Facebook could have more dead members than living ones within 50 years, according to academics at Oxford University.

But the broad implications of the digital hereafter remain grave.

"The demise of your biological body does not completely strip you of ethical rights such as privacy and dignity," the study's lead author Carl Öhman said last spring. "Overall, Facebook has done a pretty good job in navigating these issues and has balanced the interests of the bereaved with those of the deceased." But he added that it is up to the bereaved families to curate the digital legacies of loved ones that "both accommodates their grief, and supports the community around the deceased in the best way."

What to do when you're still alive

You don't have to leave all the specifics for friends and family to handle

after you're gone.

With Facebook, you can request to have your account permanently deleted after you die. Or you can designate a "legacy contact" who can look after your memorialized account once you pass. Such a person can then manage tribute posts on the memorial profile, by choosing who can see those posts or contribute their own sentiments. The legacy contact can also respond to new friend requests, delete posts and remove tags.

As with everything else you leave behind, keep in mind that the legacy contact might access content that wasn't originally visible to him or her.

According to Facebook, however, what this person won't see are messages, ads you clicked on when you were alive, pokes, security and settings info, and photos you automatically synced but didn't post.

To get started via web browser, head to Settings on Facebook, click "Memorialization Settings," click "Edit," and then examine your options. Should you choose a legacy contact, Facebook will auto-generate an editable message to send to the person you've picked. On mobile via the app, whether Android or iPhone, it takes only one more step to get to that option, tapping "Account Ownership and Control."

Brubaker, who consulted with Facebook on the design of the legacy contact solution, advises people to explicitly give [family members](#) or people they trust "symbolic permission" to do what they think is best after they're gone.

"We hear from lots of bereaved a really deep anxiety around not wanting to disrespect or dishonor the memory of their loved one but being left with a kind of ambiguity and uncertainty about what they should do," he says.

If wishes aren't outlined or expressed before death, you as a family member can still request that the member's Facebook account be removed. You will have to provide proof of the death (an obit or memorial card), and proof that you have the authority to make such a request such as power of attorney documentation, a birth certificate, will or estate letter.

All the many people with Google accounts can similarly set up an Inactive Account Manager to care for the person's Google remains after death.

But there are limits, as Google explains on the web. "We recognize that many people pass away without leaving clear instructions about how to manage their online accounts. We can work with immediate family members and representatives to close the [account](#) of a deceased person where appropriate....We cannot provide passwords or other login details. Any decision to satisfy a request about a deceased user will be made only after a careful review."

The request for a dead person's Google data may also require a court order.

It isn't entirely clear how or even if the social media data from a behemoth such as Facebook that people leave behind remains commercially viable—dead people no longer look at ads, after all.

But there are still strong cases to be made for preserving our digital legacies. They may prove useful artifacts of a bygone era. Future generations may learn from the pictures and posts we leave behind. And to family members and close friends, honoring the people they've lost and keeping their memories alive is priceless.

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