Full length article

"Why are they commenting on his page?": Using Facebook profile pages to continue connections with the deceased

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines what the living discuss on the Facebook profile pages of deceased loved ones and how these messages change over time. A content analysis of 2533 messages posted on ten deceased individuals' Facebook profile pages reveals that messages to the deceased reflect three themes: Processing the Death, Remembering the Deceased, and Continuing the Connection. An analysis of messages over time indicates that posts pertaining to processing the death and remembering the deceased peak immediately after loss and then decrease in frequency, while messages signaling continued connections increase with time. In discussing the results, this study seeks to expand upon Continuing Bonds theory and existing literature on grief communication online.

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I know people think well why are they still commenting on his page, but when ever [sic] we cared about what people though [sic] right? LOL! You are still apart [sic] of our family and talking to you like this and out loud are the only ways we can reach you.
–(Sister writing on her deceased brother's Facebook profile page, 2012)

1. Introduction

In 2009, the world's largest social networking site, Facebook, introduced a new feature that transformed the way people communicated with their deceased loved ones: memorialization of a deceased person's Facebook page (Kelly, 2009). Rather than deleting a user's profile page after death, Facebook adopted a policy that 'memorialized' pages by keeping them intact, allowing people to interact with the profile of their deceased friend just as they would with those who are still alive (Church, 2013; DeGroot, 2012). Through this feature, individuals are able to use the social

networking site not only as a place to interact with friends, but also as a tangible place to maintain connections with the deceased. While other online memorials such as funeral home websites enable users to speak *about* the deceased (Barnhill & Owen, 2007), as expressed in the post above, the Facebook profile page provides one of the few places for the bereaved to write directly *to* the deceased (Church, 2013). In 2015, Facebook introduced what they called the "legacy contact" as an update to memorialization (Facebook Newsroom, 2015). With this feature, users of Facebook can select a friend or family member to be the manager of their page when they pass away. This makes it so that users can create special posts that go to the top of the timeline, allow for new connections to the page (something previously not allowed) and to change the profile and cover photos (Facebook Newsroom, 2015). As the only social networking site that leaves profile pages active for its more than 30 million deceased users (Blaha, 2012), Facebook provides a unique venue to explore how friends and family utilize social networking sites to continue connections, even when their loved one cannot respond. This study examines what the living communicate on the Facebook profile pages of deceased friends and how those messages may change over time. We begin with a review of the existing literature and an explication of the methodology used for this study. This is followed by the findings and a discussion of results.

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2. Literature review

Silverman and Klass (1996) note that despite a commonly held belief in society that in order to properly grieve a death one must "let go" or "move on," often the actions of family and friends do not show a complete severance of that tie. Practices such as visiting gravesites and talking to the deceased illustrate that continuing a connection with the departed is not a new concept. Neimeyer (2001) suggests that theories of grief communication need to recognize the importance of maintaining a relationship with the deceased even after they are gone, but for that relationship to be productive there must be a process of meaning reconstruction. This process involves "making sense" of the relationship to the deceased and their death; without it the grieving process is not productive, and could be prolonged and difficult for the bereaved (Neimeyer, 2001). Making sense is important for many as they strive to have control over their world, something that death and grief often takes away (Neimeyer, 2001). Sensemaking, coupled with a continued bond, becomes the primary focal point for considering the process of grief, as it plays out online. Indeed, advances in technologies continue to alter what it means to maintain a relationship with the deceased. The growth of the Internet is no exception, transforming virtual memorials from specially created websites to profiles on social networking sites.

2.1. Virtual memorials

Virtual memorials — also referred to as web cemeteries — are described as online spaces that provide a place to honor and remember the deceased, including memorial webpages, online funeral home guest books, blogs, discussion boards and social networking sites (DeGroot, 2012; de Vries & Rutherford, 2004; Roberts & Vidal, 2000; Sofka, 2009). There are similarities between offline and online memorials, such as the feelings evoked, the texts articulated, and the imagery utilized (Moss, 2004); however, more notable are the differences. Roberts and Vidal (2000) describe four major characteristics of online memorials that are distinct from offline formats: 1) flexible timing, 2) access, 3) visiting, and 4) sharing.

First, virtual memorials provide flexible timing, meaning that the bereaved can access the memorial when it is convenient for them (Roberts & Vidal, 2000). Not only does this provide users with the opportunity to mourn at any time of day, but also for varying lengths after the death (Roberts & Vidal, 2000). Second, the access to virtual memorials is unrestricted. With the exception of those who do not have Internet access, these memorials are available to the public through open websites (Barnhill & Owen, 2007). Accordingly, this medium ensures that no user can be denied participation in the public grieving process and users can join in the grieving process from any geographical location. Third, these sites are available for users to visit until (and if) the site is deleted, providing timelessness and permanence (Barnhill & Owen, 2007). Finally, virtual memorials enable sharing, allowing the bereaved to share the site with others and participate in the remembrance of the deceased (Roberts & Vidal, 2000).

There are other advantages to online memorials as well. While offline memorials are bound by constraints such as physical space (or textual space needed for obituaries), online memorials have few guidelines dictating the size of the memorial and what is presented (DeGroot, 2012; Roberts & Vidal, 2000). With few restrictions, virtual memorials contain a range of content, from text and photos, to videos, music and links providing the bereaved with a selection of communicative methods for expression (Sofka, 2009).

Interacting with a virtual memorial can also serve as a healing mechanism for the bereaved because it often helps the mourner express what is difficult to say to others (Barnhill & Owen, 2007). Cyberspace provides users with an unlimited amount of time to write, edit and post messages, along with the ability to monitor self-presentation (Walther, 1996). This flexibility allows users to sidestep the discomfort typically associated with face-to-face death-related communication, but still express grief (Carroll & Landry, 2010; DeGroot, 2012). In their analyses of college students, Carroll and Landry (2010) found that participants in virtual memorials appreciated the ability to think about their writing before posting, particularly when they were not sure what to say. Similarly, Roberts (2006) reported that for 91% of adults, turning toward virtual memorials during the grieving process was helpful when coping with loss. Previous studies illustrate that, with their unique features, virtual memorials provide an outlet for the bereaved to express thoughts and seek support from fellow participants. The rise of Facebook in the virtual memorial scene, however, has provoked yet another change in how the deceased are remembered.

2.2. Facebook: virtual memorials with a twist

With approximately ten thousand users dying each day (Thogmartin, 2012), Facebook's decision to adopt a policy to deal with the profile page of the deceased can be seen as a necessity as much as a courtesy. Rather than immediately deleting the profile page after death, or archiving it through another site, Facebook memorializes pages by keeping them 'alive' through a legacy contact, unless a user specifies that they wanted their accounted deleted upon their death (Facebook Newsroom, 2015). With the exception of deleting contact information, profile pages of deceased individuals remain intact, even allowing the legacy contact to make minor changes or add new connections post-death that would like to participate in the grieving process (Facebook Newsroom, 2015). This results in a community of mourners who are all connected to one another through their mutual friend.

Unlike other virtual memorials that are created after an individual has passed, Facebook profile pages are created by the user before death (Pennington, 2013). This is significant because the status posts, images and activity that were generated by that individual before passing create a tangible representation of that person. Moreover, turning toward an individual's pre-existing profile offers the bereaved a familiar space for communication with the deceased, making interaction feel more ordinary (Church, 2013). It is also notably different because of the private nature of a profile versus a memorial group page. DeGroot (2014) found a high prevalence of what she termed "emotional rubberneckers" in public Facebook memorial group pages, wherein users would comment about their own experience with death or loss with little or no knowledge of the person for whom the page was created. Recent research from Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish (2013) compared the focus of a personal profile versus a memorial group within their interviews, with the researchers pointing to the possible benefit of a Facebook memorial group in stating, "the nature of these groups allows those who are uncomfortable with mourning and memorializing on Facebook to control their exposure by managing their connection with a group rather than the deceased's page" (p. 156).

A limited but growing body of research has examined the use of Facebook as an outlet for communication with the deceased. Carroll and Landry (2010) surveyed college-aged Facebook users to explore the habits associated with grief-related posting, such as frequency of page visitation and perceptions about those utilizing this medium. They found that participants were twice as likely to visit a memorialized Facebook page than they were to read an obituary in the local newspaper (Carroll & Landry, 2010). Additionally, this