

**Thanatos**

ISSN 2242-6280, vol.3 1/2014

© Suomalaisen Kuolemantutkimuksen Seura Ry.

[https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/mukherjee\\_griffithwilliams\\_digimemorials1.pdf](https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/mukherjee_griffithwilliams_digimemorials1.pdf)**Death and Digi-memorials: Perimortem and Postmortem Memory Sharing through Transitional Social Networking****Ishani Mukherjee**

University of Illinois, Chicago

**Maggie Griffith Williams**

University of Illinois, Chicago

**Abstract**

Impending death and the event of passing can leave one in a state beyond bereavement, leading to a penchant for rationalizing the entire process. Increasingly people turn to social media not only as a community of mourners who come together to share their grief, but also to create chronicles of hope for the deceased's life-before-death through acts of sharing emotional narratives, prayers of faith, as well as relational visuals awaiting the passing away. These digital networking communities have displayed the power to hold onto the fleeting. Social media possess an inherent quality of conceptual permanence that make them transitional public conduits for talking about the possibility of miracles to halt imminent death, fluidly followed by discussions of the transience of life.

This essay critically evaluates extant literature on peri- and postmortem research with a focus on how the transitional narrative of sustaining hope and shared grieving is said to have been created on social network sites. We argue that digital acts of sharing prayers and intimate memories during the transitional phase (the period connecting the before and after mortem phases of a loved one) as done within social networking sites such as Facebook, conflates and complicates our accepted notions of social presence by reinforcing the digital enactment of what people do in offline grieving spaces.

**Introduction**

Loss of a loved one, or impending loss, has friends and family seeking support from each other and offering prayers of hope and, in cases of death, words of grief to the deceased and each other. As social media have become increasingly

intertwined with our relationships and daily lives it is natural that grief-related behaviors and practices are enacted on these sites as well.

Most scholarship studying how people cope with death, grieving communities and end-of-life reconciliation stems from research relating postmortem and obituary studies to psychology, anthropology, clinical and palliative studies, social work, journalism, and new media (Brubaker, Hayes & Dourish 2013; Marrone 1999; Nakashima & Canda 2005; Thorne, McLean & Lawrence 2004; Williams, Munson, Zupancic & Kirpalani 2008). There has, however, been less research on how people are interpreting the Internet and social media as a space for exploring immortality from perimortem and transitional perspectives (near time of death). With social media, people who are transitioning toward death have an online space to interact with friends and family, receive messages of hope and prayer, and perhaps even construct their own postmortem legacy.

We argue that digital prayer offerings, status updates, memory-sharing and other such narrative constructions during the transitional phase, as done within social networking sites such as Facebook, provides a legitimate space to conflate and complicate our accepted notions of social presence by reinforcing the digital enactment of what people do in offline grieving spaces. Negotiating death in the context of social network sites (SNSs) raises complex questions about the meaning of social presence and its ability to become everlasting in these online spaces.

### **Grieving and Sharing**

The expansion of postmortem legacy-building and memory-sharing activities to digital community networks like Facebook, have become intertwined with everyday narrative practices that weave complex “trajectories of social engagement around death,” along with the practices of updating, commenting on and ‘liking’ mundane and monumental status messages on social media (Brubaker, Hayes & Dourish 2013, 152).

Researchers have given primacy to the deceased’s legacy and/or the dying’s need for closure and comfort. Williams et al. (2008) write about “compassionate bereavement” (335) as a communal form of emotional and physical support during an end-of-life event. This process encourages certain perimortem caregiving considerations within the hospice environment, including “support for parents and family to say goodbye [...] [and] the making of tangible memories” (337) through the sharing of personal stories with the near-deceased. Making memories such as the “creation of keepsakes (footprints, handprints, good quality photographs, and name bands)” is also a crucial part of the psychological reconciliation and social memory-building process (Williams et al. 2008, 338).

Psychologists researching death and memorialization have underscored the importance of narrative exchange as a way to reflect on the “meanings of lived experience” for the dying and their communities of loved ones (Thorne et al. 2004, 514). Nakashima and Canda (2005) argue for a holistic psychosocial approach to terminal care that would benefit stakeholders experiencing impending loss and grief through shared prayers and the “creation of meaningful narratives of living and dying” (120).

Scholars of death studies have for a long time endeavored to explain the “stages, phases and tasks related to the processes of human grieving and mourning” (Marrone 1999, 498). The essence of grief has been defined as “both an emotional reaction to loss and an active process for dealing with loss” (Merten & Williams 2009). While the process of grieving makes the stakeholder express bouts of pain, loss and “short term forms of cognitive assimilation,” the rituals

of mourning include episodes of grieving and distress, thereby expediting “new and profound forms of cognitive accommodation,” as well as “eventual comfort, a sense of personal reintegration, and for some, spiritual transformation” (Marrone 1999, 502).

Death and impending death have been known to bring people closer together by helping them prioritize their affective and relational attachments, not just with the near-deceased, but also with others within the deceased’s social circle. Perimortem and postmortem negotiations reinforce the strength of already strong ties within the closed relational network by “enabling them to continue their relationship until its inevitable death” (Granovetter 1973; Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles 1999). They also create opportunities for otherwise weak ties to become strong ones by socially sharing such life-to-death transitional journeys (Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles 1999).

The process of grieving for the survivors begins from the time the loved one has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, mostly in anticipation of what the grim future holds (Glick, Weiss & Parkes 1974; Keeley 2007). This form of bereavement, also known as “anticipatory grief” (Moller 1996), focuses more on preemptive loss, spiritual realizations and reconciliatory practices of close friends and relatives (Parkes & Weiss 1983; Keeley 2007). As lack of enough literature in the area reflects, the process of perimortem reconciliation for the stakeholders should be given a lot more weight than it is because it is “essential for preparing survivors emotionally for their impending loss of their loved ones” (Glick et al. 1974 as cited in Keeley 2007, 228). The offline context fails to provide an ideal set of behavioral norms for those about to lose their loved ones, let alone creating a prescribed communication pattern for them to follow in their “social role of the anticipatory griever” within the digital social paradigm (Moller 1996; Keller 2007, 228).

Scholars and practitioners of nursing have studied how the identity crisis that is usually present in individuals facing death have better negotiated their own roles as survivors and as prolonged grievers as a result of heightened perimortem interactions. Studies have also shown that relational survivors most often “found themselves examining, reevaluating, and at times redefining themselves,” because they were able to socially share their grief with others invested in the life and legacy of the near-deceased (Moller 1996; Keeley 2007).

Perimortem communication is a critical bonding ritual where near-deceased and their loved ones “turn toward death together” (Keeley 2007, 226). This seems an important observation in favor of encouraging the possibility of turning toward death together through social media channels. What is still not very clear is the nature of these conversational constructions, their content and the functions they serve (McQuellon & Cowan 2000; Keeley 2007). Answering some of these questions will create opportunities for us, who have lost loved ones in a digitally ubiquitous age, to find more accessible and acceptable channels for sharing memories, finding strength and social support through transitional stages of peri- to postmortem bereavement.

### **Social Network Sites**

Social network sites (SNSs) are a series of linked online pages that afford varying levels of interaction and socializing among connected members. Specifically, they are defined as, “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison 2008, 211). The first SNS appeared in 1997 (boyd & Ellison 2008) and they have since become a regular part

of many people's online experience and activity. boyd (2010) identified four unique features of social media: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. That is, social media are constructed of messages that are recorded and stored, they are easily duplicated, the potential audience for social media messages is great, and those messages are accessible for searches (boyd 2010). Research on social media, and SNSs in particular, is a robust area of communication research, investigating topics such as: self-presentation and identity negotiation (e.g. boyd 2007; Rettberg 2009; van Dijck 2013), social capital (e.g. Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007), privacy (e.g. Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn & Hughes 2009; Vitak 2012), politics (e.g. Wojcieszak & Smith 2014; Williams & Gulati 2013), and more.

On social network sites, users create a page that reflects aspects of their lives, including interests, accomplishments, major life events, mundane life activities, opinions, et cetera. SNSs are a form of self-presentation on a potentially global scale, depending on the privacy levels that individuals set for their page. Interestingly, due to the nature of these sites, users must manage and negotiate "context collapse." Context collapse is the phenomenon identified on SNSs wherein an individual's many social contexts (family, college friends, high school friends, acquaintances, co-workers, etc.) become "collapsed" into a single "flat" category of "friends" (Marwick & boyd 2011). Users make decisions about what to share, write, et cetera based on their understanding of their audience. For example, teenagers may face the dilemma of whether to appear "cool" to peers online, or to present a more conservative identity that would be acceptable to adults (boyd 2007). Sometimes one's audience consists of people known in real life and people unknown outside of the network. Marwick and boyd (2011) found that on Twitter, a SNS launched in 2006, users imagine their audiences, interact with them, follow their activity on the site, and construct an online identity in "collaboration" with this audience. This vague, imagined audience "becomes visible when it influences the information Twitter users choose to broadcast" (Marwick & boyd 2011, 130). In other words, we can see evidence of audience influence on a user's presentation based on the decisions he or she makes about what messages to share.

These SNS-based communicative behaviors and practices, in particular these findings about context collapse and identity negotiation, are important to consider when trying to understand how people manage grief and death on these sites. Every culture has rituals that shape expected grief and mourning behaviors, but as more and more people incorporate SNSs into their lives and relationships, inevitably the question of how to navigate death, grief, and mourning online becomes important to investigate.

### **Social Network Sites and Grief**

A number of studies have explored these questions. Themes that emerge out of that research include the role of SNSs in facilitating social support for those who are grieving, rituals that people enact on the sites, how loved ones manage the public impression of the deceased, and regulation and control of the sites. These works primarily focus on the postmortem period and how loved ones cope and adjust to their loss.

Social network sites, in the context of death, afford the opportunity to broaden the mourning process in terms of time, space and social involvement (Brubaker, Hayes & Dourish 2013). Rather than perceive the practice of mourning on SNSs as an interruption or disturbance of traditional grieving practices, Brubaker, Hayes & Dourish (2013) argue that it is an adaptation of public mourning practices incorporating these online communities that are already a part of many people's daily lives. Using Facebook, the deceased's loved ones are able to "interweave" death and mourning "into the everyday" rather than simply at the traditional funeral and memorial services (Brubaker, Hayes & Dourish 2013, 160). Moreover, considering the scalability feature of SNSs (boyd 2010), it is logical that Brubaker et al. (2013)

found that the process of mourning can happen from a distance and can include a wider social network when it occurs through a SNS.

However, there are not established rules or expectations about acceptable behavior on SNSs with regard to death. People form their own understandings based on a combination of culturally acceptable grieving behavior and SNS behavior in general (Brubaker, Hayes & Dourish 2013). Acceptable online grieving behavior is a contested area, as Phillips (2011) has found in analyzing the practice of RIP trolling. She found that trolls see themselves as critics working from within dominant media and hegemonic social structures to critique “grief tourists” who, the trolls believe, are simply attention-seeking faux-mourners rather than authentic mourners (Phillips 2011). Unfortunately, in this process RIP trolls wind up offending and hurting the friends and family of the deceased. They are not opposed to the practice of grieving, but to the trolls publicizing grief at all, let alone on a SNS, is a disingenuous way of expressing grief, and is “always the wrong place and always the wrong time, especially when you’re dealing with real-life tragedy” (Phillips 2011).

Text and language on SNSs are accessible and rich sources of data for understanding mourning behaviors in this unique environment. Interestingly, researchers have found an inclination for mourners to address the deceased directly on these sites. In analyzing comments on deceased MySpace users’ sites, Brubaker, Kivran-Swain, Taber & Hayes (2012) found that while most people used “funerary-style language” others demonstrated “emotional distress writ[ing] in ways indicative of self-focus and isolation, despite the public nature of the SNS” (49). That is, SNSs may facilitate connection with others who are mourning, but for some particularly troubled and/or isolated individuals grieving online may be an inadequate source of social support.

Kern, Forman & Gil-Egui (2013) also analyzed users’ language on social network sites. Their sample of Facebook memorial pages included those designed to remember deceased individuals that were predominantly young and had passed suddenly and sometimes violently, meaning that loved ones were unprepared for this loss. The authors found that these pages “provide a place to ‘visit’ with dead loved ones [...] [and] provide [a] platform where individual conversations with the dead are permanently recorded and publicly displayed” (Kern, Forman & Gil-Egui 2013, 8). The SNS feature of persistence (boyd 2010), then, also becomes a factor in understanding mourning behavior in this environment. While the deceased cannot communicate back with a mourner on a memorial page, the mourner seems to believe that it is “a place to commune with the dead in a space where the communication may actually be ‘received’” (Kern, Forman & Gil-Egui 2013, 9). The opportunity for ongoing communication between the grieving and the dead created through digital memorialization is what renders the deceased’s social presence timeless (Church 2013).

Given the public nature of SNSs and the fact that the deceased is no longer able to negotiate his/her self-presentation, the communities of mourners take on the task of impression management. Who within that community has the authority to do this relates to the “hierarchy of legitimacy,” meaning immediate family members have the most authority, then close friends, then acquaintances, et cetera (Marwick & Ellison 2012). Impression management becomes complicated when a stranger to the deceased creates a memorial page for him/her because the page creator has the power to delete posts, comments, users, et cetera leaving close friends and family powerless within the context of that particular memorial page (Marwick & Ellison 2012). In analyzing the memories that people shared, Marwick & Ellison found that while “positive memories went uncontested, we saw explicit negotiation whenever anything negative

was said about the deceased” (2012, 393). Impression management of the deceased, then, involves a collective negotiation on how to remember him or her.

Lingel (2013) highlights the uneasiness that exists between SNS users, SNS policies and institutions, mourners, and the deceased. That is, who owns an online identity – the SNS institution or the user? Moreover, who owns the online identity when the user has passed? The digital social network, as the debated platform of “ownership, meaning making, and social ties,” becomes the site where these disparate, yet interconnected relational processes converge (Lingel 2013, 194). The purposes and processes of grieving have become more adaptable and fluid through the incorporation of SNSs. Yet we are still trying to understand “how meaning is ascribed to virtual bereavement practices even as the processes themselves are being shaped” (Lingel 2013, 194).

The question of how we want to remember people, or be remembered ourselves, arises in Odom et al.’s (2012) study of how families manage digital artifacts and family archives. The authors designed a device that would archive a person’s tweets, status updates, and other social networking artifacts as part of the family history. This device was controversial with family members because of the SNS effect of context collapse. Family members did not want offensive, mundane, or otherwise undesirable artifacts collected in the family archive. The authors explain, “participants made key distinctions between the thoughtful recording of one’s life believed to be reflected in their ancestor’s diaries, and their own practices of posting less mindful social networking content targeted at multiple audiences, often outside the family” (Odom et al. 2012, 345). The notion of essentially creating one’s own legacy and having a say in one’s own impression after death is one that has yet to be explored in the research on SNSs and death. In fact, these questions about having control over one’s own digital identity suggests a “sobering digital mood” in relation to death (Munster 2011, 69). Munster (2011) explores the development of the Web 2.0 Suicide Machine as an example of taking control over one’s digital ethos by erasing it. The Web 2.0 Suicide Machine is a computer program that automatically disconnects users from social networks sites (Munster 2011). As explained on their homepage, the program will “delete all your energy sucking social-networking profiles, kill your fake virtual friends, and completely do away with your Web 2.0 alterego” (Web 2.0 Suicide Machine 2014). Digital algorithms such as the Web 2.0 Suicide Machine create opportunities for us to reconstitute how we think, maintain and/or obliterate our identities. Users of such automated social disconnection programs are erasing the scope for creating their digital legacies, yet ironically, establishing authority over how their identities are projected.

Death online is about managing social presence. Orchestrating online death as a way to control and mitigate digital legacy is also a means to manage social presence. Whether users consciously disengage their presence from social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, et cetera, or leave behind online keepsakes of their identity for posthumous social networking, they are, in both cases, exercising control over the presentation of their digital ethos.

### **Social Network Sites and Perimortem to Postmortem Transition**

Based on extensive literature in social media and postmortem grieving, as well as weighted perspectives on perimortem bereavement in the areas of clinical and social studies, psycho-spirituality and palliative care, we believe that the practice of sharing affective narratives by survivors during the peri- to postmortem transitional period in SNSs gives new meaning to the ideas of social presence for the deceased and recreates strong ties among communities of survivors. It allows them to digitally enact what they would have done through face-to-face health updates, offline obituaries and funerals, concrete tombstones and/or physical memorials. The difference lies in that the addictive,

ritualistic and immediate nature of digital socialization renders the creation of peri- and postmortem social presence as an ongoing process. As a result, anyone from within the deceased's SNS friend circle can at any time, and with much informality and accessibility, post living conversations such as "I just wanted to say I miss you," on the deceased's SNS profile. They can also post anticipatory grief messages like "my prayers are with you all the time," tagging other SNS friends in a communal effort to show support before the passing event (Keeley 2007; Sample self-created quotes 2014).

The narrative practice of transitioning from concern, to prayers of recovery, to support through regular health updates, to grieving on loss, and back again to support for coping together is being noticed a lot on social media profiles of those who recently lost their lives (Levitt 2012). These sites enable "the family to give updates about the condition to thousands of people at once" during the period of illness or accident-recovery, and at the same time, "[t]he victim can also receive supportive messages from friends and strangers" (Levitt 2012, 78). The stages of mourning over impending death on social media starts much in advance, as an "active process for dealing with the grief of the accident" or the terminal illness, where the related social agents communally support the healing process and publicly grieve the demise of their beloved with a narrative candor much unheard of in the past (Levitt 2012).

Even for those SNS deceased-user profiles', where the content is not moderated by others or where the site has not been converted to dedicated digital memorials like Sanctri, DeadSocial, If I Die, and LivesOn et cetera (Farkas 2013), friends and relations from the deceased's inner social circle are constantly posting affective narratives on their unmoderated wall in an attempt to keep their memory alive. Websites like Sanctri are creating avenues for "posthumous social networking," through continued social media presence by allowing users to: update status messages, tweets, pictures, et cetera on related SNS accounts to be released posthumously, or record videos perimortem for the sole purpose of sharing it after the event, or even post tweets in the voice of the deceased user. These commercially encouraged digital-legacy creations reiterate that "the intentionality and premeditation required for participation in social networks after death indicates an interest in ongoing impression management or identity work," ironically by and for the deceased him/herself (Farkas 2013). Not only that, but the deceased's user profiles that are continually tagged in pictures capturing the major milestones in the lives of their survivors, pictures that then show up in the deceased's SNS photo albums, stand almost in defiance of expectations of physical mortality.

The notion of social presence of the dead is not conceptually oxymoronic for the digitally socialized survivors, who are more than doing their parts as a community of active mourners to keep the dead very much alive and socially engaged. They are as invested in their communal bidding for the lives of the near-deceased through empathic, spiritual and religious messages posted on the terminally ill user's SNS profiles. What's more, in a recent attempt to update its policy on privacy settings for deceased users' memorialized profiles, Facebook decided to maintain its social functions the way it was when the user was active on it. For example, if a user set his/her profile's privacy settings to public, then the Facebook page would remain set to public after his or her passing, with the expectation of visibility being expanded beyond an invested circuit of Facebook friends. Facebook's Community Operations Team wrote in a blog post announcing the change, where users would now be able "to see memorialized profiles in a manner consistent with the deceased person's expectations of privacy," through the SNS's timely attempt to respect "the choices a person made in life while giving their extended community of family and friends ongoing visibility to the same content they could always see" (Price & DiSclafani 2014).

Moreover, in what could be a solution to the challenges that Odom et al. (2012) encountered with incorporation of social media data in families' archives, Facebook is also enabling the creation of "A Look Back" video for deceased users. "A Look Back" videos are one-minute montages, set to nostalgic music, of a user's most memorable moments on Facebook since he or she joined the site – e.g., photos and status updates with the most "likes" and comments. Facebook offered the opportunity for users to request personalized "A Look Back" videos as part of the company's ten-year anniversary celebration in early February 2014, and the videos quickly became a popular item to share on one's page. These videos are described as "an experience" (Facebook 2014) and as a way to "thank" users for sharing their lives on the site (Rodriguez 2014). Rather than compile all of one's digital activity, these videos highlight the most interactive, social moments in our social networking lives, inviting us to reflect on our individual recent past. The videos also present an opportunity for friends and family to remember these moments, which, in cases of loss, can be a powerful memory-sharing, narrative activity supporting the grieving process. The videos are, in a sense, "memorial keepsakes" that loved ones can request on behalf of the deceased within an environment that the deceased has created and, to some extent, lived out his or her life and relationships, thus offering grieving loved ones some sense of continuity and lasting social presence despite their loss. The renewed meanings of life and relationships that loved ones of the dying and deceased are finding, co-creating and reliving through such virtually-mediated group conversations, aural memorabilia and visual nostalgia creates complex interpersonal possibilities of "turning toward death together" (Keeley 2007; McQuellon & Cowan 2000) within transitional digi-memorials like Facebook.

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

The affective networks that are created around peri- and postmortem digital narratives of the recently departed represent a social process of continuity and change, first as a collective prayer to heal the terminally ill – a social and spiritual strength in numbers if you will, and then to find emotional, postmortem support in each other through shared discourses in bereavement. The anticipatory grieving (Keeley 2007) serves a bonding function similar, yet different from the mourning that occurs after the terminal event. The former's recourse to the intimate social networking community is to find support for the restoration of life and is directed as much to the one suffering, as it is to the rest of the close community. The latter also provides strength to the network of related survivors, but is more heavily attuned to the restoration of peace after death for the departed soul and encourages digital codependence in the process of grieving and coping.

We have argued that digital acts of sharing prayers and intimate memories during the transitional phase, as done within social networking sites, conflates and complicates our accepted notions of social presence and strengthens what may have once been weaker ties within the deceased's SNS friend circle by reinforcing, normalizing and ritualizing the digital enactment of what people do in offline grieving spaces. Perhaps, at times, to a disturbingly normal and mundane extent.

As has already been established, research in these areas has primarily focused on the postmortem, but impression management possibilities and self-legacy creation by the terminally ill has raised some interesting questions. Marwick & Ellison (2012) talk about the survivors' negotiations of managing the deceased's legacy and impression in his/her absence, but future research needs to turn attention to those scenarios where a SNS user knows death is impending and takes steps to set up his/her own legacy impression online. The little empirical research that has been conducted in comparable areas has mostly focused on perinatal death mourning and the Internet's role in the "processing of bereavement after a perinatal death," or as "an example of a situation in which there is a discrepancy between the



social self – defined by how others see you – and the individual’s perception of the self” (Pecchinenda 2009 as cited in Micalizzi 2013). More empirical research should be organized that could perhaps offer a content-analysis of audiovisual identity markers that may have been created and posted by the near-deceased, such as poems, art work, spiritual posts, letters to loved ones, podcasts, Youtube videos, et cetera created perimortem by the one afflicted, and left as self-legacy on SNS for others to see postmortem. Selective surveys and focus-group interviews should also be administered for gathering quantifiable and in-depth information about the potential psycho-physiological impact of transitional online grieving and bereavement on invested social media users.

Of course there will be concerns about the veracity of finding support in an online forum, where people are constantly posting messages that are, for the most part, inconsequential, mundane and frivolous. Should there be normative limitations on the kinds of textual and multimedia behavior that people usually exhibit on such social networking platforms, keeping in mind that a bulk of their user base are increasingly turning to its communal, transitional and healing properties to grieve death, find support and fathom that which lies beyond? There is no surprise that the digital boundaries between these contradictory practices are becoming increasingly blurry, not to mention how our beliefs regarding public and private grieving and support are being continually reframed in the context of a Facebook-saturated society. Future studies should thus anticipate and address issues of how one can be sensitive while conducting empirical and ethnographic research related to digital social behavior, intimate memory sharing and online death studies by SNS users/consumers.

Recent research frenzy that has brought to life the continuity, mobility and affective rituality of networked grieving practices taking place on communally-viable digital mourning spaces, serves to offer effective answers to the question “[w]hat happens when memorials are no longer only memory but are present and interactive, essentially able not only to evoke old memories but make new ones?” (Jones 2013). However, the next step may be to address issues of transience, not just in the context of death studies and social media, but also for questioning the longevity of these digi-memorial sites. In narrating the textual-cultural history of electronic communication in North America from the early 19th to late 20th centuries, Sconce (2000) talked about the communicative powers vested in the spiritual telegraph, “an early example of the cultural construction of ‘presence’ in electronic media” (13). These turn of the century tales about “lovers separated by death but reunited through wireless” and several such metaphors of estrangement, death and reunion, as well as disembodiment and telepathic encounters represented by the “electronic presence of wireless hovering in the ether” (Sconce 2000, 14–15) is reminiscent of behaviors surrounding death and social media today. The fact that these technologically preserved memorials and narrative keepsakes facilitated through Facebook walls, Twitter feeds and Sancrti-like digi-memorials are exactly just that, channels of real (time) and ethereal communication among digitally-networked friends, family and members of the fifth element, all with a view to ‘catch up’ on life, and take ‘a look back’ as it passes us by, is what makes the entire process technologically-transitory and anachronistic. However, what doesn’t change is the present affective power of social media that have allowed its networked communities to spatially and temporally transcend the boundaries of online grieving to a somewhat fluid area where users (those invested) can find strength, empathy and solace as a group, both before and after death, making it a compelling transitional space where the norms of communal participation surrounding death have become equally fluid, codependent and mobile.

**Biographical notes:**

Ishani Mukherjee is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research focus is in social media and intercultural communication. Contact: imukhe2@uic.edu

Maggie Griffith Williams is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research focuses on social uses of new media. Contact: mgriff22@uic.edu

**References:**

- boyd, danah. 2007. Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life. In David Buckingham (ed.), *MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning – Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- boyd, danah & Ellison, Nicole. 2008. Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 13, 210–230.
- boyd, danah. 2010. Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications. In Zizi Papacharissi (ed.), *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, 39–58. New York: Routledge.
- Brubaker, Jed, Hayes, Gillian & Dourish, Paul. 2013. Beyond the Grave: Facebook as a Site for the Expansion of Death and Mourning. *The Information Society: An International Journal*, 29 (3), 152–163.
- Carstensen, Laura, Isaacowitz, Derek & Charles, Susan. 1999. Taking Time Seriously: A Theory of Socioemotional Selectivity. *American Psychologist*, 54, 165–181.
- Church, Scott. 2013. Digital Gravescapes: Digital Memorializing on Facebook. *The Information Society*, 29, 184–189.
- Cunningham, Nance. 2009. Taking Care of Grieving Through Poetry: Memories of Palliative Care's Presence or Absence. *Families, Systems, & Health. American Psychological Association*, 27 (1), 98–104.
- Debatin, Bernhard, Lovejoy, Jennette, Horn, Ann-Kathrin & Hughes, Brittany. 2009. Facebook and Online Privacy: Attitudes, Behaviors, and Unintended Consequences. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 15, 83–108.
- Deeny, Pat, Johnson, Alphy, Boore, Jennifer, Leyden, Catherine & McCaughan, Ellis. (2001). Drama as an Experiential Technique in Learning How to Cope with Dying Patients and Their Families. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6 (1), 99–112.
- Ellison, Nicole, Steinfield, Charles & Lampe, Cliff. 2007. The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12, 1143–1168.
- Facebook. 2014. What Is A Look Back? (A Look Back). Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/help/206982576163229> [accessed February 22, 2014].
- Farkas, Ashley. 2013. Who Has the Last Word? Posthumous Social Networking and its Implications for Online Grieving. Paper presented at the *Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Annual Internet Research (IR) 14.0* conference, Denver (CO), October 23–26, 2013. Available at: <http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/issue/current> [accessed February 20, 2014].

- Glick, Ira, Weiss, Robert & Parkes, Colin. 1974. *The First Year of Bereavement*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Granovetter, Mark. 1973. The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78 (6), 1360–1380. Available at: <http://www.immorlica.com/socNet/granstrengthweakties.pdf> [accessed May 31, 2014].
- Jones, Steve. 2013. The Shadow of the Uncanny Valley of Death: Memory, Memorialization and the Technologizing of Communication. Paper presented at the *Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Annual Internet Research (IR) 14.0* conference, Denver (CO), October 23–26, 2013. Available at: <http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/issue/current> [accessed February 20, 2014].
- Keeley, Maureen. 2007. ‘Turning Toward Death Together’: The Functions of Messages During Final Conversations in Close Relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 24 (2), 225–253.
- Klass, Dennis, Silverman, Phyllis & Nickman, Steven. 1996. *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. Philadelphia, PA: Taylor & Francis.
- Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. 1969. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Touchstone.
- Levitt, Laura. 2012. Posting Grief on the Wall: Using Facebook to Grieve and Offer Support after a Tragedy. *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 3 (1), 78–86. Available at: <https://www.elon.edu/docs/e-web/academics/communications/research/vol3no1/09LevittEJSpring12.pdf> [accessed February 3, 2014].
- Lingel, Jessa. 2013. The Digital Remains: Social Media and Practices of Online Grief. *The Information Society*, 29, 190–195.
- Marrone, Robert. 1999. Dying, Mourning and Spirituality: A Psychological Perspective. *Death Studies*, 23, 495–519.
- Marwick, Alice & boyd, danah. 2011. I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience. *New Media & Society*, 13, 114–133.
- Marwick, Alice & Ellison, Nicole. 2012. “There isn’t Wifi in Heaven!” Negotiating Visibility on Facebook Memorial Pages. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56, 378–400.
- McQuellon, Richard & Cowan, Michael. 2000. Turning Toward Death Together: Conversation in Mortal Time. *American Journal of Hospice & Palliative Care*, 17, 312–318.
- Merten, Michael & Williams, Amanda. 2009. Adolescents’ Online Social Networking Following the Death of a Peer. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24 (1), 67–90.
- Micalizzi, Alessandra. 2013. Cyber-Narratives about Perinatal Death: The Italian Case Study of “Special Mummies” On-line Communities. Paper presented at the *Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Annual Internet Research (IR) 14.0* conference, Denver (CO), October 23–26, 2013. Available at: <http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/issue/current> [accessed February 20, 2014].
- Moller, David. 1996. *Confronting Death: Values, Institutions, and Human Morality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Munster, Anna. 2011. From a Biopolitical ‘Will to Life’ to a Noopolitical Ethos of Death in the Aesthetics of Digital Code. *Theory Culture Society*, 28, 67–90.
- Nakashima, Mitsuko & Canda, Edward. 2005. Positive Dying and Resiliency in Later Life: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 19, 109–125.

- Odom, William, Banks, Richard, Harper, Richard, Kirk, David, Lindley, Sian & Sellen, Abigail. 2012. Technology Heirlooms? Considerations for Passing Down and Inheriting Digital Materials. Paper presented at the *CHI 2012* conference, Austin (TX), May 5–10, 2012.
- Parkes, Colin & Weiss, Robert. 1983. *Recovery from Bereavement*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pecchinenda, Gianfranco. 2009. *Homunculus: Sociologia dell'identità e autonarrazione*. Liguori: Naples.
- Phillips, Whitney. 2011. LOLing at Tragedy: Facebook Trolls, Memorial Pages and Resistance to Grief Online. [Online journal] *First Monday*, 16 (12). Available at: <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/rt/printerFriendly/3168/3115> [accessed May 31, 2014].
- Price, Chris & DiSclafani, Alex. 2014. Remembering Our Loved Ones. *Facebook Newsroom*, February 21, 2014. Available at: <http://newsroom.fb.com/news/2014/02/remembering-our-loved-ones> [accessed February 21, 2014].
- Rettberg, Jill. 2009. 'Freshly Generated for You, and Barack Obama': How Social Media Represent Your Life. *European Journal of Communication*, 24, 451–466.
- Rodriguez, Salvador. 2014. Facebook: Hundreds of Millions Have Made Look Back Videos. [Online edition] *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 2014. Available at: <http://www.latimes.com/business/technology/la-fi-tn-facebook-look-back-hundreds-of-millions-20140205,0,5058337.story#ixzz2uHIIaewd> [accessed February 22, 2014].
- Sconce, Jeffrey. 2000. *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Shneidman, Edwin. 1980. *Voices of Death*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Stroebe, Margaret & Schut, Henk. 1999. The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: Rationale and Description. *Death Studies*, 23 (3), 197–224.
- Thorne, Avril, McLean, Kate & Lawrence, Amy. 2004. When Remembering is not Enough: Reflecting on Self-defining Memories in Late Adolescence. *Journal of Personality*, 72 (3), 513–542.
- van Dijck, Jose. 2013. 'You Have One Identity': Performing the Self on Facebook and LinkedIn. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35, 199–215.
- Vitak, Jessica. 2012. The Impact of Context Collapse and Privacy on Social Network Site Disclosures. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56, 451–470.
- Web 2.0 Suicide Machine. 2014. Available at: <http://suicidemachine.org> [retrieved May 28, 2014].
- Williams, Constance, Munson, David, Zupancic, John & Kirpalani, Haresh. 2008. Supporting Bereaved Parents: Practical Steps in Providing Compassionate Perinatal and Neonatal End-of-life Care: A North American Perspective. *Seminars in Fetal and Neonatal Medicine*, 13 (5), 335–340.
- Williams, Christine & Gulati, Girish. 2013. Social Networks in Political Campaigns: Facebook and the Congressional Elections of 2006 and 2008. *New Media & Society*, 15, 52–71.
- Wojcieszak, Magdalena & Smith, Briar. 2014. Will Politics be Tweeted? New Media Use by Iranian Youth in 2011. *New Media & Society*, 16, 91–109.