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Online Memorials 2.0: When Mourning Turns Social

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This paper investigates the turn from individual to social online mourning practices and introduces a research project that follows a new memorial platform where the best from both sides are sought combined.

Online memorials in dedicated spaces have existed nearly as long as the possibility for constructing them - the first virtual cemetery dates back to the early 1990s (Haverinen, 2014). Basically, the traditional online memorial is used as an anchor for individual mourning, much like a physical headstone. Thus, the online memorial is tripple remediated (Bolter, 2002): the actual spot is digital instead of physical, the communication itself takes other formats (e.g., oral to written), and the involved rituals have to be somehow translated in the process. Still, the activities are rather similar to offline activities - one can light a candle and write a greeting, and with the graphical details articulate loss, longing and love. Just as offline traditions and rituals dealing with death are relatively stable cultural expressions (Hviid Jacobsen, 2013), the dedicated memorial spaces did not change that much during their existence. However, the changed patterns in media use and sharing, developed in tandem with the so-called social media over the last 10 years, are making their impact on online memorialization too. Not only do we still have the individual memorial spaces, connected only sparsely to the rest of the net, but expressions of loss and memorial variations are now also manifested within social networking sites.

The broader loss-related activities on social networking sites give the non-spectacular death (as opposed to the mass media reported death from wars and catastrophes) a new kind of visibility. As different losses are shared on different platforms - from Instagram's #selfiesatfunerals (Feifer, 2013) to Facebook's memorialized profiles - we become aware of bereavement in our extended social network. Where Giddens (1992) wrote about sequestration of death as one of the traits of modernity¹, our activity on social networking sites are processes of de-sequestration, re-introducing the non-spetacular death into everyday life (Christensen & Gotved, 2014; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2012). Moreover, we are not only aware of the loss felt by others, we can also express our sympaties and even join the commemoration. As the different social networks of the deceased are united in mourning online, the ritual activity around death and bereavement is becoming less individual and more social:

SNSs such as Facebook (...) can produce what pre-modernity did: a bereaved community. This is because SNSs provide an arena in which all a person's friends, colleagues, and family members can interact, or at least know of each other's existence. This continues even if a person dies (...) (Walter et al., 2012)

¹ Giddens (1992) states that the modern (and non-spetacular) death is hidden away in the society's periphery - hospitals, hospices, cemeteries - while mourning is individualized due to a geographically widespread social network.

As hinted by the word 'produce' above, on social networking sites a given memorial and the related practices are (ideally speaking) co-constructed among the involved mourners, negotiating norms, traditions and the features on the platform to build a bereaved community and share the commemoration. This activity is profoundly different from the individual conversations with either the headstone or the digital equivalent. Setting the argument on edge: the classic online memorials in secluded virtual cemeteries can be seen as modern expressions of individual bereavement, whereas the more recent developments of socially embedded bereavement on social networking sites are digital reinventions of the pre-modern wheel.

The spokes in this figurative wheel are made of sharing, a word widely used when defining social media activity. As Dijck (2013) points out, the meaning of sharing is essentially set by Facebook:

Facebook's ideology of sharing pretty much set the standard for other platforms (...). Looking at Facebook's powerful position in the ecosystem, one can hardly underrate its impact on networked manifestations of sociality (Dijck, 2013, p. 46).

However, sharing on Facebook (and other social networking platforms) can be divided into two types of coding qualities (Dijck, 2013, p. 46). Sharing as *connectedness* is the design allowing the users to construct their social world with profiles, friends and groups, whereas *connectivity* is the company's way of 'sharing user data with third parties' (Dijck, 2013, p. 47). In other words, connectedness is what we experience as networked social life, while connectivity is more or less invisible ways of monetization of data. In relation to memorial activities both forms of sharing might be seen as intrusive, specifically because it is close to impossible to figure out with whom one is actually sharing rather intimate information. A return to the secludedness of the dedicated memorial space could be a solution to that schism, but only if the attractive part of sharing (the embeddedness in a pre-modern bereaved community) is included.

The research project to be presented at AoIR 2016 is in the early stages, as the case (a new online memorial platform, secluded *and* social) goes beta in March 2016 and live during the summer. The developing company is already vested in the business related to memorials (offline and online) and thus have the necessary knowledge and network contacts to organize the process properly. Thus, the company is hopefully able to avoid what I have earlier called the industry's risk of double sequestration - that the potential customers are not overly confident online and that they (like everybody else) as much as possible avoid dealing with their own mortality (Gotved, 2014). The research design is longitudinal and will include quantitative measurements about the users' memorial building, navigation and communication, as well as qualitative interviews with selected individuals and mourning communities. In sum, the research project explores if and how is it possible to infuse a dedicated online memorial with social elements and how to embed the individual mourning practice in an empathetic community. Or, with Dijck's (2013) distinctions, if the

new platform can give the attractive experience of connectedness without the dreary risk of connectivity.

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