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PRIVACY WITH PUBLIC ACCESS: DIGITAL MEMORIALS ON QR CODES

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The focus in this short paper is how digital memorials perforate the (already uneasy) distinction between private and public, both in emotional and physical space. As a contemporary parallel to Meyrowitz' (1985) elaboration of Goffman's (1958) front- and backstage¹, digital memorials are making the private grief visible to a much larger public than before. This goes for the many variations of memorials found in social media and throughout the web (Gotved, 2014), whatever the set-ups for accessibility might be. Indeed, the fast growing research area on digital memorials draws on the very fact of public (or semi-public) access, combined with different takes on participation and ethical issues.

Theoretical context

The required actions around the physical death of an individual are transformed in tandem with the options available on the net (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011), and inherently involves the sharing of emotions (Bensky & Fisher, 2014; Jakoby & Reiser, 2014). Even though news reports in the mass media for years have challenged the notion of sequestration² (Gibson, 2007; Walter, Littlewood, & Pickering, 1995), public accessibility to private memorials is raising new questions of ethics, distinctions, and possible transgressions (Phillips, 2011). Furthermore, the following study builds on existing research of the offline cultural changes around physical death (Hviid Jacobsen, 2013), death represented online (Gotved, 2014), and privacy as a question of contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2010).

Research Project

¹ Meyrowitz remarked on TV's ability to broadcast private spaces previously inaccessible to strangers, and thus redefined Goffman's backstage into two: a mediated middlestage and a deep backstage. ² Hidden from everyday life, both institutionally (special places for the dying and the dead: Giddens, 1992) and individually (grief as a private matter: Walter, 1999)

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Digital memorials come in many variations, and the empirical bases in this ongoing study are the QR (Quick Response) codes mounted on gravestones (Cann, 2013). With the epicenter in Japan (2004), QR codes on gravestones are a slowly spreading global phenomenon, closely connected to digital mobile technology and with unknown viability. As now, QR-codes have entered the cemeteries under the figurative radar. No authorities have been involved, no act of regulation is passed, and no priest seems to bother. The codes are literally set in stone and thus close to impossible to get rid of again, should the legislation catch up. With a QR code, the gravestone is at once physical and digital, underhandedly putting presumably private content within public reach. Thus, issues of privacy and publicness are at play in the study's two connected but rather different empirical spaces: *the physical space* with the stonecutters, the cemetery, and the grave, and *the emotional space* of significance and forms of expression. Accordingly, the methodology covers a range of different perspectives, including a cumbersome collection of geo-data, interviews with diverse stakeholders, and textual analysis of the uploaded material.

The Physical Space

In a Danish context, *the stonecutters* are true gatekeepers in relation to QR codes on gravestones. They advertise, sell, deliver, and host the QR-code as part of their service. With two big chains and a score of independent stonecutters, the opinions on QR codes differ. The codes are acknowledged to merit some competition, but different issues concerning privacy surface in the sales material. Similarly, several stonecutters are unwilling to participate in the study, as they regard the whole QR code transaction as confidential. *The cemetery* as a secluded space for contemplation is challenged by pervasive communication technology, and presumably, today most visitors bring their mobile phone. Download of private memorials in a public space might disturb other visitors, either directly (by being, e.g., noisy) or ethically (perceived as out of line). *The grave* itself is a private spot, often clearly marked with small fences or hedges. One particular QR code design is extra large (5x7 cm) so the visitor can download from a respectful distance without trespassing. Another 'solution' found to the apparent dilemma of privacy in public is to hide the QR code itself behind a small locked gate, thus making the sheer installation somewhat puzzling. In sum, *the physical space* around QR codes on gravestones is an arena for renewed negotiations of private-public distinctions, closely connected to contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2010) and the physical introduction of digital memorials.

The Emotional Space

A part of the study, not yet executed, is to do interviews, thus closing in on the subjective *significance* of the QR coded memorial. The stakeholders are the stonecutters, their customers (who might be identical with the 'chief mourners' (Moncur, Bikker, Kasket, & Troyer, 2012)), the closest family, the friends, and the random visitors to the grave. Questions like 'who decide what is uploaded and why?', 'Who are the imagined downloaders?' and 'How does download alter the visit to the grave?' does all pivot around issues of privacy with public access and are likely to produce important insights. Likewise, the *forms of expression* (obituaries, letters, photos, drawings, videos, etc.) and the potential inclusion of social media profiles (e.g., memorialized Facebook

timelines or simulated tweets from “LivesOn”) points toward co-constructed legacies (Kasket, 2012), even with a technology as pedestrian as the QR code.

Conclusion

Digital memorials represent a certain part of a bigger picture of changing rituals for mourning, remembrance, and legacy. In this study, the departure is gravestones with QR codes, as the overlap between physical and digital objects act as a prism for cultural change within the subjects of death, bereavement and memorials. The ongoing negotiation of definitions in the borderland between private and public is illustrated by examples from both physical and emotional space. With our study and the upcoming presentation, we are ensuring a continued discussion on privacy as well as legacy in our digital society.

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