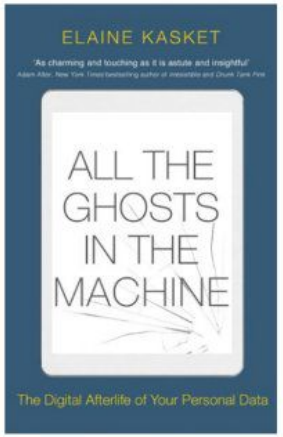
Let's talk about digital death

Online Afterlives: Immortality, Memory and Grief in Digital Culture

By Davide Sisto (translated by Bonnie McClellan-Broussard)

MIT Press: 2020. 216 pp. £15.99



All the Ghosts in the Machine: Illusions of Immortality in the Digital Age

By Elaine Kasket

Robinson: 2020. 304 pp. £9.99

After a gradual disappearance of the dead from our daily lives in the twentieth century, at least in wealthier countries, we are witnessing a reversal of this trend: the dead are returning to haunt us. A process that began with the emergence of the internet has accelerated with the advent of social media. Now each of us, when we pass

involving philosophers and theologians, but also a range of new experts including policymakers, engineers and app designers.

Davide Sisto, a philosopher and authority on 'thanatechnology' at the University of Turin, begins with an exploration of the paradoxical status of the dead: they are, he argues, "an absent presence". From the perspective of the living, the dead are present only as memories or images. Photography revolutionized this form of presence in making available to many the kind of lifelike images that previously had been available only to those wealthy enough to have statues and portraits made. Subsequent new technologies such as radio, television and now social media have added many more attributes to this presence: such as voice, movement and now the possibility of interactive communication.

Online Afterlives is a well-organized work, packed with insights. In the first part, Sisto analyses the idea of digital immortality, defining it as the ability to make virtual copies of ourselves based on our digital footprints. Leaning on Bell and Gemmell's work[2], he distinguishes between two types: 'one-way immortality' is like an interactive memory box in which the collected data is passive; while 'two-way immortality' offers the possibility of a real relationship with the avatar of the deceased. Sisto sketches some of the pop-cultural explorations of this

relations with the dead is not always needed. This allows her to take an open-minded stance on the variety of digital death-related phenomena in digital culture and, indeed, to propose her own vision of a culture of grief.

The core of her argument is this: the digital environment is perfectly designed to facilitate a culture of remembering — and even communicating with — the dead. It permits the creation of new collective practices that broaden the western model of grieving currently dominated by hyper-individualism and self-sufficiency. But this new culture of grief — as Kasket stresses — also poses new challenges, and requires us to grapple with issues of control, privacy and access to data.

What Kasket shows, recounting many moving stories, is that the fusion of corporate power and personal bereavement can cause tremendous tension and emotional stress. The tech giants such as Google and Facebook are better at monetizing the digital needs of the living than managing the data of the dead. Although they are introducing options, such as Facebook's 'memorialized accounts', Kasket proves that many dilemmas remain. For example, she invites us to consider a father whose 20-year-old daughter, Hollie, has been killed by her boyfriend. She shows how Hollie's digital legacy could give unexpected joy and relief to her bereaved family. But at the same time, she shows how emotionally draining it could be to deal with