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Vale dearest Sandra: death and digital afterlives

Biographical note:

Donna Lee Brien is Professor of Creative Industries and Chair of the Creative and Performing Arts Research Group at Central Queensland University, Australia. Co-founding convenor of the Australasian Food Studies Network, Donna is the Commissioning Editor, Special Issues, for *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, on the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, a Foundation Editorial Board member of *Locale: the Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies*, and Past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs. Donna has been writing and researching genres of creative non-fiction for the past two decades.

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A dear friend died recently.

I became aware of Sandra's death when another close friend, one of my best, Jen Webb, posted the terrible news on Facebook. I didn't, however, see Jen's original post. It was a busy day, even more than usual. I was away from home attending a research conference, and ducking out of sessions to meet with colleagues with whom it was a pleasure to touch base with face-to-face instead of our usual staccato interactions on video- or tele-conference.

After my last such meeting and a casual and noisy dinner when, unusually, no-one checked their phones or tablets, I was happily tired in my room, packing and half watching a television series set in the 1960s. The chief detective racing back to the police station to make a phone call reminded me to charge my smart phone. When it flashed into life, a long line of emails noting comments on a Facebook message made it clear that the worst had happened. I scanned back – and saw Jen's original message. I immediately tried to phone her and noted a number of missed calls that evening. When we spoke, I finally heard the news in person. Then my husband phoned and I heard his digest version of the messages on Facebook before, later that evening, eventually sitting down to read them all myself.

That was last Friday. It is now a week later. Sandra's Facebook site is still online and operational. This reveals she was posting images and reposts until close to her end – all her final messages are to do with animals, including a heartrending post about shutting down puppy farms. She abhorred and campaigned tirelessly against cruelty to animals, especially native animals, dogs and the horses she so adored. Her dry sense of humour is also evident. Her post on 11 August 2014, only six weeks past, is a photo of a gorgeously fat green tree frog, lying back, with his little hands crossed over his belly. The (now heartbreaking) slogan on the image reads 'So much to do ...'. The second part, 'so little desire to do it', is not at all representative of Sandra – and that was probably the joke she meant. For, ever since I have known her – more than a decade – Sandra was one of life's doers. Whether it was managing a major grant project, completing her own creative work, moving house or organising a conference, exhibition or wedding – if you wanted something to 'go off' brilliantly, you asked Sandra to take charge. Those posts also show that, in the days before she died, she was still 'liking' the posts of her friends and colleagues, supporting our endeavours and (mis)adventures as she always had.

Then, her posts stop.

What follows is a series of shocked messages from family, colleagues, friends and representatives of professional associations, all attracting further commiserations and every one lamenting a sense of dreadful loss. The general tone is disbelief together with an outpouring of how much everyone valued Sandra. Posts came from Sandra's home, Canberra, from all over Australia and from places across the globe. It is clear that, in the shock of the days after her death, Sandra's Facebook site provided a space whereby widely dispersed individuals could not only pay homage to Sandra's life and work, but also share their grief and offer support to each other. It seems natural that this site of regular, albeit happier communication, rapidly became a site of collective online mourning.

Scanning back through Sandra's posts, I wonder what will happen to her site now.

Writers always leave a legacy – their publications and works in progress, journals, letters, drafts and notes – continuing to circulate when they die. Some authors have tried to control this cultural inheritance, culling, burning or otherwise seeking to edit some of these materials and the stories they tell, but such actions can never destroy items already outside their own collections or in the public domain. Today, however, when someone dies, he or she additionally leaves behind a plethora of online and other digital information and, in this instance, what is 'public' and 'private' is often blurred. Apart from material that is beyond individual control – our names and records in various official repositories, for instance – there are also our personal and work email accounts, biographies and online profiles as well as a wealth of textual, visual and multimedia information including photographs and possibly videos and sound files posted on various social media and other websites, or stored in the 'cloud'. Some of these sites have policies relating to what happens to this material after the death of the named author/maker, while others do not. There is also a growing graveyard of dormant, but still visible, sites on the Internet with no one to contact, even if there was a past process in place.

In 2009, Facebook employee Max Kelly explained how the death of a close colleague prompted the company to instigate the 'memorial profile'. Clarifying the rationale, he wrote:

When someone leaves us, they don't leave our memories or our social network. To reflect that reality, we created the idea of "memorialized" profiles as a place where people can save and share their memories of those who've passed. ... We try to protect the deceased's privacy by removing sensitive information such as contact information and status updates. Memorializing an account also prevents anyone from logging into it in the future, while still enabling friends and family to leave posts on the profile Wall in remembrance.

Kelly's use of euphemisms for death and the dead – 'when someone leaves us', 'those who've passed' and 'the deceased' – is common in this context, reflecting, I believe, both a sincere desire to protect the raw feelings of the grieving and the general discomfort many in the West have regarding death and dying – whether in particular instances, or in general. Kelly, indeed, continued:

We understand how difficult it can be for people to be reminded of those who are no longer with them, which is why it's important when someone passes away that their friends or family contact Facebook to request that a profile be memorialized (2009).

Memorialisation converts a Facebook member's profile into a tribute page that, while lacking some personal information and detail, no longer disconcertingly appears in search results. While those who are already friends can still post messages on tribute pages, this has created some ill feeling among those who aren't, but who still want to post in such a sad eventuality, such as parents who may not be Facebook friends with a child at the time of his or her death.

Facebook will, also, its policy states, remove a profile at the request of the next of kin and this is obviously an action preferred by some. Writing in *The New York Times*,

Jenna Wortham noted the problem of Facebook ‘shuffling a dead friend through its social algorithms’, a process by which no longer living members circulate endlessly as ‘ghosts in its machine’ (2010). This can, she warns, increase pain for the grieving when they are continually reminded of someone they have lost and can be especially shocking when a name pops up out of context. Widow Donna Rawling was quoted in an article in *The Guardian* as stating that although she had managed to wind up most of her late husband’s affairs, she found his continuing presence on the web ‘eerie’ and disturbing and wished she could have some of the information removed. She explained:

Normally you get in touch with friends and acquaintances and colleagues and let them know what’s happened ... That gives you closure and stops you being contacted in future and asked how you both are. But to my knowledge, there’s no way of doing that with the web. The perception is that he is still alive and well and having fun on his motorbike (qtd. in Jefferies 2009).

Twitter states that it will deactivate accounts upon being provided with proof of death and a statement of the relationship of the requester to ‘the deceased user or their estate’ (2014). Counter intuitively, this can only be submitted to Twitter, Inc. by hard copy mail or fax although, thereafter, all communications will be conducted ‘via email’ (Twitter 2014). On the 19th of August this year, Twitter also added a policy statement regarding the removal of images or videos of ‘deceased individuals, from when critical injury occurs to the moments before or after death’ (Twitter 2014). This was seemingly in response to Robin Williams’ daughter cancelling her account after grisly photoshopped images of her late father were sent to her via Twitter (Musil 2014). Information from Twitter on this removal notes, however, that when reviewing such requests, it ‘considers public interest factors such as the newsworthiness of the content’ and warns that the company ‘may not be able to honor every request’ (Twitter 2014).

Wikipedia has a memorial listing of ‘deceased Wikipedians’ who have made a significant contribution to Wikipedia. It also has a page of guidelines outlining its ‘organized procedure for dealing with the accounts, userpages, and user rights of deceased Wikipedians as established by community consensus’ (Wikipedia 2014), including that, after stringent verification, user pages are ‘ordinarily fully edit-protected after the user has died’ to prevent ‘vandalism’, any automatic subscriptions are deleted and, ‘by default, constructively contributing Wikipedians should be honored with a listing at ‘WP:RIP’. Wikipedia adds that a colleague of an editor ‘may create a memorial page to honor the deceased, as long as the family has not objected and the user did not object to it prior to their death’ (Wikipedia 2014).

There are many online sites and services that do not, however, have any policy – or seemingly, any way of dealing with such situations. Even armed with information and authority, removing an online presence is not always easy. Google has, for example, information regarding ‘Obtaining a deceased person’s YouTube videos’ online in their ‘Help’ section but notes that this is lengthy, difficult and unlikely to be successful: ‘in rare cases we *may* be able to provide that information to an authorized representative of the deceased person ... Any decision to provide the contents of a

deceased person's account will be made only after a careful review' (Google 2014). They also warn that the process of 'application to obtain video content is a lengthy process with multiple waiting periods. Further, Google will not produce video content that is already publicly available (Google 2014).

Some online contacts may, conversely, feel pain when profiles and/or other content disappear (Cheng 2010) – I know I would feel sadder if Sandra's profile and posts weren't online. Valuable intellectual property can also be lost if an account is automatically deleted after a certain period of inaction as in, for example, Dropbox's free accounts which are deleted after a year of inactivity (Dropbox 2104).

We all selectively cultivate our public identities and, as writers, attempt this, at least in part, through our writing. Yet, no matter how carefully we might plan, no one can control the meaning others take from our work, and the persona that, therefore, lives on in public memory. Thinking about Sandra, my memories are of a blend of our actual and our online interactions, but also vividly of her writings. I have a folder named 'Sandra Burr' in the 'My documents' folder of my laptop as well as an email folder with the descriptor 'S Burr' on that computer. Apart from the many word and pdf documents created by Sandra in these and other folders on my hard drive and stored on Dropbox, these are also echoed in my various external backup systems. There are many drafts and versions of articles, conference presentations and papers, and reports that Sandra, Jen and I wrote together – these are variously named BurrBrienWebb, BurrWebbBrien, WebbBurrBrien and so on, together with the date that version was made and/or circulated. Many have a letter after the date, showing that on that day (or night), there were many versions flipping back and forth between us. The day and time determined whether we were in our various offices or homes, and sometimes we were all away from home and even overseas, but still the drafts circulated until they were ready to submit for publication or deliver to an audience. Sandra was not only a careful editor and an expert spotter of the obscure or redundant phrase. Many of our drafts were constructed with blank areas where one author was lost for words, and one of Sandra's great skills was to be able to fill these with the perfect idea, phrase or reference. As we almost always used track changes in our drafting and edits, there are thousands and thousands of comments and changes that are tagged with Sandra's name in my files. These show what truly collaborative endeavours our co-written pieces were. I will keep these drafts, but don't have the heart to open them right now to further investigate.

Sandra's textual legacy will live on in many other ways in the public realm. Like most contemporary academics, Sandra engaged in a range of research projects aligned with both institutional imperatives and her professional interests, but the research that was most personally important to her related to animals. Her PhD thesis (she graduated in 2008) is a model of a self-reflective researched creative nonfiction memoir plus theoretically informed exegesis. This research was inspired by her equestrian skill and experience and deep love, and empathy, for horses, and comprised a creative work, 'Writing riding: reflections of an Australian horsewoman' and an exegesis, 'Women and horses: a study of Australia's recreational horsewomen'. This can be accessed via TROVE, the National Library of Australia's digital information portal, and downloaded from the University of Canberra. She was a member of the Australian

Animal Studies Group and Human-Horse Relations Research Group, and this led to her to work with the Australian Capital Territory's (ACT) Rural Fire Service, helping property owners with an agisted horses plan for bushfires. A skilled and personable, although always modest, public speaker, Sandra was a longstanding and much valued member of the Writing Research Cluster of the University of Canberra, the ACT Writers Centre and the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP). Her special skill was her ability to make conference and seminar audiences laugh as well as think about the material she was presenting – whether this was academic research or her creative writing. Her rare combination of dry wit and steel-trap intelligence melded to gentle sensitivity also made her a popular and influential teacher of both creative writing and creative/cultural research practice.

Much of Sandra's scholarly service was through online media and her contribution can be traced through these sites. She was a foundation member of the editorial board for *Axon: Creative Explorations*, for instance, a fully online journal, and a frequent and valued peer referee for a large number of online publications including *Axon*, *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, *M/C Journal* and *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development*, as well as themed issues of journals or conference proceedings such as Australasian Children's Literature Association for Research's 'Write4Children' special issue and the AAWP's annual published conference proceedings. In my editorial roles, I could always depend on Sandra for a thoughtful review, always delivered on time and, sometimes, unreasonably rapidly if this was necessary. She was always consummately confidential and this means that many academics and writers have unknowingly benefited from her knowledge and insight. Sandra's reviews were models of gracious generosity and her curiosity in this area led to a co-written journal article on the role and important contribution that peer refereeing makes to the scholarly endeavour, together with some of the limitations of this form of review (Brien, Burr and Webb 2010).

The most extended project we worked on together was a nationally grant funded project – *Examination of doctoral degrees in creative arts: process, practice and standards* (Webb, Brien and Burr 2012) that Sandra managed for Jen Webb and I from 2010 to 2012. In this, Sandra proved herself to be an extremely accomplished project manager – 'competent' sounds so weak a descriptor in this context – and this led to her also being called upon to act as a conference and seminar organizer, roles she always fulfilled with quiet calm and an eye for detail. We conducted much of our strategic and organisational communication about the project through email, and Sandra also organised the archiving of these emails in various repositories, as well as the design and creation of websites for the dissemination of project news and information. So vital and embedded was the work Sandra completed with us on this project, that we soon began putting our three names on all project material, including the many publications and presentations developed from this work and, including – in an important recognition of Sandra's significant contribution – the final reports submitted to the government.

Email and websites are also largely the way notices about conferences, symposia and roundtable discussions are now disseminated – whether they be international, national

or local in scope – and a number of such events have Sandra to thank, at least in part, for a successful communications strategy. This included her work on two major AAWP conferences in Canberra (2007 and 2013), the Biennial Conference of the Australasian Children’s Literature Association for Research, *If We’re Being Honest: The Facts and Fictions of Children’s Literature*, at the National Library of Australia (2002), and the *Creative and Practice-Led Research Symposium* (2009) that was a component of our OLT grant and the *Development and Aid Effectiveness: Interrogating Pedagogies in International Development Studies* (2010) conferences, both at the University of Canberra.

Most importantly for future readers and researchers, digital platforms for publication dissemination mean that many of Sandra’s beautifully written pieces are available online. A number of her papers were published in *TEXT* (2007a, 2010a, 2010c) for which she co-edited a special issue (2010c). Some of her work, however, readers will need to locate in print. This includes short stories and poetry (2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2007b, 2008, 2009a, 2009b), as well as two of my favourites: a perceptive chapter on how to write about animals in Elaine Walker’s *Teaching Creative Writing* (2012) and the important study ‘Women and horses’, which was published in *Hoofbeats* (2007c). A piece I re-read again only a few weeks ago to cite in my own work is an article in which Sandra profiled the development of a field of an extremely specialist writing – cookbooks and, therefore, food writing for pets. Her abstract explains:

Across many cultures companion animals have attained the status of significant others in human households. Pets are now family members living in the intimacy of our homes occupying our bedrooms, our hearts and our deepest affections. In many ways, the lives of our pets mimic our own with designer outfits and personalised accessories, exercise classes, heated beds and specialised diets. ... Today pet food is a significant global industry producing a complex range of scientifically formulated nutritionally complete canned and dried food for busy pet owners. In response to this phenomenon is a rise in the number of pet cookbooks whose authors refute the claims of commercial manufacturers, emphasising instead the importance of home-cooked food for the health and wellbeing of our animal companions. While America continues to dominate the pet cookbook market, Australia has produced a number of pet cookbooks that reveal a great deal about past and contemporary cultural attitudes towards companion animals in this country (Burr 2013).

This article reflects on the evolution of human-animal relations in Australia through the lens of this small but significant body of Australian publications. This type of inquiry linked her research interests in exploring our evolving relationships with the non-human animals all around us with that of writing. Colleagues in both these fields, as well as all the other areas Sandra made a contribution to, will miss her and her wise contributions.

Note

1. Almost a month after her death, Sandra’s Facebook site is still online and operational. It now contains a series of messages about a well-attended ceremony held to commemorate her life, complete with her horses, Myst and Indie, and continued commiserations from near and far.

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Research statement

Research background

The personal essay has been an area of writerly inquiry since Montaigne's *Essais* (1580), although more recent research has focused on ethical issues of concern for writers of creative nonfiction (and especially memoir) such as the borderlines of fact and fiction and the ethics of disclosure, rather than forms and potential of the personal essay. This work is part of a larger project investigating the forms and sub-genres of creative nonfiction writing, in this case, the personal essay and, in particular, the personal obituary essay.

Research contribution

The obituary has been investigated in terms of journalistic production (for example, Barnes 2013), what it reflects about societal attitudes to death (Barth et al. 2013/14) and linguistic practices (Todua 2014), but rarely in relation to contemporary creative writing or creative writers, or the effect of the digital online world on the work writers leave when they die. Building on Stark (2006), this work addresses these issues, in response to the death of a close friend/colleague.

Research significance

In exploring the potentialities of the obituary as personal essay, this work suggests approaches to these forms as a vehicle to discuss both the realities of personal loss and contemporary death. This essay has been accepted for publication in a peer refereed journal.

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