

Reconfiguring Meaning: Conceptions of Time and Relationship at a Danish Online Memorial Site

Dorthe Refslund Christensen

Associate Professor
Aarhus University
Denmark
nordrc@hum.au.dk

Kjetil Sandvik

Associate Professor
University of Copenhagen
Denmark
sandvik@hum.ku.dk

Abstract

This research project explores relations between ritualized space and the conceptions of time reflected in the Danish memorial website, *Mindet.dk*, a designated online community in which individuals can perform their grief for their deceased loved ones and get social support in their mourning processes through communication with other mourners and through emotional labor reflected in the individual memorial profiles. Based on an ongoing content analysis of 20 profiles for stillborns and very young children we aim at demonstrating how memorial sites like *Mindet.dk* constitute a space for maintaining as well as producing relations to the dead child and how these practices imply certain conceptions of time. We demonstrate that the timework performed at *Mindet.dk* is a necessary strategy for the parents in order to *reconfigure meaning* after an event – the death of the child – which initially has rendered their lives meaningless.

Keywords

Death online; memorial sites, grief; timework; ritual practices

Research scope

This project is situated in the realm of various studies on death and bereavement in today's Western society and the growing role of new media and the internet in this context (cf. Carol & Landry 2010, Gustavsson 2011) and of grief and commemoration practices online whether this is happening on social network sites (cf. Pennington, forthcoming) or in online games and virtual worlds (cf. Havarinnen, forthcoming). Through ongoing content analyses of the expressions and activities on 20 profiles for stillborns and very young children and the use of functionalities such as guest books and 'light a candle' we seek to expand on our understandings of practices of grief and commemoration by demonstrating how online memorial sites like *Mindet.dk* (see Fig. 1) constitute a space for maintaining as well as producing relations to the dead child and how these practices imply certain conceptions of time. Preliminary findings have been presented in Christensen & Sandvik 2008, 2009, 2012a, 2012b.



Figure 1: Screenshot of Mindet.dk's entry with our explanations

Mindet.dk seems to fill a void for having marked or designated places for mourning and bereavement (after the funeral and in addition to the graveyard), not the least in the case with the loss of infants or with stillborns: deaths which more than others leave the bereaved asking “why” and a lengthy process of mourning and reworking the meaning of life. The quality of an online community (Baym 2010) is evident in this respect; this is where users with the same experiences can meet.

Analysis: Working and reworking time

In the following we analyze the mourning practices at Mindet.dk following the thoughts of Romano as cited in the panel proposal and his analysis of how specific events like the death of a child is of such nature that “*meaning* is so radically modified, the totality of projections and finalities that dwelled in it and conferred a signifying structure on it are so altered, that strictly speaking it is no longer the *same* world”, which implies that “the occurring of such an event renders the former world insignificant, since this event can no longer be understood in light of that world’s context”. (Romano 2009: 38f). Our analysis also draws on Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy of time and narrative (Ricoeur 1980) and the concept of *timework* suggested by sociologist Michael G. Flaherty (2011). Basically, we suggest considering the mourning practices at Mindet.dk as special ways of doing time. The mourners engage in different kinds of timework which structures their ritual performances of grief especially in accordance to Flaherty’s category *duration* (e.g. ‘stretching’ time) (Flaherty 2011: 11).

How does Mindet.dk function as an organizing device for the bereaved? How can time be reclaimed as meaningful? How can the tragic events of losing a child be narrated in ways which may reconfigure life as signifying structures (cf. Romano 2009)? Due to the death of the child the parents at Mindet.dk have changed from being *parents to be* to *parents not to be*. Their main narrative of preparing for *the parenthood to be* has been broken into bits and pieces and this causes a narrative collapse which may best be characterized, we suggest, as a situation where the direction of time is reversed. The death of the child becomes an event of the past and of such strong significance, that the future dissolves as a meaningful entity and the present may be described as folded into the past, because of the all-absorbing emotions of loss and grief connected to the bereavement.

Conclusions: Death ends a life, not a relationship¹

We suggest that 3 different chronological phases of grief can be identified at Mindet.dk:

1. Establishing the death of the child
2. Staying alive and performing parenthood
3. Developing new narratives/new directions in life

Seligman et al. argue that ritual remains necessary to the ones that experience the world and life as fragmented and fractured and we suggest that even though the parents move on in life the fragmentation is permanent. “Ritual ... is an endless work of creating a subjunctive world in overt tension with the world of lived experience” (Seligman et al. 2008: 28). In the first phase of ritualizations at Mindet.dk, the parents’ timework consists of “stretching” time, imparting “duration” to the narrative of the child’s short life, sorting out the “succession” of events regarding the child’s life and death process and thereby negotiating “what happened” and, not least, appropriating death by being the ones to say: “Our baby died”. Part of this process is about coming to terms with the loss of the child and producing some kind of closure, but at the same time there also is a strong sense of documenting the child through giving it some kind of duration, however short it may be. We have suggested the term *invention of memories* for these practices (Christensen & Sandvik, 2013)

In the second phase, the repeated ritualizations of lighting a candle or other actions stress how Mindet.dk enables performing negotiations of new narratives and life practices, while still trying to find one’s feet in the world and, not the least, negotiating the future position of the child. This is a matter of establishing a persistent and bearable relation to the dead child, and due to the fact that Mindet.dk is a social sphere (a community of mourners), part of this “establishing relations to/with the dead” is also about “establishing relations to/with the living” by way of supporting, comforting and sharing. At Mindet.dk a certain “angel”-terminology is dominant where the dead children are referred to as angels and narrated as located in the heavens and also supplied with certain superhuman qualities. One might even suggest that the ending of this phase – even though the borders to the third phase are fluid – is constituted by the child having been established in its afterlife existence, however nebulously (see fig. 2).

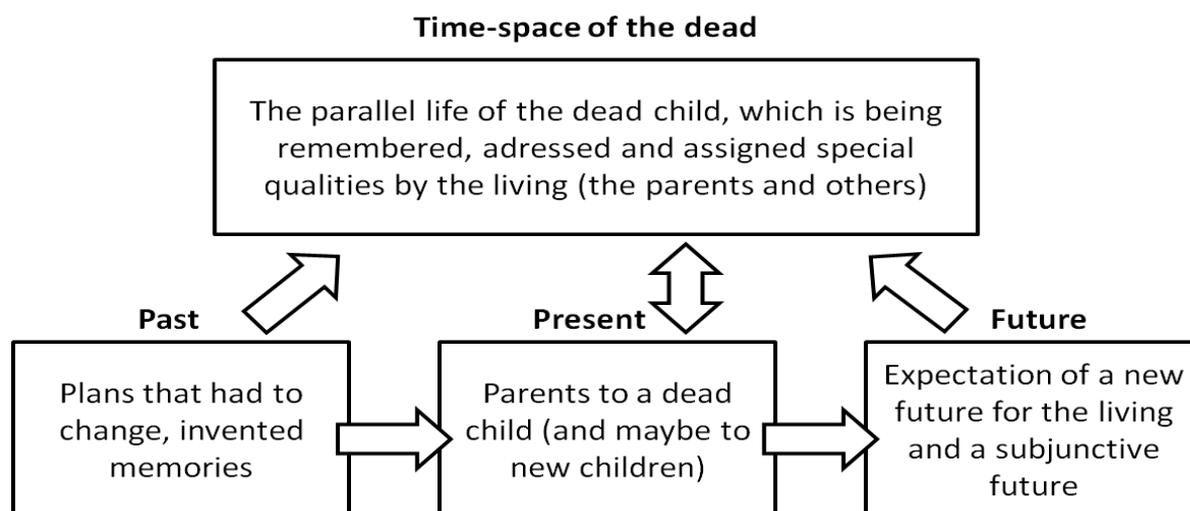


Figure 2: New signifying structures in the life of the parents in which the narrative consists of a past once again being reflected in meaningful ways in the present, creating possible directions into a set of meaning-making possibilities in the future.

¹ The former slogan at Mindet.dk

The third phase is, logically, a continuation of the second. Now, the narratives are in place, time may yet become meaningful and the child – and not the least, the relationship to the child – can be maintained through less frequent, even though intense, ritualizations of the relationship. However, we cannot document the ultimate point of the third phase merely through content analysis since the parents have moved on with their lives. They may still be active at Mindet.dk both in regard to their own lost child and in regard to showing respect and comfort to other grieving parents, but the performances, like lighting candles at bedtime or on red letter days, do not inform us of the new life they now live, though it may tell us that the dead child is not forgotten. The child has been given a parallel existence which the parents can and still do keep in touch with when they choose to do so – now and then, not very frequently, but they are continuously keeping hold (Walter 1997) even though they are moving on in their lives.

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Mourning the Unknown – Affective “R.I.P’ing” on Facebook

Lisbeth Klastrup
Associate Professor
IT University of Copenhagen
Denmark
klastrup@itu.dk

Abstract

This panel paper examines the affective mourning practices of social network users active on Facebook “R.I.P” pages, with a particular focus on the practice of mourning both strangers and parasocial acquaintances, coined “R.I.P’ing”. Using previous findings from studies of mourning practices online as an analytical point of departure, it presents findings from a study of three Danish “R.I.P. pages”, including qualitative analysis of 4100 comments made on these pages. First findings show that people on these pages use comments and postings of audio-visual material to express sympathy, talk to the deceased, share values and personal stories and material. However, a huge majority of users do this fleetingly, use banal religious discourse, and perform in affective response to general media attention.

Keywords

Facebook; death; mourning; affect; community; fandom; media ecology; R.I.P.

Introduction

If the grief of “just a fan” can be so great, you can only guess how the family feels (woman on deceased musician’s R.I.P. page)

Maria rest in peace don’t know you but hope you will feel good up there [in heaven] (male on R.I.P. page of young woman just murdered)

Which factors drive social network site (SNS) users to engage in online memorial practices relating to deceased people they have never met or only know “parasocially” through the media? A study of R.I.P pages and practices on Facebook reveal that the death of what is in principle strangers attract a huge number of “mourners” who use social network sites such as Facebook to pay their respect to the deceased. The unknown person in question can either be an ordinary person; a celebrity; or someone well-known in the public (such as influential business person or politician). What these “unknowns” have in common is that their death have generated headlines in the press and public attention. Following this mediation of death, the SNS-mourners virtually “pass by” a public R.I.P page or similar memorial page, either once or repeatedly to express their emotions through the use of likes, posts, drawings, photos and shared lyrics and songs; clearly visibly or textually *affected* by the deaths in question. This practice in its own way reflects what current death studies points out are a modern paradox: while death in the family is increasingly strange to us, the death of strangers (as experienced through the media) are what we are most familiar with.

The current body of literature on the subject of mourning on SNS primarily focus on the mourning of deceased people by users closely linked to the mourners such as family and friends, see for instance Degroot 2008, Caroll and Landry 2010, Brubaker et al 2011, Forman 2012, Kern et al 2012. Some researchers have also looked at the online mourning of celebrities (see f.i. Sanderson and Cheong 2010, Walter 2011, Radford and Bloch 2012). Thus to my knowledge this paper present the first study of *affective R.I.P’ing practices* on social network sites, understood as the media driven and often fleeting mourning of unknown others by ordinary SNS users. Can unique characteristics of this form of practice be identified?

Method

The study is based on a comparative analysis of practices and comments on three Danish R.I.P pages, one with +177.000 “fans” (as of February 2013) created in memory of the popular Danish musician Flemming “Bamse” Jørgensen who died January 1st, 2011 (sample of 885 comments); a group page in memory of a young Danish girl, Maria Møller Christensen, who was brutally killed January 1st, 2010 (sample of 2877 comments) This group at its peak had +22.000 members. Finally, I include a R.I.P. page for a drowned young man, Martin Svejgaard Helbo, created May 12th 2013 (sample of 402 comments and 20.000 “fans”), which were shortly after taken down by its unknown creator after enquiries on behalf of the family. Using findings from earlier studies of mourning practices social media sites as an analytical point of departure, screen dumps of the pages and verbal comments have and will continue to be analysed using qualitative discourse analysis and quantitative sorting.

Earlier findings

Previous research shows that on social network sites people use “R.I.P” or memorial pages dedicated to people they know for sensemaking and relational continuity purposes (Degroot 2012) and “post-mortem social networking” (Brubaker and Hayes 2011). In general it appears that the bereft use these sites to speak directly to the deceased (see f.i. Degroot 2008) and as a way to let the deceased “remain in perpetuity”, thus changing the notion of what R.I.P practices has traditionally entailed (Kern et al 2013). The R.I.P and memorial pages are places to commune with, and about the dead in public (Kern 2012), and places to both publicly and visibly express symbolic loss and solidarity, creating a biography of the person lost through personal narratives (Carroll and Landry 2010). Public communal sharing of grief using religious discourse as a shared language, and rapid cycling through grief stages are particularly salient in celebrity mourning (Gibson 2007, Sanderson and Cheong 2010, Walther 2011, Radford and Bloch 2012).

Own findings

First findings show that “R.I.P’ing” can be divided into two phases. The first phase initiates immediately after the person mourned is dead. That is, all three of the studied R.I.P. memorial pages were created the same day as the death of the person were made public in the media, and a quick and viral sign up of page fans and group members took place. My tracking of the “R.I.P. Flemming “Bamse” Jørgensen” page showed that 64.000 had “liked” the page within one day of the creation and 110.000 people had “liked” it after five. This first *affective phase* lasts for around one to two weeks during which new people with regular intervals post comments. During this phase, comments express shock and sensemaking, and sympathy with the family of the deceased. Some people share personal stories, either about “close encounters” with the deceased (concerts with the musician), identify with the situation (being a mother of a young girl) or of own experiences of loss of family members. However, most comments consists of a few words or a few sentences using religious discourse (“Rest in Peace“ “Lighting a candle”), or as an alternative, posting of a picture or link to a song. There is one notable difference between R.I.P’ing practices on the three sites: in the Maria Møller Christensen and Martin Svejgaard Helbo group, people emphasise that they “didn’t know you [her] /[him]” but nevertheless are very touched and express their sympathy with the family of the deceased. On Bamse’s page, people emphasise familiarity: he is “our Bamse”, and they will miss “your music”, and find comfort in the fact that he will live on through his music.

The second *cyclic phase* is characterised by the fact that only a minority of users are now active (most mourners only post once in the affective phase). They can be characterised as “hard core fans” or “hard core mourners” who appear to return on special occasions, such as holiday seasons (for instance, christmas), or on the dead person’s day of birth and death.

Conclusions

So far findings show that the practice of “R.I.P’ing” and mourning the unknown show many similarities with findings from the studies of mourning of relatives, friends and celebrities. However, “R.I.P’ing” takes place over a short period of time, and for most appear to be express immediate affect rather than actual grief.

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QR codes in Danish cemeteries.

How digitizing the dead might change the living.

Stine Gotved

Associated Professor
IT University of Copenhagen
Denmark
contact@contact.edu

Abstract

On several Danish cemeteries, the gravestone granite is recently supplied with way more information about the deceased than just the laconic "name + lifespan". Since early 2012, those ordering the grave monument can choose to have a QR code embedded in the stone, for them to upload digital memories, pictures, obituaries and the like. The visitors to the grave can then access the digital content with a swipe of their smartphone. This research project takes a closer look on this new way of digitizing the dead. How might this kind of concealed public disclosure change the way we are dealing with the dead? What is the reasoning behind choosing material for upload, and how does the ability affect visitors to the grave? The study is about to be executed, and the explorative approach aims to place the digitized gravestone within the fast evolving culture of online memorial practice.

Keywords

digital memorials; QR codes; sharing death online

Field of research

Taking my departure in the actual gravestone and the embedded QR-code, there are at least two tracks to follow: the human stakeholders and the digital content. Even though the tracks will zigzag each other later in the study, e.g., when researching the stakeholders' responses to the digital content, the preliminary ontology keeps them apart.

The stakeholders are divided into four categories, with an overlap between the last two.

- The deceased
- The stonecutters
- The closest relatives
- The visitors to the grave

In an attempt to outline the field, the following is a first description of the stakeholders, primarily based on assumptions.

The deceased

The name on the gravestone represents the pivotal stakeholder without whom there would be no activity to speak of. The deceased might have been an active part in deciding on a QR-coded gravestone, and might just as well have produced personal digital content in advance. However, as interviewing is out of question, this group of stakeholders will be accessed through another group of stakeholders, the closest relatives. (They are also likely to consider what kind of memorial they want for themselves, thus producing a kind of forewarning to the future growth in the number of deceased underneath a QR-coded headstone).

The stonecutter

In this study, the stonecutter is actually a kind of digital gatekeeper. As far as the pilot study goes, the actual upload of commemorative content to a secure and commercial free server is included in a QR-code gravestone deal and done by the stonecutter. Furthermore, the stonecutters might be those presenting the idea of a QR-code to the buyers, and are thus exposed to the relatives' reasoning back and forth in the decision process (regardless of the outcome). Connected to the last point, the stonecutters might offer a unique insight into the hype and fashion around the activities with QR-codes and digitized memorials, as they presumably are interested in turning the trend into serious business.

The closest relatives

The closest relatives are here defined as those who actually order the monument and/or do have the last word on the digital material. The relatives have to make decisions on how to deal with this new category of memorial, what to upload and what to keep private. The need for ethical considerations is grave when the material is made public; it might be more difficult to honor the dead without the risk of offending the still living. On the other hand, the QR-code might be the first step to a time-extended digital presence for the deceased, linking to, e.g., a Facebook memorial page or other personal profiles, thus taking part of the possible pressure of digital production away from the relatives. By deciding on a QR-coded gravestone, the closest relatives are some of the frontrunners in the cultural change, where our everyday digital life seems to continue seamlessly after the physical death.

The visitors to the grave

The last group of stakeholders is the visitors to the grave, and they can be anyone stepping by, grieving or not. They enter the cemetery with a certain set of expectations, and maybe a smartphone in their pocket. The QR-code is a visible feature, still setting the grave apart from the surrounding memorials. Indiscriminately, the closest relative and the extended family, the long-lost friend and the total stranger (like a researcher) are offered a glimpse of the deceased and her/his achievements in life. The tangible gravestone becomes a portal to the deceased's digital afterlife, and the visitors to the grave are likely to reflect upon this collision of realms. Scanning the QR-code and engaging with the digital content is definitely a new way of relating to death and the processes of grieving, and it might change the experience of the physical location as well.

The digital content (track two)

As yet, no study has uncovered the kind of digital content available in the QR-coded memorials. The material might be pictures, films, and/or text, it might be home-produced and/or clipped from the mass media, it might add a few words or a whole new perspective to the life of the deceased - it is rather hard to predict. Thus, the study of the digital content intends to analyze the material both vertically (in-depth content analysis, closely connected to the stakeholders in question) and horizontally (categorizing and comparing different kinds of material, outlining the broader cultural change in memorial practices).

In sum

The study draws on my cross-disciplinary background in cultural sociology and internet studies, and include studies in memorial and mourning practices. The total number of QR-codes in Danish cemeteries is still within reach of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and likewise, the number of stakeholders is rather predictable. The main part of the empirical research takes place during spring and summer 2013 and includes extensive interviewing, visits to cemeteries and download of QR-coded memorials.

When an increasingly large part of life, from the most intimate to the most officious is manifest online, it should be of no surprise that death is there as well. We share experiences of mourning and memorials, and there is a cultural change towards online integration in the ways we deal with death. Furthermore, as the median age of the internet population continues to go up, matters connected to the physical death will have increasing importance. The study's pivotal point is the cultural change as well

as the convergence of physical and digital, as it is played out in everyday life - in our mundane activities, in the cultural concessions, and on the actual gravestone.

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Communicating Feelings of Loss and Anger: An Analysis of Grief Communication on Facebook Profiles in Instances of Suicide

Natalie Pennington
PHD Student
The University of Kansas
USA
natpen@ku.edu

Abstract

This research project seeks to look at a specific instance of death and grieving: how a social network communicates through Facebook when the deceased committed suicide. Past research on open social network sites such as my MyDeathSpace.com suggested that flaming and other negative behaviors often occurred on the site as raw emotions emerged. Given the relatively closed nature of Facebook profiles however, it is expected that there will be different results here versus memorial sites. The big research questions are: How do members of the social network of the deceased interact on the profile page of a friend who has committed suicide? How does the discussion of suicide (if at all) change how members of the social network interact on the profile page of the deceased?

Keywords

Facebook; grief communication; suicide

Rationale

Past research has successfully shown that individuals can both give and receive social support through social networking sites such as Facebook (Carroll & Landry, 2010; DeGroot, 2012). More specifically, research has found that in times of grief, individuals believe that they can turn to Facebook for support from friends and family alike (DeGroot, 2009). Missing from the current literature however is a discussion about how the cause of death can influence the effectiveness of support received from social media. More specifically, while research has been conducted on memorial pages relating grief communication and suicide (DeGroot, 2009; Leonard & Toller, 2012), no study specifically has tied grieving the death of a friend who committed suicide on their Facebook profile page.

Memorial pages are distinct from a profile page in that their primary purpose on Facebook is to be a place to go and mourn and discuss the loss of someone—and anyone is able to join in that discussion. Research showed that these pages often attract “emotional rubbernecks”, who would access the memorial group page and talk about their own loss they’ve experienced in life, taking the focus away from the deceased (DeGroot, 2009). Conversely, the profile page is self-created and self-contained. It stands in memory of the deceased and how they wanted to be represented online—the profile picture they chose, the status updates they wrote, the interests they picked, and most importantly, the people that they chose to be friends with are connected to the page already, and the probability of the public-at-large accessing that page is low given the focus we have in society on ensuring privacy for our profiles. In the case of suicide, privacy is of particular importance (Leonard & Toller, 2012). While it is important to consider how we grieve when something as horrific as a school shooting happens, it is of equal importance to understand how we grieve when a less-publicized death occurs. This research is important as we seek to grapple with changing patterns in grief communication in a digital world.

More specifically, an open dialogue about loss is important for those experiencing grief (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008). While there is a tendency to want to say to the bereaved that they are “so strong” and “holding up well,” research suggests that these statements foreclose the possibility for the bereaved to express their loss, forcing them to think they are supposed to react a certain way and not talk about their feelings (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008, p. 28). Facilitating open communication about grief is difficult, especially with the death is sudden and unexpected; finding the right words to say when

someone close to you as committed suicide can be particularly hard, as emotions are often mixed between sadness that they are gone, and anger that they took their own life.

As Goldsmith (2004) suggests, the burden falls on the entire social network to determine the appropriate ways to communicate their loss, co-creating a space to discuss their feelings of grief. This can be incredibly difficult for some members who were not as close to the deceased as others, while they too are grieving, knowing the appropriate words to say to others, and when to say them, can be difficult (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008). Indeed, a lack of understanding of what grief is, and the process that follows, often leads to miscommunication within the network. Dyregrov and Dyregrov (2008) note that the assumption that grief is meant to be private that permeates American culture often causes members of the social network to cease discussion about the deceased with each other after a certain time period. This expectation to “move on” rather than continue bonds stymies dialogue following the funeral and/or memorial service for the deceased, preventing members of the deceased’s social network from continuing to communicate about their loss. How then do we continue to cope with grief over time? Research suggests that writing and talking about our grief is important in helping to deal with loss (Pennebaker, 1997), and as communication technology advances, another possible location for individuals to express their grief can be found on the Internet.

Leonard and Toller (2009) in their research on the virtual memorial site MyDeathSpace.com suggest that increased anonymity on the sites encourages negative discussions about the deceased, particularly in the case of suicide. By allowing users to post comments without logging in or attaching their name to the comment left on the memorial page, the researchers found that users would lash out not only at the deceased for how they died (e.g. jumping in front of a car or train), but also judged the friends and family of the deceased asking questions like “where are the parents” (Leonard & Toller, 2009, p. 16). Additional research on trolling and memorial pages (Phillips, 2011) also notes that when a page is not tightly monitored that the conversation can quickly turn negative. This is particularly true in the case of pages of where the death or discussion is seen as sensitive, because those posting are seen as easy targets (Phillips, 2011).

Research on MySpace as a memorial site (Carroll & Landry, 2010) speaks to the problems found in the MyDeathSpace.com study. While the results found that users believed it was socially acceptable to write on the wall page of the MySpace profile of the deceased as a method of coping, which is consistent with Barnhill and Owen’s (2007) analysis of online virtual memorials, they also found that these posts were often establishing a competing narrative of the life of the deceased, and that the open nature of a MySpace profile allowed most anyone to post a comment on the wall if they wanted to, altering the overall content of the page and leading sometimes to negative discussions on the site about the deceased (Carroll & Landry, 2010). Additional research on MySpace as a location for grief found that most comments left on the page occur on major holidays and the anniversary of death, though taper off and decrease as each year goes by (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011).

All together, these studies paint a fairly cohesive picture of grief on social network sites, but leave room for further analysis of suicide specifically in relation to profile pages and how friends and family of the deceased communicate their grief.

Conclusions

This project points to a continued importance of understanding how computer-mediated communication can affect a person following the loss of a friend, and finding ways to help make that affect beneficial, particularly for college students who not only frequently use social media, but will most likely experience the loss of a friend during their time in college (Balk, 2011).

By acknowledging that the FB profile page of the deceased is a probable location for the bereaved to communicate about their loss, society can help to ensure that these avenues remain open to members of the social network. While Facebook as an organization doesn’t actively delete profiles of its deceased members, increasing awareness that the existence of the pages help members communicate

their grief is important in addressing additional avenues for individuals to grieve and communicate with the deceased after they passed away.

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