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“R.I.P. man...u are missed and loved by many”: entextualising moments of mourning on a Facebook Rest In Peace group site

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Abstract

Digital media offer new domains for people to articulate aspects of their everyday selves, as well as to share resources, views, attitudes, and emotions on an unprecedented scale (Barton and Lee 2013; Georgakopoulou 2006; Jones and Hafner 2012). The recent emergence of online environments as new sites for the temporal, spatial and social expansion of death and mourning (Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013) has attracted scholarly interest in digital post-death rituals of mourning and memorialisation as an important social phenomenon (Walter et al. 2011; de Vries and Roberts 2004).

While previous studies have been largely based on content analyses of individual MySpace logs and Facebook or discussion forum posts, the present study approaches digital memorial posts as *entextualised moments of mourning* shared with and for a networked audience (John 2013; Androutsopoulos 2014).

The article analyses a corpus of Facebook memorial posts (N=525) as post sequences, wall events and texts, looking at how content on the site is produced, shared and discursively regimented. Based on the analysis, it is suggested that the entextualisation of moments of mourning on Facebook is *participatory*: it involves users' selection of moments for public display relating to offline ceremonies of mourning, calendar-important dates or personal updates and contributing to the production of a textured wall in memory of the dead. The textuality of posts is found to rely on an *ad hoc* blending of formal genres of mourning and vernacular genres of writing dependent on (i) situational (date of posting activity, position in the post sequence) and (ii) extra-textual parameters (gender of poster, relationship with the deceased). The present socio-discursive investigation contributes to the growing, in-depth understanding of the texture and textuality of Web 2.0 mourning practices.

Introduction

Online environments have recently emerged as ‘new’ sites for the temporal, spatial and social expansion of death and mourning (Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013), calling for the systematic study of digital post-death rituals of mourning and memorialisation (Walter et al. 2011; de Vries and Roberts 2004). Research in the area is currently burgeoning across the disciplines of thanatology, psychology, sociology, game studies, and discourse and communication studies, opening up exciting possibilities for interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation that can contribute to the development of a well-rounded understanding of death, dying and mourning in a techno-social era. This paper examines socio-discursive norms for mourning that are reproduced or emergent in Web 2.0 environments, contributing a discourse-centred approach to the study of digital death and mourning.

Research so far (see section *Digital Life and Death*) suggests that the use of Internet and Web 2.0 technologies for mourning ‘brings death back into everyday life’ (Walter et al. 2011, 295), and has important implications for the continuation of bonds with the deceased as well as for the construction of the deceased’s post-mortem identity. Numerous studies have foregrounded the benefits of online cemeteries, memorials and support groups for the bereaved, especially in cases of sudden or unexpected death (Cable 1996). In online spaces for grieving, it has been found that the bereaved, including disenfranchised mourners, feel an increased sense of social support through shared reminiscences (Rosenblatt & Elde, 1990; cited in Roberts 2004, 63). Furthermore, the bereaved are seen to communicate and process loss through very personal stories (Pawelczyk 2013, 15) and to use writing as a therapeutic resource for emotionally relocating the dead (Worden 2009; cited in Pawelczyk 2013, 5). Building on the aforementioned previous work and drawing on socio-discursive analytic frameworks, the present article explores the texture and textuality of online mourning based on the examination of practices of semi-public grieving and memorialisation on the Facebook social networking service¹.

Before moving on, some terminological clarification of the terms grief, grieving and mourning is in order. Grief denotes the feeling state of intense sorrow or embodied pain but, as a term, it is also used to refer to the process of recovering from loss (*grieving*). Following the by now classic schema of Kübler-Ross (2005), the recovery process involved in grieving can be conceptualised according to five stages, which are in no way necessary or sequentially ordered, and which appear to be universal. These are *denial* (one simply refuses to accept the fact), *anger* (when one can no longer deny the fact but resists accepting it), *bargaining* (when one tries to somehow postpone or diminish the inescapable fact), *depression* (libidinal disinvestment) and *acceptance*.

Grief is experienced as a crisis, as the onset of vertigo for the sufferer faced with the irrevocable dissolution of one’s meaningful life bonds with the other, the dissolution of the everyday and, fundamentally, the loss of self (see Marris 1974; cited in Moss 2004, 78). Grief marks the limits of our bonds and relations with others, disrupting our sense of

¹ Facebook is the most visited global site on the Internet, with over 70 per cent of its users living outside the US where it was first launched in 2004 (Miller 2011, x). ¹ According to Facebook statistics, about 802757 million people are active on the site on a daily basis, and approximately 81% of those are outside the U.S. and Canada (Facebook 2014).

autonomy and control²; as a liminal state, it marks the limits of language by evading articulation, explanation or re-counting. Grief marks the limits of the cultural frames in which we live and, at the same time, redraws them every time we attempt to make sense of or talk about our loss. In his account of his experience of grief over the loss of his wife, the author Julian Barnes (2014, 88) noted that “grief is vertical - and vertiginous - while mourning is horizontal. Grief makes your stomach turn, snatches the breath from you, cuts off the blood supply to the brain; mourning blows you in a new direction”.

Mourning is often used as synonymous with *grief*, denoting the “process of reckoning with loss and death” (Leaman 2013, 312), or is used to refer to “the social expression of bereavement or grief, sometimes defined by culture, custom, and religion” (Hensley and Clayton 2008, 152). The latter definition encompasses ritual practices and other types of public activity that include crying, sobbing, talking, writing, telling stories, memorialising and other symbolic acts. For the purposes of this article, *grief* will be used to denote the private experience of pain, *grieving* the process of recovery from loss, and *mourning* will be used to denote public and socially sanctioned displays of grief.

Mourning practices, which lie at the heart of the present paper, are social practices that vary across and within cultures and epochs, and which are often employed to contrast pre-modern and post-modern cultures. On one hand, numerous accounts of death and dying in local traditions around the world suggest that the death of someone in tightly-knit communities organised primarily around kin and social ties marks a significant break in the social fabric of the group, which requires extensive and varied public rituals of mourning to help to hold the community together in the face of irrevocable loss and to restore social order (cf. Wilce 2009)³. On the other hand, accounts of death and mourning in late modernity, characterised by a loosening of social bonds and radical individualism (Giddens 1990), hold that death no longer disrupts communal worlds, but rather individual ones. As Walter et al. (2011, 289) have noted, while “pre-modern societies tended to produce a bereaved community, modern societies tend to produce bereaved individuals”, leading to the privatisation of death, its experience and its sequestration from everyday life⁴ (Walter 1996).

As already mentioned above, the advent of technologies of communication has opened up opportunities for the re-insertion of death and mourning into the everyday, allowing the bereaved to share the experience of death by opening up and disclosing personal stories of grief and trauma, and exchanging informational and emotional support resources (Baym 2010; Pawelczyk 2013). Online spaces for mourning and support groups arguably afford the creation and main-

² In her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler (2004, 20) locates loss and vulnerability in the nature of our bodies as socially constituted and attached to others, hence exposed to the risk of loss. As Butler puts it (2004, 22), “I think I have lost ‘you’ only to discover that ‘I’ have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost ‘in’ you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as the tie by which those terms are differentiated and related”.

³ In his book *Crying Shame*, James Wilce moves beyond the scholarly recognition of the significance of mourning as a cultural phenomenon that can be studied through lament, “a genre of crying with melody and words” (Wilce 2009, 2) and draws attention to scholarly representations of lament as pre-modern mourning and the many uses of lament as a trope for the loss of tradition or even culture in (post)modernity (ibid, 4-11).

⁴ As Mellor and Schilling (2003, 414) observe, the gradual privatisation of death in Europe and North America has been manifest in the notable decrease in the public space afforded to death, a shrinkage of the scope of the sacred in terms of the experience of death (in favour of the medicalisation of death) and a fundamental shift in the corporeal boundaries, symbolic and actual, associated with the dead and the living. Death has hence become “institutionalized, hidden and thus de-ritualised” (de Vries and Roberts 2004, 1).

tenance of (online) communities of the bereaved in which mourning re-emerges as a group experience (Walter et al. 2011). With norms for grief relaxing or shifting (Jakoby & Reiser 2013), a wider group of mourners is entitled to participate in public mourning while, at the same time, the potential for conflict among the bereaved increases, as evident in the emergence of organised trolling behaviour on Facebook, for example (Phillips 2011).

The present article provides an empirical study of the sharing of grief on Web 2.0 semi-public spaces for mourning and sheds light on the reconfigured and emerging discourse norms for grieving online. The insights from the study are important for addressing claims regarding radical changes in mourning and the place of death and grief in (post)modern societies. The following section will outline some of the key insights into digital life and death from existing literature across death studies, psychology, sociology and computer-mediated communication, before moving on to the analysis of practices of mourning shared on a selected Facebook memorial group site.

Digital life and death

In this section, some key remarks relating to digital life and death will be presented and discussed, setting the theoretical background and motivation for the present study.

Contemporary social life is *textually mediated* (Barton and Lee 2013, 27), with texts pervading all domains of activity and persisting in a growing online corpus of communication records and identity traces. For individual users, digital media present new opportunities for the articulation of their everyday selves, as well as for sharing resources, views, attitudes and emotions in various ways depending on the affordances and constraints of the medium of use. Following the advent of Web 2.0 technologies (Herring 2013), social network sites (henceforth SNSs), defined by computer-mediated communication scholars boyd and Ellison (2007 cited in Athique 2013, 103) as “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”, have become the prime sites for users to generate their own content and discourse in a persistent, replicable, scalable and searchable way. SNS users now have the possibility to present their views, opinions and feelings to a wide public, overriding audience distinctions entailed in different social time-spaces. This is known as *context collapse* and it comes at a cost, namely extensive work on users’ self-presentation for their multiple, parallel audiences or adapted use of the platform’s affordances and tools, such as selecting friends or groups of friends to whom to broadcast a post (boyd and Ellison 2010, 9).

What distinguishes SNSs from earlier media is the increased encouragement and affordance of *social sharing*⁵. According to Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg, around 4 billion ‘things’ (status updates, images, etc.) are now being publicly shared on Facebook every day with social sharing growing exponentially. For new media scholars, it makes more sense to talk about *practices of sharing* which, according to John (2013, 175–6), involve the *distribution* of digital content in the form of links, photos, video clips and *communication*, for instance, by updating one’s status on micro-blogging sites. Sharing involves reporting, telling and broadcasting anything relating to the here-and-now of one’s activity, such as one’s current location, activity or view on current affairs or happenings, or one’s current mood, stance or feelings.

⁵ Facebook states its mission as to “give you the power to share and to make the world more open and connected” (Facebook Website 2014).

In the field of computer-mediated communication research, Androutsopoulos (2014, 9) has proposed an understanding of practices of sharing as “the entextualization of significant moments for a networked audience”, foregrounding the processes of selection, styling and negotiating that shape the discursively constructed self online via new ‘technologies’ of entextualisation, which allow users to capture aspects of their bodies and behaviour, compile and visualise that information in multiple ways and transmit it to large numbers of people (Jones 2013, 2-3). In other words, in SNSs it is not just ‘things’ that are shared, but rather it is selected moments of life that become re-semiotised or embedded in multimodal texts for further use (e.g. recycling and re-contextualisation) and consumption.

The entextualisation of selected moments of life (or death) relies on discursive frameworks, which set expectations for the production and reception of a particular kind of text. Authors draw on and shape such frameworks in their use and invocation of framing devices that carry with them guidelines as to the further unfolding of the discourse, while establishing an intertextual relationship with prior texts (Bauman 2004). The classic example of a framing device is the conventional opening of the modern fairy tale via the opening expression ‘Once upon a time’, which sets a distant spatiotemporal context for the expected unfolding of the story while establishing a link to previous tellings of stories. Framing devices are contingent to the context of use and can become more or less crystallised over time following cycles of (re)entextualisations. The process of entextualisation involves the construction of stretches of discourse as a discrete textual unit that can be referred to, described, named, displayed, cited, and otherwise treated as an object (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Bauman 2004, 4). Applying the notion of entextualisation to the study of digital representations of self involves a necessary extension of the ‘textual’ to include pictures, emoticons, videos and other modalities often featured on digital spaces. The aforementioned concepts developed for the study of digital life are very useful for developing an in-depth understanding of digital textuality of death-related practices.

Digital environments for dealing with death and dying have existed since the 1990s in the form of cyber-memorials, web memorials, virtual cemeteries and shrines, described as emerging post-death rituals (Roberts 2004), oriented to the living rather than to the deceased and playing an important role in the recovery process for grieving individuals (Roberts and Vidal 2000). Since the 2000s, SNSs gradually emerged as the primary sites for mourning, grieving and memorialising the dead. SNSs generally encourage the production of content that is more dynamic and interactive, and technologically augment active and latent social bonds (Athique 2013, 103), providing users with affordances for constructing and sustaining post-mortem relationships (Williams and Merten, 2009).

In previous research on digital death, SNSs were acknowledged as sites that encouraged the increased, ongoing interaction of the living with the deceased on residual ‘gravemarker’ personal profiles (Kasket 2012), as well as enabling the intersubjective production of post-mortem identity by the deceased’s friends (Brubaker and Vertesi 2010). Referring to MySpace post-mortem personal profiles and comments, informatics scholars Brubaker and Hayes (2011) showed that post-mortem social networking practices include, among others, sharing memories, posting updates and maintaining connections with the deceased via comments, flooding users’ personal profile page for at least up to three years after the user’s death. Similar findings regarding the content of the comments posted have been reported in recent empirical investigations of post-mortem messages in a range of other online platforms, including memorial websites created by parents who have experienced a loss due to sudden infant death syndrome (Finlay and Krueger 2011), online forums for the bereaved by suicide (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. 2013) and posts following the death of Michael Jackson on Twitter, TMZ.com and Facebook (Sanderson and Cheong 2010).

Post-mortem social networking activity on Facebook RIP pages has been discussed in Carroll and Landry's (2010) study of two hundred Facebook wall comments. The researchers pointed to the potential of social network sites for the empowerment of individuals otherwise marginalised in traditional memorialising practices (*disenfranchised mourners*). Furthermore, in their consideration of the implications of context collapse for impression management, social media researchers Marwick and Ellison (2011) affirmed the increased 'power' and legitimacy of family and close friends when compared to acquaintances and grief tourists.

So far, research on digital mourning seems to have predominantly privileged the study of adolescents' profiles, demonstrating a concern with *grieving* or *memorialising* processes (Brubaker & Hayes 2011; Carroll & Landry 2010; Dobler 2009; Roberts & Vidal 2000; Williams & Merten 2009). More recently, studies have registered a concern with the linguistic/emotional style of individual posts across a large sample of data (Brubaker et al. 2012) or the interactional and discursive production of coping with grief in online support groups (Pawelczyk 2013). More broadly the field is witnessing a growing interest in interdisciplinary work touching on different media forms and communities of practice, and addressing sociocultural aspects of communicating and performing death-related practices (see, for instance, Christensen and Willerslev 2013). Such a sociocultural focus requires a move away from an overriding focus on the content, themes and general functions of online mourning sites in favour of empirical studies of situated practices. This article provides methodological and analytic remarks that can be useful in that direction.

The present article focuses on a Facebook Rest In Peace (R.I.P.) group site (see *Data and Methodology* section) and examines user-generated content on the site. Focusing on sequentially emergent themes and interactivity, as well as on the variations in the discourse patterning of individual posts, the research questions that will be addressed are the following:

- 1) How is posting activity on SNS memorial sites produced and shared?
- 2) To what extent (and how) is posting activity on SNS memorial sites discursively regimented?

The next section presents the data for the present study, the analytic framework thereof and the scheme and procedure followed in coding the data.

Data and Methodology

Focus on a Facebook R.I.P. group site

Facebook memorial group sites, also known as R.I.P. group sites, offer rich material for the study of the everyday entextualisation of moments of mourning. Taking a Discourse-Centred Online Ethnography approach (DCOE) (Androutsopoulos, 2008), initial research for this project focused on monitoring a range of sites to establish (i) the kinds of activities unfolding online in relation to grieving (communicating with the bereaved, the deceased or group members), (ii) participants (the bereaved vs. online memorial 'tourists') and (iii) different types of interactivity involved (guestbook comments, post-mortem wall posts, private messages, R.I.P. posts on SNSs, etc.). After scrutinising a significant number of sites, I chose to focus on a specific R.I.P. Facebook group site for a young adult from the United States, which accommodates over than one thousand members, including people who knew him well and people who had never met

him. For the purposes of sampling, I used the principle of *advenience*⁶ (Barthes 2000[1980], 19), in an attempt to override selections prompted by personal and cultural preferences and look instead for a sense of dynamism and liveliness emanating from the site and the users' engagement with it. The research started in August 2013 and is still ongoing.

Facebook allows users to create memorials in two ways, either by memorialising the profile of the deceased (feature added in 2009), or by using the application *Facebook Groups*⁷. Group sites can be set up as *open*, making posts visible to all users, members and non-members alike, or *closed*, making posts visible to group members only. Memorial group sites on Facebook tend to be headed R.I.P. (Rest In Peace) followed by the name (or nickname) of the deceased.

The group site in question was created immediately after the death of an 18-year-old college student, David [pseudonym], in May 2012 by six of his closest friends in the state of Georgia, USA. The site is open to the public and is therefore accessible to all Facebook users. Part of the aim of the site is to commemorate and celebrate the deceased's life. In early stages of the project, Facebook messages were sent to the administrators of the FB group introducing the research project and reassuring the close friends of the deceased that all measures to safeguard the deceased's and participants' anonymity would be taken for the duration of the project. The administrators were asked to contact me directly if they had any concerns or questions about the project. Users and posts have been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms, and the reporting of sensitive information or references to places has been edited or avoided altogether. I am writing this article in the hope that my interest in this project will not be judged offensive to any of the authors of the posts, the creators of the group site or the bereaved members of the family.

The present article is concerned with the study of socially shared texts as practices of mourning on SNS memorial group sites; this means that the focus lies in the types of texts that users *produce/distribute* and *share* with and for a networked audience (John 2013; Androutsopoulos, 2013, 7).

Coding the corpus

The selected Facebook memorial group site has been coded and analysed for (i) content as a way of clarifying what is distributed or broadcast by and for networked audiences, (ii) significant moments aiming to capture how content is shared, and (iii) wall post openings and closings seeking to reveal the orienting generic framework guiding text production on the site.

Wall posts published on the site make up a corpus of 525 logs with a total 29, 136 words, ranging from a minimum of two words minimum to a maximum of 281 words. Postings on the group site date from the creation of the page in 2012 and cover a year following the death of David (new posts continue to appear on the group's timeline).

In terms of the sequentially unfolding discourse, wall posts cover a range of themes that have been coded in the corpus as *threads*, including sets of posts sequentially published on the timeline. Based on a close reading and re-reading of

⁶ Roland Barthes, in his reflections on photography, history, theatre and death, talks of a feeling of attraction as a guide for picking out and analysing photographs and that he describes as *advenience* or even *adventure* (2000 [1980], 19 [italics in the original]). To avoid the impulses of an impatient subjectivity articulated in the form of I like/I don't like, Barthes opts instead for an articulation of the form "“This picture advenes, this doesn't,”" a principle which can be usefully applied to other types of data selection.

⁷ In the case of celebrities, however, Facebook encourages the option of creating a new page that can accommodate an enormous number of 'friends.'

the entire corpus, the following overarching content types have been identified and used for coding individual posts: (i) death reactions, (ii) funeral services, (iii) death anniversaries, (iv) celebrations (birthday, graduation, Christmas, thanksgiving, sports games), (v) other celebrations (Thanksgiving, Christmas) and, finally, (vi) unclassified (sets of short sequences of one to five posts, which do not form a thematic thread). The coding was based on the identification of the dominant theme or references of the post, as well as on the sequential place of the post in a thread. For posts that did not include any relevant references, sequentiality was considered as the overriding criterion for inclusion in the thread.

For the coding of *moments* across the corpus, the unit of analysis is what Androutsopoulos (2014, 7) terms a *wall event*, “a multi-authored sequence of contributions that is displayed on a user’s FB wall”. Wall events consist of a minimum of one contribution (the initiative post, usually a so-called status update), followed by Likes and/or responsive contributions (Comments). Wall events thus encapsulate both the initiative moment of sharing and the responses of the networked audience. They are visually set off from each other and displayed in reverse chronological order on the profile page.

Finally, threads have been organised in excel spreadsheets, creating a single worksheet template for each in order to facilitate the qualitative analysis of the posts. The initial thread of sequential posts covering death reactions, populated in the course of two days with 17% (N=89) of the total posts in the corpus, has been also coded for author, gender and discourse structure, with a focus on framing devices. More specifically, each post has been assigned a code indicating whether the post features an opening/closing or not and, if it does, the forms of the opening/closing.

Based on reading and re-reading the posts, the following types of openings and closings were selected as categories for coding and analysis:

Types of opening

- 1) short epitaph (e.g. RIP)
- 2) greeting forms (e.g. hi, hey)
 - 3) address forms (e.g. Davey, Dave, David)
 - 4) discourse markers (e.g. well, first of all)
 - 5) politeness formula (e.g. thank you)

Types of closing

- 1) short epitaph (e.g. RIP, fly high, love always)
- 2) formulaic expressions denoting that the dead is missed (e.g. u are missed, missyou)
- 3) formulaic expressions denoting personal feelings (e.g. we all love you)
- 4) direct address to the dead (e.g. you’re in a far more better place now)

The analysis in the next section discusses the findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the corpus based on the afore-described coding categories, which will shed light on the production/distribution, sharing and discursive regimentation of posting activity online. The overarching aim of the analysis is to specify socio-discursive norms for mourning, which can point to the texture and textuality of Web 2.0 mourning.

Analysis

User-generated content on the Facebook wall

The first section of the analysis addresses the question of how posting activity is produced and distributed on the Facebook group site under study. The section examines the types of content broadcast on the Facebook R.I.P. memorial group site.

Posting activity on the site is at its highest in the days immediately before and after the set mourning ceremonies. More specifically, the first thread recording the immediate reactions to the death and the initial contributions following the creation of the group accumulates the majority of posts (N=89), which include updates on the services and memorial logs. In the posts, writers express their feelings about the deceased or stance vis-à-vis the death, or in some cases, leave notes of absence from the memorial services. Following the official services and over time posting activity decreases, but it never ceases entirely; new posts are being published each month at the moment of writing. Peaks of posting activity occur at specific times of the year, including graduation, birthday and death anniversaries and other celebrations, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

The analysis of posts for threads indicates that sequences of posts accumulate on the wall in sequences of approximately fifty to ninety posts, prompted by off-line events and important calendar dates. In between the thematic threads, shorter post sequences of approximately one to five posts, which are unrelated to off-line events or marked dates, also feature across the corpus.

Thematic threads largely shape the texture of mourning online and organise the activity of writing around a flexible set of recurrent temporal points, as well as around specific topics, themes and references. Indexing off-line events and important calendar dates in individual posts across sequences yields a sense of emerging coherence in the spatially and temporally expanded space of grieving, which is frequented by bereaved friends, acquaintances and strangers before, contemporaneously to, and after the formal ceremonies. The entextualisation of individual moments of mourning on the site is achieved in a way that fits in with the wider community's experience of grieving, generating a multi-voiced wall of tributes for public display (*participatory entextualisation of mourning*). The coherence emerging in and through posting activity on the group site under study creates sets of expectations for the reception and production of new posts, with users feeling compelled to linguistically mirror previous posts while anticipating new ones. For instance, in the thread emerging as a response to the first birthday anniversary of David, all fifty-five posts broadcast on that day linguistically mirror each other and include the formulaic expression 'Happy birthday' with little, if any, additional content. Wider discourse expectations shaped in less formulaic threads on the site will be discussed in more detail later in this article (see the Section *Regimenting Discourse Activity*).

Unlike the thematic threads discussed above, shorter post sequences are produced as regular outbursts of posting activity by individual authors. This type of posting activity is seemingly linked to an individual's personal experience of grieving, and is akin to updates on Facebook profile pages that are described as dominated by breaking news of ordinary, everyday events, with users sharing slices of mundane life (Georgakopoulou 2013, 20). Facebook RIP updates include expressions of personal feelings about the dead, the sharing of memories and dreams, as well as updates on everyday life, adding to the accumulated tribute, praise and memorial posts across the corpus. In and through the use of Facebook RIP updates, individual group members entextualise moments of mourning on an one-off basis, 'stop-

ping by' to update their connection with the dead in a way that is very similar to putting new flowers on a grave and which is similar to practices in virtual cemeteries (Roberts 2004, 63).

In summary, the texture of mourning on the Facebook group site under study relies on the temporal-thematic organisation of user-generated content, indexing important calendar dates and memorial ceremonies in the community, (re)creating or expanding in individual users a sense of belonging to a group of mourners who wish to continue to engage with or to become involved in practices of memorialisation. Users are afforded the opportunity to engage in writing activity as a way of conveying and validating their stances vis-à-vis the deceased and the event of the death with and for a networked group of bereaved individuals, enfranchising the mourning of close friends, acquaintances and members of the wider community (school and church) who may feel affected by the sudden death. The temporal and thematic points of reference guiding writing activity on the site suggest that the production of mourning online is regimented to some extent, creating specific expectations in group members about what or when to post, as well as a sense of duty to keep the group site regularly updated. Participation and affiliation with the group then emerges and is maintained via writers' adherence to these locally developing norms.

On the Facebook RIP group site, individual expressions of grief gain meaning in the context of collectively generated sequences of posts. At the same time, the public display of collectively created mosaics of tributes is enriched and personalised by regular, one-off, individual user contributions. The sense of belonging to a group, then, emerges from the collectively achieved texture of the site that takes the form of a live collective diary of grieving (Giaxoglou 2014). Users' affiliation with the online group of bereaved is enhanced by the interactive functions afforded by the Facebook platform. The next section turns to the consideration of ways in which content is communicated on the site as a means of pointing to the way in which interactive features are embedded in the group site's texture.

Sharing content on the Facebook wall

The texture of mourning online is enhanced by the specific kinds of activities afforded by the platform's social plugins, such as the Like button and the Comments box,⁸ which allow users to share content and to co-construct meaning on the site in the absence of face-to-face communication cues.

The Like button is one of the key interactive social plug-ins on Facebook, visualised via the 'thumbs up' icon. Clicking on the button enables users to communicate with each other, to acknowledge their presence online and to share content, increasing its visibility for networked friends. The study of wall events suggests that the social plug-in in question is regularly used, and in fact more often than the Share and Comment interactive buttons, performing a range of functions.

While on personal Facebook profile pages the number of Likes a post accumulates is generally used as an analogue for the user's social status in the online community, on the RIP group site the Like button is predominantly used for enhancing the popularity and visibility of the group site itself and for affirming or validating group members' engagement with the site, by virtue of the fact that Like activities feature on personal profile timelines (see Example 1).

⁸ Facebook describes the Like button as a function that lets people share pages and content from their site on friends' Facebook profiles with one click, increasing the visibility of content to friends. The Comments plugin lets people comment on any content on the site (Facebook 2014).

Example 1 (21 likes)

PLEASE READ THIS EVERYONE!!!!ITS ABOUT DAVID!!!!

Aye Sumone Who Should Tell EDITED NAME or EDITED NAME At The Gradution To Leave David's Chair Where Its Suppose To Be & Ask His Mom For His Cap & Ginon? & Put It In His Chair & To Still Call His Name To Make It Like We Never Lost Him?

PLEASE LIKE IF YOU AGREE ?!?!?!?!?

(Facebook Memorial group wall post, No1, Accessed 20/04/2014).

The example above features the first post via which the group site was launched, in which the writer and one of the close friends of the deceased explicitly asks other group members to click Like as a way of expressing their agreement regarding the proposal for paying tribute to David on the day of the school graduation. In this case, the use of the Like button serves as a resource for group decision-making, akin to an online voting application that users can deploy for signalling approval of a certain course of action. Example 1, then, illustrates how the use of interactive social plug-ins enhances a sense of belonging to a group in which members are encouraged to commit both to online and offline memorialising activities.

The majority of accumulated Likes on posts across the corpus, however, indicate that the social plug-in in question is most regularly used as an acknowledgement of sharing, akin to a nod, arguably indexing the Liker's active engagement with posting activity on the site and indicating his/her support for online mourners and the deceased (cf. Marwick and Ellison, 2012, 14) (see Example 2). In online memorials, then, participants not only "upload grief and download compassion" (Blando et al. 2004; cited in Moss 2004, 79), but also upload mediated forms of support and compassion by clicking on Like.

Example 2 (39 likes)

*I can still hear you singing and see you walking down the hallway, talking to everyone you passed. You were a great inspiration to so many people and you brought so many people so much closer together today. It was great to see everyone come together at the school as one. And people I never thought I'd see at a church were there tonight for you and they got to hear the gospel because of you. I know you were up there with a big smile on your face and praising Jesus with us as we worshipped him tonight in the youth room. I'll miss you David more than you know and I'll miss eating Moes with you on Monday's and we just talked last week about how we needed to start going again but now you're gone. I know no matter where I go you'll always be there in spirit and it's great to have you and my dad as my guardian angels, always with me!!
Love you David!*

(Facebook Memorial group wall post, No23 Accessed 20/04/2014).

Most importantly, the use of Like was found to be equally available to the networked public, irrespective of the place a user occupies in the hierarchy of legitimate mourners (with family, close friends, acquaintances and strangers with family occupying the top place in the hierarchy) (Marwick and Ellison 2012, 12). The use of the Comments box, which enables users to add their own content as response or follow-up to an individual post, is used less frequently⁹ compared to the use of Like. Its use seems to be preferred by members of the group who interact with each other outside the online group and index a close relationship to the deceased, hence featuring high in the hierarchy of legiti-

⁹ It is estimated that the Comments plug-in is used as response or follow-up in the case of 9.3% of initiative posts in the corpus.

mate mourners. For example, the greatest amount of brief comments is inserted in appreciation of the posting of a tribute song created by friends of David and shared with the group. With very few exceptions, comments on the wall event are authored by individuals who knew the deceased personally, while Likes are used by anyone in the hierarchy of legitimate mourners.

The use of the social plug-in Like and the Comments box is therefore argued to be differentially distributed across users, depending on their place in the hierarchy of mourners; in other words, how well - if at all - they knew the deceased. The use of these social plugins enhances the popularity of the deceased, ascertaining the worthiness of remembering and commemorating him and, at the same time, indexes individual group members' engagement with activity on the site. In other words, user-generated content is not just produced and achieved in a participatory manner, but is also shared with and for a networked audience wishing to engage with memorialising activity as a way of enhancing the deceased's popularity, and to display that engagement via the use of Comment or Like. The final part of the analysis will turn to linguistic-discursive aspects of posting activity in order to clarify how users textually shape their posts, guided by more or less tight frameworks of genre.

Regimenting posting activity

This section addresses the question of the extent to which (and how) posting activity on SNS memorial sites is regimented in terms of discourse genres. This part of the analysis will focus on the analysis of the first thread (Death Reactions, N=89), which is considered as key for setting the tone for subsequent posts in the corpus.

Discourse genres of mourning¹⁰ are prototypically emotional genres, whose structure and tone vary according to a set of parameters, including situational (setting, audience) and extra-textual parameters (gender of the mourner, gender of the deceased, relationship of mourner to the deceased). The present analysis looks at openings and closings of individual posts in order to shed light on the discourse shape of posts. Openings and closings serve to frame a message in terms of an orienting framework that sets expectations about the unfolding discourse and which guides interpretation. The sample is made up of eighty-nine (89) posts, of which forty-four (44) were authored by male and forty-five (45) by female participants.

Based on the quantitative and qualitative study of posts in the sample of openings and closings (see Section *Coding the Corpus*), it was found that openings are optional, while closings are preferred by the majority of authors. In terms of openings, more specifically, there does not seem to be a clear pattern emerging between the option of opening the post (52%) using any of the coded forms (short epitaph, form of greeting, direct address, discourse marker or politeness formula) or starting the message directly by using personal pronouns in the singular ('I', 'you', 'it's') or plural ('we') (46% of posts). Both seem to be equally acceptable.

A closer look at the posts suggests that about half of the posts (54%) featuring openings start with a direct address using the name of the deceased, either in full (David) or using a diminutive form of the name (Davey, Dave). The main

¹⁰ Popular genres of mourning and commemoration in the United States include eulogies, a speech or writing in praise of the dead and epitaphs, brief statements in memory of the dead inscribed on tomb headstones. Such genres have been predominantly associated with formal occasions of mourning, displaying conventional openings, phrases and closings, although the bereaved are increasingly opting for personalised versions in their choice or production of eulogies and headstone epitaphs.

body of these posts is varied (see Figure 1): it predominantly includes expressions of praise for the deceased, followed by a closing with the short epitaph 'RIP' (see underlined elements in Example 3). Alternatively, posts opening with a direct address can revolve around the expression of personal feelings about the dead or the event of death, and close with the short epitaph 'Fly High' (see underlined elements in Example 4)¹¹.

Example 3.

Davey, u will always be remembered man u were the best out of all players man we love. R.I.P [full name] rest in peace (Facebook Memorial group wall post, No 32, Male sample, Accessed 01/06/2014)

Example 4.

Davey, I miss you a lot. But I know your [sic] in a better place watching over all of us. I'll never forget when you gave me that great advice about gossiping and drama 3 weeks ago. You always knew what to say, and you always knew how to put a smile on somebody's face. Can't wait to see you again. I love & miss you a lot. Fly high. (Facebook Memorial group wall post, No 62, Female sample, Accessed 01/06/2014)

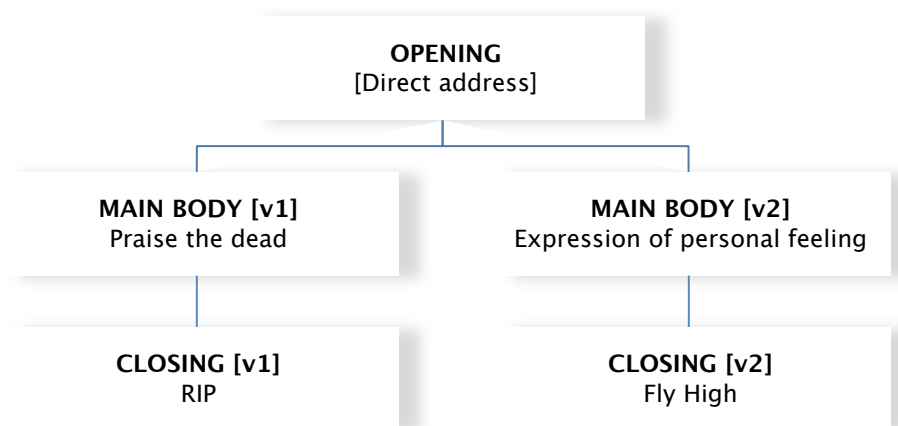


Figure 1. illustrates the two main types of discourse variations (v1, v2) observed in the sample of posts starting with a direct address.

In terms of gender patterns in the posts, it has been found that it is predominantly females who show a preference for opening their posts using the name of the dead (direct address), compared to using the short epitaph RIP at the start of their post (a single occurrence in the sample of female authored posts).

A smaller number of posts (17%) open with the short epitaph RIP and even fewer posts open with forms of greeting (11%), a discourse marker (9%) or politeness formulae (7%). Posts opening with the short epitaph RIP (see Figure 2) tend to be followed by a term of address or direct address, and close with an expression of missing the dead (see underlined elements in Example 5) or include an expression of praising the dead and lack a clear closing (see underlined elements in Example 6).

¹¹ In longer posts, both praising and the expression of personal feeling can feature.

Example 5.

RIP man .. u are missed and loved by many (Facebook Memorial group wall post, No2, Male Sample, Accessed 01/06/2014)

Example 6.

Rest in peace Davey. You where a great person all around & impacted so many lives. You will always be greatly missed but never forgotten.

(Facebook Memorial group wall post, No6, Male Sample, Accessed 01/06/2014)

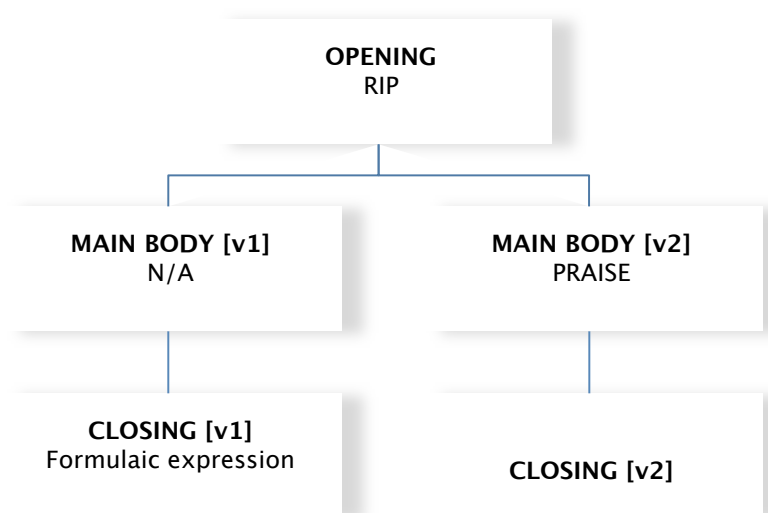


Figure 2. illustrates the two main types of discourse variations (v1, v2) observed in the sample of posts starting with the short epitaph (RIP).

In terms of gender patterns in the sample of posts opening with the short epitaph RIP, it has been found that male authors tend to prefer this type of discourse shape, also accompanying the epitaph with a term of address (bro, man), which indexes the author's close relationship to the deceased.

Finally, in terms of closings, the patterned distribution is clearer than in the analysis of openings. More specifically, the majority of posts feature some type of closing (85%), arguably serving to discursively set off the post from other posts on the tribute wall and discourage the development of a wall event in interaction with networked mourners. Short epitaphs (RIP, Fly High, love always) were found to be the preferred type of closing in almost half (42%) of the posts that featured a closing. Conventional expressions of personal feelings featured less often as closings (29%), while expressions of sadness or missing the dead were used even less (14%) (as these tend to feature in the main body of the message). Gender patterns indicate that females show a preference for the use of the short epitaph 'Fly High', while males preferred by far the use of RIP (with the exception of one post by a male author, which features both forms of short epitaphs).

The gendered patterning observed indicates that a more explicitly positive style tends to be generated by female authors, compared to a more solemn style shared among male authors. It is argued that the positive style is not only a

matter of gender, but that this style is viewed as being more appropriate for group members indexing a lower place in the hierarchy of legitimate mourners. In this group, male mourners occupy a higher place in the hierarchy of mourners, as they are the ones who were closer to the deceased, who was also male.

To sum up, the structure of posts displays a discourse patterning that varies in terms of openings and closings framing the message. The lack of clear patterning for openings suggests the lack of strict generic regimentation and points to the emergence of *ad hoc* generic blending depending on extra-textual parameters, such as the gender of the author and the relationship with the deceased. The opening of posts by the use of direct address or the use of personal pronouns invokes genres of personal writing and diary writing, respectively. The preference for including some form of closing, especially the expressions R.I.P or Fly High, invokes the genre of short epitaphs inscribed on headstones. The analysis therefore points to the mixing of conventional genres of mourning, including epitaphs, letter and diary writing.

In conclusion, patterned variation in the discourse structure of Facebook RIP posts in the use of framing devices (openings and closings) indicates that the speech style guiding the discursive production and reception of posts in the semi-public digital environment under study is based on an *ad hoc* generic blending of formal and vernacular genres of mourning in response to extra-textual parameters, such as the gender of the poster or the relationship with the deceased. The analysis extends previous research, which has acknowledged the emergence of social norms on Facebook memorial pages as a process of negotiation that involves both wide cultural norms and specific contextual understanding (Marwick and Ellison 2012, 32), by providing a close examination of the posts' discourse structure. The findings are preliminary at this stage, as they will need to be further tested against a larger sample to include all threads in the corpus under study, as well as across different memorial sites.

Conclusion

This paper examined practices of sharing mourning on Web 2.0 participatory environments with a focus on a selected Facebook R.I.P. group site, which presents a rich and complex picture of text-centred, informal grieving activity, regulated by the closest friends and peers of the deceased instead of by the family or the funeral home.

The analysis examined wall posts as post sequences, wall events and texts with the aim to shed light to how content on the site is produced, shared and regimented. It was suggested that user-based content generation involves users' selection of moments for public display relating to offline ceremonies of mourning, calendar-important dates or personal updates, contributing to the production of a textured wall in memory of the dead. The texturing of mourning around the thematic organisation of content around important calendar dates and off line ceremonies of mourning, interpolated by regular outbursts of personal updates helps create vernacular and personalised memorial spaces. Similar to web cemeteries and online memorials (Roberts 2004), Facebook R.I.P. group sites afford users the opportunity to give meaning to their individual expressions of grief in the context of their participatory entextualisation of moments of mourning. In addition, through the use of social plugins (Like button, Comment box) users affirm their engagement with the site, as well as their commitment to supporting each other and raising the deceased's post-mortem profile through posting or interacting with others on the site.

In the Facebook memorial site under study, as in other social network sites, writing remains at the core of digital activity and is used along with visual and multimodal resources in users' technologised representations of self in participatory contexts. Even though these contexts appear to be less regimented and more agentive, they in fact feature subtle

thematic, interactional and discursive regimentation. The representation of mourning in Web 2.0 environments is achieved through *participatory entextualisation* (Androutsopoulos 2013); users select significant moments for public display, configuring the semiotic resources at their disposal to produce a textured wall. In and through such entextualising activity, participants (re)create for and with the networked bereaved a sense of belonging to a group, affording the potential for the exchange of emotional support resources. The group also accommodates the broadcast of personal updates helping users to maintain bonds with the dead while attesting to the deceased's popularity and status as a person who was greatly loved and missed¹².

Web 2.0 mourning is found to be largely a reconfigured, rather than an entirely new form of mourning practice, which relies on sharing user-generated content produced in an *ad hoc* blending of formal and vernacular genres dependent on (i) situational (date of posting activity, position in the thread or sequence) and (ii) extra-textual parameters (gender of poster, relationship with the deceased). The textuality of contributed posts is reconfigured from existing genres of mourning, namely epitaphs and eulogies, as well as genres of vernacular writing such as diary writing and letter writing, which set up specific local norms for posting activity and interaction on the site. This article provided a socio-discursive investigation of mourning practices seeking to contribute to the growing, in-depth understanding of the texture and textuality of Web 2.0 mourning practices.

To conclude, the call by researchers of online texts in digital media for interdisciplinary approaches to the study of social practices in online worlds (see Georgakopoulou 2006; Jones and Hafner 2012) also applies to the study of death-related practices online. Such an interdisciplinary direction would greatly benefit from discourse-centred situated studies of grieving and mourning online practices that can complicate our accounts of digital death and mourning.

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¹² It is important, however, to note that posting on the memorial site need not be seen exclusively as a therapeutic outlet for the bereaved. Posting activity on memorial sites also constitutes a cultural account and objectification of grief, reproducing and remediating dominant ideologies of mourning in contemporary societies in ways that deserve further scholarly attention.

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