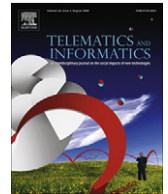




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## R.I.P.: Remain in perpetuity. Facebook memorial pages

 Rebecca Kern<sup>a,\*</sup>, Abbe E. Forman<sup>b,1</sup>, Gisela Gil-Egui<sup>c,2</sup>
<sup>a</sup> Manhattan College, Department of Communication, Manhattan College Parkway, Riverdale, NY 10471, USA

<sup>b</sup> Temple University, 414 Wachman Hall, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA

<sup>c</sup> Fairfield University, 1073 North Benson Road, 222 Donnarumma Hall, Fairfield, CT 06824, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Facebook is not only a virtual space to commune with the living, it is also a place to honor, memorialize, and engage in dialogs with the deceased. This study examines 550 memorial pages on Facebook for age, gender, race, and cause of death of the memorialized, as well as to whom the communication is addressed. Where ritualistic memorials and mourning practices usually occur in cemeteries or at the sites of accidents, memorial sites on Facebook offer an alternative space to mourn that is public, collective, and with archival capabilities. Individual dialogs and memories in this alternative space are not private, and often involve direct communications with the deceased. In this way, the dead never really die; rather perpetually remain in a digital state of dialogic limbo.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, social networking via MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook has become increasingly popular as a way to interact with people virtually and globally. Online communities bring people together from all lifestyles, from all over the globe, to share knowledge, entertainment, and collective dialogs. Facebook is now the most popular website in the world based on unique visitors (Reisinger, 2010). Facebook has attracted at least 35% of all web users with 540 million unique visitors during the month of April, 2010. Another website known as Facebakers.com aggregates data provided by Facebook to assess penetration rates in countries around the world as well as a plethora of demographic information. Interestingly, although the United States ranks first in number of Facebook users with 140,475,700, as of early October, 2010, the US ranks eighteenth in Facebook penetration at 45.2%. In contrast, Vatican City ranks number one in the same category as of September 8, 2010, at 91.6% in penetration but boasts only 760 users.<sup>3</sup> Some additional demographic information shows that 54.3% of Facebook users identify as female and the fastest growing population is the age group of 55 and above with 922.7% increase between 2009 and 2010 (Corbett, 2010).

With continued exponential growth in its user base, Facebook is fertile ground for researchers seeking to understand many types of behavior including the building and maintenance of communities. Most social networking sites, Facebook included, begin by focusing and marketing themselves to a niche market and subsequently moving beyond it (Papacharissi, 2009). Facebook constitutes itself as a place for people to connect and share, and a place to form online communities and engage in discussion.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 718 862 3847; fax: +1 718 862 3846.

E-mail addresses: [Rebecca.kern@manhattan.edu](mailto:Rebecca.kern@manhattan.edu) (R. Kern), [abbe.forman@gmail.com](mailto:abbe.forman@gmail.com) (A.E. Forman), [ggil@fairfield.edu](mailto:ggil@fairfield.edu) (G. Gil-Egui).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 484 995 7300; fax: +1 215 204 5082.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +1 203 254 4000x3043; fax: +1 203 254 4131.

<sup>3</sup> Penetration data is constantly updated by Facebakers at <http://www.facebakers.com/countries-with-facebook/order/penetration>.

Facebook is also a place to commune with, and about, the dead in a public forum. Two distinct page types exist for people who have died: memorial pages established by loved ones/friends and the original Facebook pages of members who have passed. Facebook ‘friends’ to/of these pages can, and do, continue to post comments to the deceased and have dialogs with each other. In addition, through their posts, the ‘friends’ collectively remember the deceased, engaging in ritualistic behaviors akin to behaviors performed at wakes, burials, and cemetery visits. The difference is that these discussions and rituals are public, virtual, eternal, and direct. These friends, or mourners, engage in what Ricoeur (2004) noted as the third level of memory about the dead, the dialog between the mourner and deceased. Ricoeur argued that memorialization of the deceased occurs within and by the mourner, between members of a group, and between the mourner and the deceased. The dead never really die; but rather are perpetually sustained in a digital state of dialogic limbo.

Scholars have researched online communities in a variety of forms and forums. Much of the previous research on or about Facebook has examined its use and effectiveness in educational fora (Boon and Sinclair, 2009), cognitive development in young people (Walther et al., 2009), self-expression and identity development (Livingstone, 2008; Martinez Aleman and Wartman, 2008), or the uses and gratifications of teen and college student engagement with this interaction tool (Debatin et al., 2009). Others have examined the use of Facebook as a public relations tool in political campaigns (Bortree and Seltzer, 2009; Johnson and Perlmutter, 2009). Very few studies have examined cultural behaviors and rituals across a broader audience and the use/value of such behavior for the participants. Of particular interest is how technology provides a forum for rituals otherwise performed in private, non-mediated environments. Additionally of interest, is how the creation, maintenance, and participation in *In Memoriam* pages both creates and encourages community.

This study builds upon previous studies of online and offline communities, by examining memorial Facebook pages as evidence of participation in this public remembering of the dead. Using content analysis as a methodology, this study explores such pages for their frequency, voice, and audience. In addition, this paper asks the following questions. What commonalities or differences do the pages share? Who administers the page and for how long? To whom is the communiqué directed?

The literature review that follows provides a framework for the analysis proposed here, by examining the concept/phenomenon of Facebook memorial pages through the lenses of scholarly work on collective memory, as well as on Internet (Web-based) community and culture. First, we offer a brief presentation of the private and public rituals tied to death and mourning, and the ways in which collective mourning occurs. Formation of Facebook’s memorial pages are situated between *en masse* collective memory and private sites of remembering, creating a hybrid, and mediated environment for sustainable and everlasting mourning. Moreover, we argue that memorial pages act as mediated site of direct communication with the deceased.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Public and private mourning rituals

Death is one great common denominator of humankind; it happens to everyone. Mourning rituals for death also exist across cultural borders. While individual cultures across the globe perform mourning rituals differently, including expressions of emotion, some form of reverence or bereavement exists for the deceased across the board (Huntington and Metcalf, 1979; Laungani and Young, 1997). In many cases, mourning rituals can be elaborate, lengthy affairs, where those connected to the deceased commune in celebration, in silence, in viewing, in feast, or in some other form of communal gathering.

Mourning serves many potential functions, some which affect the mourner and some of which are believed to affect the deceased. Crissman (2004) noted that wakes began as a “waking of the dead” (p. 64), where mourners did not believe the body had truly died and could still be awoken. Belief in an afterlife for the deceased provides a strong impetus for the living to ensure the proper steps are taken to deliver that body to its final destination. Expressions of grief aid in the process of mourning, as they show, to the deceased and to others, the importance of the life that is gone. Becker and Knudson (2003) suggested that mourning is a responsibility, a “heroic act” (p. 713), a need to carry on memories of the life of the person, particularly if that life affected the mourner in a positive and meaningful way.

Death is generally a private, an increasingly secular event. Claiming a growing penetration of humanist ideals – no life after death, Walter (1997) argued that, “Modern death is characterized by tension and accommodation between Christian ideals and secular, rational processes” (p. 166). In other words, in an increasingly secular society there is still belief in an afterlife, whether Christian or another religion. Despite claims about an increase in humanism and about a decrease in the belief of an afterlife, there is still a reserved apprehension surrounding death and its rituals (Parkes, 1997). Death is a taboo topic, rarely discussed publicly, and if it is, then it is mostly relative to a public figure.

Privatization and medicalization of death in the middle to late 19th century moved death from the home to a semi-public locale. Due to an increase in funerary parlors and hospitals, and fears of illness, dying and death were no longer events secluded to the home (Humphreys, 1981; Huntington and Metcalf, 1979). This shift made death and dying a removed event, an industry run by men – doctors, embalmers, funerary directors. The experience of death was in the *post*, where invited mourners come to mourn the deceased, not the dying. The invitees were usually the immediate family, and also those that had been invited through announcement and those that were closely connected to the deceased (Laungani and Young, 1997). Wakes and funerals, and even burials, provide visitors a brief chance to mourn and express condolences to the family. These

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