"There Isn't Wifi in Heaven!" Negotiating Visibility on Facebook Memorial Pages

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"There Isn't Wifi in Heaven!" Negotiating Visibility on Facebook Memorial Pages

Alice Marwick and Nicole B. Ellison

Today, social network sites are a key site for public displays of connection and grieving. Mourners weigh the benefits of publicness with the problems associated with large and diverse audiences. The replicability, scalability, persistence, and searchability features of networked publics influence both how mourners grieve and their control over depictions of the deceased. This article analyzes a corpus of posts and comments on Facebook memorial pages (N = 37). We examine how the social and technical affordances of social media, and Facebook in particular, affect public displays of grief and portrayals of the deceased. The visibility of social media both encourages performative displays of mourning and allows wider audiences to pay respects. This openness allows for context collapse and potentially unwelcome participants such as "trolls." We consider the ways in which the publicness of the SNS memorial page affects displays of grieving, specifically around efforts to engage in impression management of the deceased.

Online memorial pages provide an opportunity to study networked publics and the presentational affordances they offer. The mourning process in the United States involves both private and public spaces. Although many aspects of grieving are private, the need to share news of the death and bring mourners together means that family members or others must publicly distribute the death announcement, typically through newspaper obituaries, churches, or other venues. Social media have reshaped this process, due to their features of persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability (boyd, 2010). Social media such as Facebook make possible future audiences that may not be anticipated by the participants. Moreover, the wide

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range of audiences that exist on public memorial pages gives rise to different, and potentially conflicting, understandings around topics such as salient aspects of the deceased person's identity, the purpose of the memorial page, and the nature of the mourning process.

Mourners experience the desire for openness and publicness, as well as tendencies towards communication contexts that are more private and closed. The newspaper advertisement or obituary spreads information about the deceased to as many people as possible, and public wakes and funerals allow community members to mourn collectively. Social media are very effective for sharing information with interested or relevant others, and may be superior to newspaper obituaries for this purpose because they are more likely to be read by and provide access to multiple, varied networks. However, the quasi-public nature of social media means that information about the death will also be shared with a larger public than just the readers of a local newspaper. These audiences may include strangers who wish to take part in expressions of public mourning (sometimes dismissively called ''grief tourists'') or ''trolls'' (people who post deliberately inflammatory messages with a disruptive intent, usually under a pseudonym). Furthermore, the communicative affordances of social media mean that any announcements distributed through these channels are likely to include the opportunity for feedback or user-generated content. While this may be gratifying in many cases, it shifts control over how the person will be remembered, from a carefully crafted obituary written by a family member and published in a static, broadcast medium, to a free-for-all discussion forum. Due to the warranting principle (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009), third party utterances may have more power to shape how the person is remembered, and thus this kind of forum may be threatening to those close to the deceased or those who are emotionally invested in controlling how the deceased is described.

The wide and varied audiences common to social media also give rise to the phenomenon known as ''context collapse'' (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vitak, Lampe, Ellison, & Gray, 2012), in which individuals representing multiple social contexts (e.g., work, family, high school acquaintances, close friends) are ''collapsed'' into the flat category of ''friends'' or ''contacts'' on social media sites, creating what others have referred to as the multiple audience problem (Leary, 1995). While in face-to-face situations people vary their self-presentation based on context and audience (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Leary & Kowalski, 1990), this process of impression management is compromised in online contexts where friends and acquaintances from different social settings, classes, and cultures can consume and comment upon one's online content, unintentionally or intentionally sharing conflicting portrayals or understandings of the person. People use a variety of social and technical strategies to manage this context collapse, with varying levels of success. For instance, Hogan (2010) describes the ''lowest common denominator'' approach, whereby individuals only share content on social network sites (SNSs) that would be suitable for all audiences. Other strategies include deleting particular comments, untagging oneself from risqué photos, or creating ''lists'' in Facebook that make it possible to target content to a subset of Friends (boyd & Marwick, 2011).

In the case of memorial pages, none of these strategies are available to the primary focus of conversation on the site: the deceased. Because he or she is not present to manage impressions by deleting content, separating audiences, or utilizing privacy settings, Facebook memorial pages constitute a unique setting for exploring context collapse in SNSs. In the case of public memorial pages, which can be accessed by anyone with a Facebook account, the potential for context collapse is even greater than on a personal profile limited to approved Friends. The public nature of online memorial pages and the broad audiences who are drawn to them offer an opportunity to explore the changing nature of public ritual in the age of social media.

This article asks how the technical and social affordances of social network sites, specifically Facebook, affect one's ability to communicate with different audiences. Using online Facebook memorial pages as a research site, we examine how these affordances affect portrayals of the deceased. What can this context help us understand about how SNSs are changing our notions of the benefits and challenges of being public? Specifically, this article attempts to answer two questions:

RQ$_1$: How do the technical and social affordances of Facebook reshape the public presentation of deceased individuals and public displays of grief?

RQ$_2$: How is ''context collapse'' managed when the subject of the page is not there to manage impressions?

Literature Review

Social Media and Context Collapse

Social media is a broad term for Web sites or mobile applications that combine social interaction with functions like bookmarking, information-sharing, and user-generated content. Social network sites, the most popular category of social media, are defined by boyd and Ellison 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'' (2007). The Pew Internet project estimates that three-quarters of people online under the age of 30 use social network sites (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010); the most popular SNS, Facebook, has over 900 million users as of this writing (Facebook, 2012).

While specific technical affordances of SNSs differ by site or application, scholars have identified four characteristics common to social network sites. User-generated content on these sites is persistent, replicable, scalable, and searchable (boyd, 2010). It is *persistent* in that content created by users does not expire; even if it is deleted from the site, it is often available through caches or search engines. It is *replicable* in

that it is easily copied, and can be posted elsewhere, combined with other content, or sent to other users. It is *scalable* in that user-generated content has enormous potential audiences; the most popular videos on YouTube, for instance, have tens of millions of views. And it is *searchable* in that it is often indexed and easily accessed by curious viewers. The effect of these networked technologies on public life has been the emergence of what boyd calls ''networked publics'': spaces and collectives where people interact through technology (boyd, 2010).

In person, interactions are co-constructed by the participants, making it both possible and natural to alter self-presentation based on social context and audience (Blumer, 1969; Garfinkel, 1967). As a result, people in face-to-face conversations alter the way they speak and the subjects they speak about based on a variety of audience factors, including racial differences (Fleming & Rudman, 1993), status differences (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p. 38), and friendship strength (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). Even in challenging circumstances, people vary tone, language, and non-verbal communication to manage face-to-face impressions (Banaji & Prentice, 1994).

The scalability of SNSs results in potentially wide and varied audiences, complicating identity performance in that users must self-consciously manage their own self-presentation to appeal appropriately to these audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Although online contexts typically provide users with more control over their self-presentation (Walther, 1996), the common practice of Friending people of varying tie strengths in SNSs means that users must work harder to self-present appropriately to these different audiences; this can produce conflict when the audiences' expectations of the user are both different and concurrent (Vitak et al., 2012). ''Context collapse'' has thus engendered a variety of audience management techniques, both technical and social, from the creation of multiple profiles, to coded language, to sharing only banal information (boyd & Marwick, 2011; Hogan, 2010). Such strategies and performances have been observed in many different digital spaces, including social network sites (Livingstone, 2005), blogs (Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008), online personal sites (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006), and personal homepages (Papacharissi, 2002). This process of impression management is complicated in Facebook memorial pages, as the person is not present in the social network to censor or monitor what is said about him or her. Memorial pages provide an opportunity to study context collapse in a situation where the subject has no agency or voice.

Digital Mourning

The role of the Internet in the grieving process has been examined by a range of scholars (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Carroll & Landry, 2010; Dobler, 2009; Getty et al., 2011; Roberts & Vidal, 2000; Wang & Gloviczki, 2008; Williams & Merten, 2009). Most of these articles focus on adolescents, who were the primary users of social network sites until recently. Early studies examine online memorials,

Web pages constructed by people other than the deceased. Roberts and Vidal, for example, analyze online Web memorials and find that they are primarily targeted to the living rather than the dead, and that they provide an important grieving function, regardless of the mourner's relationship to the dead or how long the person has been deceased (2000).

Other studies have focused on the role of SNSs in the memorial process, primarily the profile pages of deceased young adults. Dobler (2009) describes teenage mourning on the MySpace pages of deceased friends. The article finds that commenters generally do not interact with each other, but write as if they are talking to the deceased. He lists several types of comments, such as expressing sorrow, thanking the deceased for protection or signs, referring to ''cues'' from the deceased (such as ''their song'' playing on a radio), and planning reunions in heaven. Dobler frames this as ''folk religion'' much like roadside memorials to young people killed in automobile accidents (2009). Carroll and Landry (2010) found similar patterns in their study of 200 Facebook wall comments, such as sharing memories, ''visible and public symbols of grief,'' and praise for the deceased (pp. 344–345). Similarly, Brubaker and Hayes (2011) analyze 200,000 comments on 1300 MySpace profiles collected from MyDeathSpace.com, a site that aggregated the profiles of deceased MySpace users. They found similar patterns in these comments as did previous studies, including comments written to the deceased, shared memories, and maintaining ongoing bonds with the dead.

Most of the literature in this area has focused on SNS profiles of the deceased, which are different from online memorials. First, there is a difference in temporality. While Dobler sees MySpace profile pages as eerily fixed at the time of death, Brubaker and Hayes conclude that ongoing updates by mourners on the profile pages of the dead create a sense of ongoing bonds, situating the deceased within a community of peers rather than a static moment. Similar patterns were observed by Williams and Merten (2009), who found that posting comments was a way for adolescents to maintain connection with the deceased and maintain the ''same relationship'' they had with the dead. Second, SNS profiles are constructed by the deceased while online memorials are put together by friends or family. This is particularly salient on MySpace, where profile customization is common and page graphics, fonts, and audio are usually chosen by the profile owner. On Facebook, profile pages have a consistent look and feel; moreover, Facebook pages can be updated by people other than the owner, through tagging photos and posting to the Wall. With Facebook's new policy regarding the ability to ''memorialize'' pages, this has become irrelevant as mourners can post on a public, shared grieving page set up precisely for that purpose rather than the person's profile.

The phenomenon of context collapse with regard to death has been observed by other scholars. In their MySpace study, Brubaker and Hayes (2011) found evidence of context collapse, writing:

> Previously, survivors from separate social spaces may have developed these narratives in relative isolation. The SNS profile, however, often cuts across different

> facets of the deceased's life, increasing the probability that survivors will encounter multiple parallel depictions of the deceased. In this way, SNSs prompt new questions about ownership of the identity and the technological ability to negotiate different narratives for the deceased in one shared, albeit virtual, space (p. 2).

However, Brubaker and Hayes did not identify patterns in these interactions and parallel depictions, and did not include examples in the article. An article by D. D. Martin drew on ethnographic work with two groups, Mothers of Murdered Sons & Daughters (MOMS) and Parents of Murdered Children (POMC), to explore the identity work that goes on after death. Martin describes how parents deal with situations like police and media framing of the incident, friends and gang members showing up at funerals and putting drugs or gang paraphernalia in the coffin, retelling the stories of their children in light of their death, and so forth. This article demonstrates that ''context collapse'' also exists in the popular press and at spaces like funeral homes and memorial services (Martin, 2010).

Turning to impression management, a 2006 *New York Times* article details the efforts of workers at online obituary sites like Legacy.com to delete negative comments about the dead (St. John, 2006). Funeral workers and grief counselors point out that people rarely, if ever, leave negative comments in cards or physical guest books, but such comments are common online. They are so common that Legacy.com devotes one-third of its budget to managing such comments, deleting them before are published. Anonymous commenting is not allowed on Facebook, as all comments are tied to a persistent account. It seems likely that the persistent nature of Facebook accounts, when compared to anonymous forums, may discourage negative commentary from people who knew the deceased. However, negative comments do appear on Facebook memorial pages, both from authentic Facebook accounts and trolls using fake accounts.

Facebook Memorial Pages

Distinct from previous studies of mourning on SNSs, most memorial pages on Facebook are not the personal profile of the deceased. If Facebook is notified, via an online form, that a user has died, their profile is converted to a memorial state. At this point, only users who were ''Friends'' with the deceased at the time of their death can post on their page. As Facebook relates on a page entitled ''Remembering Loved Ones on Facebook'':

> When someone passes away, Facebook will memorialize their account in order to protect their privacy. Memorialization changes the account's privacy settings so that only confirmed friends can see that person's profile or find them by typing their name into the search bar. A memorialized account will also be removed from the Suggestions section of the Home Page, and no birthday reminders will be sent out on their behalf. To further protect the account, no one is allowed to log in or receive login information about it.... While there is no cure for the pain of grief,

> Facebook's hope is that by allowing people to mourn together, the grieving process will be alleviated just a little bit (Facebook, 2011).

Because these changes often lock out acquaintances, memorial pages are frequently set up by friends, family, and on occasion, strangers, as a more ''public'' place to grieve. These memorial pages, or ''RIP fan pages'' (Phillips, 2011), are similar to Facebook profile pages, with particular technological affordances that include:

- *Page Creator.* The page creator has the technical capability to control content on the page, including deleting posts and banning users. Sometimes the identity of the page creator is unknown to participants, as the site gives page creators the option to ''use Facebook as [the name of their page],'' which means their activity is associated with the page account (e.g., as ''RIP Jane Doe'') as opposed to their actual profile name.
- *Posts and Comments*. Users can post to the page Wall; similar to traditional profiles, these posts can include text, images, or links to other forms of content such as videos. Others can comment, or reply to posts.
- *Likes*. Users can publically ''Like'' any Facebook page by clicking on a ''Like'' button. This creates a quantitative metric that is prominently displayed on the page. Users can also ''like'' individual posts or comments.

Method

Because non-Friends cannot access memorialized profiles, data collection for this study was primarily restricted to memorial pages, although we did collect data from two deceased individuals' Facebook profiles that were not memorialized, but remained public. We used several methods to find memorial pages. First, we used Facebook's search bar to find pages that included ''R.I.P.,'' which typically resulted in the most recently updated memorial pages on the site. Second, we searched Google using the query ''site:facebook.com'' and a vocabulary of memorial page-related words. Third, we viewed obituary pages to find recently deceased individuals and then searched Facebook to locate related memorial pages (this method was unsuccessful). Finally, we looked at posts to the site 4chan.com that included a facebook.com URL. 4Chan is a central home for memorial page trolls (Phillips, 2011), who often shared potential targets. Although many of the RIP page links posted on 4Chan were ignored, we were careful to capture these pages soon after they were posted to the site. We found 62 memorial pages using these methods, of which we selected 37 for analysis. Because we were not focused on selecting a random sample for generalizability purposes, we selected these pages based on the extent to which they offered insight into our RQs.

The deceased in our sample passed in a variety of ways, including murder, motor vehicle accidents, spousal abuse, drunk driving, suicide, assault, and drug-related fatalities. In some cases, the cause of death was not mentioned. The average age

of the deceased in our analysis sample was 19. This sample included 26 men and 12 women (one profile was for a couple).

All 62 pages were converted to PDF files and saved. Since Facebook only displays a limited number of comments at a time, comments were manually expanded on each page and individual Wall post. While memorial pages are dynamic, our sample was captured at a specific point in time and thus represents an incomplete dataset, as we had no access to deleted comments or content. Rather, we have snapshots of these pages as they were at a particular moment in time.

The 37 memorial pages that were selected for analysis were imported into the quantitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. Altogether, the PDF files for our sample were 2641 pages in length. The authors created a codebook, based on reading the entire corpus and pilot coding of two profiles, and then individually coded 37 pages using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Other codes emerged during the coding process and were incorporated into the codebook. All quotes used in this article are transcribed verbatim, with the exception of a few confusing typos which have been corrected and appear in brackets. Because the pages we accessed are public, first names are used if they appeared in the original quote; surnames have been removed.

Findings

Our research question asked how the affordances of Facebook come into play in the context of memorial pages. Analysis of the dataset revealed two primary themes. First, mourners grapple with both benefits and challenges of public and privateness. Second, in the absence of the subject, context collapse is observed, but we see audience members selectively participating in impression management to compensate. Conflicts are settled based partially on a hierarchy of legitimacy in which family and close friends are more ''valid'' than acquaintances, and, especially, grief tourists.

Public vs. Private

Facebook memorial pages embody the characteristics of scalability, persistence, searchability, and replicability, making them potentially very public. On one end of the publicness spectrum, a page could be set to allow anyone with a Facebook account to access the content and contribute to it. Gradations of publicness are possible, depending on how the page creator sets up the page, how active he or she is in monitoring content, and the particular dynamics of those who engage with the page. For instance, contributing to a particular page may be included in one's News Feed and thus visible to one's Friends network, but a page that is ''liked'' by users with large Friend networks will be seen by more people than a page ''liked'' by a small number of users with smaller networks. Our findings suggest that individuals contributing to a memorial page struggled with the benefits and

challenges of publicness, and enacted both social and technical control mechanisms to meet their expectations for engaging with the site.

For those who suffer a death in their family or close circle, there are many benefits associated with making knowledge of the deceased more public. For instance, wide distribution of this information makes it more likely that large public displays, such as a large funeral with many visitors, will occur. These very public displays of mourning are generally perceived as an indication of the importance or meaning-fulness of the life of the person.

We saw evidence of a similar dynamic in our dataset. Many commenters noted the number of people commenting on the page or referenced the number of times the page had been ''liked.'' Both strangers and those who knew the deceased framed these metrics as an indication of the impact or importance of the deceased. Comments such as the following were common: ''I just noticed there are over 3300 people who like this page—that speaks volumes about how many hearts Beth and Cord have touched.'' In some cases, posters made explicit mention of the count and the need to increase it. For instance: when the creator of the ''RIP Bethany Harlen'' page stated, ''I'm not going to bed until this page gets 1000 likes,'' the next comment by Candy was: ''We can do it! She deserves this [much] support!'' In this example, the number of times a page was ''liked'' was positioned as a metric of ''support'' for the deceased. In other instances, these metrics were described as evidence of how much the person was loved or, in the case of a Canadian police officer killed in the line of duty, raising awareness of ''the danger the police men and women put themselves in everyday.''

Metrics such as these are common on social media sites and are often used as analogues for social status (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007; Marwick, 2010). However, norms around this kind of ''cheerleading'' were in flux. While some of these ex-hortations were met with supportive comments, as in the example above, other posters expressed dismay at the emphasis on quantifiable metrics over memories or more meaningful utterances. For instance, on another page, Nicole writes: ''WE MUST REMEMBER ITS NOT HOW MANY LIKES SHE GOT, THIS IS A TRAGIC SITUATION, NOT A COMPETITION, PEOPLE WHO ACTUALLY KNEW. . . . AND LOVED CHRISSY ARE DEEPLY SADDENED BY THIS AWFUL THING . . . AND ALL WANT TO PAY TRIBUTE TO HER MEMORY, NOT UP THE LIKES.''

On this same page, the profile creator had posted, ''Are we near 1000 yet? I can't see! If so she was definitely loved by many. Which she was, r.i.p. xoxo.'' This posting resulted in a longer thread—22 comments—discussing the appropriateness of this comment and suggesting other, more tangible ways to offer support, such as a donations page for the deceased woman's children. After a few comments, including one suggesting the donation page, Emma writes, ''Not being funny but dis aint a competition. Yeeeeahhh. We payin respect.'' To which the page creator replies, ''I know, I'm just notifying you how loeved she was, she'll be deeply missed. Sorry if i offended you.'' Emma replies: ''Yh I am feelin offended if u knew her u would [know] hundreds of people loved her. Don't mock it'' to which another poster chimes in with: ''Mayb u shud jus let ppl like the page in their own time,

the ppl who knew her r still coming 2 terms wiv it all n the las ting theyr bothered about is how many members uv got on ur fb group (no offense).'' In this particular case, the page creator did not know the deceased, as evidenced by his later post saying ''i know i didn't know you but.. so sad.'' In this case we see an individual who does not know the deceased create a page and then attempt to increase its popularity, a move some called out as distasteful.

The motivation towards publicness and larger audiences may also be linked to the urge to have the death serve a larger purpose. In one particular case, the death of a high school baseball player, there were many references to how his large high school was enriched by his passing:

> i never imagined just one person alone could ever completely change central. all by yourself brought a school of 3,200 and some all together. Central is no longer 3,200 people because of you we are now one big family.

In other instances, commenters talked about the need to raise awareness of a particular issue, such as bullying or drunk driving, and positioned news of the death as a way to do so.

In the case of Bethany and Cord, two young adults murdered by gunshot, commenters used the site to spread requests for information in the period before a suspect was identified:

> I did not know either of them but live around the area. It is such a shame that these two's lives had to be ended so soon. Put this on your faccebook to help and try to get any information to the police LET'S PUT FACEBOOK TO USE. SOCIALLY NETWORK THIS. COPY AND PASTE.IF YOU KNOW ANYTHING OR HAVE ANY IDEA ABOUT THE MURDERS OF CORD AND BETHENY, CALL THE SHERRIFS DEPARTMENT. ANY INFO WILL HELP, AND IT NEEDS TO BE TAKEN CARE OF.... STUFF LIKE THIS SHOULDN'T HAPPEN IN SMALL TOWN USA, SO LETS FIND THEM AND NOT LET IT HAPPEN AGAIN.

Memorial pages were often used to share practical information, such as funeral details or fundraising efforts. People also used the memorial page to broadcast updates on the family, news related to the death, and links to obituaries or related articles. One family indicated that they preferred to communicate via Facebook, according to a woman who wrote, ''On behalf of my daughters … please refrain from calling and texting for updates.... Please respect the family and give us time to cope with our loss. We will post updates here.'' In these cases, the publicness of Facebook memorial pages allowed them to serve as distribution channels for important information, enabling broadcasting to a wide group rather than contacting people individually.

Sometimes the open and public nature of the memorial pages, combined with the visibility of member activities (such as liking a particular page) in the News Feed meant that other Facebook users—strangers to the deceased—found the site and then joined or contributed. We saw many examples similar to this post, on the page of a young man: ''I don't know you, I never met you but I joined this

page because I heard, and I wanted to show my respect, and say a prayer for your family.''

The motivation for these contributions by strangers (sometimes called ''grief tourists'') is unclear. In many instances, individuals spoke of a connection to the person, such as being a mother, losing someone in a similar fashion, or being from the same town. In some instances, individuals presumably found the page after the case was covered by popular press. Many posters had only a tenuous connection with the deceased, such as a person who lived near an accident site or a classmate from primary school (e.g., ''he went to school with my niece bless him'' or ''I believe my brother worked with his father. So sad.''). Others may simply seek to participate in a ritual of public mourning:

> Brittany: i dont kno if this sounds wierd but i jus go around on fb seein who all have passed away so i can say sumthin nice to them and encourage the family a lil bit and have sum one new to pray for at night i read his story and may god have mercy on those indivuals souls

In this case, Brittany takes altruistic pleasure in expressing condolences to strangers and having someone to pray for. Others may want the attention that sometimes comes with grief. One commenter wrote, ''Andy I'd like to say I knew you well but that wouldn't be completely truthful so I guess we were only friends through mutual friends. Nevertheless I'll miss u.'' This comment suggests a desire for the legitimacy that comes from having a close relationship with the deceased.

Reaction to these strangers and their role in the mourning process was ambivalent. In some cases, their presence was tacitly accepted. In other cases, posters expressed dismay about the presence of people who didn't know the deceased. These posts appeared on different memorial pages:

> Katrín: Jessica are you goddamn retarded? You don't know the guy, why are you on his RIP page? The entire reason these pages attract these weirdos is because they're trying to point out that RIP pages are for grief- tourists and freaks like you.. If you didn't know him, fuck off!

> Joseph: Dont randomly ''like'' this page because you saw it!!!!! ''like'' it if you actually knew the guy ! jeez!!! RIP bro!

Across our corpus, there was no consensus regarding the acceptability of strangers' presence. While some posters expressed acceptance of strangers or appreciated the wide audiences that Facebook enabled, others found it offensive and even disturbing.

In some cases, the page creators themselves were strangers to the deceased. Because the page creators can choose to post as the name of their page—a common practice in the pages we analyzed—it can be difficult for posters to ascertain who created the page and their motivations for doing so. We saw many examples of posters asking who created the site, and many instances in which the answer was a

stranger who did not know the deceased. In one case, a highly publicized murder, a 12-year-old child created a memorial page for the victim:

> R.I.P Chrissy: Many heartbroken people so sad.. I'm george by the way.
>
> Carly: Hi geroge I think what u have dun is amazing.
>
> R.I.P Chrissy: x
>
> Carly: George
>
> R.I.P Chrissy: Thankyou i didn't know her I was just so sad, i'm only 12! X
>
> Tracey Anne: Are you local George?
>
> R.I.P Chrissy: Bedford yeah.
>
> R.I.P Chrissy: X
>
> Andrea: Good for you George.
>
> Sarah: Omg only 12 wow to do this your so mature for your age glad some1 decided to make a group dedicated to a wonderful person x

In this case, George states that his motivation was feeling ''so sad,'' but it is likely that there was a status motivation as well. As the page garnered thousands of views, he actively encouraged people to ''Like'' the page and clearly enjoyed the attention he was getting from strangers. As mentioned previously, this ''cheerleading'' met a mixed reception from Chrissy's friends and family. Notably, in the exchange above Tracey Anne asks George if he is ''local,'' a mark of legitimacy.

The inability to distinguish strangers from loved ones, enabled by the publicness of Facebook memorial pages, may have contributed to posters making specific reference to their experiences or knowledge of the deceased. Mentioning particular memories, sharing how much the person meant to them, or referencing information that only the deceased and the poster would know were strategies for establishing the legitimacy of the poster and his or her comments. We witnessed evidence of a hierarchy of relationships; those with a close relationship with the deceased had more legitimate claims to how the deceased should be remembered. In this hierarchy, being a family member trumped all. In one example, a classmate posted a home-made YouTube video memorializing the deceased:

> Kaylee: unfortunately i had to remove the video at request of mitch's brother
>
> Kayla: Sorry Kaylee, I'm Mitch's older sister, and its just to hard to see that stuff pop up of Mitch, we all appreciate the support, but non of us got a chance to create anything for Mitch yet. Out of respect to us and the rest of his family, I think we just all want a chance to control what is being posted about my little brother.

Kayla's right to control the presentation of her brother goes uncontested by other audience members.

Questions about how the person died were a particularly rich source of conflict regarding the right to be a member of the community and appropriate norms

of behavior on the page. This question was frequently asked—184 times in our sample—but answered in different ways. In instances where the cause of death was unambiguously tragic and random, commenters answered the question and in some cases expressed a desire to publicize the specifics of the case. For instance, in the case of a young boy in Los Angeles who was randomly attacked, those who asked about the cause of death were routinely told the story and asked to ''spread the word'':

> Kayla: im not tryna be nosey or anything but how did he past?
>
> Denaye: your not be nosey.
>
> everyone needs to know Bobby's story & maybe you can help stop bullying.!
>
> Bobby past because a group of boys wanted to punch the next random guy that walked by. unfortunately, bobby was that random boy. they beat him to death..
>
> spread the word & help people understand that things like this need to stop.!!!!

In cases where the cause of death could be related to behavior exhibited by the deceased, questions about the cause of death were less likely to be answered and in many cases, the questioner was berated for asking the question:

> Drew: what the fuck happend???
>
> John: She passed away wtf do you think happend
>
> Drew: How
>
> Courtney: not something you post, youre an idiot

One commenter wrote, ''You can [google] this information. It has been widely reported.'' In other cases, participants suggested that asking a question was a sign of ''grief tourism,'' as evidenced by comments such as ''If people should know, they already know'' and ''if you didnt know him, it shouldnt matter.'' In some cases, both technical and social controls were enacted, similar to the way in which Mitch's page creator deleted the video and his family expressed their opinion about it. For instance, a thread that included the questions ''what happened?'' and ''omg why?!'' was followed by ''Sorry Meg had to delete that comment can you not write things like that on here please xx.'' While it was common for posters to write directly to the deceased (e.g., ''RIP love, I hope that wherever you are there's a 24-hour Starbucks and the lattes are always free''), as per previous studies, when one poster addressed the question of cause of death to the deceased (''how did you die?''), he was met with derision and scorn (''wow seriously? what did u want him to answer u or something, there isnt wi-fi in heaven'').

In the most extreme case, strangers visiting the page were trolls, representing the most negative aspects of the public nature of memorial pages. As seen in our dataset, trolls engaged in a range of behaviors on memorial sites designed to upset and provoke. They posted disturbing images, such as pictures of car crashes or gunshot

victims that they claimed were photos of the deceased, and made comments that evoked anger, disgust, confusion, and grief among the page's participants. In some cases, the rhetoric was obviously inflammatory, but in other cases, it was not clear whether the comment was authentic or designed to torment (such as ''I know that I didnt know her very well. But I found out she was my half sister. I wish all the family well. U are dearly missed.'').

Trolling comments, such as those that expressed pleasure in the deceased's passing, provoked outrage and confusion from some participants, causing others to try and explain why it was happening and offer suggestions. For instance, Shayna explains,

> Please do NOT give into the hate, racism, or lack of respect that has been on this page. Trust me, I know it is hard. It is ONE person that is posting and making these ''fake'' profiles just to make you mad; and LOOK it is working. Don't LET IT!! This page should be regulated better, and hopefully something will happen to stop this madness. As much as you want to go back and forth with this person who is being hateful, showing them no mind or commenting in a way that is respectful will make you the winner, not him. He wants the attention and he wants to get everyone stirred up, don't let someone have control over you like that.

While some participants sought out technical means for controlling trolls, such as reporting photos, blocking profiles, and calling for the page creator to delete comments, others engaged with the trolls by calling them names and deriding them, often threating violence. Deleting the page was debated, with comments like the following: ''if we are going to make a memorial page please just make it in his regular profile … im tired of the fucking idiots with no life that keep fucking with one of the sweetest kids i have ever met. no one deserves the disrespect hes getting. i love this kid, so please delete this and make his regular page the memorial.'' Cases in which the profile owner failed to monitor the page often resulted in pages that were dominated by trolls and comments from participants pleading with the profile owner to take action.

Context Collapse

Public memorial pages attracted people from many aspects of the deceased person's life. People ranging from close friends and family to acquaintances and strangers posted comments on memorial pages. While these audiences may have had different experiences with the deceased, they rarely commented negatively on each other's memories. Overwhelmingly, comments about the deceased, or directed to the deceased, were positive and supportive.[1] Information-sharing, such as pointers to news stories or funeral logistics, were common and typically neutral in tone. While context collapse was evident on memorial pages, it only manifested in conflict if the values of different audiences conflicted, or if someone spoke negatively about the deceased.

In their posts, participants frequently mentioned the social context in which they knew the deceased. (This is similar to the many strangers who cited vague connections with the deceased, such as being from the same hometown or liking the same things.) On the page memorializing a deceased teenager named Daniel, friends contextualized their comments by stating their connection to him. Olivia mentioned that ''being on the swim team'' with Daniel was ''amazing,'' while Stacey talked about meeting Daniel on a youth mission trip, and Michael said, ''He was always the one who always made everyone laugh when we needed it in Wind Symphony.'' While these are different contexts, the posts are invariably positive and refer to Daniel's sense of humor. Portrayals of the deceased on memorial pages are often one-dimensional. We found that people who knew the deceased frequently focused on one or two traits—such as ''she was a good mother'' or ''he was a fun lad''—that were repeated and amplified by the strangers who commented.

In contrast to such innocuous memories, some commenters referred to behaviors that would be considered inappropriate in some social contexts:

> Shad: today was a good day it was your day I bagged this chick and I felt you looking over me proud I just wanna say swagg nd good night

> Haydn: my favourite funny memory would be me you zach and dougy out the front of the fish n chip shop after playing cricket. That hot chick with the huge rack got out of the car and i was starring at her jugs and her boyfriend walked up and said straight up, you looking at my miss's tits?!!

> Ahh man we pissed ourselves after aye!

In the first example, Shad tells his deceased friend that he'd be proud of his sexual prowess. In the second, Haydn recalls ogling a woman with the deceased. While certainly there are social contexts in which these references are inappropriate, the memorial page reflects the norms of the audience. It is likely that in the social milieu of the deceased, this language was normative and acceptable. These memories, and many others, are uncontested by other audience members.

We saw evidence of explicit conflict when people differed on the appropriateness of commenters' modes of remembrance.

> Brandy: ''God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'' John3:16

> Kevin: save the scripture. was Krista even religious??

And:

> [Picture of Lolcat]

> Kelsie: It's kind of disrespectful to post a picture like this on a memorial page :/

> R.I.P Bethany: She liked lolcats :|

While Brandy's comment would have raised no eyebrows in a Christian social context, another of Krista's friends admonishes her, saying that it is not appropriate on Krista's page since she was not religious (and thus implying that Brandy could not have known Krista very well). Similarly, Kelsie argues against posting a funny cat picture; the maintainer of Bethany's memorial page, a close friend of the deceased, points out that the post is in keeping with what Bethany would have liked herself. In both cases, the comments reflect a sense of legitimacy, in that the closer friends suggest they know what the deceased was "really" like. Notably, neither exchange questions the legitimacy of a poster's memory of the deceased, but the commenter's own actions to memorialize them. While context collapse exists on memorial pages, it seems only to cause conflict if the cultural values of the commenters conflict with others' understandings of the deceased.

A related form of publicness came in the form of bringing together audiences that might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact on an ongoing basis after the initial funeral or meeting. For instance, in the case of a young boy who drowned in front of his football teammates on a camping trip, the Facebook page provided a space for one of the boys to express his guilt and the boy's father to respond. A poster, presumably a boy who witnessed the incident, wrote to the deceased on the page:

> Dylan: Miss u soooooo much bro wish it had neva happened sorry for not jumping in after to im sooooo sorry plz forgive me.

A response came in the form of a comment from the boy's father[2]: "Dylan, don't beat yourself up mate, there is nothing anyone could have done. Even if anyone had jump straight in it was still to late. the cops said it was impossible for anyone to have made a difference." In this case, the memorial site enabled an interaction that potentially offered closure for the deceased's friend and was perhaps less likely to have occurred in the absence of this persistent channel.

The scalable nature of SNSs resulted in multiple and divergent memorial page audiences. Page participants usually treated different experiences of the deceased with respect, even if they included ribald language or, in many instances, illegal drug use. However, conflict arose when commenters made assumptions that diverged from other audience members' understanding of the deceased. In those cases, the variation in expectations among page participants about appropriateness was brought to the forefront. In these conflicts, a hierarchy of legitimacy among audience members exists, with close friends and family members having more "right to grieve" and more control over the depiction of the deceased. In the next section, we see how these patterns play out with regard to impression management.

Impression Management

While positive memories went uncontested, we saw explicit negotiation whenever anything negative was said about the deceased, following the popular adage

''speak no ill of the dead.'' Virtually every time an explicitly negative comment about the deceased was posted, it was refuted by other commenters. It is likely that other negative comments about the dead were deleted by page creators; our inability to view these is a limitation of the study. Still, we saw many traces of arguments and discussions about how the deceased should be remembered. In this way, impressions were managed through a co-constructed social process in which the posters to the memorial page collectively established accepted boundaries for memorializing the dead.

In this example, Troy suggests that the deceased's suicide was a selfish act.

> Troy: I hope his mum is already gone coz that ain't a nice mothers day present. Why do it few days before?
>
> Thomas: well this is an insensitive comment.
>
> Tess: this is probably the rudest, most inconsiderate thing i've ever read
>
> Troy: Sorry didn't mean for it to sound that way. Just thought it wasnt the best timing
>
> …
>
> Cassie: I am Kahls aunty and I understand what you were meaning. Often tragic things like this are done on special occasions
>
> Cassie: From Kahls nanny.... Troy, when people are in severe pain they don't organize a good time to die. If they were in a right frame of mind to consider this, they would be alive, not passed on. No matter when he would have done this, we will always love him. He wil always be with us. Xxx
>
> Troy: Finally sumone who gets what I was saying … and I understand what Ur sayin too cassie, sorry for the loss!

Thomas and Tess argue that Troy's original comment is unacceptable. In this way, they reinforce the social norm that only positive comments about the deceased should be posted. However, Cassie claims legitimacy by stating her relationship to Kahl, the deceased. She validates Troy's statement and explains her position in relation to it. Her comments end the discussion, perhaps because her status as a member of the family is considered more ''important'' by the commenters. This example highlights how differences of opinions are negotiated through a complex process of legitimacy, status, and validation.

The norm against speaking ill of the dead is so prevalent that one of the primary activities of memorial page trolls is to post negative comments about the deceased explicitly to provoke angry responses. For example, the page for Alyssa, a girl who died while driving a golf cart while intoxicated, was inundated with trolls. Their comments were met with hundreds of angry rejoinders.

> You know I don't even know this young lady but U JERKS SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF URSELF FOR TALKING ABOUT SOMEONE WHO IS DECEASED. GOD DON'T LIKE UGLY!!

Although the commenter is a stranger, he sticks up for Alyssa and thus reinforces a shared social norm. In this way, both participants and bystanders work to maintain the positive view of the deceased that dominates memorial pages.

In other cases, audience members clearly stated their understanding of how the page ''should'' be used:

> The things posted on this page should bring comfort to the family and friends of Cord and Bethany.... If people need a space to share concerns, thoughts and other related topics a new page should be created for this. Respect and dignity are in order!

On the same page, after someone made a comment about ''a drug deal gone wrong,'' a commenter entreated others to ''please stop posting negative things here ... please, I know it's not easy but family is reading this!'' To which the next commenter suggested: ''maybe they shoulnd't if it upsets them.''

When negative remarks are made, page creators often serve as moderators, deleting negative comments or trolls' posts. In the case of the memorial page for Bethany and Cord mentioned previously, the page creator deleted hundreds of comments, effectively erasing the entire connection of Beth and Cord to drugs. (We discovered this when we went back six months later and compared the live version to our archived version.) In cases where the page creator is not actively managing the account, he or she is often scolded by other participants for neglecting his or her responsibilities (e.g., ''Whoever madde this page, needds to delete all horrible comments by these sick people, then block them'').

While the subject of the page is not around to manage impressions and negotiate issues of context collapse, the page moderator and the other commenters on the memorial page take on this chore—when it is technically possible. The audience members work together to enforce norms of appropriateness and verbally discourage comments that do not correspond to their impressions of the deceased. In this way, we see evidence of the impact of context collapse even when the subject is absent. This speaks both to the importance of impression management and of social interaction as a process of co-construction involving both subjects and audiences.

Discussion

Facebook is an effective platform for sharing memories and participating in the grieving process. It allows people to express grief and mourn with friends in a familiar setting. The site's massive adoption and immediacy increase the chances of reaching a wide audience of people who knew the deceased, as opposed to a newspaper obituary. This publicness, however, has both costs and benefits, as we see in instances of context collapse, trolls, and impression management of the deceased. Moreover, the specific technical affordances of Facebook, such as the way page creation is managed, the use of status metrics, and the discovery of pages through the News Feed, has particular effects on how this publicity is experienced and managed.

We find that the public nature of interaction on the site has benefits and challenges. The different audiences in the space are regulated through both social and technical controls. While the social norms are negotiated by group members, and thus subject to the conflicts and discussions that are common to norm setting, technical regulation happens differently. First, the site itself limits and shapes the ways that users can interact. For instance, while the "Like" button is often used as a metric for the deceased's significance, the naming of the button itself troubled some users ("u know i had 2 click like on this page to comment, its sooo sad! i don't like this and noone eles could either!!"). Second, the way that Facebook deals with page creation gives enormous power to the page creator, who may be a complete stranger to the deceased. This person has the technical capabilities to delete comments, ban users, regulate privacy settings, and otherwise act in ways that leaves other participants powerless. We saw many instances in which participants pleaded with site creators to take action, especially in regard to trolls—sometimes to no avail.

Using the four characteristics of social media as an analytic toolset, we are able to better understand how the affordances of Facebook play out in the context of "public" digital mourning.

Persistence

Facebook memorial pages are persistent in a way that other forms of memory-sharing and presentation of the deceased, such as eulogies, are not. This means that participants are cognizant of future audiences, particularly family members. For instance, one commenter writes, "Pls just play tribute not ask questions. Her children 1 day could see this page and its sooooo sad that they r without a mother who adored them." Content is viewed not only from the perspective of the current audience, but with a theoretical future audience in mind. Despite this, pages can and do disappear from Facebook, sometimes as a result of complaints about trolls. As we have seen, pages are frequently "pruned" of negative content. One significant difference between online and offline contexts is how content persistence is managed. The creator of the memorial page, and anyone he or she has deputized, has the ultimate power to arbitrate whether content persists or is deleted, as if it never existed. Page creators can ban trouble-makers or set strict guidelines for content. This is different from other forms of memorializing, which may exhibit a form of shared governance. For instance, an obituary might be discussed and agreed upon by a group of family members who are adhering to a fairly rigid form and structure.

Replicability

It is simple to create perfect copies of digital content, with no way to distinguish between the original and the duplicate. As we saw in the case of trolls, identities on Facebook can also be replicated (one participant remarked, "they even tried

making a profile of me and using my name and pics''). In some cases, we saw trolls posing as the deceased. Moreover, replicability makes it difficult to determine authenticity. While in a funeral home, close friends and family members will be seated up front; however, on a memorial page anyone can claim closeness with the deceased, even without deceptive intent. It is often difficult to ascertain who actually shared a relationship with the deceased and who did not, based solely on the collection of profiles. Perhaps replicability of identity in this space engenders the practice of sharing ''authentic'' memories to establish legitimacy. While some of these expressions of grief can be viewed as performative, they may be a response to the mimetic identities enabled by socially mediated publics.

Scalability

Social network site content has the potential to be viewed by very large audiences. In our sample, the pages of people whose deaths were covered by the popular press could garner thousands of comments and tens of thousands of ''Friends'' or ''likes.'' (For less notorious deaths, the posters seem to be limited to friends, family, and acquaintances, but not always.) This can create greater awareness of the deceased, thus validating their importance in the eyes of friends and family, aiding in fundraising efforts, or increasing funeral attendance. At the same time, the scalable nature engenders curious onlookers, or ''grief tourists,'' who post messages of concern even though they did not know the deceased. Even more problematic are the activities of trolls, who can inundate a memorial page with offensive content. The scalable properties of Facebook memorial pages and wide audiences give rise to multiple, co-existing audiences that may have conflicting understandings of the deceased, requiring impression management.

Searchability

The way in which knowledge of the page promulgates through the site means that it can easily be found by strangers, who may be grief tourists or trolls. It also brings up the possibility that future audiences will find the site, and thus need to be considered as audiences (e.g., children or family of the person). Weak ties may be more likely to find it as well.

In addition to these four characteristics, our findings bring up the issue of regulation and control. Social media is often framed as an egalitarian, democratic alternative to more centralized forms of media (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). While we see social norms on Facebook memorial pages as a process of negotiation that involves both wide cultural norms and specific contextual understanding, the technical regulation of these pages is less participatory. The code of Facebook and the site's particular technical affordances tightly constrains user expression and interaction. Within this environment, the page creator has ultimate control, far more than friends or family of the deceased. His or her legitimacy is purely based on

technical capability and the fact that he or she created the particular page first and was able to publicize it effectively. This issue of ''control'' is one that exists within virtually all social media spaces, from IT sysadmins and domain hosts to conflicts between gamers and parent corporations. Publicness must be understood in this context; rather than an extension of equal participation, it is a striated hierarchy, shaped by participant norms but ultimately determined by technical privilege.

Limitations to this study are primarily due to the incomplete nature of our dataset and our inability to discern the history of the page, including deleted content. We did not track pages over time, and thus have no access to data about how these pages change. We were also unable to verify the identities of the posters. Future research should employ qualitative methods to better understand how memorial page participants and creators view the role of the site, their motivations for participation, and how they perceive other kinds of audiences on the site, such as strangers.

The popularity of social media, and social network sites in particular, has altered many social rituals as they move into mediated environments such as Facebook. In this article, we analyze public mourning as it exists in scalable digital environments where wide audiences can easily come together. This publicness, together with the technical mechanisms of Facebook, affects public displays of grief and portrayals of the deceased. The visibility of social media allows acquaintances and far-away friends to pay respects, and makes possible explicit displays indicating the deceased's significance, which may bring comfort to mourners. Simultaneously, this visibility engenders context collapse and larger audiences that may include unwelcome participants such as trolls. Our findings offer insight into how users manage the tension between privacy and publicity in SNSs by studying a context in which participants are trying to connect with one another, share information, engage in impression management strategies, and find meaning. Although the specific instance bringing the participants we studied here together may be tragic and uncommon, these motivations are shared by millions of SNS users across the globe.

Notes

[1] Note that negative comments may have been deleted, so there may be more evidence of contested impressions than was visible in our sample.

[2] We base this assumption on newspaper articles that named the father and the fact that he shared a last name with the deceased.

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