



University of Pennsylvania  
**ScholarlyCommons**

---

Departmental Papers (ASC)

Annenberg School for Communication

---

5-3-2013

## The Digital Remains: Social Media and Practices of Online Grief

Jessa Lingel

University of Pennsylvania, [jlingel@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:jlingel@asc.upenn.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers](https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers)



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lingel, J. (2013). The Digital Remains: Social Media and Practices of Online Grief. *The Information Society*, 29 (3), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2013.777311>

At the time of publication, author Jessa Lingel was affiliated with Rutgers University. Currently, she is a faculty member at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [https://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers/594](https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/594)  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

## The Digital Remains: Social Media and Practices of Online Grief

### Abstract

This article analyzes comments posted in response to articles and blog posts discussing Facebook's policies on the pages of deceased site members. These virtual discourses reflect the sociocultural importance of social media policies in everyday life that is increasingly a blend of online and offline interaction. The analysis reveals themes of contested ownership of online identities, resistance to unilateral institutional policies, and social media site users' complex relationship to the preservation of virtual content. As a still-evolving phenomenon, virtual grief elucidates wider cultural trends at work in the construction of identity and community online.

### Keywords

online grief, bereavement, memorial, Facebook, SNS, social media, policy

### Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

### Comments

At the time of publication, author Jessa Lingel was affiliated with Rutgers University. Currently, she is a faculty member at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

## The Digital Remains: Social Media and Practices of Online Grief

### The Digital Remains: Social Media and Practices of Online Grief

With an increasing number of social activities taking place online, an emotionally fraught and culturally complex question has surfaced regarding what happens to someone's online content and identity after death. Social media sites are increasingly sophisticated in the development of tools and applications available for users to interact with each other online, but when it comes to virtual versions of bereavement, both the technical and cultural protocols for processing grief are still very much in the process of developing. This paper examines Facebook's policy on the pages of site members who have died as a means of addressing online grief as a social phenomenon, as well as a point of access to tensions surrounding questions of online identity and computer-mediated communication. The background for this analysis is established with a brief discussion of traditional funerary practices in the United States<sup>1</sup>, before moving to a review of scholarship that addresses grief, and online grief specifically. Methodology for analysis of online discussions of Facebook's policy is outlined, taking into account issues of how online identities are theorized and why blogs are specifically appropriate as a source of interpretation for examining online grief. Themes from these online discussions are identified in order to analyze how social media users understand practices of virtual bereavement, and more generally conceive of constructing online identities, relationships and communities. Analysis of online grief creates a space for understanding a social phenomenon as it is being formed, but also for consideration of what it means to construct, maintain and lose relationships and identities that are formed online.

#### *The social context of online grief*

---

<sup>1</sup> Although this analysis is predominantly concerned with examining changing practices of grief in the United States, location is an increasingly difficult focus to manage in online environments where users from dispersed geographic points can interact irrespective of time zones and spatial distance.

Understanding online grief in the United States as a cultural, collective practice requires situating it in a larger historical tradition of interacting with death. The following section introduces anthropological and sociological examinations of grief, with the aim of weaving together analyses of cultural components of traditional and virtual bereavement in order to determine dimensions of these social rituals that are alternately challenged and reinforced by technological change.

In Metcalf and Huntington's (1991) classic anthropological survey of rituals of death, the authors devoted the final chapter of their text to an analysis of funerals in the United States. In their discussion, the authors outlined a paradox in the homogeneity of funeral practices somehow sustained by a heterogeneity of personal beliefs:

Because American funerary rituals are so ... uniform, one might reasonably assume that it would be correspondingly easier to deduce the ideology underlying them. But this is not so ... Americans claim adherence to a number of different denominations, whose formal doctrines on the fate of the soul in death are dissimilar. (p. 195-196)

Although the rituals surrounding death (the embalming process, the wake, the funeral home) are generally familiar and ideologically accessible, the individual beliefs underlying these processes are much less so. Another way of positing this division between individual and collective behavior is to question whether the homogeneity of rituals obscures actual beliefs, emotions and needs of individual mourners. Along these lines, Metcalf and Huntington elaborated the differences between cultural practices and individual sentiments, where "between ritual and emotion there is a subtle feedback so that it is difficult at any moment to say whether the emotions are propelling the ritual or vice versa" (p. 203). Metcalf and Huntington are here suggesting that the order and general recognizability of funerary practices do not (entirely) mitigate personal feelings of grief, loss and emotional conflict. Furthermore, participating in rituals of mourning requires a negotiation of individual feelings and expectations of fulfilling collectively-sanctioned social obligations, where Metcalf and Huntington suggest that there is something of a conflation of private

emotions and public practices at work in funeral rituals. Ostensibly, funerals as cultural rituals provide spaces for publicly coping with death, where an individual can process someone's passing through displays of grief that cohere with collectively-constructed rituals, which do not eliminate or neutralize individual feelings so much as provide a site for their display. In terms of online versus offline practices, this claim is not so much an assertion that traditional rituals of mourning are rigidly defined and unanimously followed, only that these practices are more recognizable, with more coherent protocols, than emergent, internet-based practices. The construct of subtle feedback between individual feelings and collective rituals serves as an apt description of the halting, iterative Internet discussions where online grief as a cultural phenomenon is being individually interpreted (and enacted) even as the practices themselves are unfolding and evolving.

More specifically, one facet of traditional funeral practices that has been fundamentally altered by technological change involves disseminating news of someone's passing. Within their description of the development of funerary practices in the United States, Metcalf and Huntington (1991) discussed protocols related to the circulation of information about a death, which cover "both the way that people are told, and the order in which they are told" (p. 204, italics in original). In a traditional model, the circulation of information is regulated by the degree of intimacy with the deceased, where immediate family is notified before extended family, close friends before neighbors and coworkers, with information eventually being filtered to loosely-affiliated acquaintances (p. 205). In this way, knowledge becomes a signifier of intimacy, and the order in which family and friends are made aware of a death makes explicit levels of privilege within the surrounding social ecology of the deceased. This process of notification, which is fairly controlled and linear, is threatened, if not entirely upended, by the ability of social media sites to inform an entire set of online "friends" of someone's passing with a single broadcast post or status update. Online, the hierarchy of intimacy honored by traditional information protocols is thus flattened into a unilateral awareness of someone's passing, irrespective of the offline level of intimacy between users.

In addition to traditional protocols of informing a social group about a death, there are prescribed, normative places (a wake, a Shiva, a burial) in which grief has traditionally been displayed. Attendance at these events is highly regulated; as Sudnow described, “information is sought as to the propriety of a visit, to make sure of not intruding on an intimate family scene ... an organizer often emerges who is able to decide matters of protocol; someone close enough to the family to be aware of their desires, but not so close as to be more properly concerned in active grieving” (Sudnow 1967: 156-7, in Metcalf and Huntington, p. 205). In place of a physical space established as a setting for grief, mourning can now take place (either in addition to or instead of physical spaces) online, on memorialized Facebook pages, comments of an obituary, or in chatroom support groups. Rather than coalescing around the implicit and explicit instructions of an accepted moderator for organizing and monitoring funeral rituals, there are malleable, fluid roles that can be taken up by a number of the deceased’s acquaintances, with or without the family’s sanctioning. The emergence of social media sites can thus be seen as disruptive to rituals of mourning on several levels: disseminating information about death, providing a virtual (rather than physical) space in which to display grief, and altering social protocols for roles in collective mourning.

Related to the lack of moderation, a critical affordance of online grief is the ability to craft individual responses to death in an open venue that is less constrained by social and cultural obligations than a funeral home or cemetery. Even so, participating in an online forum involves displays of grief that do not take place without spectators. Although individual messages of mourning may manifest deeply personal feelings, they are subject to, constructed and witnessed by social (if virtual) surroundings, and these surroundings in fact form a crucial process of coping with and working through loss. In their analysis of complex grief, Neimeyer, Prigerson and Davies (2002) posited that “the meaning making triggered by loss is pursued at the juncture of self and system rather than only in the private thoughts and feelings of the bereaved individual. Thus, the self is constituted and reconstituted in relation to an embracing social world,” (p. 239). As a process, bereavement requires both a personal and public negotiation of signification, and

this need for meaning-making is increasingly taking place in online forums. This movement towards online interaction in the context of grief is made possible through the formation of online identity, where both mourners and the mourned are constructed in computer-mediated discourses of social as well as technological protocols.

Having worked through some of the established protocols in traditional funeral rituals, we can now turn specifically to scholarship examining online grief. In the limited (but growing) literature on social media sites and politics of death, a number of articles have focused on social media and death in terms of celebrity culture. For example, Sanderson and Cheong (2010) examined user messages related to the death of Michael Jackson, and the findings indicated that social media sites allowed fans to work through (rather than reject or deny) the death of a beloved music icon. Gibson (2007) also addressed computer-mediated grief largely in consideration of celebrity deaths, but in the course of her analysis of both fictional and celebrity deaths on television and in online media, Gibson advanced the notion of do-it-yourself (DIY) forms of mourning (p. 416), where practices of negotiating death are being undertaken individually and displayed publically. DIY mourning involves forging personal responses to death in an impromptu but networked way, where the virtual venues in which reactions to death are crafted offer points of connection within the deceased's social community. As Gibson has written:

One of the peculiar features of the internet is that it enables very personal and intimate communication to take place between strangers who may or may not become identified as friends. The grieving may find that it is amongst strangers or "virtually located" friends that they gain consistent support particularly when the time for talking about grief has stopped between other friends and work colleagues. (p. 422)

Online grief can thus be positioned as an opening up of organized, established practices, which is not so much a rejection of traditional mourning as a moving past or setting aside of these rites in order to foster new modes of social support. The emergence of DIY mourning suggests that although traditional funeral

rites may continue to be followed, there is a developing interest, or perhaps even need, to craft, organically and disparately, individual displays, practices and rituals for experiencing loss. Focusing on adolescent behavior, Williams and Merten (2009) analyzed social media site profiles of deceased adolescents in order to determine “whether adolescents use online social networking to cope with the death of a peer; more importantly, if they do use the Internet for this purpose, what do their coping strategies entail?” (p. 72). Their analysis found that the users’ peers continued to direct comments directly to the deceased user’s page rather than friends, family and other mourners (p. 76), an interesting contrast to traditional rituals of mourning, in which public displays of grief are not typically addressed (directly) to the dead.

Although this literature suggests that the Internet is being used as a crucial coping strategy for processing death, these behaviors are often emotionally vibrant, but not (yet?) entirely consistent in content. Social media sites collapse geographic boundaries, meaning that online grieving is essentially free, as opposed to the cost of providing or attending funerals. In addition, online mourning can be seen as an extension of the non-denominationality of death rituals in the United States (Metcalf and Huntington, 1991, p. 214). Although displays of online bereavement may reference religion, the cohesion of these references within a single denomination is less likely than a variety of disparate, diverse religious citations. In contrast to the homogeneity of funeral customs described by Metcalf and Huntington, online grief lacks the established history and cultural familiarity of traditional practices, and is a still-developing phenomenon that has yet to take (and in fact may never take) a rigidly-defined shape.

#### *Social media and displays of grief*

An extended examination of the formulation of online identity is beyond the scope of this article, however, given that this analysis centers on online discussions, it is worth stating briefly how computer-mediated relationships are here understood. This analysis follows Rybas and Gajjala’s (2007) argument that technological interaction should be examined as an embodied practice in which “subjects/objects produce selves - through typing, writing, image manipulation, creation of avatars, digital video and audio -



and engage in practices of everyday life at these interfaces" (Cyberethnography, para. 4). Resistance to analyzing the embodiment of online behavior stems at least partially from the characterization of digital life as requiring an eschewing of the physical, when in fact logging on to a computer and signing into a social media account by no means negates one's physical experiences and is furthermore a continuation of one's embodied, socially-constructed reality (Race in Cyberspace, para. 1). In the following analysis of online interaction, comments on blogs and references to social media are assumed to be the result of technologically mediated and enabled social practices rather than a metamorphosis from the purely physical to the disembodied virtual. This strain of interpretation is particularly apt in a discussion of the emotional and social stakes in virtual mourning, where at least two kinds of construction are at work: the online identities of deceased users are (re)constructed in new and different ways by those in a process of grieving for the lost, and as well, mourners construct themselves in relationship to loss through online participation.

### *Methodology*

An online phenomenon requires analysis of online discourses. This paper focuses on conversations that have taken place in reaction to articles, announcements and blog posts disseminating information and expressing opinions about Facebook's decisions related to policies on, access to and maintenance of profiles and pages of deceased site members. Articles were located by querying search engines for web pages related to Facebook's policies on deceased site members. Texts were selected based on their coverage of Facebook's policies and the presence of related discussions in comment forums. These virtual discourses, unfolding asymmetrically and presumably between strangers, are analyzed using the article or blog text as contextual background and the comments as the primary source of interpretation. A sample of individual quotes is positioned as illustrative of social negotiations of online protocols in response to death. The themes that emerge from these discussions speak to some of the tensions resulting from the emergence of online grief, as demonstrated by or performed in social media

sites. These discussions can be read as a hashing out of the technological protocols (Jenkins, 2006) arising from experiences with online grief. Following Jenkins (2006), protocols refer to “social and cultural practices that have grown up around ... technology” (p. 13-14). As people have begun to spend an increasing amount of time establishing relationships through social media sites, the technological protocols resulting from these interactions are necessarily being adapted to include online grief.

Locating this analysis on comments generated by articles about Facebook policies (rather than support forums, memorial pages or obituaries) is a choice that aims to engage online grief as an emergent and contested set of technological protocols being actively discussed and disputed in blog comments and community forums. This project assumes that memorial pages and support forums are primarily (but not exclusively) sites of online grief, while the texts discussed here are about online grief. Instead of centering analysis on discussions that have been set up as spaces to mourn specific individuals, these texts are intended to provide a space to discuss Facebook’s policies. The division between these two sets of dialogue is neither fixed nor impermeable, but the choice reflects an attempt to avoid opportunism of theorizing people’s private processes of mourning as well as an interest in focusing on how social media users think of and discuss policies of sites that form an increasingly important part of contemporary social relationships.

Distinct from using blogs as a site of textual analysis, analysis of blog comments specifically is itself an evolving methodological approach. In their quantitative analysis of blog comments, Mishne and Glance (2006) wrote that “by overlooking comments, much of the conversation around many influential blogs is being missed” (p. 3). Mishne and Glance were largely interested in examining blog comments for the purpose of improving content-based search queries, but their observation that comments “provide access to a different perspective of weblog posts, namely, the impact on their readers” (p. 4) is quite relevant to an interpretive approach to understanding an online phenomenon through analysis of comments to blog posts and articles. A blog’s comments reflect the response of readers to a text, its reception among

its readers, creating an interactive conversation indicating the relevance, impact and import of a subject in readers' lives. These discussions are informal, ongoing and vary widely in the level of analytical sophistication, but they provide a critical point of access to understanding how stakeholders are working through what it means to craft – and mourn – online selves. Computer-mediated discussions are thus used as a site of analysis for a computer-mediated social phenomenon. Research questions guiding this analysis include: What kinds of conversations are taking place online related to policies of social media sites and the deaths of site members? What can we learn (about community, mourning and online identity) from these discussions of online grief?

### *Facebook's Contentious Policies*

This analysis centers on Facebook's policies regarding pages of site members who have died. Although originally limited to students at a set number of private high schools, membership is now open to anyone; currently, Facebook has more than 400 million active users, about 70% of whom are outside the United States. Half of Facebook's active users log on in any given day, the average user has 130 friends and creates 70 pieces of content each month (all statistics from Facebook, 2010b). Facebook's policy on the pages of deceased users has undergone serious changes in the company's five-year history. Currently, Facebook requires proof of death to memorialize a user's page, at which point "sensitive information" such as status updates are removed and profile access is restricted to confirmed friends (Kelly, 2009). At Facebook's help center, users can report a deceased user, at which point a page is memorialized, or, if requested by immediate family, deleted. These policies are in contrast to the preexisting approach of deleting a profile one month after a user was reported as dead (Kelleher, 2007).

The Facebook Blog elaborated on its policy in an October, 2009 blog post, in which the author Max Kelly explained, "we wanted to be able to model people's relationships on Facebook, but how do you deal with an interaction with someone who is no longer able to log on? When someone leaves us, they don't leave our memories or our social network" (para. 3). As of May 7, 2010, there were over 700 comments for

this post, ranging from personal requests for help to sharing memories of a friend who had passed away to extended descriptions of experiencing online grief. In terms of Metcalf and Huntington's (1991) binary between individual and collective rituals of mourning as taking place through feedback, this comment forum provides a striking literalization of communicating conflict between personal experiences of loss and institutional direction as to the technological parameters in which grief can be expressed online.

A number of comments responded to Kelly's post in terms of resisting Facebook's perceived heavy-handedness and unilateral approach: "i beleive you have no right to take control and think you should sort this out so other grieving people have a right to control whats going on [sic]." Similarly, another poster wrote, "I think it would be best to allow friends individually to grieve in whichever way they chose, rather than have a blanket solution for every person who dies on Facebook." Although Facebook pages are homogenous in structure and design, their content reflects the user's interests, identity and social ties, effectively creating an intensely individual collection of media objects representing and constructing the online self. Evidencing a concern for control over a Facebook member's page content, and related to issues of conflict between various members of a user's social sphere, one user responded to Kelly's post by writing: "The biggest issue with your memorial policy seems to be its irrevocability. I don't know what should override: a poll of his friends may seem crass; allowing his family to make the decision doesn't solve the problem of disagreement. But either of those things seem like an improvement over the current system." Here, Facebook's policy is portrayed as problematic for its finality, which is perceived as being particularly disconcerting because of the emotional stakes at work as online rituals are being developed. Additionally, this remark suggests a kind of uneasiness as to Facebook's policy in terms of technological protocols, where the half-hearted suggestion of a poll points to the possible roles of existing tools for communication that have emerged on social media sites (including quizzes, polls, pokes, status updates, broadcast messages, tags, group and event invitations and many others) being incorporated into online grief. Although this commenter voiced a conflicted sense of how best to use these tools in order to facilitate

virtual bereavement, for others these virtual acts of communication form an integral part of online interaction that seems to take on additional meaning after death.

At stake in any of Facebook's decisions about its members is the ownership and control of this intensely personal and individualized content. When issues ownership and control are complicated by the death of a user, pages of deceased site members can become even more contested sites of ownership over content, and by extension, the users' online legacies. Although users in any context could foreseeably object to Facebook's legal ownership of the material produced on its pages<sup>2</sup>, the death of a friend renders this ownership more immediate and emotional. Continuing to address issues of control over content, a source of conflict in response to Kelly's post centered on whom among a deceased user's social sphere should be allowed to make decisions about his or her page and profile. One poster described decisions made about her son's page: "Someone, I'm assuming one of his friends, memorized his page. Although as a family we appreciate that, we are still unsure of who decided to this [sic]." Decisions as to the maintenance over and access to a deceased user's page is here not only an issue of user versus institution, but also among a user's social circle; without the objective influence of traditional moderators for rituals of death (such as a funeral director), these conflicting interests become increasingly contested.

A second theme that emerged from this discussion involved references to crafting, maintaining and preserving records of online relationships. Taking issue with Facebook's policy, one poster commented, "for those of us who had connected profiles while that person was alive, we have a need to continue with that link, as it symbolizes some of our most personal parts of our relationship in a tangible way & we desire to maintain that link." This reference to tangibility in the context of online interactions is a different (although perhaps related) articulation of Rybas and Gajjala's (2007) claim as to the embodiment of participation

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Facebook's terms of service, users "own all of the content and information" posted on Facebook. However, for content considered intellectual property, including videos and photos, by creating an account, users grant Facebook "a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license to use any IP content that [is posted] on or in connection with Facebook," (Facebook, 2010a).

online. Rather than simply seeing the act of being online as an embodied process, this post confers a kind of physicality on the collaborative construction of messages through Facebook, where continued access to a page allows this sense of physicality to endure after a user's death. As one commenter wrote of a deceased user's page: "it would be really sad if I would no longer be able to see his photo's and his postings. I hope I don't have to lose him again [sic]." This poster effectively conflates the digital media on someone's page with the user himself, where losing access to those artifacts is itself constructed as a loss. Resulting from the time and energy spent crafting online profiles and maintaining relationships, a number of digital artifacts – including photos, polls, posts and conversations, the use of which can be called technological protocols – have emerged, both document and structure friendships. Having or gaining access to these artifacts after a user's passing to some extent determines the possibility of grieving online, to participate in virtual displays of mourning and to return to media objects that formed a crucial part of online friendships. From this sample of comments, reactions to this explanation of official policy were varied, but as a whole, Kelly's blog post provides a singular instance of interaction (although largely asymmetrical) between a Facebook administrator and Facebook users, where key tensions arose around the applicability of a universal policy to a diverse user group, issues of access to and control over content of a deceased user's page, and the stakes of having these pages preserved.

In the wake of Facebook's 2009 decision to change its policy, a number of blogs and online magazines took up announcements on these decisions as a point of discussing issues of online identity and virtual grief. The following analysis looks at three such blog posts, ordered chronologically, as a sample of the points of conflict and discussion that have arisen around online grief, taking as a shared impetus Facebook's announced policy decision about the pages of deceased users.

A blog post on Brazen Careerist (2009), a social networking site geared towards young professionals, addressed the recent Facebook decision in terms of privacy and content ownership. The comments analyzed here suggest a deep connection to the preservation of online content for reasons that

include providing a site of contact between the deceased, grieving users and the actual content that sustained relationships prior to death, as well as assisting in the process of mourning. Adopting a somewhat personal tone, the author stated “it’s always chilling to read the words of someone who was once alive and now is dead. Especially when the internet is so alive and organic.” An interesting dichotomy present in this description is the position of death as a static marker of finality in the midst of an online environment that is perceived as fluid and constantly growing. In terminology from Rybas and Gajjala (2007), this characterization of a social media user’s death as something that gives pause to viewing the Internet as “alive” and “organic” underscores the extent to which online communities are interactive, communicative and embodied. Responding to this post, one commenter replied, “I gotta say that, it’s sort of like a public journal and my opinions/comments/rants/posts all sort of belong to the organic public that I choose to associate with. If the profile and posts are deleted, it’s kind of like deleting a part of other people’s lives as well, since this is about a conversation.” Critical to this comment is the division between individual and community, where content is seen as belonging to the social sphere surrounding and interacting with a user. Although deleting or blocking access to this content might be motivated by a desire to respect and a virtual legacy, for this commenter, it does a disservice to the social circle who contributed to the deceased user’s page. As a result of this regular online contact, records of online participation are perceived as communal – rather than institutional or even personal – property.

In terms of protocols of grief, this discussion suggests points of reconsideration of Metcalf and Huntington’s (1991) description of the ordering of notifications are being updated in a web 2.0 world. Discussing these protocols for notifying a community of a death, or collective rituals for mourning that death, one commenter explained the role that an online profile played in terms of organizing a friend’s funeral: “if her Facebook page weren’t still active many of us wouldn’t have known about the wake and the funeral ... It seems kind of perverse to say, but Facebook brought all her friends closer when she was lost.” Although online notification of someone’s passing may obscure or disregard hierarchies of relationships to

the deceased, it also allows a wider circle of friends, family and acquaintances to participate in both online and offline grief. Beyond this, the reference to the perversity of generating a sense of intimacy through online social connections indicates the embodiment referenced by Rybas and Gajjala (2007), where the characterization of virtual activity as being embodied is underscored by the emotional and social ties at stake in these interactions and the protectiveness of online content. Resurfacing throughout these comments are conflicting reactions highlighting divisions between an individual user's page and the surrounding online community, obligations to a user's wishes versus those of family and friends, and questions of ownership of content in terms of the user, the institution and the family and friends.

In his blog on technology and Asia, Crampton (2009) provided a summary of policies for several social media sites including Facebook, provoking a number of comments about the memorialization of online profiles. Perhaps because the site is more business oriented, many of the comments used corporate and legal language, as demonstrated by one commenter's claim that "online identity is a personal estate" and a user questioning, "What happens to the digital legacy? ... Very interesting case about ownership of digital identity." These comments again point to issues of ownership, where the issue of memorialized pages brings to the forefront questions of what happens to the content produced online, who owns it, and how it is used. Instead of focusing explicitly on relationships between users on social media sites, virtual mourning here provides a motivation for thinking about the relationship between individual users, content and Facebook as an intermediary with claims to intellectual, virtual property. More personally, and perhaps somewhat contradictorily to posts discussed earlier, one commenter suggested that the rigidity of Facebook's policy is something of a relief, where Facebook "resolves" issues of funeral planning, essentially replacing the detailed organization required for adhering to customs of traditional (and physical) funerals: "Facebook resolves this, since all your friends can meet at an agreed time, and say whatever they want. I think I am quite happy with this." Rather than expressing an interest in maintaining individual control over virtual identity, this poster seems to take comfort in the decisions related to the maintenance of his



profile being pre-determined, as opposed to users who questioned the appropriateness of Facebook's homogenous approach to a heterogeneous population.

In an article for Newsweek's online edition, Miller (2010) discussed Facebook's policy in terms of managing online relationships. Discussing memorialized pages, Miller noted that "one might imagine such virtual mourning is shallow, but it's not. Here is a real gathering place, where friends can grieve together – and where the deceased continues, in some sense to exist" (para. 3, emphasis mine). Returning to Metcalf and Huntington's (1991) description of traditional spaces for mourning, memorialized page are described by Miller as providing an addition to or substitute for established sites of communal grief. Additionally, Miller's suggestion that this "gathering place" allows friends to "grieve together" echoes claims from Neimeyer et al. (2002) that collective mourning provides a coping mechanism for making sense of loss. Given the need (or at least the psychosocial benefits) for having a shared site for coming to terms with death, and given the extent to which social media sites facilitating construct interpersonal relationships, it is perhaps unsurprising that social media users see Facebook pages as sites for online grief. These virtual rituals, however, are nonetheless a challenge, or at the very least a revising, of traditional modes of grief that existed in entirely physical ways, in some cases with funerary practices with histories dating back centuries. In this way, DIY mourning is not just a technological practice, it is also a social and cultural one.

In response to Miller's article, a commenter explained that in the wake of a friend's death: "I needed [a friend's] facebook page to remain, and have used it to grieve her death, because it was such a part of our life together. When you become close with someone in college, your facebook relationship is almost as real as your 'real' relationship." Interestingly, this construction of online grief is tied directly to being in college, a distinction that's increasingly likely to fade as Facebook's user population continues to expand beyond its original age group. The commenter goes on to explain, "paying my respects on facebook feels like a more appropriate way to honor her life, and our friendship, than visiting her grave, for her physical resting place is unfamiliar and only serves to remind me of her tragic death." This invocation of

familiarity is an important one in that Facebook becomes the habitual site for interaction with friends, and by extension the logical or appealing space for responding to news of a Facebook user's passing. This familiarity is contrasted with the sense of removal or alienation from the traditional, physical sites of mourning, such as a cemetery. This commenter views traditional spaces of physic grief, those for wakes, funeral services and burials, as unfamiliar and foreign, in contrast to the intimate recognizability of a Facebook page. As a whole, this discussion demonstrates that death and mourning do not present a limit to personal investment on social media sites, and in fact, sites like Facebook offer useful, perhaps even critical, possibilities for coping, individually and collectively, with grief.

### *Discussion*

An inherent danger in taking this methodological approach would be to suggest that sweeping or universal claims about online identity and mourning can be made by drawing on a limited number of comments in response to a sample of blogs and articles documenting changing policies of social media sites on the pages of deceased site members. This analysis is not intended to indicate that online mourning is motivated by a unanimously-shared set of beliefs sublimated into consistent practices. Rather, the aim of this paper is to look at the comments provoked by articles on this subject as a vibrant, although not always entirely coherent, discussion on the subject of online grief, which, as a still-developing practice<sup>3</sup> highlights some of the ways that technological change is affecting interpersonal relationships and community.

Themes from these discussions include ownership, privacy and collaborative creation of content, where users who devote a great deal of energy and time to online interaction feel intimate connections to and a degree of ownership over the profiles and pages of deceased friends and relatives. In terms of

interpersonal relationships, the tensions that emerge from these texts can be positioned as dynamics of

---

<sup>3</sup>Perhaps predictably, online companies have emerged to offer a variety of services for managing online identity after death, including Death Switch (<http://deathswitch.com/>), Legacy Locker (<http://www.legacylocker.com>), MyHeartwill (<http://www.myheartwill.com>) and the Vault (<http://www.mylastsong.com>), among others. The services offered by these vendors vary from information insurance to password security to creating media content to be sent to friends and family after death. Thus there is a commercialized version of creating tools and applications for monitoring online grief even as there are also developing social protocols.

institutions versus mourners, intramourner conflicts (as when there are disagreements between the deceased's family and friends) and, fundamentally, between mourners and the mourned. An equalizing, uniting structure linking these dynamics is Facebook itself, with its provision of pages that are essentially identical in concept if highly differentiated in content. In the context of online grief, these pages become the contested site of ownership, meaning making and social ties.

Social media sites are sometimes criticized for the presumed superficiality of relationships or flippancy of content that results from online interaction, and various scholars have attempted to verify or disprove these claims by positing theories to describe the meaning assigned to online interaction. Donath (2008) suggested that devoting time to online interaction displays a commitment to the maintenance of social ties. In Donath's analysis, commenting on blog posts, rating videos and tagging photos are all displays of affective care for online relationships. In particular, Donath positions online interactions on social media sites in terms of fashion, or shifting trends of popularity that influence the use of technology (Fashion and the Display of Information-Based Status, para. 3). When commenters stressed wanting to maintain access to a friend's page after his or her death, it can be read as wanting a platform for the continued display of care. Regarding public displays of bereavement, interactions with a deceased user's profile signals continued care within his or her social circle, which can be displayed by posting on the user's wall or creating a memorial page. These displays can furthermore be read as straddling both private and public rituals of mourning, where there is an interest both in archiving previous records of signaled care and in having a space for collective grief, emphasized by Neimeyer et al. (2002) as a critical stage in mourning.

Alternatively, Lange (2007) used the concept of media circuits (originally developed to discuss the use among migrant laborers of media objects to sustain relationships) to describe the use of YouTube videos to sustain relationships in social groups. In her paper, creating, sharing and interacting with YouTube videos enabled the maintenance of social ties in a close community; as a video circulated within a group, exchanging, commenting on and rating media offered ways of cementing social relationships.

Objections to the deletion of conversations between a deceased user and her friends can be read as a desire to preserve media objects. In this way, the user's page becomes part of a media circuit that provides a valued point of connection within a user's social community. Thus a social media site user's page becomes a kind of social artifact, but continued interactions on the user's page keep it from being a static one. It may in fact be that the very permanence and irrevocability of death contributes to the desire for a virtual space in which the deceased "lives on." Required for that sense of continued presence is the ability to interact with an online profile in the same way as when a user was alive. Protectiveness over a user's page signifies a commitment to the media circuit that both sustained friendships during a user's life and connects mourners after death.

In addition to these frameworks, there is also a potential analytical framing in terms of the participatory creation of content. Typically, participatory media refers to a shift in the production of content from institutions to individuals (Jenkins, 2006), an important, perhaps even democratizing force of creative energy that effectively dismantles corporate, hegemonic control of content. Mash-ups, fanvids, bit torrent sites – these tend to be cast as the domain of participatory media. In the discussions of online grief analyzed here, however, participation refers to something else, where users come together in a space and create conversations and interactions. The quotidian intimacy enclosed within those conversations generates a sense of ownership, and when sites like Facebook assert their claims to content (which is emotionally, as well as legally contested) in the wake of death, the reactions of Facebook users demonstrate a resistance to institutional control. As described by one user, removing access to a friend's page after death can be seen as tantamount to deleting a socially-valued part of someone's life. As a whole, DIY mourning can be seen as a kind of participatory media centered on communication, where new forms of social interaction are taking place outside of traditional manifestations of mourning. In this way, even the most ordinary forms of online participation are imbued with social significance in the context of

grief, where control over the records generated by these interactions touches on issues of collective ownership of collaborative content, community norms and virtual legacy.

What we learn from careful analysis of online discussions on the subject of online grief is how meaning is being ascribed to practices of virtual bereavement even as the processes themselves are being shaped. The protocols related to online mourning are still being developed, the norms are still being collectively constructed, and the consequences for either following or violating these scripts are still in the process of being codified. As online grief continues to evolve, it will be a process that exposes fault lines of both social and technological protocols, a point of convergence between online and offline identities, individual users and collective rituals, cultural rituals and technological change.

## References

- Crampton, T. (2009, June 30). Facebook after you die. Thomas Crampton Social Media in China and Across Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.thomascrampton.com/silver-surfer/death-facebook-die-lilian-edwards-sheffield/>.
- Donath, J. (2008). Signals in social supernets. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 231-251.
- Facebook (2010, April 22). Statement of rights and responsibilities. Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/terms.php>.
- Facebook (2010). Statistics. Press Room. Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>.
- Gibson, M. (2007). Death and mourning in technologically mediated culture. *Health Sociology Review*, 16(5), p. 415-424.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture*. New York: NYU Press.
- K., O. (2009, February 23). Death & social media: Should Facebook remove your profile when you die? *Brazen Careerist*. Retrieved from <http://www.brazencareerist.com/2009/02/21/death-social-media-should-facebook-remove-your-profilewhen-you-die>.
- Kelleher, K. (2007, February 22). Facebook profiles become makeshift memorials. *Brown Daily Herald*. Retrieved from <http://media.www.browndailyherald.com>.
- Kelly, M. (2010, October 26). Memories of friends departed endure on Facebook. *The Facebook Blog*. Retrieved from <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=163091042130>.
- Lange, P. G. (2007). Publicly private and privately public: Social networking on YouTube. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1). Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/lange.html>.
- Metcalf, P. & Huntington, R. (1991). *Celebrations of death: The anthropology of mortuary ritual*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Cambridge, University Press.
- Miller, L. (2010, February 17). R.I.P. on Facebook: The uses and abuses of virtual grief. *Newsweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/id/233779/output/comments>.
- Mishne, G. & Glance, N. (2006). Leave a reply: An analysis of weblog comments. Presented at WWW 2006, May 22-26, 2006 Edinburgh.
- Neimeyer, R., Prigerson, H. & Davies, B. (2002). Mourning and meaning. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46; 235.
- Sanderson, J. and Cheong, P. (2010). Tweeting prayers and communicating grief over Michael Jackson online. *Bulletin of Science Technology & Society*, 30(5) 328-340.
- Rybas, N. & Gajjala, R. (2007). Developing cyberethnographic research methods for understanding digitally mediated identities. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 8(3). Retrieved from <http://nbnresolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0703355>.
- Williams, A. & Merten, M. (2009). Adolescents' online social networking following the death of a peer. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24(1), 67-90.