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Networked Emotions: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Sharing Loss Online

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Introduction to Special Issue: “Networked Emotions: interdisciplinary perspectives on sharing loss online”

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From Emotions to Networked Emotions

Emotion has long been a contested concept and subject to different, often conflicting, definitions and approaches. Emotions have long been viewed in a reductionist way as solely biological components, as private components of the personality structure of an individual, or as entirely socially and culturally constructed. These views, that separate analytically different facets of emotion, reflect persisting dichotomies of human phenomena as nature vs. nurture, universality vs. culture-specificity, and private vs. public, which have served as the key organizing principles in Western science and humanities. Emotions, however, occupy a liminal space between divisions (Leavitt, 1996); they involve phenomena that are interactive and integrated with cognition (Izard, 2009), playing a key role in human development, in everyday social interaction, and in the organization of social and cultural life. Emotions are, then, to be understood as a not exclusively private object of inquiry (Zembylas, 2007). The study on emotion has received an enormous increase since the 1980s with a marked rise in psychological studies, and gradually engendering more insight from sociology, political science, anthropology, communication and cultural studies, among others (Döveling et al., 2017). Scholars seem to have reached consensus on the usefulness of the term ‘emotion’ to refer to certain socially embedded psychobiological processes, even if they do not necessarily agree on how such processes cohere, or to what extent components such as arousal, feeling, appraisal, or facial expression can be given causal or

Networked Emotions

definitional prominence (Beatty, 2013, p. 416). It is, however, agreed that emotions constitute a lens not only into the development of human evolution and cognition, but also into the complexities of meaning-making, the organization of roles and relationships in social life and the way these may change over time. Emotions can then be conceptualized as a broad range of affective phenomena, including moods, feelings, affects, and related concepts (Döveling et al., 2012), which are not contained in a single domain, but rather belong to several domains, including the affective, the social, and the evolutionary/motivational (Wilce, 2009) . Emotions are particularly pertinent to the investigation of communication practices in online contexts.

In contemporary socially mediated and mediatized contexts, public life is not just complicated, but it is, in many respects, reconfigured (Baym and boyd, 2012, p. 320). Marwick and Ellison (2012), for instance, point to new possibilities afforded by social media for temporally extending public identities even beyond one's lifetime. This is exemplified in the case of Facebook memorial pages: in networked mourning users share emotions relating to loss publically (or semi-publically), increasing the visibility of what has been formerly viewed as a 'private' or 'intimate' emotional experience. In order to deal with the complexities resulting from such increased visibility of otherwise 'hidden' moments, users turn to the careful management of their socially mediated public life and to increased levels of monitoring and controlling their acts of sharing emotions in networked contexts. The socially mediated communication of emotion is intricately linked to the social textures of networking technologies, which include the affordances of *persistence*, *replicability*, *scalability*, and *searchability* (boyd, 2011) in an emerging culture of *sharing* (John, 2016). This means that existing views and definitions of emotion are not adequate and need to be complemented by understandings of networked contexts. In other words theories

Networked Emotions

of emotion become theories of *networked emotion*, that is to say the mobilization of affect in online emotional cultures as a transmittable, spreadable, and self-contained resource, bringing out formerly privately shared emotions into online spaces and collective experience (Garde-Hansen and Gorton, 2013).

The acknowledgment of the increasingly central place of emotion in digital cultures of participation and sharing (Benski and Fischer, 2014) calls for systematic research on networked emotions. This line of research is intimately linked to the study of socially mediated public life and can provide insights into how social media complicate the nature and workings of emotion in spaces where private and public distinctions are being contested and (re)negotiated (Giaxoglou, 2017). Networked mourning practices, in particular, which are currently widespread across social media platforms, arguably constitute rich sites for investigating the different facets of mediated public and semi-public acts of networked emotions with and for multiple publics and their implications for the experience of loss in personal, social, and cultural contexts.

The growing body of research into practices of loss online (Willerslev and Christensen, 2013; Christensen and Gotved, 2015) has brought to the fore some of the key sociocultural implications of the remediation of loss, including for instance the revival of public mourning (Walter, 2008), the creation of new communal spaces for the performance and sharing of emotion (Walter et al., 2011) and the increased affordances for mourners' identity and affective trajectories (Giaxoglou, 2015). However, the wider contribution of studies in this area to theorizations of networked emotions in digital cultures of participation and sharing has not been sufficiently emphasized in individual articles or published collections so far. The special issue seeks to fill this gap, calling

Networked Emotions

for the extension of the study of emotion from the domains of everyday life (Gross, 2000), culture (Ahmed, 2004), and mass media (Döveling et al., 2017) to virtual online environments (Döveling, 2015) which are implicated in wider transformations of social and cultural practices. The articles selected for inclusion in this special issue collectively provide an interdisciplinary and intercultural lens to emotional communication in mediatized contexts of grieving, mourning, and memorialization and contribute to the understanding of the reflexive and social dynamics of sharing emotion online.

Sharing loss online: navigating a spectrum of visibility

The multi-layered contexts of social media entail intense impression management work on the part of users, that involves a set of interactional and attunement strategies mobilized to frame the situation and one's relationship with others (Goffman, 1959). Some people seek to minimize visibility by minimizing or controlling their sharing of emotion, while others look to increase visibility, by maximizing and sensationalizing their sharing, thus complicating their alignment to or disalignment from networked publics. For instance, a user's increased emotional sharing can prompt different reactions to networked audiences: some users may be prepared to acknowledge such emotional displays and engage in the exchange of emotional and support resources (Baym, 2010), while others could see such sharing as an instance of over-sharing and disalign themselves from such acts. It is in and through such acts of alignment and disalignment online that norms for displaying loss-related emotions emerge.

Networked Emotions

In networked mourning, this ‘spectrum of visibility’ and its varied reception is further complicated by the involvement of different parties - often hierarchically organized as shown by Marwick and Ellison (2012) - in establishing, negotiating, or contesting the degree of publicness of mediated acts of sharing. For instance, in the case of the death of a loved one, the peers of the deceased may opt to increase the visibility of shared emotions by regularly posting memories, thoughts, pictures, and songs on the memorialized profile of the deceased. They may seek to further engage in co-constructing their friend’s after-death identity in a memorial page, specially created as a public space for remembrance (Kasket, 2012). Bereaved parents, on the other hand, may prefer less public modes for their grieving and seek out ‘safer’ modes and sites for sharing their emotions, as for instance the ones provided by specialized closed forums where interaction with other bereaved parents takes place in an affiliative and supportive environment. Finally, in the case of celebrities or public figures whose death attracts extensive media attention, visibility tends to extend and amplify on social media, often raising reactions or suspicions of inauthentic emotional displays and over-pouring of parasocial grief (de Groot and Leith, 2015). The above description is, of course, schematic; it is possible for the death of a previously unknown individual to be highly mediatized under specific circumstances, and for the death of a well-known public figure to receive very limited attention. In some cases, parents can seek out to increase the visibility of mourning for their child (in many cases linking such activity with specific types of social or charity action), while friends of a deceased or celebrity fans can form closed groups to continue performing their social identities of friendship or fandom. Lastly, individual users might opt for increased visibility or obscurity at specific stages or moments in their affective trajectory. To the above individual and social considerations, one should also add the technological affordances of the platform and users’ own understanding of the ways in which publicness is

Networked Emotions

mediated on specific sites: for instance, on Facebook, it can be more or less difficult to know who is seeing what and when, pointing to what Baym and boyd (2012) refer to as a ‘conundrum of visibility’ which further complicates the nature of networked sharing.

In sum, there are a range of diverse possibilities for visibility or obscurity online, which suggest the existence of a *spectrum of visibility* that users are expected to negotiate – and in some cases to struggle with. This depends on the circumstances of death, the type of loss involved, and the sociocultural practices users draw on in the process of remediating their grief. The significance of such factors as well as possibly additional factors are to be empirically identified drawing on a range of methods and frameworks, as articles in this special issue set out to do. This line of research focuses on networked emotions as acts of sharing and sheds important insights into how loss-related emotions are placed on a spectrum of visibility and publicness online, reflecting, magnifying, or minimizing the place of death, mourning, and grief in social life, both online and offline.

Interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives on sharing loss online

The articles included in the collection deal with practices of sharing or managing loss from a range of disciplinary angles, including media psychology, media and cultural studies, and communication studies and report on case studies from Germany, Sweden, Denmark, US, UK, and Australia. Collectively, they provide a much needed interdisciplinary and cross-cultural lens to the study of grief as a social emotion that enhances understandings of contemporary personal, public and cultural repertoires of networked emotions more broadly.

Research presented in the collection contributes to three interrelated areas: (i) the exploration of links between forms of emotional communication and specific factors, such as time, tie strength, and type of loss (see Pennington; Döveling, this issue), (ii) the identification of key norms of sharing grief online and different perceptions of the appropriateness of that type of sharing in specific cultural contexts (see Sabra; Christensen et al., this issue) and (iii) the investigation of wider social and cultural implications and complications of the increased visibility afforded by digital mourning and memorializing practices (see Nansen; Hutchings, this issue). Taken collectively, the articles contribute to the theorization of networked relationality and the networked self (Papacharissi, 2011) in the context of ongoing changes in the way private and public experiences are shaped, lived, and reacted to and contributes to the burgeoning work in the interdisciplinary field of death online. More specifically, studies in this special issue complicate consistent findings of earlier empirical studies of the remediation of loss online which have tended to foreground how social media, and in particular Facebook, constitute techno-spiritual spaces (Brubaker et al., 2013), beneficial for mourners as spaces where they can continue their bonds with their loved ones and in addition, be supported in their grieving.

Natalie Pennington uses survey analysis techniques to assess the perceived supportive value of Facebook during times of grief in US contexts. Her analysis of the factors of time passed since death, degree of user engagement on Facebook and user's relational closeness to the deceased showcases the complicated relationship networked mourners report having with Facebook: in the case of mourning the death of a friend, users perceive the use of Facebook as both helpful *and* harmful. Pennington explains that frequency of use of the social network and identification with

Networked Emotions

the site constitutes one of the most important factors in perceptions of grieving on Facebook as useful in the mourning process, whereas relational closeness arguably gives rise to complex and conflicted attitudes to such practices.

Jakob Sabra's research findings, which are based on a study among Facebook users in Denmark, point to similar conflictual perceptions of practices of grieving online. Based on attitudinal survey techniques used to ascertain social media users' perceptions of grieving on Facebook including participants with and without previous experience of engaging in digital mourning practices, Sabra finds both positive and negative attitudes to sharing loss-related emotions online. His analysis of participants' answers to the open-ended part of the distributed questionnaire, provides an insight into why such divergence in attitudes is attested. Sabra argues that participants' attitudes are grounded in evaluations of over-management ('feeling too much') or under-management of grief ('feeling too little') that are linked to 'traditional' social understandings of grief as a private activity practiced offline and understandings of the intensity and duration of grief depending on the mourner's relationship to the deceased. Sabra also argues that conflicting views reflect the emergence and establishment of divergent norms or netiquettes for different types of loss-related activity: networked emotions are considered to be legitimate acts of sharing and spreading in memorializing-related activities, while mourning-related practices are seen to be less amenable to public expression.

Katrin Döveling's content analysis of posts in five popular platforms in Germany further contributes to explaining the conflicting perceptions attested online, bringing insights from another cultural context and discipline. Her study examines emotion regulation patterns and different types of networked emotion shared in digital mourning contexts and points to the

Networked Emotions

prominence of empathy sharing among users, irrespective of the age of the bereaved. Her findings corroborate to some extent empirical findings on the benefits of participation in digital grieving spaces for mourners. However, the closer examination of users' orientation to types of emotional regulation through which mourners exhibit the way they cope with their grief brings to the fore differences in the emotional displays of groups of bereaved of old age and groups of bereaved of a very young age: adults are found to demonstrate an orientation to positive emotion regulation patterns online and horizontal, non-judgmental social comparison, while bereaved of a very young age show a predominant orientation to sharing despair, seeking out forms of social support not readily available in offline contexts. In sum, networked emotions are expressed in different ways depending on the type of sharing activity, the age of the bereaved, and the purpose of the sharing and can attract very different types of assessment and attentional focus from users.

Considered from the perspective of the visibility-obscurity conundrum mentioned in the previous section, the findings of the above studies on users' perceptions and assessments of others' online behaviors can be taken as implicit statements about their own preferred impression and visibility management norms of networked emotion in online contexts. Further research into their actual strategies would be needed to ascertain the degree of match between those implicit, reportable statements and practice.

Issues of the visibility spectrum are aptly illustrated in **Christensen, Segerstad, Kasperowski, and Sandvik's** study, which examines mourning in the particular case of the loss of a child, drawing on case studies from Sweden and Denmark. The authors discuss uses of digital media for accommodating particular and complicated types of loss, such as the loss of a stillborn or an

Networked Emotions

infant and show how social media affirm the importance of the paradigm of continuing bonds and the continued performance of parenthood after the loss of a child. In this case, practices and norms for grieving are found to develop across time and to depend on the particular conditions for participation in the online forums as well as on dominant ideas of grief in society. This study further foregrounds the complexity and dynamic nature of networked emotion displays and sharing in loss-related contexts and clearly shows how such practices are implicated in tabooising, detabooizing and retabooizing grief online as well as offline. Christensen, Segerstad, Kasperowski, and Sandvik's study highlights the need for social media research to consider the close interrelationships between the online and the offline and move away from an analytical divide of the two domains as separate spheres of activity. Such a move is important for shedding light into the wider social and cultural repertoires of emotion and mourning, in addition to individual ones. The last two papers contribute important insights into such wider contexts and interconnections between institutions and emotional genres and registers.

Bjorn Nansen's study focuses on market institutions, sketching out the response of the funeral industry to the changing technological landscape in Australia, the US, and the UK during the period 2014-2016. Based on a combination of ethnographic and content analysis methods, he discusses recent innovations in this domain including an 'end of life planning tool' (DeadSocial), which provides DIY resources for navigating death, bereavement and commemoration online, a remote-controlled Skype-enabled robot that enables funeral attendance and participation at a distance ('CARL', Orbis Robotics), and commercial memorial websites that incorporate social media aesthetics and features such as 'social buttons' to share grief (HeavenAddress; funeralOne). The discussion shows how the funeral industry draws on the digital affordances of

Networked Emotions

social media and the increasing vernacularisation, individualization and digitisation of commemorative practices and how it is oriented to ‘translating’ the ethic of participatory digital culture to the emotional labour of planning of death. In other words, the study shows that the increased digitisation of grief has had a felt impact on the funeral industry across Australia, US, and the UK. Such advances call for the further study of the deceased’s involved in anticipating and planning for their own death, as well as for studies of emotion and participation frameworks in the case of mourning at a distance.

Tim Hutching’s article draws our attention to the ways in which religious institutions, in this case the Swedish national church (*Svenska kyrkan*), makes use of digital media for sharing particular forms of loss-related emotions and discourses about emotion that serve its own purposes and mission. For instance, through a hybrid digital-physical installation in Swedish cemeteries and a series of Facebook posts on death and sadness, the Church constructs emotion as a universal shared experience unifying humans in an attempt to consolidate its emotional brand and also to address and attract religious and non-religious audiences. The study points to a much needed examination of emotional dimensions of death and digital media in the context of institutional frames, where the injunction to emotional openness and sharing becomes a vehicle for consolidating particular kinds of emotional regimes and ideologies. Hutching’s study is grounded in an understanding of emotion as rhetorically and socially constructed and points to the political and social implications of such constructions in the case of institutions’ emotional branding. This line of research is worth to be expanded to other institutional domains and bring forward the increasing mobilization of emotion as a commodity in everyday capitalist formations.

Concluding remarks

Articles in this special issue provide an interdisciplinary and international lens into the changing nature of emotion on social media with a particular focus on digital contexts relating to loss and death focused on diverse cultural settings, including the US, UK, Australia, Denmark, Germany, and Sweden. In sum, articles in this special issue clarify how socially mediated publicness has impacted networked emotion displays and communication in contexts of remediated loss and how forms of sharing emotion afforded by technology are mobilized in identity construction as well as in the circulation of emotion as ideology. Taken together the articles point to three main shifts in research foci in the study of death online: (i) a shift from a concern with the ‘new’ affordances of digital platforms for the expression and collectivization of grief to a concern with users’ attitudes to uses of digital platforms as sites for mourning and their growing awareness of the constraints and challenges that such uses entail, (ii) a shift from an interest in what users ‘do’ in different online platforms for mourning and memorialization to what people ‘say they do’ across platforms and across cultural contexts, (iii) a shift to interconnections between the online and the offline with a concern about individual, social, and institutional registers and regimes of emotion. Based on the findings of the studies included in this issue, it can be argued that while technological affordances of digital platforms bring out a widely attested ‘injunction to share’ (John, 2013), the display of emotion as part of networked public experience is closely related to existing sociocultural norms about loss-related emotional expression and appropriateness at least at the level of evaluating such displays. Even though it is sometimes argued that social media have changed the way we mourn, there is some evidence to suggest that in some corners, there is also a considerable amount of resistance and discomfort vis-a-vis to particular aspects of loss

Networked Emotions

remediation online and the increased publicness of grief (but cf. Döveling, this special issue). There still seems to be scope for further research into sociocultural sensitivities to emotional displays in relation to ideas about the boundaries of the body and the boundary between life and death across different religions and different contexts even within cultures, seeking to avoid cultural essentialisation and Western biases (Kellehear, 2007).

In addition, further study of networked emotions could develop a better understanding of cross-platform technological affordances and constraints that would take into account the polymedia environments users navigate in their everyday lives depending on their emotional and social needs (Madianou and Miller, 2012). Polymediality allows the expression of multiple, concurrent, and in some cases clashing acts of identity and emotional performance, depending on the types of interaction promoted on particular platforms; for instance, a user might post a R.I.P. post on the Facebook memorial of a friend displaying grief and a couple of hours later, post an update on their personal profile page sharing a picture of them enjoying themselves with friends. There is scope for examining such cases and explore what they tell us about the complexities and tensions in acts of performing networked emotions. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the politics of platforms and the way ‘data-bodies’ including those of the memorialized dead continue to be sources of value in the context of data-mining interactions in current commercial models of social networks, such as Facebook (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013).

Finally, this special issue addresses key issues for individuals arising from the pervasiveness of uses of digital platforms for mourning and memorialization and considered the impact of such practices on innovations in the funeral industry and new Church initiatives. Future work will

hopefully deal with innovations in the area of social robotics (Lifenaut, 2016), which promise a form of after-death existence and interaction with others based on uploading one's individual beliefs, feelings, and memories on a computer. Such technological advances open up important questions about the nature of networked humanness that extend currently developing theorizations of socially-mediated publicness and emotionality.

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Networked Emotions

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