



Selected Papers of Internet Research 15:  
The 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Daegu, Korea, 22-24 October 2014

## **SELFIES AT FUNERALS: REMEDIATING RITUALS OF MOURNING**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper we examine the controversies surrounding the posting of online ‘selfies at funerals’ that sprung up in late 2013. We argue that the controversies reveal a form of ‘boundary work’ through which participants and publics are negotiating the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate online practices, as well as legitimate and illegitimate responses to death and the rituals associated with death. In Gieryn’s writing, ‘boundary work’ refers to the rhetorical labour scientists engage in to demarcate legitimate science from illegitimate non-science. We use the term to refer to the rhetoric used by participants to position online practices as acceptable or not, especially those associated with grief, bereavement and other matters deserving of gravitas and respect. Woven through these debates are competing threads in which evolving forms of online and youthful expression become entangled with established notions of respectful mourning.

### **The emergence of the funeral selfie**

Selfie (informal): a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website: occasional selfies are acceptable, but posting a new picture of yourself every day isn’t necessary (Oxford Dictionary)

In the year that ‘selfie’ beat ‘twerk’ to become the Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year for both the US and the UK (Oxford Dictionaries 2013), the journalist/commentator

Suggested Citation (APA): Gibbs, M., Nansen, B., Carter, C., & Kohn, T. (2014, October 22-24). *Selfies at funerals: remediating rituals of mourning*. Paper presented at Internet Research 15: The 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Daegu, Korea: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Jason Feifer created an Internet firestorm with his Tumblr blog 'Selfies at Funerals'. On the 29th of October, Feifer posted 20 images culled from Instagram, Facebook and Twitter; the results of "social media curiosity" and a search of the terms 'selfie' and 'funeral' (Feifer 2013a) in a bid to mock, provoke and incite. He succeeded and outrage ensued. Virulent condemnation of these "narcissistic" and "gratuitous" photographs flooded online media. Some sought to understand these photographs as natural, poignant, if callow, responses to grief (Clark-Flory 2013). Yet, others wondered what has happened to our humanity, and if social media has emptied everything, even death, of meaning and gravitas. Many questioned the implications for contemporary society if the outlet of choice for grief and mourning was a funeral selfie (Huffington Post 2013). And then on December 10th there was an image captured of President Obama posing for a selfie taken by the Danish Prime Minister, Helle Thorning Schmidt, along with the British Prime Minister David Cameron, at the memorial service for Nelson Mandela. The debate was re-ignited, spreading into the mainstream press. Fury, flames and corresponding calls for sober reflection ensued. Feifer (2013b) declared "*Obama has taken a funeral selfie so our work here is done*". Forgotten, however, was the context. The photo was taken amidst the carnival atmosphere of a stadium full of South Africans honoring their departed leader with dancing, singing and laughing (Schmidt 2013). Yet, many in the world's social and mass media chose to lift the photograph out of context in order to vilify and condemn.<sup>1</sup>

We argue that the controversy that briefly raged around selfies at funerals is a form of 'boundary work' (Gieryn, 1999) through which commentators across varied old and new media platforms are negotiating the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate online practices associated with death, grieving and memorialization. In Gieryn's work the term refers to the rhetorical labour scientists engage in to demarcate science from non-science and to mark one side of the boundary as legitimate and the other as illegitimate. In this paper we use the term to refer to the rhetoric used by participants to position the practices of taking 'selfies at funerals' and sharing them online through social media as relatively legitimate or illegitimate activities. Through this boundary work, various media publics and commentators are challenging and attempting to constrain emergent forms of online practices both specific to death, and more generally.

### **Controversies surrounding selfies at funerals**

I would like to say that these brats will be running the country in about 20 years time but actually they won't because most of them are too stupid to even get into college today. We are absolutely 100% doomed as a society and I am praying hard for that 70-mile wide asteroid to obliterate us in 30 years. Only good can come of it.<sup>2</sup>

For some, selfies at funerals was the epitome of youthful narcissism and selfishness. They reflected a generation that "*has been conned into thinking obsessive, endless,*

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<sup>1</sup> While important to mention in the context of the selfies at funerals topic for the remainder of this working paper we will leave aside the specific debates that surrounded

<sup>2</sup> All unattributed quotes are sourced from publically available comments on online news articles and blog posts.

*mindless (moronic) photographing of oneself is akin to living”, or “a whole generation of disrespectful, whiney, irresponsible teenagers”. Less vitriolic, some felt that “kids these days share too much online”, or dismissed the practice: “aren’t selfies just the latest kiddie ‘thing’?” While this controversy was often attributed to the generation of millennials, others attributed it to youth in general; “is there any standard of behavior and common sense that our youth can grasp without having every detail explained to them as though they are 5 or 6?” Other blamed the parents; the ones “too busy looking at their own silly phones. What a sad society we have become”, or by claiming that “my child would get a hand upside the head if I ever saw her doing this”. Within commentaries of this kind, the selfie was most frequently seen as a sign of “a shallow and attention-seeking personality” rather than a legitimate expression of grief or an appropriate mourning practice.*

For many of those engaging in the debate, from journalists to a blogging public, the act of taking a selfie at a funeral lacked respect, for both the dead and the grieving. It was *“just disgraceful, tasteless, and hurtful to those who lost their loved one.”* They argued, *“broadcasting pics, or tweets, or yapping on a phone is totally alien to the purpose of a funeral.”* Respect for the deceased was commonly invoked by those critical of the funeral selfie: *“You turn up to a funeral to show respect to the dead and the grieving, showing the narcissism to take photos of yourself and publish them on the internet isn’t showing respect”.* Lack of respect for the family was also criticized as trivialization of grief, *“It is highly disrespectful. Not of the deceased but for the family and loved ones of the deceased. They are hurting and grieving and these clueless youngsters are trivializing their grief.”*

Many commentators, however, defended the selfie-takers, challenging *“The sheer nerve of telling someone who has just lost a loved one that they are ‘self-absorbed twits’ for not playing the part of mourner correctly”.* Similarly, another writer critically suggested that commenters *“Stop trying to police other people’s mourning”*, pointing out that one of the criticized teenagers had just lost a father. Some saw the selfie as an expression of life, vitality and as a means of reassurance when faced with the profound reality of death, similar to *“so many funeral clichés, like drinking too much or falling into bed with a fellow griever”* (Clark-Flory 2013).

### **Contextualizing the culture of funeral selfies**

Others frame the problem more broadly to suggest it is not simply a product of youth, but rather belongs to a contemporary western and increasingly secularized culture that has disengaged from death and emptied the grieving process of established rituals: *“Our cultural traditions have failed them, and selfies at funerals are one of their only outlets to ritual and mourning in the age of the smartphone”* (Doughty 2013).

Commentators also suggested that selfies were part and parcel of the new and emerging practices associated with mourning across all media platforms; practices that are the natural outgrowths of contemporary life for many. While the *“ephemerality of online mourning”* seems to be *“mocking death’s enormity”* the turn to social media for mourning and to express grief has occurred because social media is *“increasingly where we go to process our inner thoughts and feelings about pretty much everything”* (Waldman 2013).

At times, the debate was extended to the topic of any kinds of photos at funerals. Some argued *"it's inappropriate to take any photos at funerals"*, whereas others maintained *"pictures are not just for happy events but for recording memories."* The latter position was justified as, *"a funeral is often a gathering of a large part of the family. Photographs at this time would be a valuable record of a family's history."* Tied into this debate was a filament of historical awareness, invoking the fact that *"the Victorians took photos of the family WITH the deceased"* and that some form of capturing or preserving the events in material form has often been historically part of funerary practices, such as the plaster death mask.

### **Conclusion: remediating ritual**

*"Selfies at Funerals" – regardless of Feifer's humorous intentions – is actually scathing cultural commentary... (Doughty 2013)*

The emergence of selfies at funerals has served as a locus for debates about the legitimacy of emerging practices associated with social media. The profundity of death has helped to bring into sharp relief the seemingly, to some, vacuity of contemporary forms of expression offered through social media. Many commentators on 'selfies at funerals' were quick to criticize the character of the people involved for being narcissistic and lacking proper respect and tended to focus on the problematic character of 'today's youth'; an age-old conundrum. However, for others who attempted to understand rather than dismiss this practice, there was recognition that social media such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook are integrated into many people's everyday lives and are thus 'natural' avenues for personal expressions of grief. Given the waning of institutionalized mourning rituals in contemporary western societies (Margry & Sánchez-Carretero 2011; Wouters 2002), disentangling the vitriol from the vernacular in expressions of digital culture are needed if we are to adequately comprehend how funeral rituals are being remediated.

### **Acknowledgments**

This research was supported by funding from Australian Research Council Discovery Project (DP140101871), and the Institute for a Broadband-Enabled Society at the University of Melbourne.

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