

Announcer: Welcome to Tram Talks, a little taste of Deakin University here in the world's first mobile lecture theatre. You've chosen to listen to podcast number two, 'The Digital Dead', in which Dr. Patrick Stokes grapples with the ethics of death in the social media era.

Dr. Stokes: Did you know that Facebook has 1.5 billion monthly active users? And there's many more who are inactive, including at least 30 million Facebook users who aren't posting much these days because, well, they're dead. In fact, the Internet is more and more full of dead people. As users die, they leave behind increasingly large and sophisticated online remains in the form of social network profiles, blogs, email accounts, digital music and movie and book collections and so on.

So what do we do with the things that the dead leave behind online? As the social media era enters its second decade, that's a question that governments, courts, corporations and grieving loved ones have all had to grapple with. How to dispose of these remains and who gets to decide? Now, you might think that when it comes to dealing with the dead, the living can pretty much do whatever we want. After all, even if someone wanted their online presence to go on after their death, what does it matter? You can't hurt the dead, right?

So if you delete their account, you're not harming them, because there's no one there to harm. Now that view goes back to Epicurus, a 4th century BC Greek philosopher. Epicurus and his followers, like the Roman philosophical poet Lucretius, argued that something can only be bad for you if it involves unpleasant experience. They're also atomists. They said everything's just made up of atoms, and when you die, your atoms just disperse. So you don't really exist after death. If you don't exist, you can't experience anything, and so nothing can be unpleasant for you. And so, they concluded, neither your death nor anything that happens after your death should really matter to you.

But many philosophers suspect that Epicurus got that one wrong. That's not surprising, because most of us, even philosophers, do fear our deaths, and we certainly act as if we think we can be harmed after death, too. When we make a will, for instance, we're implying that it would harm our interests if our wishes aren't carried out after we die. And when we make a promise to somebody who's dying before they die, most of us feel that we owe it to them to carry it out. We'd be wronging them, even betraying them, if we didn't.

But how can that be if the dead no longer exist? Well, here's one answer, and this is derived from the American philosopher Thomas Nagel. Imagine you're sitting in a cave with no phone and no Internet. At that exact moment, on the other side of the world, unbeknown to you, your partner is cheating on you.

You've been betrayed at that precise moment. But you don't know that you've been betrayed and you may never find out. So there's no unpleasant experience on your end. But if we can wrong people across space like that without it causing them any unpleasant experience, maybe we can also wrong them across time. By deleting my dead friend's Facebook profile, perhaps I'm harming her in the past by frustrating the interest that she has back there.

But that only works if my friend does have an interest in her online traces being preserved. Not everyone does. After all, many of us are Epicureans without even realising it. Besides, I think that's only part of the reason why we shouldn't be too quick to delete the digital dead. Today, social media is one of the main ways in which we're present in the lives of others. It's a big part of how we appear in their worlds and they in ours. So when social media users die but their profiles remain, it's like a small part of them remains with us in our life-world, and that may help us to carry out one of our main duties to the dead: the duty to stop them from being wholly erased from the world, to stop them being obliterated by time.

The 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said that because the dead can't force you to do anything or give you any reward, remembering someone who has died is the freest and most unselfish, loving act you can do for them. In remembering the dead, we paradoxically also keep them alive in an important sense. They remain part of our lives, part of our ethical regard, and we keep them as part of our family and, yes, social networks. And if social media profiles are part of how people are present in our world, they're also an important tool for keeping some part of those we love present with us after they die.

So in fact, we might have at least some ethical obligation not to delete the dead.

Announcer: Thanks, Dr. Patrick Stokes. This has been another Tram Talk from the world's first mobile lecture theatre. Just a small sample of what's available at Deakin University. Visit study.deakin.edu.au to learn more.