

Death Glitch: How Techno-Solutionism Fails Us in This Life and Beyond

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In contrast to the often-pristine aura of digital platforms, researchers drawing from STS and adjacent fields have long pointed to their hidden and deeply problematic dimensions. Crucially, scholars have revealed not only the exploitative labor conditions of social media platforms' content moderators but also the energy-intensity of their operations (Crawford 2021). Another often neglected yet constitutive feature of digital platforms is the increasing presence of the data and profiles of deceased people. As the so-called Web 2.0, characterized by social media platforms and blogging sites, enters its third decade of existence, this development is hardly surprising. Still, it surfaces a difficult question: how to navigate the data of our dead loved ones once they perish? Amid predictions that the number of dead users' Facebook profiles may in some decades outgrow the number of those alive (Öhman and Watson 2019), pressing questions related to the cultural, ethical, and economic significance of the dead's data in today's digital infrastructures arise.

This is where *Death Glitch* enters the picture. Written by Tamara Kneese, a media studies scholar who has previously researched the intersections of digital media and care practices in manifold ways, this book constitutes an in-depth analysis of the fundamental challenge that human mortality poses to Silicon Valley's techno-solutionism – the belief that technology can solve deep-rooted and convoluted social problems. Concretely, the book offers a narrative which foregrounds the complexities of death and attendant care practices, thereby countering techno-solutionist imaginaries that conceive death as a technologically fixable problem – a mere “glitch”. At the same time, the notion of the glitch points to the productive potential of death to reveal the hidden and messy dimensions of otherwise sanitized digital infrastructures. Thus, centrally mobilizing the image of the glitch allows the author to both foreground the disruptive intricacies of death as well as to critique simplistic understandings of these.

The book consists of an introduction, four chapters containing empirical case studies of how death troubles techno-solutionism, and a conclusion. Kneese's book is quick to reveal its indebtedness to crucial STS insights, highlighting in the introduction a few key concerns that should stir the interest of all STS-inclined scholars. Explicitly drawing from Star's (1999) now-classic argument that infrastructures become visible upon breakdown,

Kneese approaches death as a “moment of breakdown” (p. 4) that can reveal the relational networks that undergird all kinds of digital content. Such digital content, she suggests, is dependent upon assemblages of human and non-human actors, “from platforms’ terms of service, operating systems, and servers to social networks of commenters, mutuals, and surviving loved ones” (p. 3), echoing, albeit not explicitly referring to, the analytical symmetry granted to human and non-human actors so often found in STS research. Perhaps the most important inspiration for her theoretical framework is constituted through feminist STS perspectives which emphasize indispensable, yet habitually neglected forms of care work that go into the production of science and technology (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011). It thus emerges from the outset that this book combines multiple STS sensibilities, therefore being of interest to all those who draw from the field.

The introduction further acquaints the reader with the book’s methodological strategy and some key concepts for understanding how death disrupts techno-solutionism. Kneese accomplishes the methodological creativity needed to study such a thorny subject by drawing from and adopting ethnographer Burrell’s “network anthropology” (2009, p. 25). Concretely, the author herewith signifies that her research combines digital ethnographic methods of archived Facebook profiles, in-depth interviews with digital caregivers and transhumanists, and participant observation at the Internet Archive and *Wired* magazine’s anniversary festival, most of which took place in the USA. This allows her to account for the networked nature of digital technologies that nonetheless rely on the grounded labor of humans. Moreover, some of the key concepts that guide the reader throughout the book are elaborated, including “digital remains” (p. 6), “communicative traces” (p. 6), and “platform temporality” (p. 20). While the concept of *digital remains* denotes all those elements left behind on digital infrastructures by dead people, the notion of *communicative traces* refers more to the affective value that such traces may possess for the ones left behind after a person’s death. The concept of *platform temporality* helps us grasp the fast-paced cultures of many Silicon Valley-based tech firms, embodied most prominently by the well-known mantras of “fail fast, fail often” or “move fast and break things” (p. 19), which Kneese juxtaposes with the demands for a long-term capacity to mourn the dead. The reader rapidly reencounters this contradiction between platform temporality and users’ want for stable digital mourning sites in the ensuing pages.

In Chapter 1, Kneese carefully depicts how death disrupts the original designs of social media platforms. Taking the reader back to the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, in which thirty-three people died, serves as an illustration of how swiftly Facebook profiles took on cultural significance. Significantly, it was the company’s initial policy to have the dead people’s profiles removed within thirty days. This, however, was an unacceptable glitch to large groups of users, who refused to see their dead loved ones’ profiles as digital wastelands but instead highlighted the affective significance of their communicative traces. It was thanks to these users’ grassroots efforts, Kneese details, that Facebook altered its policy and opened the possibility for profiles to persist after a person’s death. As a consequence, profiles of the dead could for long remain “well-visited shrines for people who knew them” (p. 39). The dead’s continued presence on Facebook, Kneese astutely observes, further constitutes deceased users as productive members of the platform insofar as it keeps users affectively invested. Platform temporality, however, renders the fate of Facebook memorialization deeply precarious. This

chapter demonstrates the immense power wielded by corporate digital platforms to shape experiences of death, highlighting that human mortality was not considered in the initial platform design and therefore constitutes a glitch in these systems.

The next case study, presented in Chapter 2, centers on illness blogs in which people who are facing diseases or death share intimate details about the course of their illness. Kneese argues that such blogs represent a peculiar form of digital remains as their production is attended by the writers' awareness of their being digital remains before they perish. One of the author's key concerns in this part of the book is to highlight the necessary care work that takes place behind the scenes of illness blogs, arguing that "physical and digital caregiving go hand in hand" (p. 75). Crucially, Kneese points out, the people who care for a dying person's physical well-being, including their basic material needs, are often the same who work to maintain the availability of their digital remains. Such often gendered work of caregiving may go on for long after a loved one's death. In countering the immaterial imaginaries of the internet, Kneese suggests that an analysis of such care labor "is a way of reinserting materiality and embodiment into discussions of post-Fordist labor" (p. 89). By pointing to the entanglements of physical and online caregiving in the production of illness blogs, this chapter collapses the often-made division between the digital and the material.

Chapter 3 shifts the analysis to an account of the burgeoning digital estate planning industry. This industry promises to help people arrange their digital assets, such as their social media accounts, banking sites, or commercial domain names, in advance of their deaths. Kneese situates this analysis within the history of the life insurance industry, arguing that digital estate planning in a parallel fashion increasingly assumes the status of a moral responsibility. Crucially, however, digital estate planning departs from previous forms of estate planning. This is because the pervasiveness of digital assets somewhat constitutes them as a "democratizing force" (p. 110) since "for many people, it is more likely that they will have an accumulation of digital assets, not tangible ones, to bequeath to the next generation" (p. 131). However, Kneese remarks on the inescapable messiness of digital assets exemplified both through the continual evolution of many digital objects, such as when social media profiles are commented on, and their collaborative processes of production. Keeping these insights in mind, the author brings the chapter to a close by stressing that digital inheritance must accommodate queer concepts of kinship so as to allow "digital remains to be kept by a network of people, rather than a sole inheritor." (p. 132). This chapter thus carves out the ambiguity of digital assets as inherently more messy than traditional assets, yet potentially more democratic.

In the book's final part devoted to empirical analysis, Chapter 4, Kneese homes in on the imaginaries of smart technologies, embodied by such devices as Amazon Alexa or Google Home. Highlighting first that smart objects, despite being intended to save labor, demand constant upkeep through people along gendered expectations, the author then recounts her fieldwork at Stewart Brand's Long Now Foundation and the Mormon Transhumanist Association (MTA). While the Long Now Foundation ponders humanity's long-term technological future, for instance working to resurrect extinct species and conserving software code for future generations, the MTA combines technoscience with Mormon theology advocating to become "more godlike through technology" (p. 167). What unites both, according to Kneese, is their futurist fixation on transcending the lifespan of mere mortals through technology. Again, Kneese il-

illustrates that the futurist orientations of these subcultures, along with the smart home imaginary, fail to recognize the “realities of digital decay” (p. 177). The author ends the chapter by pointing to the works of afrofuturist and feminist writers, such as Octavia Butler and Ursula K. Le Guin, whose works could productively help imagine “a more expansive, collection version of digital afterlives” (p. 180). This invocation signals Kneese’s broader ambition to foster a different approach to digital death; one that replaces reductive techno-solutionism – which so often leads to death glitches – with a lived awareness of the care work, social networks, and materialities that always accompany processes of dying on digital platforms.

Finally, having taken the reader through her network anthropology, the conclusion ties together Kneese’s empirical analyses with the conceptual apparatus developed in the introduction. As readers have come to see for themselves, the author summarizes her insights by pointing out that:

there is an immense gulf between the sanitized digital afterlives imagined by technologists, who build posthumous chatbots or other radical life-extension technologies, and the people on the ground whose lives and deaths are subject to the machinations of platform necropolitics (p. 182).

Further contending that “glitches are sites of radical potential” (p. 191), Kneese asks towards the book’s final pages: “how might the data of the dead be mobilized toward the collective, the ritualistic, and the political rather than being hijacked by the most powerful members of the society?” (p. 191).

Death Glitch forcefully lays bare the fundamental discrepancy between Silicon Valley’s brisk technoculture and the affective realities of death. The four-part empirical analysis, resulting from its creative methodological approach, together with its conceptual sensibility towards infrastructural breakdown, care work, and temporalities, generates critical, innovative, and convincing insights regarding the different ways in which death poses a glitch to digital techno-solutionism. The book’s main strength is constituted through these novel empirical insights and the invaluable concepts of digital remains, communicative traces, and platform temporality, which are bound to enter the vocabularies of STS scholars interested in digital infrastructures, platforms, and media. While Kneese tentatively opens the floor for imagining other modes of navigating death in digital infrastructures, for instance by pointing to the works of Octavia Butler, this is where the reader might have benefitted from a more elaborate discussion. Although not Kneese’s prime concern with the book, a thorough analysis of alternative designs for digital infrastructures which treat death not as an afterthought, but as a central concern, would have productively illustrated a path forward. Of course, this does not diminish the book’s fundamental success in mobilizing STS sensibilities to reveal the messiness of death glitches.

Overall, *Death Glitch* constitutes both a timely and empirically rich analysis of the overlooked dynamic of death within digital platforms. The book is a prime example of how theoretical and methodological STS sensibilities can inform innovative research about digital infrastructures, reminding us of the immense value of studying neglected things – and how these may be rescued from neglect. Most importantly, the book embodies the generativity of a question that STS researchers are attuned to asking: could things be otherwise?

References

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