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8-4-2015

Expressions of Grief on Facebook: The Complicated Nature of Online Memorialization for the Bereaved

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Expressions of grief on Facebook: The complicated nature of online memorialization for the bereaved

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Just as someone leaves behind a sweater or a journal when they die, a user's Facebook profile serves as a relic of this person's identity. Every status update, comment, or photograph is memorialized within the platform, and gain meaning when left behind once someone dies. Objects left behind are treated with care, and come to stand in for the person that is gone. This includes a person's digital traces, from their untended email account to a stagnant blog. Visiting someone's Facebook profile can be a sentimental experience that may provide some comfort for the bereaved, yet we may feel a pang of sadness when Facebook reminds us that it's an old friend's birthday that has since passed away, or when we stumble upon an image that brings to mind a favorite memory. [1] Revisiting a loved one's Facebook profile can feel like an opportunity to reencounter a friend. Conversations

and photographs live on through the platform, acting as perpetual reminders of this person and the moments that made up their life.

As we interact with others via digital tools like social networking sites, writing a post or sharing a thought may feel fleeing. Later on these posts can seem eerily indestructible and serve as a reminder of who we were when alive. These immaterial bits of ourselves we leave online may seem as though they are more preserved than something physical, but as a young adult on Facebook this is likely not something that is cause for consideration. When faced with the death of a friend, we are left connected to a profile that seems to live on – and for young adults, this may occur without having ever navigated a personal experience with death and mourning. [2] As a result, expressing grief on Facebook is a complicated experience that straddles the line between private and public, comforting and incredibly uncomfortable, with the knowledge that other Facebook users can see what and how we post.

Digital sites preserve parts of ourselves that we choose to share while we are alive, but using the site to interact with the deceased has implications for how we understand death and our own legacy. These profiles come to be an extension of ourselves – our friends feel as though they are talking directly to us when they post on our Facebook wall – albeit a closely curated self. Having in-depth conversations with young adults to learn how they use Facebook when a friend dies is vital to understanding some of the ways death, medium,

and persistent identity are related and are shaping a "'postmodern' culture of grief." [3]

The relationship between theories of grief and communication on social network sites is an important starting place for this research. One discipline that embraces both of these elements is *thanatechnology*, a field of study that is concerned with how computer technology can be incorporated into the science of and research about death and practices associated with it. [4] These questions extend to Facebook and online identity. Thanatechnological concepts are pertinent to framing this discussion.

Online memorialization draws on traditional expressions of grief as much as it does on our understanding of how to act online. There are spaces online in which grief is expected and welcomed (like an online support group or in a Facebook group dedicated to the memory of the deceased) but the Facebook profile is not a space explicitly created for the expression of grief. Social network sites act to "reshape" the grieving process by their very nature. [5] The site facilitates the creation of "networked publics" [6] that replicate our existing offline communities, placing friends next to co-workers, family members, and classmates. These disparate groups often come together on Facebook to express condolences, share stories, and comfort one another, not unlike what happens at a funeral. However, Facebook also opens up a bereaved community to peripheral friends and acquaintances. Among a group of Facebook users who are contributing to the narrative of the deceased, does a perceived audience become a factor

in what is shared or posted on the user's profile? Does the fact that an entire community can see your posts change the tone or nature of condolences as they are expressed?

On Facebook specifically, the abandoned profile is seen as a space for the bereaved to connect with one another or interact with the profile of the deceased while mourning. [7] Among the networked users Facebook becomes uniquely positioned as a dynamic digital narrative – where first the Facebook user created a profile in his or her likeness, but where the narrative was turned over to these Facebook connections after death. [8] While telling stories about the dead is common practice, the Facebook profile is a platform on which these stories are compiled and curated in an ongoing, real-time endeavor, and where stories are shared with the deceased as living Facebook users interact with a profile that is emblematic of this person's identity. [9]

The characteristics and nature of Facebook as a social site may have an impact on the expressions of grief, complicating the process and "rendering loss as ambiguous." [10] This can certainly be observed on the site in the numerous comments left on a Facebook profile. Others have used survey data to conceptually map this experience or engaged in content analysis of memorial page comments on Facebook and Myspace. [11] Looking at Facebook specifically, the site's role in the expansion of grief and mourning has been explored "temporally, spatially, and socially." [12]

These studies, among others, have led me to ask phenomenological research questions concerning persistent identity and expressions of grief on Facebook, including:

> How do Facebook users experience interaction with a deceased user's profile?

> How do young adults experience the expression of grief on Facebook?

> How do Facebook users engage in online memorialization of a deceased user?

Through phenomenological, in-depth interviews I explored the answers to these questions and used emergent theme analysis to draw conclusions about Facebook's role in mediating grief for young adults. [13] Literature in death studies, theories of communication, and research in expressions of online identity inform this research. Ultimately, a discussion of persistent identity unfolds as participants discuss how they feel about the profile's persistence and how they navigate visiting a profile that can be a source of emotional conflict.

By considering Facebook users' actions and posts through a phenomenological lens, we can appropriately contextualize how and why people choose to use Facebook to express grief. The personal experiences of participants show that Facebook creates an environment rife with emotional conflict for users. When a friend dies, users may initially seek comfort on Facebook and want to contribute to the

memorialization process. Over time, Facebook catalogs each post, many of which contain stories about the deceased. Friends post a favorite memory, and one by one these memories build on top of one another to weave a new narrative of whom this person was and why they should be remembered. It can be comforting to feel as though that relationship is preserved online at first, and can provide a space for mourning that may be lacking for young adults. [14]

These posts can continue for months, or even years. Continued interaction and sharing on a deceased user's wall proves to be annoying or uncomfortable for users. As a member of a Facebook memorial group in which ongoing updates became frustrating, one participant says, "…You kind of try to get over it, and then you get these updates. Months later. From his dad, just 'I miss you' in the Facebook group. And so that's the continuous nature of it, [which] is I think the hardest part, because I'm still in the group and so are all of my friends." These updates seem to be a source of pressure, since it becomes clear that these posts may continue into the unforeseen future and users may feel as though they are expected to participate in this community.

There can certainly be pressure to perform grief on Facebook, where the lines of private and public expression are blurred. Even though Facebook lacks the formality of a funeral or wake (and there are not necessarily specific behaviors deemed appropriate) many young adults acknowledge a set of "rules" or what is right and wrong to do in these situations. It is best – and most comforting – when someone

expresses him or herself "correctly," but if the situation is misread in any number of ways discomfort can quickly occur.

What's considered "right" or "wrong" on Facebook is generally a matter of personal opinion, since expressing oneself on the site under these circumstances is a relatively new experience. The individual's relationship to the deceased plays a key role in what is shared – both in terms of comfort level of the individual when sharing, and also comfort with what others post.

During the interview process it became clear that participants would analyze the profile and consider what others were posting before sharing something, ultimately situating their relationship within a hierarchy of relational closeness to the deceased in order to post as was appropriate to their friendship. Participants shared that they watched as others posted on the profile, taking stock of how close this person was to the deceased and what they shared publicly. Many participants explicitly described instances in which others shared messages deemed inappropriate based on that user's relationship to the deceased. When a childhood friend of one participant died, she described feeling annoyed and uncomfortable as people expressed grief on the profile when these same people made fun of her friend while she was alive. Actions like these seem disingenuous.

Determining one's status – whether a close friend or a peripheral friend – is necessary to taking the appropriate action. Overstepping any boundary would be embarrassing, and makes referring to a

hierarchy of relational closeness necessary to avoid feeling or causing discomfort. Relying on this hierarchy makes it easier to express grief, since users feel their messages will be appropriate to their relationship.

As the profile of a deceased friend remains online, its persistence can be a source of both comfort and discomfort. In one way, simply knowing that the profile is online is comforting. As one participant expressed: "When there's, like, this representation of them – somewhere, it's like, you feel like, in some weird way you are communicating with them, I guess." Many young adults I spoke with could not imagine the profile being taken offline. However, the thought of it remaining online forever did not seem plausible either. In fact, it was distressing for some individuals to think about the profile remaining "active" when their friend was no longer alive. One participant was visibly uncomfortable at the thought, saying that it "[takes] away from the realness of death."

While being able to look at the profile to remember this person may initially seem incredibly comforting, it can be a source of emotional conflict for those viewing the profile. Drawing comparisons between visiting a Facebook profile and a grave, users find that Facebook might be a more accurate representation of this person's identity:

> ...I find someone's grave to be very, like, morbid, and kind of like a religious [representation] of their death, whereas if you go on their old Facebook page you see these pictures of them laughing, them on a hike, doing all this stuff. It's like you're

remembering the good things about them rather than, like, their physical death.

The profile's persistence as both a dynamic site and an archive of moments can make it an emotional place to visit, though it may seem harmless and even helpful to have in their absence. For some, the experience of viewing a profile was so emotionally conflicting that that they decided to "unfriend" this person in order to avoid seeing updates and continued posts as they tried to move on without the constant reminder of loss.

The nature of the Facebook profile is such that it lends itself to persistence. The stream of posts expressing condolences or sharing stories might seemingly live on in digital permanence, leaving a legacy. It can be comforting to see that we try hard to remember someone after they die. It might make us feel better to think that their life was important and impacted others in a sincere and long-lasting way. It can also be comforting to picture a friend as we knew them – often at their best – and to ignore the fact that they will not be creating new memories or moments.

Although memorialization of a Facebook profile is in line with expressions of grief that take place offline, the persistent profile presents a new set of problems. In our daily use of the site, we feel forced to acknowledge death in a place that was previously only used to connect with friends. When grief and other status updates are displayed side-by-side in Facebook's Newsfeed those other posts can

seem trivial, or the expressions of grief may seem inappropriate by comparison. As more time passes posts on a deceased user's profile may be unrelenting. Previously comforting, these posts are constant reminders of loss, even as the profile immortalizes the memory of a friend. We want to contribute, sharing our stories about them and honoring this person as we hope others will honor our memory when we, too, die. Reflection on our own mortality can be disturbing and uncomfortable, but ultimately necessary. When a profile's persistence is a given we can more easily avoid the realities of physical and emotional loss and assume that our digital traces will live on without us.

Conclusions

Dealing with death is uncomfortable for most people, but in the past we have learned to grieve with more privacy – within our families and communities, at a cemetery, or internally:

> ...death and its aftermath are in many ways private affairs; feelings of loss and grief may be diluted and misrepresented if shared too widely. Though cemeteries are ostensibly public places with responsibilities to the neighbouring community, they exist to obscure the terrifying fact of death through ritual practice. [15]

Using Facebook to continue a relationship with the deceased is another method with which we obscure the fact of death through

ritual. Rather than address what happens on a physical level, we place importance on what is left behind. Rituals are one way with which we can avoid thinking about death, engaging in an "endless shying away from confrontation with mortality." [16] A Facebook profile's existence may force us to think critically about our own mortality by bringing it into a more public space, and standing in as a representation of a person's identity.

Each time we use Facebook during these circumstances we are learning how to grieve – what it feels like to find out a friend has died, be part of a bereaved community, and partake in appropriate mourning practices. The technological affordances of Facebook blur the boundaries of bereavement, as these practices expand across our digital social platforms. As a result, we must consider the way in which a perpetual online connection to the deceased impacts our understanding of death and our ability to move on in a healthy way. Facebook users are left to deal with the discomfort and emotional conflict a persistent profile presents.

Even when a friend dies, we "differentiate between social and biological death in that the social lives of persons might persist beyond biological death, in the form of the material objects with which they are metaphorically or metonymically associated in the social process of memory making." [17] We give ourselves the task of maintaining the social identity of the deceased, and postponing social death as long as possible. Contributing to the memorialized Facebook page is a key part of keeping social identity alive, but it ultimately allows

and perhaps invites us to ignore the reality of biological death and oblivion.

Notes

[1]   Walter et al., 2012

[2]   Brubaker & Hayes, 2011

[3]   Walter, 1999, p. 207

[4]   Sofka, 1997; Sofka et al., 2012

[5]   Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010; Marwick & Ellison, 2012

[6]   boyd & Ellison, 2008; boyd, 2011

[7]   Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010

[8]   Marwick & Ellison, 2012

[9]   Sofka et al., 2012

[10] Sofka et al., 2012, p. 9

[11] Carroll & Landry, 2010; Dobler, 2009; Williams & Merton, 2009; Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Marwick & Ellison, 2012

[12] Brubaker et al., 2013

[13] Interviews were conducted with 20 young adults between February and March of 2013.

[14] See: Carroll & Landry, 2010 for a valuable discussion of how populations marginalized by traditional grieving processes can find a space for new social grieving practices on SNSs (p. 342)

[15] Francis et al., 2005, p. 214

[16] Metcalf & Huntington, 1991, p. 201

[17] Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 43

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