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On the fate of social networking sites of deceased academics in the Covid-19 era and beyond

Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva

Independent researcher, P. O. Box 7, Miki-cho post office, Ikenobe 3011-2, Kagawa-ken 761-0799, Japan

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented death, and among those touched by this virus are academics who have, at some point in their career, lost their lives, or academic institutes or countries who have lost valuable intellectual contributors. In the shadows of their deaths, it is incumbent upon us – as members of academia and the public – to somberly reflect on the realities of living close to, or alongside, death. One aspect that has not been widely discussed, but that seems to be more pertinent now than ever, is the fate of social media accounts, institutional websites, social networking sites, and other publicly available sites of deceased academics. A deceased academic continues to have responsibilities beyond their death because their work and legendary status may be posthumously challenged at any point in the future. Faced with challenges, absent an active voice that might be able to offer a suitable response, and considering the “fallible” nature of science, that legendary status and literature could change, for example, via the postmortem correction or retraction of their academic papers. While many academics have likely not reflected too deeply – or at all – on this issue, they would do well to ponder on this topic now, especially in these unprecedented times of Covid-19.

Broadly speaking, on a global scale, 2020 is like no other year most have ever experienced in terms of extreme or traumatic experiences. The pandemic has already left, and continues to inflict, profound social wounds (Dubey et al., 2020) and psychological scars (Osofsky et al., 2020), causing long-lasting emotive and behavioral patterns in individuals from all walks of life in society (Saladino et al., 2020). Touched directly or indirectly by Covid-19, this pandemic has cemented the notion that death can arrive momentarily, and without notice. Absent a reliable defense, such as a vaccine, or an effective curative, it is not hyperbolic to state that there is an imminent fear of becoming ill and dying, especially since, in the case of Covid-19, death may occur within a few days after infection (Riggioni et al., 2020). In the light of this sobering reality, we, as academics and members of the public, are drawn to deeper reflection and called to be as prepared as possible for sudden and/or inevitable death. Academics, like other members of the public, have seen their personal lives at home, and professional lives in the workplace, transformed by Covid-19, as their personal and professional behaviors, attitudes and routines have been forced to adapt rapidly, and radically (Giorgi et al., 2020). In extreme cases of lockdowns, and to a lesser extent by social distancing, the physical separation of individuals, including academic-academic and student-mentor relationships, have pushed students and others to revert to social media to maintain their social networks and retain, as best as possible, their psychological balance (Elmer et al., 2020).

Academics, including scientists, have been increasingly drawn to social media to expand their networks and to showcase their intellectual repertoires, thereby accruing social capital (Kapoor et al., 2018). The use of social media may also be accentuated in times of risk or crisis (Rasmussen and Ihlen, 2017), like Covid-19 (Pitas and Ehmer, 2020). As a result, academics have been increasingly using social network services/sites (SNSs). These might range widely from social media tools like Twitter or Facebook, platforms such as ResearchGate, Academia.org or Google Scholar to showcase their research and publication curricula and to record their academic evolution over time, institutional websites or ORCID accounts that officially validate their existence, or other publicly available websites, such as blogs, that may in some way enhance their academic and/or research profiles and networks, and impact their success or failure (Stadtfield et al., 2019). At the time of death, and beyond, these profiles and networks are in some way affected.

At the time of death, whether caused by Covid-19 or other causes, any or all of these SNSs may enter a state of disuse. And with disuse comes the risk of invalidation, either due to information becoming outdated, or due to the fluid nature of all things digital, including communication and transmission channels (e.g., servers and URLs), causing resources to become dysfunctional over time, post publication (Zeng et al., 2019). As a result of this constant fluidity and change, the SNSs of deceased academics may become populated with outdated, erroneous, or

E-mail address: jaimetex@yahoo.com

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inaccurate information, partly because of the inaccuracies of academic databases (Dorsch, 2017). Stokes (2015) provided *pro tanto* arguments for maintaining vestigial SNSs and other digital remains of deceased academics' SNSs, relying on the defense of having an obligation of not deleting such digital artefacts. This vein of thought contrasts starkly with the arguments by the "right to be forgotten" camp of philosophy, which argues that an individual has the right, under any – including extraneous – circumstances, to have digital information related to them permanently deleted (Townend, 2017). Thus, the longevity of a deceased academic's SNSs, and of the academic's legendary status, has a profound ontological and ethical background that needs to be debated now more than ever, in the Covid-19 era, that humanity and academia are faced with something akin to an existential crisis.

One of the ways in which the legendary status of an academic may crumble may be through the often treacherous process of post-publication peer review (PPPR) (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2016). PPPR may reveal errors or even misconduct in an academic's career or publishing curriculum, issues that still need to be addressed at the postmortem stage (Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki, 2015). Absent a deceased author, for example, if faced with a misconduct allegation or the discovery of errors in their published literature, it is incumbent upon co-authors – if they exist and if they, too, have not deceased – or editors/publishers to handle, and resolve, PPPR claims that might arise. It can thus be argued that the destiny of an academic's legendary status, or even their published literature, is not secure, may be subject to changes, and is beyond their control.

The fundamental nature of this change in the status of an academic or their literature will depend on whether their evolution is perceived as a "threat" (if seen through the prism of cancelation), as "fluidity" (if seen through the prism of instability), or as "change" (if seen through the prism of improvement). In all cases, however, a core issue is whether science, science's theories, or scientific ontology and epistemology are mutable, malleable, or fallible. The teachings of Popper (2002) allow us to appreciate this distinction by noting that scientific discovery is not "eternal", and can, at any time in its trajectory through history, be challenged, but never fully canceled. The acceptance of, or resistance to, errors and their correction, even posthumously, will require addressing – and reforming where necessary – three core issues: 1) how errors in science should be handled, managed, processed and perceived, without inducing a stigma (Teixeira da Silva and Al-Khatib, 2020); 2) how to value peer review and appreciate its centrality in sustaining the integrity of academia (Resnik and Elmore, 2016); 3) the value of established knowledge/theories and their irrefutability in an attempt to preserve knowledge while constantly stimulating change.

Such changes and fluidity of an academic, their research repertoire and their publishing portfolio, which come about not only by the fluid nature of scientific challenge itself but also by an evolving scientific ontology and epistemology that can fluctuate between eliminative and corrective (Blachowicz, 1995), will directly affect the accuracy of their SNSs, especially if nobody is curating them. Elsewhere, it has been argued that *curriculum vitae* need to be accurate, up-to-date and verifiable (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2020). Since SNSs are, to some extent, applied forms of a *curriculum vitae*, this indicates that these evolving aspects will irrevocably impact an academic's status, reputation and legend long beyond death.

This age of Covid-19 might be the most pertinent time to reflect on these issues and to debate guidelines and infrastructures that can safeguard the security and accuracy of deceased academics' SNSs, which go hand-in-hand with database, information and literature security (Soomro et al., 2016). Among the issues that require urgent attention is the ethical perspective of the permission needed to list deceased authors, especially when authorship criteria, such as approval and accountability, must be considered (McLaughlan, 2018; Helgesson et al., 2019).

Covid-19 has brought about a transcendental change in society. As part of that society, academics have also been impacted, as has their work mode, productivity, and way of life. As academics move forward,

hopefully towards a safer post-pandemic state, the knowledge and theories that they have established, most often though published papers, will remain, even long after their death, but increasingly subjected to extreme challenging forces, such as anti-science rhetoric (Hotez, 2020), or more subtle forms of scientific challenge, such as PPPR. Death does not guarantee a legendary status, not in the Covid-19 era, nor beyond.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest of relevance to this topic.

Author contributions

The author contributed entirely to the intellectual discussion underlying this paper, literature exploration, writing, reviews and editing, and accepts responsibility for the content of this opinion piece.

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