Unit 5 Paper details: Please read the Issue section of Unit 5, "When Do Online Avatars Die?" and share your reactions/feelings with respect to this article. Main content Issue: When Do Online Avatars Die? Interactive Situation QuestionsEnlarge Image Frenzel/Shutterstock 30 million. That’s the number of Facebook users who died during the service’s first eight years in operation. The number of deceased Facebook members is projected to outnumber its living avatars by 2030. Have you ever wondered what happens to online avatars when their owners pass away? Consider the 2011 case of a 15-year-old high school student in Virginia who tragically committed suicide. His parents wanted to access their son’s social media accounts to look for clues that might explain his motivation. Their request for access was denied. Facebook’s denial was based on state statutes, federal laws, and language in the 1986 Electronic Communications Privacy Act that protects the privacy of minors. “Do you want to live forever?” Valeria asks Conan in the movie Conan the Barbarian (1982) As a result of the ensuing controversy, the Virginia Legislature passed HB 1752, or the Virginia Digital Assets Law. This law allows parents or legal guardians of minors to access their childrens’ social media accounts. According to the official summary, this bill “Provides that the personal representative of a deceased minor has the power to assume the deceased minor’s terms of service agreement with an Internet service provider, communications service provider, or other online account service provider for the purposes of consenting to and obtaining the disclosure of the minor’s digital assets.” The Virginia law focuses on the rights of minors and their parents, but who has rights to an adult’s digital data after his or her death? The estate of a deceased person includes personal effects such as clothing and household implements. It may also include financial assets and real estate. An executor is an individual whose responsibility is to dispose of these personal effects. The ability of an executor to access the digital assets of a deceased person depends on a myriad of state and federal laws as well as the policies of various social media services. The terms of use for most social media sites are nontransferable, which means that account access and use cannot be transferred from a deceased person to an executor. The images and posts on social media sites are just a fraction of the many digital assets that people accumulate throughout their lives. Other digital assets include accounts for email, online banking, bill paying, and medical records. Each category of assets has different implications for an individual’s privacy rights, which legally remain in effect after death. Processes and procedures exist for releasing bank accounts and similar financial assets to an executor. However, purely online financial holdings such as bitcoin and PayPal accounts may be more difficult to access, as the executor must prove his or her credentials digitally rather than in person. Email accounts, which hold correspondence with multiple individuals, are even further complicated. Messages from correspondents were sent with an expectation of privacy. Neither the sender nor the recipient may want the executor rifling through old love letters, complaints, or messages that might have repercussions on their reputations. As with other aspects surrounding estate planning, a fully executed will is the key to ensuring that real and digital assets are handled in a specific way and by specified people. Some people may wish their online avatars to live forever, whereas others may wish to exercise their right to be forgotten. Facebook will now memorialize deceased members’ accounts when provided with proof of death. A memorialized account cannot be modified and logins are not allowed. The account can, however, accept messages and content that was posted, before the account holder’s demise continues to be accessible. Individuals may not live forever, but their social media avatars can continue to exist in cyberspace. Online identities can be frozen in time, surrounded by posts and images accumulated over a lifetime and now set as a permanent, unalterable record of a person’s activities, friends, and accomplishments. It makes you think: What kind of digital legacy are you leaving behind? Try It! Who can paw through your digital belongings after you die? There’s never a good time to think about your demise, but no one is immortal. Keeping an eye on your digital reputation includes specifying your wishes for the disposition of your digital assets even after you are no longer around to manage them. 1 Visit one of the social networking sites that you frequently use. Search for its policy about access to the accounts of deceased members. Briefly describe the policy and explain if you are satisfied with its terms. If the site offers user-modifiable settings, are the default settings appropriate or would you choose to change the settings? 2 Use Google to search for online resources about digital death and digital afterlife, or view the resources at www.thedigitalbeyond.com/online-services-list/. Some of the services are a little strange such as the crowd-funded b-emortal.com, which aims to provide an everlasting memorial for loved ones that includes, for a small fee, a photo and a reading of the person’s name annually for the rest of time. The idea is that you don’t really die until you are forgotten. List and briefly describe two other online digital death resources that you were surprised to find. 3 Visit www.digitalpassing.com and search for List of State Laws. Find your state in the list, and read its associated laws and proposals. Read about your state’s policy regarding digital property in the event of death. Write a brief summary of the laws and/or proposals in your state. 4 One of the first things that you can do when creating your own digital legacy is to compile a list of your digital assets and accounts. Visit www.funeralwise.com/learn/digitallegacy/ to get some tips on how to accurately compile your own list. Then, make a list of your own digital accounts. You don’t need to be specific, but you should mention general accounts such as online banking, social media, email, smartphone, and computers. 5 Document how you want your online accounts handled in the event of your own death, and decide who will handle your accounts. Also think about and determine a place where you would store your list of digital accounts and assets, including who and how your accounts should be handled. Interactive Situation Questions Infoweb You’ll find updates at the NP2016 Unit 5 InfoWeb. www.infoweblinks.com/np2016/Unit05 Issue What Do You Think? Have you ever thought about what happens to the social media accounts of people who are deceased? Do you know who might have access to your social media accounts if you meet an untimely death? Are memorialized accounts a good idea?