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THE EMERGENCE OF NETWORKS ON FACEBOOK MEMORIAL PAGES

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, online death, mourning, and memorialization have grown into a vibrant field of interest and research. Social media, and social network sites, play prominently here and are key sites for public displays of mourning and memorialization. Studies examine various social media platforms, including MySpace (Carroll & Landry, 2010), YouTube (Harju, 2015), Instagram (Gibbs et al., 2015), Twitter (Cesare & Branstad, 2018), and TikTok (Eriksson Krutrök, 2021). However, the most dominant platform in terms of mourning and memorialization practices is Facebook which comprises several different sub-platforms – Profiles, Groups, and Pages (Navon & Noy, 2021). Each sub-platform possesses distinct affordances, thereby enabling and shaping different social dynamics and emergent practices.

In this paper, I closely examine the practice of memorial Pages and suggest viewing it through the theoretical lens of the social capital approach. Social capital is one of the leading areas of interest in social-media literature (Stoycheff et al., 2017). Yet, most of the research concerning Facebook looks at ordinary users and does not consider the unique affordances of Page admins. In what follows, I briefly describe Pages affordances and the focus of the current research.

Facebook Pages is an essentially public sub-platform that is visible to anyone on Facebook by default (as opposed to Profiles or Groups). Pages may have an unlimited number of followers, and their content is controlled by their administrators (admins). Their official aim is to serve businesses, communities, and public figures who seek to increase their digital presence; however, users creatively adapt Pages to their own needs, one of which includes the memorialization and publication of ordinary individuals. The memorial Pages I look at in this paper are all created in memory of ordinary people yet generate public mourning.

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The research sample includes 18 cases, 12 men and 7 women (one case refers to the death of female and male spouses), ranging in age between 15-55, with an average of 25.6. None of the commemorated individuals were public figures or known publicly before the death. Data collection procedures employed Facebook's search bar (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). To avoid or offset possible biases of Facebook's unknown algorithmic preferences, I conducted multiple searches and did not sample Pages from the top of the result list every time.

In the next phase, I selected Pages for analysis based on the "intensity sampling" method (Suri, 2011; Marwick & Ellison, 2012) and considered an additional factor of heterogeneity in terms of gender, age, cause of death, socio-cultural background, etc. Between June 2018 and March 2021, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork based on the principles of digital ethnography (Varis, 2014), and in line with Varis's approach, I implemented the two layers of media affordances and online-offline dynamics as part of my analysis.

Findings reveal how users negotiate Facebook affordances when creating, designing, and maintaining memorial Pages. From the first moment of naming and categorizing the Page, users contend with restrictions put forth by the platform as the list of available categories provided by Facebook does not include any option that relates to memorialization. Users do not have the freedom to choose a Page category of their own, so they take the freedom to interpret existing categories (Community, Interest, and Public Figure) and use them according to their goals. The use of Pages for memorialization purposes pursued despite or as a variation of Facebook's official policy.

Users strategically lead this process and employ socio-technical practices to reach an audience, create a network of followers, and become admins. As admins, they portray the deceased as a special person whose story carries social significance and collective moral value. The acts of engagement with the Page, therefore, emerge as socially valued actions. Furthermore, users make a *causal connection* between visible and measurable online engagement (Like, Share, Follow) and cognitive or emotive implications – public memory, recognition, and esteem.

Admins utilize the Page, together with their network of followers, to run extensive memorial activities, both online and offline. They accumulate various resources - from monetary donations to physical attendance in events and emotional support - these resources amount to the social capital that admins generate.

The most significant factors influencing social capital processes are the size of one's network and the patterns of interaction (Ellison & Vitak, 2015). Indeed, admins invest great efforts at gaining followers and increasing the size of their network, and their interaction with their network is multi-layered and highly strategic. On the one hand, they use a formal register, especially on the Page About section and biographical posts,

to establish a sense of formality, authority, and recognition towards the deceased and the Page. On the other hand, they use a highly personal, enthused, and emotional register as they express gratitude and show their appreciation to followers, generating in this way an encouragement-engagement circle. Finally, they discursively position the followers, who are otherwise strangers, as vital partners in this process.

The contribution of this study is twofold: in terms of memorialization, it sheds light on novel commemorative practices and norms of public remembrance in and through social media. In terms of social network sites, and more broadly, it provides fruitful insights into current social capital processes. The attention to admins' affordances, and the dynamics between admins and their network of followers, may be beneficial to a wide array of research on social capital processes in different contexts and themes.

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