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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore how and why younger Internet users of social networking platforms such as MySpace and Facebook maintain connections with those who have died or been killed. This article, therefore, examines the blurring or blending of interpersonal communication and mass communication via the web as what once was very private communication—messages to the deceased—becomes very public. The findings suggest that these online social networks enable or empower individuals marginalized by more traditional forms of memorialization.

Keywords

online mourning, grieving and bereavement, memorialization, Facebook, Myspace, social network sites, discursive surfaces, thanatechnology

The life of the dead consists in being present in the minds of the living.

—Cicero

Introduction

Because Facebook claims more than 350 million members and more than 100 million people use MySpace as a tool to communicate within and to expand their social networks, it should not surprise anyone to learn that many of that number use social networks also to memorialize the dead (Hafner, 2009). While MySpace is well known as a resource for establishing contacts and relationships, exploring new music, and for exhibitionism and voyeurism, lesser known is the site's utility in the process of bereavement in providing a "place" for communal memorializing and a surface for discourses of grief after death. As its members collectively spend an estimated 10 billion minutes per day, the online social network Facebook is similarly altering the process of mourning. The emerging roles of social networks in public displays of mourning are fueling a trend that has increasing numbers turning to online communication in memorializing and grieving the dead, a trend that will likely continue (Hart, 2007).

In watching traditions once reserved for religious ceremonies, funeral homes, and gravesites become activities on online social networks such as MySpace and Facebook, questions have been raised about society's openness to and interest in death, dying, and bereavement. What is happening on the

profile pages of the deceased is nothing revolutionary but rather a new and in some ways logical platform for people to memorialize and to grieve. These social networks are proving to be effective media forms for expressing and sharing grief because of the characteristics of the sites as artifacts of and developments in thanatechnology, and because of the psychological needs of people who are in mourning (Sofka, 1997).

Rituals of mourning have evolved with changes in discursive surfaces, and communication media, and because of the fracture of community as a geographically situated experience. Prior to the advent and adoption of the printing press, for example, knowledge of an individual's death rarely extended beyond the immediate physical area where the person was born and lived his or her entire life. This proximity meant that those individuals affected by the death could gather for wakes, funerals, and other rites to support one another and to memorialize the life of the deceased (Doring, 2006).

With the rise of newspapers, formal obituaries quickly became a preferred method of memorializing, replacing epitaphs in prose or verse. Until only recently, obituaries were one of the most widely read and, not unimportantly, one of the most profitable sections of the newspaper (Stephens, 2007). Obituaries not only served the purpose of informing

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acquaintances, or, in social networking parlance, weak links, with details about the person's death, but they also provided a discursive surface on which to remember the accomplishments and note the survivors of the deceased.

The forms and functions of the obituary changed with advances in communication technology. For example, with radio the obituary could be read or announced to a geographically disparate audience. With television, memorializations of the well-known became prime-time programming "specials." Advances in technology usually yielded an increase in the geographic reach of the obituary and in the depth of information that could be offered. Online social networks represent a step forward on both of these continuums, in expanding the potential reach of obituary-like information, and in increasing exponentially the amount of information (and misinformation) on the dead. Discursive surfaces such as those offered in and by MySpace and Facebook, then, can be seen as next steps in the evolutionary process of memorializing, casting news of the deceased potentially to the entire world at the click of a mouse (Oltjenbruns & James, 2006). The power of this reach was evidenced in the wake of the shootings at Virginia Tech in April 2007, for example, when "the global community of young people turned in their mourning, fear and anger to Facebook.com, the social website that's like a universal online student union for collegians and high schoolers" (Gohring, 2007).

This article identifies and explores some of the new rituals of mourning made possible by sites such as MySpace and Facebook as important new forms of representation and even competition on the Internet, and it seeks to begin conceptually mapping these rituals. Friends and relatives are, for example, using MySpace and Facebook pages of the deceased as discursive surfaces and memorials that exist, in the words of one critic, "between the gravestone and that teenage bedroom that never gets touched" (Debatty, 2007, p. 130). In mapping these rites and rituals, this exploratory research attempts to provide the beginnings of a conceptual framework for categorizing the emerging social practices mediated by these online networks by and through which spaces of commemoration and narratives of memorial are created. In so doing, this article contends that online memorializing is a unique form of communal discourse.

Specifically, the research findings show that social network sites are altering the process of mourning. As more members die, it is likely that this evolution will continue. The findings also show that though public displays of mourning are not in vogue culturally in the West, the ways that youth are using social networks to grieve and memorialize could be changing the norms for what is socially or culturally acceptable. Finally, this research demonstrates that online memorial pages are living, sometimes competitive documents that serve different functions for different people, most of whom claim some chain of association with the dead.

Method

To begin mapping online bereavement rites and rituals and categorizing the emerging social practices mediated by the online social networks, this study relied on an online survey of 100 undergraduate students enrolled at a small, liberal arts college in the Southeast, all of whom were (or are) self-identified users of Facebook. The survey was conducted online using SurveyGizmo.com, so respondents were self-selected. Self-selection is not without problems, but it does seem to be suited for this initial study of online grieving and for examining individual responses to loss and to death in a public forum. To promote the survey, a Facebook group page was created to invite participants to the survey. More than three fourths of the respondents were female, and the average age of respondents was 21 years.

Prior to the survey, an ethnographic analysis of approximately 200 MySpace memorials and expressions of bereavement was conducted, providing qualitative findings to complement the mostly empirical survey information. The survey and the ethnographic analysis were separate projects, though the qualitative data did inform the survey design. The survey was conducted as part of an undergraduate course on the Internet and society; the ethnography was part of an undergraduate course on online community. This article combines the findings of both projects to compare how the two sites are used in bereavement and memorialization.

Memorial pages at MySpace.com were found using MyDeathSpace.com, an archival site containing news articles, online obituaries, and other publicly available information. The site offers "the opportunity to pay your respects and tributes to the recently deceased MySpace.com members via our comment system." The sample of 200 included nearly all of the memorial and obituary pages available at MySpace.com as identified by MyDeathSpace.com during the months January to April, 2008.

Historical Context and Review of the Literature

A little more than a century ago, people in Victorian England ritualized the mourning process with very visible symbols of their grief. Bereavement stationery and mourning clothes, including black armbands, identified those who were grieving, and mourners were encouraged to display these symbols for months, even years (Lewis, 2008). During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, public memorializing tended toward "controlled, carefully planned forms of expression," such as funerals and memorial services. After World War II, these expressions broadened to include living and vernacular memorials (Foot, Warnick, & Schneider, 2006; Shanken, 2002).

In contemporary U.S. society, prevailing attitudes seem to encourage a return to "normal" as soon as possible and therefore to discourage lengthy periods of mourning. Even

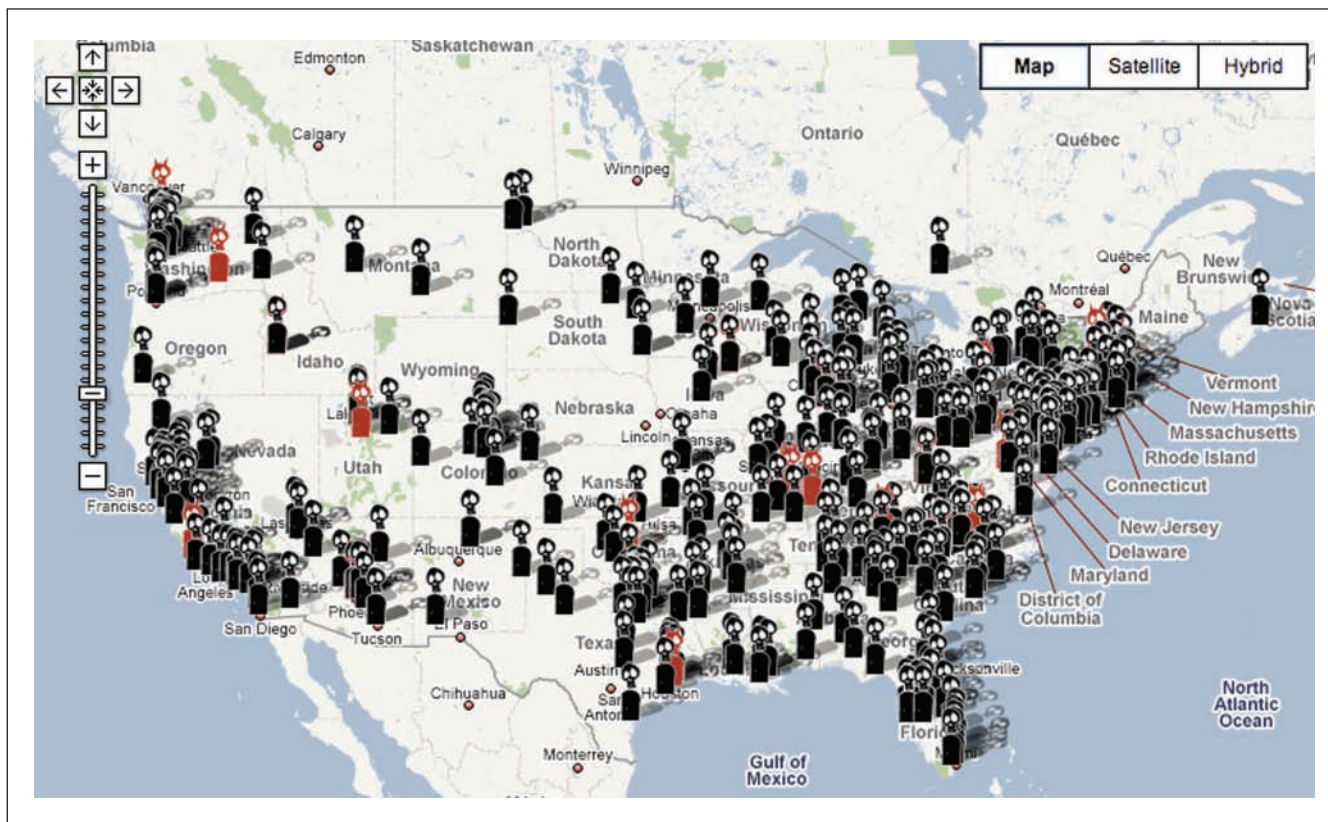


Figure 1. MyDeathSpace.com heatmap of deceased who had (and still have) MySpace.com pages.

Source: <http://mydeathspace.com/map/>

funerals, still a central ritual in the grieving process, have been diminished as community events and as extensions of the church's role in daily life. In the United States, what once could have been described as celebrations have become displays of stoicism, a transition symbolized by the practice of wearing sunglasses to funerals, even to funerals indoors. It has seemingly become more important to hide emotions than to join with others in displaying them. In this light, online memorializing, in particular its more public dimensions, can be viewed as important new forms of expression (Walter, 2006).

Recent research in psychology is changing the ways grieving is understood. The traditional model of grief outlined by Sigmund Freud (1917) in his seminal article, "Mourning and melancholia," stated the purpose of grief as returning an individual to a stable state in which he or she can move forward with life and leave the deceased behind (pp. 288-301). This process includes, according to Freud, working through stages of emotions he identified as anger, guilt, depression, and sadness. A new model of grieving identifies one of the purposes of grief as constructing a biography of the deceased that can be integrated into the ongoing lives of his or her survivors (Walter, 2006). By communicating with others who knew the deceased and in

sharing this knowledge via online social networks, a biography can be created that both allows survivors to move on and memorializes each survivor's ties and importance to the deceased.

Online memorials or "virtual cemeteries" began appearing in 1995, and research suggests that the model of grieving they represent are closer to many non-Western models than those common in the West (Chang & Sofka, 2006). In many Asian and African cultures, for example, the deceased are remembered and included in the daily activities of the ongoing lives of their survivors. Setting an extra place at the dinner table for a loved one is perhaps an odd practice in the United States, but the concept of writing on a deceased one's MySpace wall is increasingly acceptable and, as this study demonstrates, increasingly common. Also noteworthy is the development of sites devoted to memorializing deceased MySpace users, sites that include Yourdeathspace.com and MyDeathSpace.com. The latter aggregates links to the pages of deceased MySpace users, along with stories, obituaries, and blogs that detail their lives and how they died (Debatty, 2007).

While research into online mourning practices and the rites and rituals of online memorializing is nascent, with virtually all of it thus far having been conducted in the social

sciences, research on the rhetoric of memorialization can be found as long ago as Aristotle, who used ceremonial discourses for his conceptions of epideictic speech. This subject is of renewed interest in the 21st century because of the growth of online media and, unfortunately, due to a series of catastrophic and tragic events in recent American history, such as 9/11 and the Virginia Tech shootings (Hess, 2007). Little to no scholarly work on online bereavement exists in the various disciplines of communication, including mass communication. This article, therefore, is an attempt to begin filling this gap. It has been recognized that online memorializing represents an emerging set of social practices mediated by computer networks (Foot et al., 2006). Aaron Hess (2007) has argued that online memorializing is “a unique form of communal and vernacular discourse” (p. 813). This study is meant to begin examining what these practices are and what they mean as discourses and spaces of commemoration.

Importantly, in much if not all of the early research, “all indicators suggest that creating web memorials has a positive impact on the bereaved” and that this positive impact does not vary by age (Roberts, 2004, p. 42). Identification of the benefits of online memorializing, therefore, represents a new and important piece of the puzzle in understanding the impact and effects of online social networking on its participants. The literature suggests that most online memorials “appear to be heart-felt, positively portraying the deceased and noting the author’s grief at the person’s death” (Roberts, 2004, p. 42).

This article looked primarily at high school youth and college students, populations for which the research suggests are often excluded or marginalized by traditional memorial rites and rituals off-line. For example, K. J. Doka (1998) found that friends are frequently disenfranchised in death, and that memorializing online uniquely offers the opportunity to honor a friendship that may have been overlooked in more traditional rituals. Several studies have shown that as much as 15% of online memorials are posted by friends of the deceased as opposed to family (Roberts, Lowther, Skidmore, Kaddis, & Sandoval, 2003; Roberts & Vidal, 2000).

Prior research has also analyzed entries in the guest books of online cemeteries, surveyed the authors of these entries, and surveyed the authors of individual webpages memorializing the dead (Roberts, Bruce, Izarraraz, & Soni, 2000; Roberts et al., 2003; Roberts & Vidal, 2000). From these studies, Pamela Roberts (2006) offered a taxonomy of the functions of online memorials, identifying functions such as providing a means for emotional expression, for personalization in death rituals, for the demonstration of continuing bonds with the dead, and for facilitation of shared grieving even across geographic distances. The ways Facebook and MySpace are being used for mourning and expressing grief online adds to a growing body of evidence of the Internet’s incorporation into all realms of social and cultural activity.

Research Questions

Building on the existing literature, among the questions this article seeks to answer are the following:

- How are college-aged youth altering the process of mourning in their use of online social networks?
- What do these online discursive surfaces and communal grieving spaces offer that other, more traditional ways of bereaving and memorializing do not or cannot offer?
- How might these new rituals of mourning be categorized and contextualized?

Findings

MySpace

Writing on a MySpace wall as a discursive practice is an increasingly socially acceptable method of coping with loss and, therefore, part of a new model of or for grieving. By examining the MySpace “wall posts” of an individual who has died, one can identify or discern a narrative of the deceased’s life. This narrative is in part contested, as any public memory is, making the MySpace pages of the dead to some degree sites of competition among voices strategically or tactically claiming access to the past (Browne, 1993). Individuals sometimes seem to be competing to define the personal narrative after death, or to include themselves as prominent actors in the deceased’s life.

These evolving, negotiated narratives give the impression of permanence because they have been catalogued on the deceased MySpace users’ walls and are, therefore, easily accessible to many. MySpace executives themselves have said that posting on a deceased user’s profile “is a way for friends to celebrate the person’s life, giving friends a positive outlet to connect with one another and find comfort during the grieving process” (Zimmerman, 2005).

By cataloging and analyzing the roughly 200 wall posts on the MySpace profiles of the deceased, five themes emerged to offer the beginnings of a conceptual framework or mapping. The researchers did not begin the analysis with any sort of predetermined or hoped-for themes or categories; the themes were identified solely from a content analysis of the posts. This framework represents, therefore, a set of emergent social practices through which spaces of commemoration are produced and used. It should also be mentioned that nearly three fourths of the posts included more than one theme, and that a majority of the single-themed posts were short, often one-sentence posts. The five themes, listed in rank order of frequency: (a) MySpace as a very visible and public symbol of grief; (b) as a mode of praise and admiration of the deceased; (c) as a method of petitioning the deceased for help; (d) as

Table 1. MySpace

Themes or Categories for Wall Posts Memorializing the Dead	Percentage of 200 Total Wall Posts Represented by the Theme or Category
Visible symbol of grief	42
Mode for praise and admiration	38
Method of petitioning for help	31
Narrative or biography of deceased	28
Discursive surface on which to write of values, beliefs of deceased	15

a form of biography or narrative of the deceased's life in which the individual remembering plays a central role; and (e) as a surface on which to write of the values, beliefs, and meaning of the deceased. A percentage breakdown is shown in Table 1.

By far the most commonly found or manifest of all of the themes also is the simplest, and it is perhaps the simplicity that explains the frequency with which the posts in this category were observed. This post category includes cursory comments that could be thought of as virtual black arm-bands, veils, or flowers left at a gravesite—symbolic and public expressions of loss and solidarity. Most of these posts succinctly state something very simple, like “I miss you” or “R.I.P.” While these posts may be simple and straightforward, they serve to identify the poster as a survivor sharing in and with the grief of others. Here's one example:

i miss you adam, i wish you could come back but since you can't, i wanted to say that i love you very much, we all miss you, ♥courtney (Posted on April 9, 2007) (<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=175255389>)

The majority of the posts in this category were identified as being only in this category, and their relative short length predicts this. There was quite a bit of crossover, however, in the other four themes or categories, with approximately three fourths of all posts containing more than one of the five themes.

The second most common theme or discursive practice revealed in analyzing MySpace memorials was praise or admiration of the deceased, a modern take on Aristotle's notion of epideictic, or ceremonial, speech. An example, posted by “Summer” on February 28, 2008:

I also think about the strong, confident, loyal man you grew into! Of course, you were always all of those things. You make me so proud. I feel so blessed to have had you as a friend. I just wish so much you wouldn't have gone so soon. The world needs more people like you, and instead we have one less. (<http://>

profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=105079497)

The posts containing this theme, which was identified in 38% of the total, are not unlike the testimonials and tributes presented at funerals in which family and friends extol the virtues of the deceased. Here is another example, from “Poquette”:

adam your father and i miss ya so much.but it gives us some comfort in are hearts to know so many people care. your life was cut short for reasons only the good lord knows but while you were here on earth you sure as hell touch alot of lifes. you will never be forgotten. we know we have to be strong and some days are harder than others but if you were here we know you would hold us gently and say please dont cry for me iam fine. (<http://comment.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewComments&friendID=175255389&page=2&state=127!50!1!3569610!1110600>)

A third category includes posts that petition the deceased for guidance or help in specific situations, posts that could be regarded as a sort of prayer. An example of this type was posted by “RJ” on February 15, 2008, more than 18 months after the death of Kayla Rae, to whom it is addressed:

hey angel. As you probably know this weekend is cheersport, and everyone will be praying to you now more than ever. They have all had a rough year and are going through ups and downs in their lifes. I cant be there to do my part in helping the whole weekend because i made a promise to be there for another very special person who is remembering someone they lost a year ago this week. We all miss you, and please be there for each of them. We all miss you like no other and will be looking to you for help (<http://www.myspace.com/heavenlythunderangel>)

In some ways the most interesting theme concerns the way many posters contribute to and therefore author or coauthor biographies or narratives of the deceased's life, biographies that evolve over time and that in important ways are contested or negotiated by the post writers. These posts include memories and stories the posters shared with the deceased and are recording or writing in a public space. It is important that in these memories the survivor usually has played a central role. As such, these contributions reveal a tension between the need to prominently and uniquely include oneself in the narrative of the life being remembered and the shared goal among posters of uniting in communal grief, or of finding or creating a common theme. In identifying this theme or purpose in 28% of the posts, this study confirms earlier findings in a study of web-based

memorializing in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks (Foot et al., 2006).

An example of this fourth theme or post category is by “nicky ray,” posted on April 4, 2008:

My favorite memories with you:

1. Launching kids into the air and into the water yelling “sacrifice!”
2. Hitting up kids for the good snacks at lunchtime
3. Driving you home from taco tuesday and having colorful discussions
4. Jamming with you all day and playing Mr Blue Sky
5. Heckling you from the dolphin cabana
love and peace, nick (<http://www.myspace.com/arielflips>)

Another theme that emerged was that of drawing attention to and, therefore, reinforcing the beliefs or values of the deceased. If MySpace entries can be viewed as a story or narrative of the mourned individual’s life, then these posthumous wall posts serve in important ways as a sort of final chapter, a last opportunity to celebrate a value or ideal epitomized by the individual. A post by “♥ B i l l i e ♥” on April 9, 2008, demonstrates this theme, which overlaps with and was also counted in the category for writing praise for and admiration of the deceased:

I’m so proud of you for following your dreams . . . so many people fall short . . . but not you . . . you lived them to the fullest regardless of what anyone said. You pushed through and you succeeded . . . like we always knew that you would. Looking back, I admire the type of person that you were the most. You were so compassionate. You genuinely cared about everyone . . . and your love for animals was just as strong. You never held grudges or stayed angry for very long. You said that life was too short for those things. You always told us to tell people how we feel. I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you more often that I missed you . . . and how proud of you I was. (<http://www.myspace.com/evanex>)

Once the five themes were identified and agreed on, the posts were re-read independently by two coders. Using Scott’s pi, the rate of agreement among the two coders ranged across the themes from 76% for the writing of narratives or biographies to 95% for the first theme, visible signs or symbols of grief and mourning.

Why are mourners using MySpace to grieve and to memorialize? Could the needs during grieving not be met in other ways? When viewed in the context of the benefits unique to online memorializing forms facilitated by social networks,

and when compared with face-to-face interaction, it is possible that the answer is, “No.” Websites such as MySpace and Facebook can be accessed from any geographical location at any time, provided there is an Internet connection. Survivors can live hundreds, even thousands of miles from the gravesite or funeral site of the deceased. MySpace, then, provides a widely accessible and convenient discursive surface on which to write personal and public expressions of grief and loss. Visitors can come to the deceased’s page while in their own homes. Over time, these expressions can coalesce into a sort of memorial that has been coproduced by often disparate actors.

As Foot et al. (2006) observed, these MySpace pages potentially provide more opportunities for change and development over time than do gravesites, printed obituaries, and memorial services, offering a durable but malleable surface on which to record these expressions and memorials. This is especially important for MySpace because the company, as policy, does not delete pages or accounts after death, unlike other social networking sites. MySpace, which offers space (or pages) at no cost to the individual user, has stated that it will not delete profiles due to inactivity. MySpace cofounder Tom Anderson has stated, “MySpace handles each incident on a case-by-case basis when notified, and will work with families to respect their wishes” (St. John, 2006).

Though it would be difficult to argue that MySpace represents a community as that term has been traditionally understood, it is clear that the website can be used to facilitate the formation of subcommunities centered on or tethered to the page of someone who is deceased. In observing hundreds of MySpace memorial pages, it is clear that these subcommunities organize around the page of the deceased, a page that serves as a sort of hub of and for communication (Lin, 2001). Individuals from different areas or dimensions of the deceased’s life commonly formed relationships through their interactions on MySpace. This quality of the bereavement communities that have formed on MySpace allows users to overcome the distance and separation of the deceased’s social network. In times past, when people remained in one village or town their entire lives, it was impossible for their families not to know their friends from school, colleagues from work, or co-parishioners. However, in today’s increasingly mobile society, it is common for surviving family members, who may not be well-connected due to divorce, job changes, or other reasons to relocate geographically, to have never met the deceased’s co-workers, to not know the deceased’s peers from school, or to be unaware of relationships the deceased formed with people in different physical places.

One friend of Kathryn Miller wrote of learning of “a woman I wish I’d known” by reading on Facebook the accounts and reminiscences of others who knew the deceased. “I’ve learned some things . . . about who she was to her loved ones,” he wrote. He learned that she was “a best friend, the

awe-inspiring guide, the southern girl who moved west and found her calling, the girl who danced to Grateful Dead . . . the hardened but humored alpinist who jokingly radioed from the summit plateau of Cho Oyu, ‘Which way do we go from here?’” The poster, David Gonzalez, wrote of the loss to “those like me, who didn’t know these details until it was too late to hear them directly from Kathryn” (<http://www.thesnaz.com/2009/03/17/words-for-kathryn>).

It has also been found that virtual or online linkages and associations can spur real-world relationships. As a community forms around the deceased, or through sharing the memories of the deceased, often this community is used to make funeral and memorial plans and arrangements. As a byproduct of this process, face-to-face meetings are often arranged, as well. In a study of online memorials in general, not exclusively those hosted by MySpace, 75% of respondents said they had shared the experience of visiting the online memorial with another individual actually sitting beside them (Roberts, 2006). In this study, individuals reported feeling that the support they found online was more valuable than that offered by traditional support groups.

MySpace seems to enable or empower individuals marginalized by more traditional forms of memorialization. By allowing asynchronous, one-way communication, by facilitating community building and making manifest a community centered on the deceased, and by allowing a degree of individuality not possible in funeral and off-line memorial settings, MySpace can uniquely meet some of the psychological needs of those who are grieving. Because it is a more open site, with fewer privacy options and restrictions than Facebook, MySpace seems particularly suited to help those who feel alienated or marginalized, or those who are or feel unable to express themselves face-to-face. Unless members specifically block or restrict their MySpace pages, those pages are viewable by anyone, in contrast to Facebook, for which viewers or visitors need the page owner’s permission to view or visit that member’s pages.

Facebook

Just as MySpace pages attest, a survey of collegiate Facebook users revealed, among other things, that online selves can persist long after a person’s physical body has gone. Just as they are on MySpace, on Facebook the digital selves of the deceased are managed in important ways by visitors to the pages of people who have died or been killed. Unlike gravestones or urns, these memorial pages are dynamic and inclusive.

Of the 100 respondents to the online survey on Facebook, nearly 60% reported visiting the page of someone who had died or who had been killed, though less than 10% had ever posted to a memorial page themselves. This could indicate that adoption of Facebook for or as a part of grieving is nascent. Only eight respondents reported having sent a

Table 2. Rates of Facebook Page Visitation Over Time. The Survey Question: “When or How Often Have You Visited the Facebook Page of Someone Who Is Deceased?”

Item	Survey Response Count	Percentage of Total
Immediately following death, or when you first learned of the death	43	44.8
Never viewed or visited the profile of someone who has died	33	34.4
2-6 months after death	10	10.4
6-12 months after death	8	8.3
1 year or more after death	10	10.4

message directly to the dead by posting to or on his or her wall, or the space on a user’s profile page that allows friends to post messages.

In another similarity to MySpace, the greatest interest in the Facebook pages of the dead occurs just after death, according to the survey responses. Approximately 45% reported visits “immediately” after learning of an individual’s death. Surprising was evidence that visitation often continues long after death and, while much lower in terms of frequency, seems to hold fairly steady over time (see Table 2).

Though most Facebook users merely view memorial group pages and read the pages included in these memorials, importantly 38% reported joining such groups formed around the dead and 14% changed their own profile photos to either that of an image of a deceased person, a ribbon honoring a deceased person, or to some other memorial image. Future research could track changes in participation levels for these various activities over time, and it could explore how these practices inform or contribute to identity creation and expression.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in the survey related to responses to a potential scenario. Respondents were asked, “In which ways would you respond to the following hypothetical situation? During a semester break, an acquaintance of yours from class dies in an accident. You learn this news through campus e-mail.” Options for action included reading the person’s obituary in the local newspaper, contacting mutual friends, accessing the deceased’s Facebook page, and visiting a Facebook memorial group set up in honor of the deceased. Roughly the same percentage reported that it would be likely or certain that they would access the memorial group (85%) as would contact mutual friends (85%). By contrast, only a combined 42% reported that they would look for or read a printed obituary (see Table 3). These findings underline the evolving uses and changing roles of media, particularly for the young.

The benefits or advantages of Facebook over more traditional rites and rituals of mourning are abundant, according to the survey’s findings. For example, social networks allow

Table 3. Responses to “In Which Ways Would You Respond to The Following Hypothetical Situation? During a Semester Break, an Acquaintance of Yours From Class Dies in an Accident. You Learn This News Through Campus E-Mail.”

Item	Certainly (%)	Likely (%)	Not Likely (%)	Never (%)	Don't Know (%)
Read an obituary	13	29	42	14	3
Contact mutual friends	44	42	12	2	1
Visit the deceased's Facebook page	38	43	13	1	4
Visit or join a memorial group on Facebook	31	52	13	2	2

mourners to overcome geographic distance, a benefit cited in several previous studies. One respondent to the Facebook survey said, “People may be far away from the person’s grave or maybe they can’t attend the funeral. Facebook gives them a voice.” These physically disparate mourners can take part any time of the day or night merely by logging in, wearing anything (or nothing at all). This convenience was mentioned in different ways by several survey respondents. Reasons for using Facebook to grieve also included the ability to connect to the deceased in an effort to find or effect closure. In the words of one survey taker, it was important to visit “one last time before letting them go.” Others said Facebook allowed them to revisit old memories, realizing, in the words of another respondent, that “you can’t make any new ones.” Still others said they used Facebook to avoid the social awkwardness of not knowing what to say to family and friends. One respondent said, “Facebook gives me a non-intrusive way to show I care.”

Similarly, lurking, a surveillance phenomenon or practice that is common online, was evidenced also in this survey. Some reported monitoring how much other people wrote of missing or grieving over the deceased. Others said they wanted to see how other people were being affected by the death in order to “identify [their] own grief with the grief of others,” in the words of another respondent. Still others reported being so “heartbroken” that they wanted to share thoughts with the deceased person to let him or her know how much he or she meant to them, an activity or expression similar in some ways to prayer. Connectedness, whether to the deceased or to other mourners, showed up as a goal in a number of responses. This shouldn’t surprise, because connectedness is what Facebook offers or promises. One respondent said he or she believed that “the greatest appeal to Facebook groups is that no one wants to grieve alone,” while another said Facebook offers “a community where they can grieve in a ‘safe place.’”

Conclusion

The results of this analysis suggest that an examination of practices across a larger, more diverse group of pages or sites is needed. It is clear, however, that online memorializing of the kind seen on MySpace and Facebook is important to many in commemorating individual lives and in enabling the

expression of personal grief. Given how important these sites seem to be in life, perhaps it should not surprise to find them playing central roles in death, as well (Hafner, 2009). These expressions as analyzed here indicate both private and communal purposes for these sites in the grieving process, and that as an aggregate they can form an important narrative of and for a person’s life and legacy as a type of public memory. As J. Bodnar noted, public memory is “a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication its future. It is fashioned ideally in the public sphere” (Foot et al., 2006, p. 92).

MySpace memorial pages are dynamic in nature; they will continue to evolve as the needs and wishes of users change. Because of this fluidity, they are difficult to study. However, there are many areas of future research. Because grieving rites and rituals vary widely from culture to culture, it would be interesting to compare U.S. MySpace and Facebook profiles with those from other countries, in other languages. Would an eastern culture be more accepting of incorporating the deceased into daily life, for example, and therefore be more active on MySpace and Facebook memorials? MySpace and Facebook still are relatively new and are still growing and evolving. Only over time will it be clear what roles these social networks play in the grieving process, so longitudinal attitude studies would likely be fruitful in establishing trends in online bereavement and memorializing.

The findings also show that individuals’ online selves persist after their bodies have gone, and that these surviving digital selves are managed in important ways by others. These new forms of persistence are dynamic, therefore, and contrast in important ways with gravestones, epitaphs, monuments, and urns. This notion of persistence is worth further research, including its legal implications, in particular for copyright claims and in the area of intellectual property law as it relates to content posted to the social networking sites.

Finally, it is recognized that any sample of Internet users is not representative of the population in general, but only possibly of the population with Internet access. It is this latter population, however, that most matters for this study of online mourners. It is also recognized that those who do have Internet access tend to be more highly educated, more affluent, and younger than those who do not have Internet access (eMarketer, 2006). A convenience sample of self-selected volunteers presents limits to generalizability but can point

the way forward for more rigorous analyses on this topic. The findings offer insight into how those who bothered to respond think and feel, and into why they turned to online media to grieve and to memorialize (Couper, 2000).

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