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## Mind Your Digital Grave: How Digital Traces Mutate Into Digital Zombies

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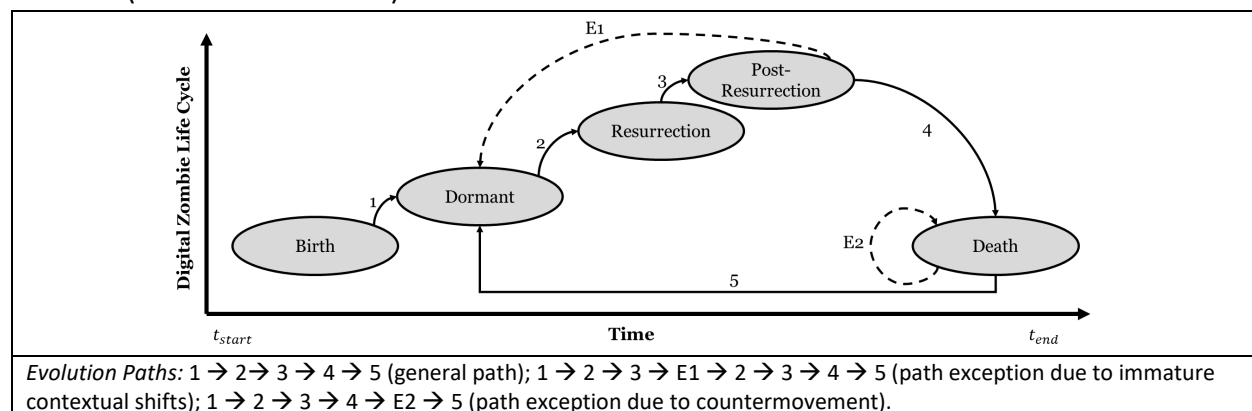
## Mind Your Digital Grave: How Digital Traces Mutate Into Digital Zombies

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### Abstract

In the age of privacy, people have the right to ask a data controller (e.g., Twitter, Meta, Google) to erase their personal information. While the right to be forgotten can save one from being haunted for a lifetime, the fundamental privacy problem lies in the fact that digital traces live forever, and such traces might lead to unintended negative consequences. For example, even if you were able to remove some old tweets that may (for whatever reason) haunt you in the future, other users might have captured and documented those tweets and can use them as evidence against you in the future. In a sense, the digital trace of your past activity finds a new life, or is resurrected, to haunt you in the future. We describe this phenomenon in terms of a “digital zombie” – which refers to *digital trace(s) created by an entity on digital platform(s) in a specific context and at a specific time and mutated in a way that reflects negatively on the entity*. We use longitudinal case studies and process theory to understand how digital traces mutate into digital zombies and cause unintended negative consequences (Figure 1). The model shows the evolutionary stages that digital traces follow to become digital zombies. Moreover, we highlight how contextual changes combined with major external events can trigger such mutation. Our contribution is twofold. First, we contribute to the privacy literature by highlighting the effect of seemingly benign disclosures on the future of their creators (Dinev et al. 2015). Second, we shed light on a novel area within the dark side of IT literature, namely digital zombies (Tarafdar et al. 2015).



**Figure 1. Stages and Paths of the Digital Zombies Lifecycle**

### References

- Dinev, T., McConnell, A. R., and Smith, H. J. 2015. “Research Commentary: Informing Privacy Research Through Information Systems, Psychology, and Behavioral Economics: Thinking Outside the ‘APCO’ Box,” *Information Systems Research* (26:4), pp. 639–655.
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