



The following article was first published in *Media Development* 3/2014.

Virtual Grief

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The advent of social media has altered the communication of relationships in myriad ways. High school friends – lost years before to different colleges, cross-country moves, and growing families – are now back in contact via social networks. Communally speaking, social media relationships are held together by seemingly random posts about trips to the grocery store or a night at the movies that lead to days of commentary from family, friends, and acquaintances. Social media also appears to be changing the ways we grieve with one another, our communal expression and ritual of grief.

In years past, information about a friend's death most often moved from person to person by a visit or telephone call, where careful phrasing and a kindly presence or tone helped soften the news. What was commonly viewed as normal grieving occurred at a visitation and funeral attended by family and friends. Later, people brought food to a repast or reception and sent flowers and cards to the bereaved. Then, with the formalities ended, the bereaved continued with the process of recovery on their own.

Now, the popularity and ease of social networking sites such as Facebook have altered the way people hear about a death, with the news often shared in waves of postings that can quickly overwhelm a user's newsfeed. However, this online conversation doesn't stop at the initial revelation; instead, it can continue with family, friends, acquaintances, and now strangers online for days, weeks, months and even years afterward. Increasingly, the public and private spheres of life are blurring, challenging longstanding traditions of the boundaries between personal and shared information.

Changes in ritual communication practices have created different norms and traditions of grief in the context of social media and perhaps beyond. By looking at artefacts of mourning expressed through Facebook and other social networking outlets, this research considered what might be gained and lost in this new configuration of grief, both for those immediately affected by the death

and those tangentially connected. Because the research dealt with what Walter Ong, S. J. called secondary orality, we used his thoughts to consider whether social media is moving grief into a third public digital space that shares characteristics of both orality and literacy.

When Ong (1982) talked about literate culture, he argued that written words take the author out of the discourse (p. 77). Referencing Plato's Socrates, Ong stated that "real speech and thought always exist essentially in a context of give-and-take between real persons. Writing is passive, out of it, in an unreal, unnatural world" (p. 78). A reader can't argue or even discuss the words with the author like he or she would in an oral culture. However, in the world of social media, a discussion does take place – an engagement in communal ways similar to those found in oral cultures. People comment and respond. They dialogue and, in some unusual ways that will be noted later, they disagree and criticize.

Social media, while clearly the work of a literate culture, shares a great many of the characteristics of orality that Ong discussed. For example, there are elements of the human lifeworld. People are talking about grief, a foundation of the human experience, and they are demonstrating empathy, digitally mediated but still meaningful. Also, like orality, the postings are agonistic in that social media creates a space for interpersonal interaction and impact and, occasionally, argument. However, social media exists in that literate sphere, as Ong said, where "written words are residue" (p. 11).

We found Ong's work a useful heuristic, then, as we conducted a pilot content analysis of Facebook pages that seem to memorialize the dead. Through this process, we found several ways that virtual grief appears in a social media context, sitting between oral and literate culture and giving rise to the contours of this changing practice of collective mourning.

Broadly, we found that in this public and private sphere, everyone can participate in the grieving over someone's death – even the death of a person they didn't know. We also found a change in the amount of time spent grieving. Through social media and practicing virtual grief, the bereaved can subtly seek solace forever, reminding others through posts, keeping the loss in the present. Finally, we found "new" or emergent ways of coping with grief. Each theme is detailed in the next section.

Virtual grieving

In years past, grief was more a private experience; now, increasingly on Facebook and other social media sites, the grief is public. Public and two-way communication means everyone can participate in the grieving over someone's death. For instance, in December 2013, a Washington state couple died on their way to Montana to celebrate their anniversary. In an online comments section opened up by local news station, people unrelated to the couple commented on the tragedy, responding to each other's posts and seemingly sharing in grieving a couple they didn't know.

This public opportunity easily derailed into irrelevant side commentary, such as in the case of this same couple that died. A random commenter criticized the grammar of another commenter. While the site was intended for condolences, it

instead devolved into a verbal match wherein one person called the other a “whiner.” In this way, what Ong described as the agonistic element of oral culture, takes place in written form, name calling that is “standard in oral societies around the world” (p. 44) but highly unusual in the context of death.

In a more intimate example, a wife lost her husband. The husband’s Facebook page shows a post from a friend who writes about having a drink in memory of him. Another friend posted about having imagined she saw him on a street corner and commented about how much she missed him. In traditional ways of grief expression, the wife most likely would not know about all the public grieving of her husband – particularly five months after his death. Now, the ability to post on a social media site is normalizing what might once have been considered trespassing on the wife’s grief because most people would consider it rude or invasive to bring up another person’s loss.

In a newspaper article about her recently published book about her daughter’s death, author Hunt talks about how people avoid discussing loss. “To the dismay of many bereaved parents, after a brief time, people rarely want to talk about the dead child for fear this will be upsetting. These silences add another layer of pain” (as cited in Hval, 2014, p. D6). Possibly these postings from friends and family allow an outlet for the bereaved to feel that their loss is not forgotten and, in some possibly comforting way, shared.

Time spent grieving is also different virtually with possibly no end in sight. We saw many cases where those left behind have a lingering and public relationship with the deceased. In one instance, a woman posted a photograph of her husband at Christmas and mentioned how hard the holiday was without him. At least 50 people responded with words of comfort. As the author Didion wrote in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a book about losing her husband and daughter in quick succession, Americans view grief as something to be overcome and hidden.

“When someone dies, I was taught growing up in California, you bake a ham. You drop it off by the house. You go to the funeral. If the family is Catholic you also go to the rosary but you do not wail or keen or in any other way demand the attention of the family” (2005, p. 61).

Ceremonies such as funerals were divined to help provide closure, but with social media, the grief appears to be endless and shared. The woman whose husband died wrote recently that she planned to keep his Facebook page up forever. Her comment received 460 “likes” and 25 comments.

Another woman frequently comments on Facebook about the baby she lost 10 years ago in childbirth, and often what results is something akin to a grief circle, where people add comments about their own lost children – some from people she obviously knows and some she clearly doesn’t. Like Ong’s oral culture, social media is “empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced” (1982, p. 45). While the written word “sets up conditions for ‘objectivity,’ in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing,” orality focuses on the subjective, “encased in the communal reaction” (p. 45).

Dealing with loss

Our final theme involved ways of coping with loss. In the past, people dealing with loss might have used tattoos and car decals as public grief displays, and these may have prompted discussions with strangers. However, any conversation that arose from these would go largely one way – now there is this new emotional outlet, this give and take, this reaching out and, often, receiving solace. This communal reaction often becomes aggregative, where people rely on similar – often the same – words to express their condolences.

Commenters repeat phrases: “Thinking of you.” “So sorry for your loss.” “Rest in peace.” As Ong wrote, “Once a forumulary expression has crystallized, it had best be kept intact” (1982, p. 39). These repetitive phrases seemingly provide solace and support for the bereaved. In the instance of two teenage girls who died last fall in a car accident in Washington State, the Facebook page dedicated to them is maintained and *growing*. The mother of one of the girls regularly comments, and people interact with her – even people who often say things such as, “You don’t know me, but ...”

The interaction is ongoing. In terms of time and in terms of interaction, this human lifeworld of oral culture takes place online. As Ong (1982) said, “oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings” (p. 42).

All these notations don’t take into account the phenomenon of parasocial relationships, wherein one person knows a great deal about another, while that person knows nothing of the first – such as with celebrities or public figures. Consider Nelson Mandela or the death of the actor Philip Seymour Hoffman. Many people learned about these deaths first via social media. Some posters reacted as if the loss were quite personal, sharing favourite movie scenes or quotes. In regards to Hoffman, who died of a heroin overdose, many commenters talked about the manner of his death and a small few criticized what they considered his poor choices.

Facebook has created a new grief support outlet – an online community, available at the publishing of a post. Social media allows for more intense and more frequent interaction with the bereaved, changing what people say and keeping the death more present. Recently, according to Dennis (2012) who examined self-help books meant to offer guidance to people experiencing grief, “grief theorists have endorsed the value of attaining new meaning(s) and continuing bonds with our lost loved ones instead of ‘moving on from,’ ‘letting go of,’ or ‘achieving closure from’ them” (p. 393). Apparently, according to Brody (2009), support groups for bereavement can be helpful to the grieving process, depending on who is in them. This raises questions about the effectiveness of public Facebook support.

Clearly, in the areas of public and private and interaction and time, the experience of grief and the ways of coping with grief are changing. What does not appear to be changing or even present in social media grief is expressions of anger, deep depression, guilt, disbelief, yearning or bargaining. In our sample,

Facebook posts did not have comments that signal these “common” emotions from family, friends, or strangers, aside from the derailed conversation about grammar use.

These findings bring up some questions about the implication of these changing practices and norms of grief. While social media is a form of secondary orality with many traces of oral culture as Ong described, changing ways bring changes in consciousness that should not go unnoticed. It is intuitively good to have social support for loss. Is public support also good? We aren’t so quick to leave the past behind, and our notion of getting over loss can linger indefinitely – maybe forever. Are we moving away from the closure that our ceremonies and rituals involving death provide?

Ong (1982) wrote that while written text is removed from the “living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers” (p. 80). His words seem prescient when considering Facebook and other social media sites that have seemingly endless potential in a digital and communal space and context.

This article was first published in Communication Research Trends Vol. 33 (2014) No. 1. Reprinted with permission.

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