

Bereavement round up: Digital legacies

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A number of articles published recently and discussed here have examined aspects of bereavement expression via social channels and the impact of social media tools on connections to the deceased. For the bereavement support community, there is an onus to be familiar with the expanding options available for grieving via social network sites and to become aware of the increasingly sophisticated options developing to enable digital immortality.

Memorialising and the suicide bereaved

Bell J, Bailey L, Kennedy D (2015). 'We do it to keep him alive': bereaved individuals' experiences of online suicide memorials and continuing bonds. *Mortality* 20 (5) 375-89

Bailey and Bell are no strangers to the examination of grief displays on Facebook having previously written about the experience of bereaved people interacting with Facebook memorial accounts. In this article they return to Facebook, this time detailing interviews with bereaved people who maintain Facebook memorial accounts.

Their article draws on Klass, Silverman and Nickman's concept of continuing bonds, updating it to assert that with the individualised nature of expression in social media personas it is natural that our digital selves be co-opted into our expression of grief. Citing the significant body of literature they indicate evidence of the therapeutic nature of online memorialisation. They do however acknowledge that the persistent and openly accessible nature of Facebook memorials can pose a problem for some mourners. This is particularly so for those coping with suicide bereavement like the study interviewees. They also advise of potential difficulties in changed representations of the deceased's personality and idealisation in online memorials. The possible link between this idealised representation of the deceased and potential for suicide contagion, particularly in the case of younger people is indicated as requiring further examination.

In detailing the response of their interviewees to loved ones' Facebook profiles after death the authors give a good illustration of the options available to next of kin in maintaining profiles

after death. Echoing previous work, they assert that continued access to Facebook accounts of those who have died enables a continued relationship and is comforting, particularly in the early stages of bereavement.

They use six case studies from the interviewees to detail how the bereaved interacted with their loved one's profile over time. These case studies provide a valuable insight into workings of continuing bonds on digital platforms.

As with a traditional location of grief like a grave, family and friends express a desire to maintain the site well. The case studies also reflect that grief expression on Facebook memorial pages, as in face-to-face interactions, are heightened in the period immediately after the death but become less frequent over time. This initial surge in posting was cited by one interviewee as a 'distraction from grief' though the drop off in activity was also noted as potentially a cause of concern.

The accounts given by interviewees are consistent with existing studies of grieving in digital spaces. Bell *et al* highlight again the key themes of grieving on social networking platforms: the continued bond with the deceased; the online community of grievers; the lapsing of activity over time; and the individualised nature of grief expression.

They indicate that for some bereaved people, attachments to the virtual presence had potential to become an issue, with one interviewee becoming overly attached to the profile. Issues like loss of access, ownership of posthumous profiles and the potential impact of the online grieving community 'moving on' are teased out as being worthy of further examination. ■

The posthumous digital self

Meese J, Nansen B, Kohnc T, Arnold M, Gibbs M (2015). Posthumous personhood and the affordances of digital media. *Mortality* 20 (4) 1-13.

It is into the areas where studies like Bell *et al* leave off that Meese *et al* take up their examination. They delve into new software developments in their article, examining the extent to which social media and digital tools can extend relationships with the deceased. They look at three possibilities: the continued interaction of the deceased through a surrogate; new autonomous software allowing

the deceased to use social media to transmit messages at key future points; and more sophisticated tools employing algorithms to recreate messages in the persona of the dead.

Drawing from anthropological sources they examine the notion of personhood, highlighting that the qualification of 'being alive' to be afforded personhood is a relatively modern construct. They agree that even beyond death, the deceased retains a semblance of personhood and the acceptance of the right to dignity of the corpse reveals this.

They see the development of software to maintain social media profiles after death as a means to extend personhood beyond the grave. Whether a profile is maintained after a death and administered by a relative, a profile continues to post pre-assigned content from beyond the grave, or new content is generated through an algorithmic tool, some form of the deceased person continues to interact with the living. The authors note the 'blurred lines between "representation" and "personhood proper"'. While their initial observations dwell on the examination of the notion of the person there are considerable implications for bereaved people in these blurred lines.

Meese *et al* examine the impact of this range of services aiming to create 'a kind of digitally mediated immortality'. Looking to the not-too-distant future they envision the possibility of digital clones or avatars offering the opportunity for the persona of the deceased to continue to communicate and interact with the living. They note that existing practices like memorialising a loved one's Facebook page or creating a digital archive of social media content can be seen as an extension of the existing social relationship. They look to new developments in enhanced posthumous digital personas as affording the deceased more agency, and allowing direct communication with the living.

This possibility of a form of continued interactive communication with the deceased raises questions about how this integrates with the grieving process and with continuing bonds. The authors conclude that increasing options to allow continued communications with the dead pose questions about the nature of this communication. For the bereavement support community too, the advancement of posthumous communication will raise questions about the nature of continuing bonds in the age of digital immortality, and the role and appropriateness of such continued communication in the grieving process. ■

Living forever in the digital afterlife

Bassett D (2015). Who wants to live forever? Living, dying and grieving in our digital society. *Social Sciences* 4(4) 1121-1139.

Continuing the theme of the digital afterlife, Bassett examines the literature on the developing phenomena of digital immortality. Illustrating just how recent the development of digital memorial options are, Bassett traces their origins back to requests for Facebook memorial pages in the wake of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings. In the relatively short time in which social networking profiles have risen to prominence, the

practicalities of account maintenance after death have come to light. Many of the issues arising around maintaining accounts after a death, ways in which bereaved people interact with the dead through social networking sites, and how communities of grief operate on social networking platforms could not have been envisioned even ten years ago. Bassett sees analyses of online memorialising rituals as multidisciplinary, with implications for communications theorists, sociologists, grief counsellors and palliative care professionals.

Bassett begins by emphasising the need for clarity of terminology in this area. She distinguishes between digital selves and virtual lives. Noting that a number of variants on the term 'digital legacy' have been used interchangeably in the literature she aims to define terms more clearly. The two categories of 'digital data' and 'digital selves' are outlined, the former broadly being accumulated digital data and assets and the latter being memory items enabling narrative development. Bassett applies her own definitions with 'digital legacy' being assigned to digital data such as passwords and general digital property. She applies the term 'digital memories' to replace digital self, drawing on bereavement literature by appropriating Tony Walters's term 'durable biography'.

Looking to the changing relationships between the dead and dying afforded by social networking platforms Bassett sees social media as providing a space to normalise death. It also allows for the voices of the dying and bereaved to be disseminated and has provided a new platform for the debate on what constitutes a good death. Bassett feels that social networking sites have provided a new outlet for bereaved people. They have also changed the nature of the grieving process with social networking sites being incorporated into the rituals of grief and acting as a virtual location for grieving.

As in physical relationships, the living continue to maintain relationships with the dead in the virtual space with the nature of communications changing. Bassett highlights different styles of interaction between memorialised Facebook sites and those maintained by families. She proposes the new term of 'zombie site' for those sites where the original profile owner is dead but the profile continues to be maintained by a third party.

Bassett sees continued relationships on social networking sites representing a paradigm shift for the continuing bonds theory. The option to create virtual memorials enables a different type of sustained relationship with the dead. Similarly, social networking sites and their use by the bereaved have implications for the Dual Process Model of bereavement. The oscillation and 'grief work' of Dual Process Model argues Bassett, may be performed in an online space. Bassett also examines phenomena like Thantablogging (blogging about death and dying) and its potential as a tool to give voice to the terminally ill and the bereaved.

In concluding Bassett presents a range of aspects of digital immortality worthy of further study including the positive or negative impact of digital immortality on bereaved people and the potential uses of digital archives or memory material with Alzheimer's patients. ■