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2017

https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/595

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität Marburg

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It was 1:30 a.m. My family had been trying for hours to contact me and a point had been reached where our social media ties prevented them from informing others. "I don't want her to find out over *Facebook*," said my Mum. The dilemma being, the more people were told of the news—close family even—the greater the risk would be of one of them posting online. Today, those privileged with online access rarely log out. As our offline selves become increasingly dictated by our online presence and our lifestyles rely on mobile devices and social media, it becomes all the more pressing to investigate the impact of this phenomena on the inevitable accompaniment to our existence: death. Our social media platforms alert us of a death before traditional forms of media such as newspapers, radio or television have the chance (Carroll & Landry 2010). This phenomenon was clearly demonstrated by frenetic activity on UK social media sites following the passing of David Bowie and Alan Rickman at the beginning of 2016. The news of both deaths became '*Trending Topics*' on *Facebook*. Media coverage was dominated by now familiar announcements stating that thousands of tributes were pouring in via *Twitter*. One user posts a photo, another shares a video and the *hashtag* '#RIP[insert celebrity's name]' goes viral.

Image 1

An English *Facebook* user's post on a friend's Timeline the day after David Bowie died. January 2016.

Due to the scope and sensitivity of this topic, it would require extensive analysis to address all the surrounding issues fully, something I quickly appreciated from the outset. I began looking into the role of memory in the digital age with the rather broad question: how do technological advancements affect, aid or hinder the way we remember someone who has passed away? However, as my research progressed, the nature of my question changed slightly. Despite the original enquiry still playing a prominent role, my specific focus became: To what extent has social media changed the way we grieve?

DIGITAL TRACES

My father, who was not an active social media user (*WhatsApp* only), passed away recently. Despite his physical absence, I continue to notice ways in which his digital presence seeps through. I constantly scroll through his iPhone photos and re-read his *WhatsApp* chat; essentially I'm becoming dependent on digital means to remember him. Hannah Arendt (1970) expressed her fear of

technology in doing the thinking for us, predicting the takeover of machines long before the invention of the smart phone. Our answers are now at the push of a button and our dependency on such tools has increased. It is becoming rare to hand-draw a route in advance of a journey—*Google Maps* will simply show us the way on our portable device. If it is becoming optional to remember, does this imply we are becoming better at forgetting?

For Adi Ophir (2005), traces are things that something, or someone, has left behind once they have disappeared or become lost. These traces relate to reminders for the memory. In terms of death, we are (to an extent) prepared for physical traces to remain present as relics, acting as a trigger to activate and unlock a deeper thought—for example, I knew my Dad's shoes would still lie by our front door and his guitars would sit gathering dust. Despite operating in the same way, what I was not prepared for, and what I believe has changed with technology's dominance, are these same triggers lingering within our digital environments.

For the past few years, I have accidentally left myself logged into my *Gmail* account, which is synced to *YouTube* on my father's iPad and laptop. Whenever he watched a video, my account took note. As a result, my recommendations were always an odd mix of bike videos, live performances of the band 'Big Country', bass guitar tutorials (Dad's videos) and things that I had watched, such as bunny show jumping, food challenges and 90's R&B. This underlines technology's omnipresent ability to curate a digital persona for us. This online curatorship of the self may not be as obvious as a *Facebook* profile, where the user actively mediates the information they reveal, however, it is nonetheless an online reflection of an offline personality.

Four months after my father's passing, my *YouTube* recommendations were devoid of any of his videos (except perhaps one of the 'Buzzcocks')—everything else I could vouch for. In the absence of my father's viewing, my *YouTube* profile acquainted itself once more to my taste. "Disappearance to the second degree; the gradually diminishing presence of the traces, the gradual depleting identity of what disappeared, to the point where all that can be said is: 'There was something there'" (Ophir 2005: 52).

Dad's swift exile from *YouTube* struck me. Perhaps he just did not watch enough videos, but what would it be like to lose someone more active? One moment: notifications, event invitations, comments, Tweets on *Twitter*, *Facebook* timeline domination, and then … silence; a digital presence lost. Or is it really gone—in a physical sense? When thinking of others in recent mourning, I realized that I had invariably discovered the news of their losses on *Facebook*. How then are social media platforms such as *WhatsApp*, *Facebook* and *YouTube* affecting grief?

I am an active *Facebook* user and therefore required no real introduction to the site. Once contact was made over *Facebook*, the aim was to explore the

grief experiences of others on alternative social media platforms; however, the scope was too large. Primarily this research became about *Facebook*. I initially reached out to five *Facebook* users through the platform itself and later met them in person. Further research would require not only an extension outside of my social network but also an extension outside of England. The majority of my *Facebook* network consists of, though is not limited to, other English-speaking users based in England. Having said that, I have also noticed that people within my *Facebook* network who reside in England are much more active on social media than friends who reside elsewhere, partly explaining my selection. The idea that social media has decreased our privacy in England (Miller 2016) cannot be a worldwide generalization, so the geographical focus must be taken into consideration. My questions extended to:

How is a person remembered on a social media site such as *Facebook*?

What are the motives for users, close family even, for carrying out this form of remembrance?

How has social media changed the boundaries between public and private?

What are the implications of such posts?

METHODOLOGY

Social media allows us to easily participate in an otherwise passive world; it's not like television (Agger 2012). Agger is critical of the overly sharing nature of *Facebook*, stressing the need for a return to the division between public and private. I must admit, I too held a skeptical stance over publicizing a death or sharing a memory of someone who has passed away on *Facebook*. One *Facebook* user, Patti, whom I knew personally and had recently suffered a loss, told me that she would never consider announcing that news on *Facebook*. "I will tell the people I want to know. I don't want my whole *Facebook* network knowing that information; it's very private. It's just selfish and attention seeking." No doubt, Agger too would call for a retreat back into the private sphere. However, announcing a death was seldom a private affair; in England obituaries are not new and traditional gravestones in cemeteries are accessible to the public. Still, social media has created a bridge between public broadcasting and private communications (Miller 2016). Unlike a printed obituary, which goes out once to a mass audience, close to the time of death and with no real invitation for response, such notifications of grief on social media are immediate and interactive. They come directly from a user, with a curated profile, friend list, previous posts and the ability to mediate an audience.

Image 2
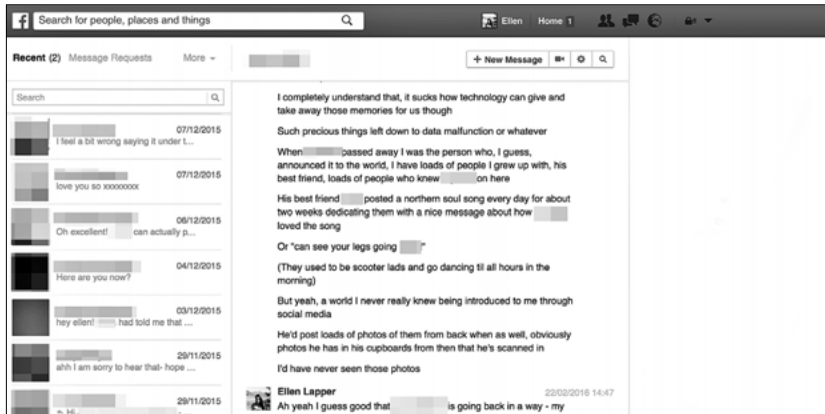
Facebook Messenger chat with Dominic. February 2016.

The instantaneous nature of publicly expressing grief on social media paradoxically presents us as vulnerable to a wider audience, yet the technological distance somehow protectively shields us. Agger's (2012) criticism is based on the belief that people overshare online in ways they wouldn't face to face. For Stella, a *Facebook* user who lost both her father and brother (the former before the prevalence of social media, the latter in the midst of it), it was exactly this factor of distance that helped her share the news of her loss; she didn't know where to begin in person.

It took me forever, to put it up on *Facebook* and what to write, blah blah but then, it was kind of like a sense of relief. But then you know when you're a bit like, oh my God, now what?! It was just really hard [...] but I was so glad that I could put it up on *Facebook* cos people know and people were like, "When can I come to the funeral? When is it?"

Stella's last sentence shows exactly how such posts invite immediate interaction and the support that people need at times of instability. The appeal of technology becomes clear when we are most vulnerable, as Sherry Turkle stated in her TED talk[1]. She elaborated that—in using this medium, as opposed to physical interactions—we have the ability to edit our content and present the self as we prefer to be seen. This could partly explain why, when announcing sensitive news concerning death, users find comfort and ease in communicating over sites such as *Facebook,* as the written form allows for better formulation.

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1 | Turkle, Sherry: "Connected, but alone?" Filmed February 2012. TED video, 19:41. https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together?language=en

When initiating contact with *Facebook* users in my network, I began by using the *Messenger* tool. The messages (Image 2) I exchanged with one user, Dominic, are grouped together as they were sent seconds after each other. The narrowing of the audience and the chat set-up allows us to create a more rapid, intimate dialogue; however, a slight delay in the construction of the text gives us the ability to recompose. Dominic's messages revealed positive repercussions of posting his loss online. It triggered "a world I never really knew being introduced to me through social media." Stella also noted this "nice" revelation of another side to the deceased's life through pictures shared on *Facebook*. Arguably, these shared photos uploaded by friends could have been brought physically to the bereaved person. However, the potential immediacy of a response from an extensive audience elicits a different kind of interaction. Distance aside, users can choose to what extent they engage with the variety of media-sharing *Facebook* offers. *Facebook*'s language of 'sharing' and 'friending' entice us to feel comfortable in using social media.

The sharing of a memory on social media accelerates Maurice Halbwachs' (2011) otherwise natural theory that all our individual memories are formed within a societal structure, and can then only be understood in a group context. Does online sharing then add another layer to its collectiveness? By allowing others access to this perhaps once-private memory, we force it out of our personal sphere and into the minds of others. When exposed to shared trauma or traumatic knowledge, past events can seem to constitute the memories of the generation that follows; their memories become our memories (Hirsch 2011). What effect does social media have on this form of collective memory? Do the memories of people on our *Facebook* timeline become our memories? When we see something within our social network, are we lured into thinking it is ours? I discussed this with Faye, who recently lost a friend and put out a tribute to her on *Facebook*. Faye agreed that *Facebook* often has the ability to make you believe you knew something about someone, or were present at the time an event took place, only later to discover that you learnt it via passive observation online. In this sense, others' posts are subconsciously becoming our memories or our collective memories.

Faye elaborated, "I wouldn't normally post something like that but it was the way she lived her life—she was very open on *Facebook* about everything and I wanted to honor that. It invited such a response; I got so many, so many messages, all such lovely words, was so comforting." We concluded that perhaps it helps to share the pain. The conversation in which we shared our experiences might not have taken place had I not seen her *Facebook* post. The interactivity of such shared information on *Facebook* is exactly what makes it different from printed obituaries—it invites an immediate response. Similarly, Stella enjoys sharing memories concerning her lost loved ones for their interactive connectivity—on an anniversary or birthday, for example. This is

what I understood from everyone to be most comforting. As these memories are shared within their networks, others can comment, 'Like' and attempt to share the experience.

Image 3

Facebook post from Natasha, one user in my network, on the day of her brother's funeral. December 2015.

For Arendt, whatever is experienced internally is valueless unless shared with another. "Pain [...] is so subjective and removed from the world of things and men that it cannot assume an appearance at all" (1970: 51). She expands her view on physical pain within our body as being the only thing that you cannot share, however, I would argue that grieving is physical pain. The bereavement posts on *Facebook* could be a result of our struggle to share this physical, internal pain by using the alternative forms that social media offers to us. Texts and words aside, users can share videos, post photos or use emoticons; all these options endeavor to express something where vocalization fails. The process of *posting* offers users opportunities to connect with others who may share similar experiences or offers messages of support, as illustrated in Image 3. The emoticons replace text. Some 87 people 'Liked' the post and 97 comments were made—many of which stated: "so sorry to hear that", indicating it was the first time they learned of this news. Somewhat ironically within this context, though

I do not doubt the sincerity, the comment shown at the bottom—"Memories we hold in our hearts forever" almost pulls us back to humanity for a second and out of this virtual sphere. I would argue that online sharing and the use of technology to express grief and memorialize has the ability to become the new form of collective memory, although perhaps we are not fully conscious of it yet.

WAILING OVER *WHATSAPP*

Halfway into this research, I became a victim of my own stupidity, curiosity and digital culture. Upon seeing an image online, supposedly from Apple, claiming to show you what your iPhone would have been like in 1970, I followed the instructions and set the date to January 1st 1970. In an instant, I had 'bricked' my phone and it refused to turn on. I cried. I wasn't crying over the device itself, rather the loss of the *WhatsApp* chat and *iMessage* history held in my 'phone—essentially the last conversations with my now deceased father. I was wailing over meaningless chat, usually in the form of attempts to organize something banal like who was going to pick the milk up, which, if written down on paper, would most definitely be in the bin right now. I truly believed I needed to resurrect this "biological development of mankind" (Heisenberg 1955: 14-15). Thankfully after a stint in the Apple store, the iPhone was restored but my chats were wiped. I could still log on to my father's phone and read it there, but it wouldn't be the same. I couldn't bring myself to activate Dad's digital presence by changing: 'last seen 20 November 2015'—the day he died (Image 4).

Stella and I exchanged our devastating *WhatsApp* experiences. She had lost her conversation with her brother Trev, which along with a written letter, he had used to say goodbye.

Luckily I went into a phone shop and they connected [his phone] back up for me. So I got [the *WhatsApp* conversations] back, but they're not on my phone and it's not the same. I don't want them on his phone. I thought 'I'll send them to me'. And then I thought 'I don't wanna do that', but obviously the date changed.

Stella referred to the same issue I had with the "last seen online..." which is displayed on most users' *WhatsApp*:

And then people were like, "what the hell, his phone's on?" Texting me and Mum and I was like, "No it's me! It's me." I thought do I put the *WhatsApp* status up saying, "it's his sister"? But he'd put his status as "I love you Stella and Mum, I'm sorry". And that was like his last status, and I thought I don't wanna delete that but these people were like "fuck all my messages are sending".

Bernadette, an active *Facebook* and *WhatsApp* user, spoke of her loss:

He's still in our uni *WhatsApp* group. I found it odd at first when I saw his name at the top but we've just had it since uni so we're just gonna keep using it. Obviously when we make new groups to arrange stuff we don't add him in like we used to but yeah, he's still there in the main one.

Image 4
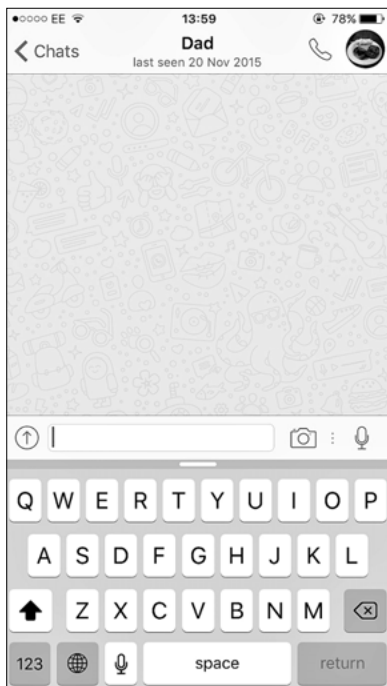
A screenshot of my WhatsApp chat with my father after my phone had been wiped. February 2016.

The digital presence for *WhatsApp* requires a separate analysis in comparison to *Facebook*. Generally, it is for private, instant messaging—usually just one-on-one—but also useful for groups to communicate, normally with people they know personally. Messages often contain a mix of banal and significant exchanges, the latter demonstrated in Trev's goodbye. Stella's resurrection of Trev's *WhatsApp* sparked a disturbed response; I am also reluctant to bring my father online again. We are ill-equipped in dealing with the remains of a digital presence and we can't bear to lose them. Aside from *YouTube* perhaps, this illustration reinforces the impact of social media presences on our society; they cannot be easily removed. Our initial exposure leads us to believe that we

need these presences to remain in order to remember. As Stella said, "If I didn't have it at all then I wouldn't feel that much pain over something." I am also now struggling to recall what I wrote about with Dad, what pictures we exchanged and who picked the milk up. It is tough; I want that little device to help me. However, perhaps we need to forget in order to remember (Augé 2014).

Digital ghosts

The preservation of a digital presence became more apparent as my research continued. Bernadette told me that the *Facebook* profile of her late friend remains unchanged and has not been memorialized.[2]

Bernadette went on to express her annoyance when people write on her friend's *Facebook* Wall:

> He's not there anymore, he's not going to read it. But maybe that's just because I always think scientifically. I don't know why it annoys me. His best friend got so irritated 'cos it sparked loads of other people to write on his wall. People that didn't even know him. Even this girl he dated for just a few months. I don't know who has access to his *Facebook.*

Ari Stillman (2014) discusses the possibility of a collaborative identity construction based around the deceased's *Facebook* Wall. His idea, that the "identity of the deceased belongs to those who construct it" (ibid: 59) in turn helps shape a collective memory of the individual. Could it be that the *Facebook* profile becomes a memorial, even if it has not been officially memorialized through *Facebook*'s given terms? I would argue, yes. There are some individuals, like Bernadette, who do not like the idea of the profile being active as it invites others to craft an identity of the deceased. She elaborated on the posts of the "girl he dated for a few months"—in that they didn't correspond to anything she or the close friends knew—yet appeared publicly on his profile, asserting her apparent relation to him. Despite this, she said she wouldn't want it otherwise—she couldn't imagine the deletion of his profile. It is simply easier to do nothing, which in turn risks misinterpretation as disbelief of the death.

Faye explained her interaction with her late friend's *Facebook* profile:

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2 | *Facebook* offers a "memorialized account" as a way of remembering the deceased. Essentially, the profile remains and current friends can interact with it, however no new friendship requests can be sent and the user does not appear in searches or birthday reminders. Memorializing a profile was a function introduced by Facebook in 2009. https://www.facebook.com/help/103897939701143 Accessed April 29 2016.

I just can't stop going on it. But it's weird, I can't search for her and click on her profile. I have to do it through someone else who is a mutual friend, and then I see her photo there and I just click on her via this other friend. I just want to look at her profile. But I don't want her to appear in my recent searches. I don't know why.

When asking if it was because people had posted things on her *Facebook* timeline, she said, "No. She has like a Timeline Review, so what you can see on her wall is very limited." *Facebook* profiles are ultimately private, individual constructs of a user yet, at the same time, they are not the only ones crafting their online identity (Davis, Sieder & Gardner 2008). Social media is social. When a user passes away, despite Timeline privacy restrictions, the interaction with what remains can still maintain this collaborative process and develop into a form of collective memory.

Ophir (2005) talks about the inseparable interchangeability between disappearance and appearance much in a similar sense to Marc Augé's (2004) discussion of memory's relationship to oblivion. For Augé, we must forget in order to remain present. To an extent I agree, however, I would rather argue for us to push these memories aside to make way for new ones. The reduction of these memories into traces allow for their dormant storage. Then, as Ophir explains, "Some thing has to remain present 'to this day,' and first and foremost here and now, in order to testify to what has disappeared" (Ophir 2005: 52). The digital reminders I have discussed are testament to that loss. Stella explained how she never had the option with her first bereavement. Only now the feeling of deprivation arise:

They're like old pictures, they're like really crap pictures, whereas Trevor's are like amazing, it's almost...made it harder on my Dad, cos I think, God it was so long ago. I don't feel like it's a long time ago, but I don't have any of the things, like I can't remember my Dad's voice. And it kills me. I can't remember it at all, like what his tone of voice was or anything. And I hate that and I feel like I've forgotten it. With Trev, I'm like always gonna be able to hear that. I'm always gonna hear his laugh. And that is only through having a video on my phone. But other times people hate having all that, cos you know, you've gotta be in the right mood, and ready for it, and if you're not, then it like takes you like ten steps back.

There is actually no difference between the effect of the physical and digital reminders left behind when someone passes away; when unprepared, both can set you back. The differences lie in the possibilities that digital technologies offer us now, as Stella describes:

With Trev, I can put so many pictures up [on *Facebook*] and I love it. And I can just change pictures all the time and then I feel like, oh my God am I letting my Dad down? I need a picture of my Dad but there's like only the set 7 or 8 I've got of him.

Loss in the digital age simply provides us with more. Despite our integration into digital technologies, it is this bombardment that we are still coming to terms with and are currently unable to process. Initially, one thinks of the bombardment as constant reminders, however when relating this back to Augé (2004), the increase provided by the digital age could potentially make it harder for us to forget.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary research into grief and social media has primarily revealed its extensive complexities, in which humanity is constantly catching up with technology. As worlds between offline and online blur, we must become better acquainted in how to deal with the loss of an online presence. Particularly within *Facebook*, there remain many unexplored topics, including the memorialization of a *Facebook* profile (which none of my sources were aware of) and—through *Facebook*'s introduction of a legacy contact—the problems in acquiring access to digital assets in the case of the bereaved (see Image 5.).

   Other considerations also arose, such as the possibility to continue crafting your online identity after death (using apps such as *If I Die*), the nature in which we remember on *Facebook* (changing profile pictures) through to the manner in which people interact after death ('Like', comment, share, private message, etc.). My study touched upon three social media platforms used by England-based users, however worldwide there are plenty more with varying purposes and modes of interaction which would produce a different cohort of results.

Image 5
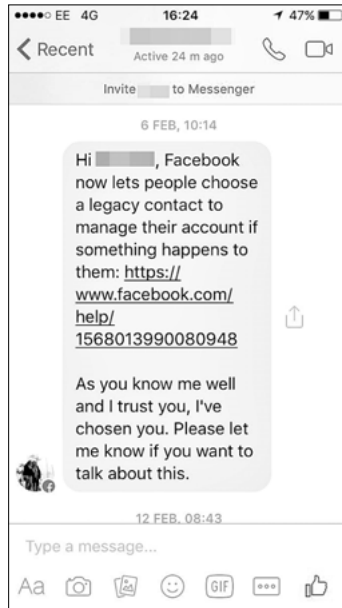
Screenshot of automated private Facebook message after one
user was selected as a legacy contact by her mother. February 2016.

Of the users I spoke with, the ones who announced their loss or posted tributes regularly share information, so perhaps, despite the difficulty in phrasing, grieving on social media is a normal and comfortable outlet for those who are already integrated and accustomed to posting. The breakdown between private and public provided by social media creates a protective, technological shield. Most people simply announced their loss via a status update, however in the case of Stella, she regularly uses *Facebook* to share a memory (normally photos) of her lost ones. The benefits of such actions are highlighted through the speed and immediacy of the scope in which we can interact, connect and share. It is consoling to receive messages, share photos and form a collective memory of a late individual. If anything, this study has opened my opinion on the 'oversharing' nature of grief on social media. Whilst I am still hesitant to perform it myself, it is essentially just like in real life. Grieving is a natural process that requires the comfort and support of others to heal. Social media platforms, as extensions of our brains, are aiding us. *WhatsApp* interaction requires additional research but currently serves to highlight our unpreparedness in dealing with a loss online. As our digital presence bleeds into our lived reality, everything—including death—must take its course. Similar to the physical reminders left behind by

the deceased, as our lives become digitalized, these naturally take form online; only we are still acclimatizing.

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