POLICY

The unsettling scourge of obituary spam

In the wake of death, AI-generated obituaries litter search results, turning even private individuals into clickbait.

By **Mia Sato**, platforms and communities reporter with five years of experience covering the companies that shape technology and the people who use their tools.

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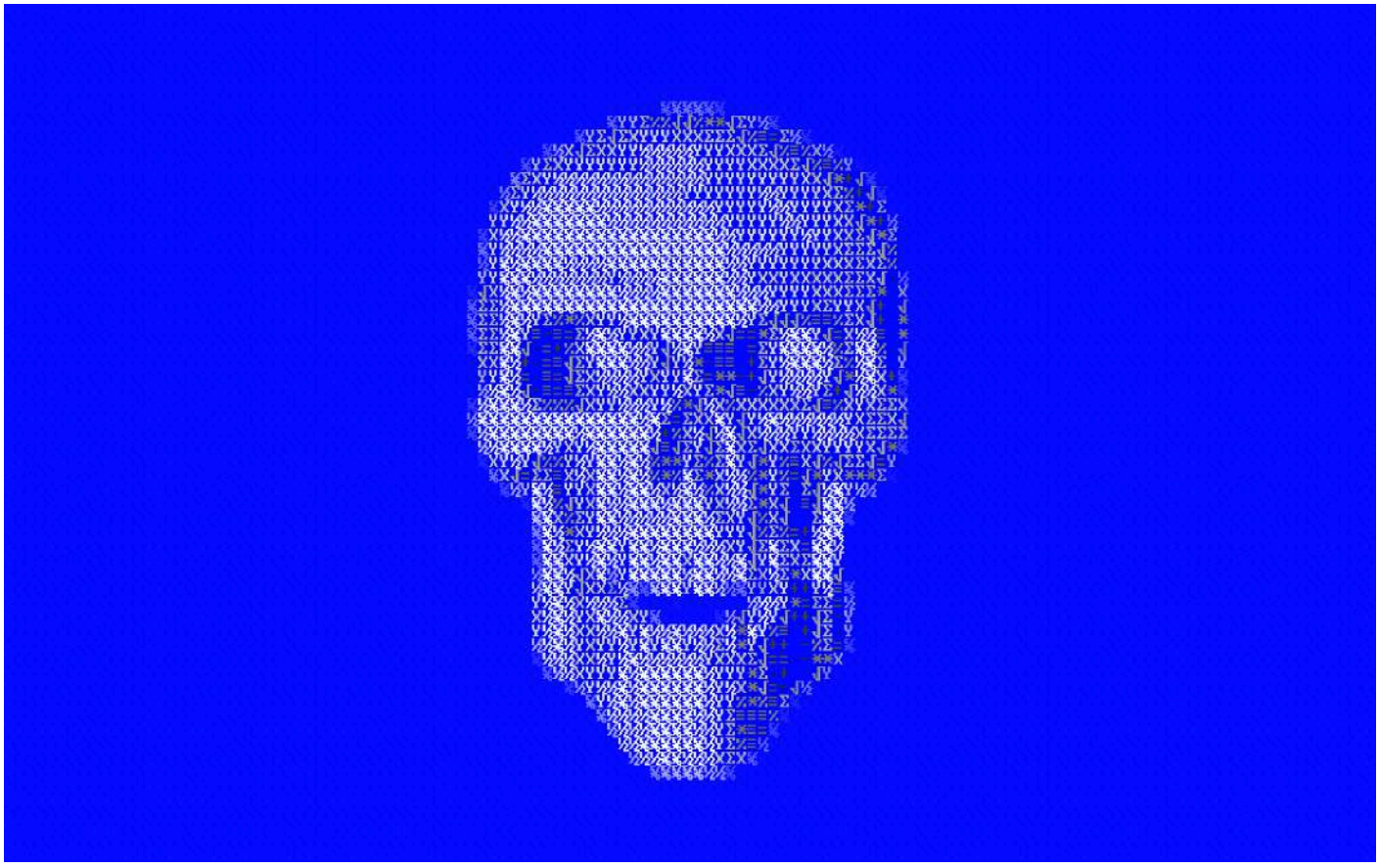

Illustration by Erik Carter

In late December 2023, several of Brian Vastag and Beth Mazur's friends were devastated to learn that the couple had suddenly died. Vastag and Mazur had dedicated their

Beth was an advocate for disabled people and writing about chronic illness. As the obituaries surfaced on Google, members of their community began to dial each other up to share the terrible news, even reaching people on vacations halfway around the world.

Except Brian Vastag was very much alive, unaware of the fake obituaries that had leapt to the top of Google Search results. Beth Mazur had in fact passed away on December 21st, 2023. But the spammy articles that now filled the web claimed that Vastag himself had died that day, too.

"[The obituaries] had this real world impact where at least four people that I know of called [our] mutual friends, and thought that I had died with her, like we had a suicide pact or something," says Vastag, who for a time was married to Mazur and remained close with her. "It caused extra distress to some of my friends, and that made me really angry."

"Beth Mazur And Brian Vastag Obituary, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS/ME) Killed 2," reads one article on a website called Eternal Honoring. Another site called In Loving Memories News says, "Beth Mazur And Brian Vastag Obituary, Chronic Fatigue Fyndrome (CFS/ME)." In addition to the articles claiming Vastag was dead, there were numerous bogus obituaries about Mazur, written with clickbait-y headlines and search engine optimized structures.

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The Verge identified over a dozen websites that published articles about Mazur's death, along with several YouTube videos of people reading obituaries off a script. The sites have strange, unfamiliar names and maintain a constant stream of articles about a wide range of topics, including the deaths of individuals around the world. The articles are clunky and provide little information but are filled with keywords

for what Google users are searching. Beyond the dozen sites writing about Mazur, there is a sprawling network of high-ranking websites making money when family, friends, and acquaintances go searching for information about a deceased person.

The sites have hallmarks of being generated using artificial intelligence tools. Vastag suspects that misinformation around his apparent death, for example, could be attributed to someone scraping an op-ed that Vastag and Mazur co-authored (one article claiming Vastag had died appears to be an AI summary of the op-ed). The obituaries are detached and nearly identical to one another, with a few words moved around and repeating inaccurate details, like where Mazur lived. The articles began appearing within a day of an announcement by MEAction Network, a nonprofit she co-founded.

Google has long struggled to contain obituary spam — for years, low-effort SEO-bait websites have simmered in the background and popped to the top of search results after an individual dies. The sites then aggressively monetize the content by loading up pages with intrusive ads and profit when searchers click on results. Now, the widespread availability of generative AI tools appears to be accelerating the deluge of low-quality fake obituaries.

“Obituary scraping” is a common practice that affects not just celebrities and public figures, but also average, private individuals. Funeral homes have been dealing with obituary aggregator sites for at least 15 years, says Courtney Gould Miller, chief strategy officer at MKJ Marketing, which specializes in marketing funeral services. The sites trawl news articles and local funeral home websites, looking for initial death announcements that have basic details like name, age, and where a service might be held. They then scrape and republish the content at scale, using templated formats or, increasingly, AI tools.

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Yahoo.com is the biggest, most established version of aggregators — but countless smaller, sketchier websites pop up continuously. Some of these sites contain inaccurate information, like the date or location of a memorial service. Others collect orders for flowers or gifts that don't arrive in time, frustrating family and friends and causing headaches for local funeral homes, Gould Miller says. Aggregation sites regularly outrank the actual funeral homes that have a relationship with grieving families.

"I think [Google is] looking at who has the most backlinks, who has the most authority, who has the most traffic, the typical things that their algorithms are looking at. An aggregator is, of course, going to have more of all of that than a local funeral home," Gould Miller says. "It's the core of the business for the aggregators, right? They know that Google search algorithms are on their side."

"Google always aims to surface high quality information, but data voids are a known challenge for all search engines," Google spokesperson Ned Adriance told *The Verge* in an email. "We understand how distressing this content can be, and we're working to launch updates that will significantly improve search results for queries like these." Adriance said Google terminated several YouTube channels flagged by *The Verge* that were sharing SEO-bait obituary and death notices, but refused to say whether the flagged websites violated Google's spam policies.

After Vastag discovered the articles that claimed he, too, had died, he reported them to Google, hoping to get the pages removed from search. The company sent back a canned answer, saying the flagged sites didn't violate its policies.

Some websites churn out a constant stream of clickbait news articles about the deceased. AI has only made the problem worse, making it harder to tell the legitimacy of obituaries at first glance, when family and friends in mourning aren't looking carefully at the URL of an article or its author.

One site called The Thaiger is filled with news spanning every topic imaginable. Its writers follow viral news cycles, like political dustups at Ivy League colleges. Under the Thailand news category: "Man's public poop at Thai car showroom creates

internet clickbait.

Stories about deaths are often tagged as “trending” even when there’s no indication the individual was known outside of their community

But sprinkled among the hundreds of articles of celebrity gossip and recaps of TikTok videos are morbid, robotic write-ups about the deaths of average people who weren’t public figures. Writers at The Thaiger — which is based in Bangkok, Thailand — churn out more than 20 stories a day at times, including the SEO obituary articles about people who died after illnesses; college students who died by suicide; and minors who were in fatal car accidents. The stories follow a similar structure, sometimes using identical vague phrases about the deceased. Stories about deaths are often tagged as “trending” even when there’s no indication the individual was known outside of their community, and the articles appear to be aggregating or rewriting local news reports, social media posts, or actual obituaries from family.

Content on The Thaiger has hallmarks of being generated using artificial intelligence. The obituary articles are written with a nondescript gravitas, using unnatural phrasing like the “indelible mark” a person has left, or their “untimely demise,” but without any actual detail about their life. The articles are written like typical obituaries and news articles, but they lack quotes from family or friends of the deceased and do not cite outside reporting.

Obituaries appearing on The Thaiger have an inhuman, inappropriate quality to them. Some articles promise a “comprehensive account” of the death, or that “the internet is abuzz” with interest in the event. “Further updates are anticipated, and the curious and concerned public is advised to stay tuned for verified information,”

The Thaiger staff page lists eight writers, none of whom appear to have LinkedIn profiles, and at least three of whom appear to be AI generated in their headshots. "Luke Chapman," who covers Australian and New Zealand news, for example, is wearing an open button-down shirt that has buttons running down both sides. "Jane Nelson," who's described as "a seasoned financial journalist," has on a gold necklace that disappears halfway down her chest. Even for the profiles that feature what appear to be real people's photos, the writers are like ghosts — there's no record of these journalists existing anywhere else.

The Thaiger and CEO Darren Lyons didn't respond to multiple requests for comment. After *The Verge* asked about the AI-generated headshots, The Thaiger silently removed the authors from the staff page, along with their archive of articles.

On another site called FreshersLive, articles about people who have died are ruthlessly optimized for Google. Keywords like "Beth Mazur," "MEAction Network," and "Chronic Fatigue Syndrome" are sprinkled in every few sentences. The copy is split into several sections with SEO-driven subheadings, like "Who was Beth Mazur?" and "Is Beth Mazur Dead?" There's even an FAQ section at the bottom — a darker, crueler version of a tactic that is all over the web.

In an emailed response to *The Verge*'s questions, a person who identified themselves only as "Dilip" denied that the site used AI tools, and said staff attempts to contact family of the deceased. When asked how FreshersLive finds and assesses deaths to write about, "Dilip" responded, "That's highly confidential."

"Whoever came up with [the articles] — they didn't know Beth, they don't know anything about her," Vastag told *The Verge*. "They don't have any right to publish an obituary on her."

Vastag's own obituary for Mazur was published on January 12th, weeks after she died. And though the spam sites were faster, only Vastag's obituary captures the actual person Mazur was.

She worked in tech before she got sick — during the last months of her life she had also experimented with generative AI tools like ChatGPT, Vastag told *The Verge*. She was funny and smart, and friends and colleagues remember her as a visionary organizer who didn't look for recognition for her work. She planned and hosted themed parties for friends, danced at Burning Man, and helped patients access care and resources. None of the spam obituaries, of course, mention these facts.

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