GRIEVING ONLINE BY DEFAULT

Final Paper for i203, Social and Organizational Issues of Information
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I. A word to the reader

This paper discusses at some length the details of online grieving, mourning and death rituals. This is a subject that at times can evoke strong emotions in some readers, including this author.

II. Introduction: A Changing Landscape

During the past decade, a dramatic change has occurred that has shifted many aspects of the American lifestyle onto the Internet (Feldman 2002). As this has happened, many studies have been completed that discuss the effects this change has had on society, however there is one area of study that has received relatively little inspection and analysis, both historically and in the aftermath of this change (Doka 2003, 55). This area is that of how society memorializes and ritualizes a person after their death. It should not be surprising that this area has not received similar attention as other topics, for as Elizabeth Kübler-Ross puts it, "death is viewed as taboo, discussion of it is regarded as morbid, and children are excluded with the presumption and pretext that it would be 'too much' for them" (Kübler-Ross 1969, 6). This is however an important area for research for a number of reasons. Although

expressions of grief and rituals around death have been present on the Internet in the form of memorial websites for many years (See generally: Roberts 1999), in the past few years the creation of these sites has moved from an active action taken by grievers to a passive and generally inadvertent action taken by users before their death. This is a result of the increasing popularity of social networking sites, which increasingly are being used by grievers as online memorials. As of early 2009, it is estimated that 35% of American adult Internet users have a profile on a social networking site, and that 65% of American teens use such services (Lenhart 2009). As the popularity of these sites has increased, so too has the popularity of their use as memorials, prompting a number of articles (both satirical and otherwise) in the popular press (St. John 2006; Randazzo 2009; North 2007). This change has happened without deliberate actions by users, and has been given very little serious academic inspection.

There are a number of ways that the use of online memorials impacts both individuals and society at large, and it is important that we consider these carefully if there is a trend towards online memorials by default. In this paper, I will argue that on the whole these impacts are for the better, and that they will generally aid in the grieving process, however there are indeed many ways that this change will impact grievers for the worse, and I will delve into those aspects where appropriate.

I will discuss these topics in four movements. In the first, will begin by discussing the history of grieving both on and off the web, and I will provide groundwork for the terms that will be used throughout. In the second section, I will discuss the many advantages of the use of social networking sites as online memorials, and in the third, I will discuss some of the potential problems that this change creates. Finally, I will finish the paper by proposing some solutions to the problems that are raised. Through this discussion, I hope to bring many issues to light that will provoke further research and inspection in this area, thus mitigating any negative impacts that such changes in memorialization may incur.

II. The history and groundwork of memorials: digital and otherwise

It is important and wise to begin with definitions, and I will do so now. Previous popular definitions of *memorials* have been proposed by Pierre Nora to include "an object, a place, an ideal transformed by human agency or time into a symbolic element of the inherited touchstones of memory of a community" (Preface to Nora 2001). In this paper however I will narrow this definition to include only those items that serve to mark or celebrate one or more lives after their death. In addition to narrowing Nora's definition, this also broadens it by allowing non-physical memorials such as the online ones that I will be discussing in this paper. I use the term *online memorial* to mean

any kind of memorial, as defined above, that exists on the Internet and which was created either by an individual or a community. For the term *social networking site* I borrow a definition provided by Boyd and Ellison that defines the term as "a web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd and Ellison 2007).

Memorials and death rituals are part of a larger picture, and with these definitions in place, we can turn our attention briefly to the grieving process itself, of which memorials form but a part. One of the seminal studies on the reasoning and importance of grieving was completed in 1969 by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a medical doctor who studied and interviewed terminally ill patients. Her theory has received some criticism during the past 40 years, but maintains a central role in how researchers think about the grieving process. She broke down grieving into five major stages that included: 1) Denial and Isolation, 2) Anger, 3) Bargaining, 4) Depression, and 5) Acceptance (Kübler-Ross 1969). However it is important to note that these five stages "are not stops on some linear timeline in grief," and that "Not everyone goes through all of them, or in a prescribed order" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005, 7).

These stages are useful to bear in mind as we analyze the ways that memorials and rituals are completed, as in many cases, the rituals themselves serve the purpose of working through one or more of these stages. For several hundred years, these rituals were relatively stable, however during the latter half of the 20th century, the advancement of medicine moved death out of the home and into hospitals, creating waves in the ways that individuals ritualized death. This resulted in an increasing disassociation with death, and has changed the mourning process to be "less of a formalized social obligation ," and to be "increasingly privatized and individualized" (Wouters 2002, 3). Whereas in the past, there were known traditions such as arm bands and black garb, in the aftermath of this change, such signals have become "obsolete, particularly in cities" (Wouters 2002, 6). In the mid-eighties people began to feel a need for new traditions to replace the old, though it is noted that "many people fail in their attempts to invent a rite...and thereby provoke embarrassment" (Wouters 2002). During this period of experimentation, one scholar identified four steps of effective post death rituals, each of which can be satisfied to some degree by the use of the Internet for memorialization. These fours steps are: 1) entering into a special time or place; 2) engaging in a symbolic core act; 3) allowing time to absorb what has occurred and is occurring; and 4) taking leave (Kollar 1989). In the aftermath of this history, it should not be surprising that the invention and

incredible popularity of the Internet created a new opportunity to invent traditions, and that indeed, beginning in the mid-nineties, the Internet began seeing popular use for the furtherance of such experiments.

Since that time, online memorials have taken many forms, and have been made to celebrate the lives of many different things. In the early days of the Internet, for example, it was popular to create online memorials for your pets, and indeed thousands of such memorials were created (Roberts 1999). To this day however, the range and format of memorials is vast, including such diverse sites as those that allow users to create memorials for their horse (Garrett 2008) as well as those that allow users to view or contribute to the AIDS memorial quilt (Names Project Foundation 2008). Further, online memorials do not always exist solely for grievers and survivors, but often serve a historical function as well, such as the site that lists the first police officer killed in the line of duty (Officer Down Memorial Page Inc. 2009) or the site that lists the presidents of the United States (Whitehouse.gov 2009).

The Internet has also seen popular and very successful use as a grieving platform where discussions of grief can be posted and shared through email lists and forums (Oliveri 2003). Such systems can be very powerful for users. One user of such a system even went so far as to state, "I don't think I could have survived my son's suicide without the web...one day I know I would have bought a gun and followed him to the next world. I

can't prove this, but believe me, I know this." (Michaels Hollander 2001, 141, ellipses in original). Such testaments are quite common in the literature on this topic, and speak directly to the usefulness of the medium.

This is not to say however that the use of the Internet for memorialization and support is not without its flaws, for indeed each of the mediums presented above has its own advantages and disadvantages. While the common web memorial as they existed in the late nineties provided an outlet for anonymous grieving and a method to post semi-public messages to the deceased, it had very limited interactivity, and grievers on the whole were unable to discuss their grieving process amongst the other grievers that were using the platform. Indeed, some early web memorials even functioned by postal mail, allowing users to mail in their proposed text, which would then be typed up and posted online by the editor of the site. On the other end of the spectrum, email lists and forums provide powerful ways for users to connect with and talk to others that are in similar situations to themselves, but lack many of the curatorial features that the memorial sites possess.

Beginning in the late nineties, a new form of website began to emerge as companies such as Sixdegrees, Classmate and Friendster[1] began creating early versions of what we have defined above as social networking sites. These sites allow users to create personal profiles, to collect an

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1   Sixdegrees has ceased to be in business, but can be found at http://web.archive.org/web/200 01109000900/http://www.sixdegrees .com/. The others can be found at http://classmate.com, and http://friendster.com, respectively.

assortment of friends, and to communicate and post messages to other users (Boyd 2008, 96). As such, these sites have some of the communication features that are in common with the the email lists and forums, but also allow messages to be posted on people's profiles, similar to the way messages can be posted on online memorials. Together, these features allow users to go through Kübler-Ross' stages of grief as outlined above, and in some ways also allow users to create symbolic death rituals as described by Kollar. As we shall soon discuss however, a thorough analysis of online memorialization reveals numerous problems and solutions with the medium.

III. The many advantages of online memorials

There are of course many advantages to supplementing traditional grieving processes with online memorials. One group in particular that benefits from the use of online memorials is what Pine calls the "underclass of grievers" (Pine 1989, 13). Generally speaking, these are the people that know the deceased person, but that for whatever reason are not entitled to participate in the usual grieving process. Often, such people include the distant friends of the deceased, their ex- or (in larger organizations) present coworkers, their ex- or secret lovers, friends from distant geographic areas, and the list goes on. Traditionally, such people may not be invited or may be unable to

participate in the rituals during a person's death, however these people may nevertheless have a desire or need to go through some part of the grieving process. In the case where a traditional online memorial has been created, these people are able to participate in some of the rituals by reading comments left by others at the memorial website, and are able express their own grief at least to some extent.

Social networking sites "offer a new set of tools to develop and maintain relationships," (Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe 2008, 435) and may thus add an additional dimension to the ways that memorial sites can aid this underclass of grievers. By aiding in the maintenance of friendships in the long term, for those people that may not be in close touch with another individual, such sites may be the only way that they learn of a friend's death. The Onion has a satirical article on this topic entitled, "Facebook Friend Apparently Dead Now" (Randazzo 2009), but the point is all too well taken that for those friends that we have lost touch with, at times social networking sites can keep you better informed of their well-being, even if only to inform you of their death.

An additional benefit that is often touted regarding the Internet, and which also is true for online memorials is its ability to instantaneously span great geographic distances. It is often the case that in the event of a death, the memorials and rituals take place in an area that is distant from many of

the grievers. In this case, grievers must make a decision as to whether they are able to participate in the ceremonies, however in the case of many deaths, funerals are scheduled very quickly, and there is little time to make and act on such decisions. In these cases, the knowledge that an online memorial will allow them to express their grief, interact with other grievers, and see pictures of the deceased should help to span the distance.

Previously I discussed the way that death rituals are becoming increasingly individualized, and the ways that the traditional, more social rituals are being displaced by the movement of death out of the home and into hospitals. Here too we may find an advantage of online memorials, and in particular memorials on social network sites. This is a result of the way that memorialization on social networking sites allows grievers to come together around around a death, and to express their emotions in a shared space. By bringing grievers together again, such spaces accomplish many of Kollar's elements of a successful death ritual, including entering into a special place, engaging in a symbolic core act, and allowing time to absorb what has occurred and is occurring. What such memorials do not accomplish however is the goal of a shared time, nor do they accomplish the goal of taking leave, for it is trivially easy to come back to an online memorial and to emotionally connect with it again.

In the event of more complicated and catastrophic deaths, online memorials often are the first memorials that are available to grievers. A common example of this is the reaction of Americans to the September 11th attacks. In the aftermath of these attacks, it took years to construct proper physical memorials, and as a result makeshift ones appeared both on the street, and in many places on the Internet. The immediacy and ease of creating a website or webpage is thus another advantage of online memorials. While it can take weeks, months or years to create proper physical memorials,[2] online ones can be created in but a few minutes. With social networking sites, such memorials are indeed created even before the death of the user, for in many cases, the user's profile simply becomes their memorial after their death.

One final advantage of online memorialization that deserves mention is the new statistical databases that are created for researchers in the field of thanatology. Prior to the Internet, and the creation of digital memorials, discovering and researching the various stages of grief was very difficult due to the fact that one had to complete interviews and studies with people during a very sensitive time. By allowing written public statements to be created by grievers, a new database of information has been created. Several researchers have already completed studies of this information, (Williams

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2   Indeed, to this day, memorials for the September 11th attacks are not yet completed
    (Bloomberg 2009).

and Merten 2009; De Vries and Rutherford 2004) although for now, the focus has been on how people are grieving *online*. If more forms of grieving move to the online space, it is possible that researchers will be able to generalize the scope of their studies beyond the online experience after a death.

IV. Problems are raised

Although the above benefits to the use of online memorials should not be discounted in their entirety, a number of problems also emerge that warrant careful analysis. The first of these problems is common with many digital goods, and is quickly noted when studying this topic. This problem is that of digital curation. Digital memorials do not have a physical form in the same way as more traditional memorials, and so keeping them from being deleted or from becoming obsolete is a problem that must be solved. Early versions of online memorials did not address this problem head on, and a quick search through the literature on this topic reveals that many of the sites that were discussed in early academic papers are no longer alive on the web. One site that was discussed early on by Pamela Roberts (Roberts 1999), the Virtual Memorial Garden, has been preserved in fully-functional form,[3] but it appears that many – if not all – of the other sites referenced in this work have disappeared from the web. While this problem is common to the

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3   This site is currently maintained by a computer science researcher named Lindsay Marshall, and can be found at http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/

Internet, for memorials it is especially important to preserve the sites as long as possible in order to provide a long-term memorial. This helps with both the gaining of closure and with the acceptance stage of grieving described above by Kübler-Ross.

It could be argued that part of the reason that these sites failed in the long-term is that they existed in time when the Internet was in a stage of growth, and that they lacked a economic foundation upon which to stand. However if we are to transition to the use of social networking sites as memorials, we need to consider also the fact that many social networking sites also fall into disrepair, and that they too are prone to economic failures, mergers, and terminations. One example of a social networking site that has closed its doors already exists, sixdegrees.com, however the future of many other sites is still uncertain as well, with even the more popular sites such as Facebook having negative revenue year after year (Swisher 2008).

This problem is further complicated by the fact that although these sites invite users to input information both before and after a user's death, there are very few ways to get the information back out, especially if the original account holder is no longer alive. As an example, with the Facebook social networking site, users can upload pictures, post messages to friends, create events, and a whole laundry lists of other tasks that involve input of information to the program, however there is no way, short of hours and

days of manual labor, to get these digital goods back out of the website. This would be less of a problem if any social networking site had made commitments to its longevity or curatorial nature or was backed by another company that did, however this is not the case for any site as far as can be determined at present. At first appearance, it seems that after a profile goes into disuse (such as would happen as a result of the user's death), these sites reserve the right to delete the account, if they should so desire. This makes using them as memorials a risky endeavor.

A further problem with the use of social networking sites is that after the user's death, there is no account holder that is able to control the content on the person's profile. Information that is out of date, inappropriate or otherwise in need of editing cannot be addressed, and no social networking site has addressed the issue of how to handle these sites after a user's death. In at least a few cases, survivors of a death have taken the initiative to attempt to transfer or delete an account on a social networking site, and have been met with difficulty and challenges. While MySpace does allow profiles to be deleted if they are presented with a death certificate, such a process is unduly burdensome for an executor to track down for every site that a testator may have used. Other sites are not much better. Facebook does provide a mechanism for reporting the death of its users, however initial experiments with the form have revealed that their policy with regards to

user death has not yet been formalized.[4] This results in a further problem, which I describe as digital cobwebs. As sites fall into disrepair, they, like houses, get cobwebs in the corners that take the form of comment spam, broken links, dates that are no longer relevant and the like. Such disrepair is a disservice to the grievers, and results in a memorial that does not have long-term durability, or curation as physical ones would.

V. Some concluding solutions to problems

Although some of these issues will be quickly resolved as online memorials and social networking sites expand in popularity, others need to be addressed urgently in order to best aid those that are grieving. In a recent conference paper, a strong argument has been made that websites need to design with the mortality of the user in mind (Massimi and Charise 2009). This approach is likely to yield the best outcome, since it would result in every site addressing the issues above in a unique way that would be particular to the needs and complexities of that particular site. Other problems however, would still need to be resolved, such as the permanence and maintenance of the data.

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4   As an experiment, I recently used Facebook's form that is designed for this purpose to report to them that I had deceased (http://www.facebook.com/help/contact.php?show_form=deceased). Their response to my inquiry was to simply ask what they could do for me, and for all appearances, they did not know that I had reported a death of any user. I have attempted to obtain their official policy, however they have declined to respond to my inquiry on the matter.

In order to solve these types of problems, websites need to think carefully about a number of issues. First, sites need to have long-term planning that accounts for both their fiscal and data sustainability. While many of the present social networking sites no doubt do have long-term plans in place, many of the smaller memorial sites likely do not. One site in fact, has had an advertisement since 2001 requesting assistance in mirroring the site (Marshall 2001). Unfortunately though, such requests are unlikely to bear fruit due to the complexity and ongoing effort that is involved in such an operation. Assuming that this request is still relevant, it appears that this site may soon crash, and that when it does, it will not be backed up.

In order to solve the fiscal sustainability question, sites, government and society at large need to consider whether the preservation of such sites is a relevant social goal. If indeed it is, the users of the sites need to consider what value memorial websites hold for them, and need to help the sites to create a fiscal model where site operators do not lose money as a result of their service to users. This is a particular challenge for many sites, since asking for money from grievers is not an easy position to be in. In the case of cemeteries and funeral homes however, this problem has been solved by requesting large up-front payments that in theory are sufficient to pay for the eternal preservation of the memorial. Such a model may be inappropriate

for the Internet, but creating a model that does not rely on the goodwill and efforts of volunteers is an important societal goal.

If it is the case that social networking sites continue to receive more use as memorial websites, a second solution to many of the above problems is to allow users to configure an executor that would be able to log into and handle the account after the person's death. Although such an approach may detract from the entertainment value of the sites, and may cause users to question the purpose of the sites, such a consideration would be useful for those users that are aware that they may soon die, and would allow them to avoid the problems of virtual cobwebs and stale or inappropriate information after their death.

Two final solutions to many of the problems above apply directly to social networking sites in particular. As mentioned previously, social networking sites allow users to input vast quantities of data. These sites need logical mechanisms to export this data so that it can be backed up and saved by those who have lost somebody close to them. In addition, social networking sites need to plan their services around the fact that their users will eventually be dying, and should integrate this fact into their sites where appropriate. In the not too distant future, it is possible that social networking sites will have a high number of profiles for users that have passed away, and it is unlikely that most users will want to encounter these

profiles during their regular social networking activities. By designing early on with user mortality in mind, social networking sites can guide their users in such a way as to avoid any awkwardness or embarrassment that encountering unexpected digital cemeteries may evoke.

VI. Conclusions

In the last sixty years, rituals around death and grieving have changed dramatically. Some of these changes have been a result of the movement of death from the home and into the hospital, while others have resulted from the use of the Internet, and the feeling of needing to create new rituals.

As the Internet is used more and more for such memorialization, it is important that we consider and analyze the many changes that its adoption for this purpose will effect. Further, if online memorialization moves towards social networking sites, it is important that those sites adapt to this use case, and consider the effects that it has. In the future, it is likely that such sites will have more and more users that have died, and as this happens, it will become more and more vital to make changes to the sites, and to consider the ways these changes affect the way we grieve as a society.

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