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# Networked Emotions: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Sharing Loss Online

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NETWORKED EMOTIONS: INTRODUCTION

# Networked Emotions: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Sharing Loss Online

**Korina Giaxoglou, Katrin Döveling, and Stacey Pitsillides**

## From Emotions to Networked Emotions

Emotion has long been a contested concept and subject to different, often conflicting, definitions and approaches. Emotions have long been viewed in a reductionist way as solely biological components, as private components of the personality structure of an individual, or as entirely socially and culturally constructed. These views, that separate analytically different facets of emotion, reflect persisting dichotomies of human phenomena as nature vs. nurture, universality vs. culture-specificity, and private vs. public, which have served as the key organizing principles in Western science and humanities. Emotions, however, occupy a liminal space between divisions (Leavitt, 1996); they involve phenomena that are interactive and integrated with cognition (Izard, 2009), playing a key role in human development, in everyday social interaction, and in the organization of social and cultural life. Emotions are, then, to be understood as a not exclusively private object of inquiry (Zembylas, 2007). The study on emotion has received an enormous increase since the 1980s with a marked rise in psychological studies, and gradually engendering more insight from sociology, political science, anthropology, communication, and cultural studies, among others (Döveling, Scheve, & Konijn, 2011). Scholars seem to have reached consensus on the usefulness of the term "emotion" to refer to certain socially embedded psychobiological processes, even if they do not necessarily agree on how such processes cohere, or to what extent components such as arousal, feeling, appraisal, or facial expression can be given causal or definitional prominence (Beatty, 2013, p. 416). It is, however, agreed that emotions constitute

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a lens not only into the development of human evolution and cognition, but also into the complexities of meaning-making, the organization of roles and relationships in social life, and the way these may change over time. Emotions can then be conceptualized as a broad range of affective phenomena, including moods, feelings, affects, and related concepts (Döveling et al., 2011), which are not contained in a single domain, but rather belong to several domains, including the affective, the social, and the evolutionary/motivational (Wilce, 2009). Emotions are particularly pertinent to the investigation of communication practices in online contexts.

In contemporary socially mediated and mediatized contexts, public life is not just complicated, but it is, in many respects, reconfigured (Baym & boyd, 2012, p. 320). Marwick and Ellison (2012), for instance, point to new possibilities afforded by social media for temporally extending public identities even beyond one's lifetime. This is exemplified in the case of Facebook memorial pages: in networked mourning users share emotions relating to loss publically (or semi-publically), increasing the visibility of what has been formerly viewed as a "private" or "intimate" emotional experience. In order to deal with the complexities resulting from such increased visibility of otherwise "hidden" moments, users turn to the careful management of their socially mediated public life and to increased levels of monitoring and controlling their acts of sharing emotions in networked contexts. The socially mediated communication of emotion is intricately linked to the social textures of networking technologies, which include the affordances of *persistence, replicability, scalability*, and *searchability* (boyd, 2011) in an emerging culture of *sharing* (John, 2017). This means that existing views and definitions of emotion are not adequate and need to be complemented by understandings of networked contexts. In other words theories of emotion become theories of *networked emotion*, that involves the mobilization of affect in online emotional cultures as a transmittable, spreadable, and self-contained resource, bringing out formerly privately shared emotions into online spaces and collective experience (Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013).

The acknowledgment of the increasingly central place of emotion in digital cultures of participation and sharing (Benski & Fischer, 2014) calls for systematic research on networked emotions. This line of research is intimately linked to the study of socially mediated public life and can provide insights into how social media complicate the nature and workings of emotion in spaces where private and public distinctions are being contested and (re)negotiated (Giaxoglou, 2017). Networked mourning practices, in particular, which are currently widespread across social media platforms, arguably constitute rich sites for investigating the different facets of mediated public and semi-public acts of networked emotions with and for multiple publics and their implications for the experience of loss in personal, social, and cultural contexts.

The growing body of research into practices of loss online (Willerslev & Christensen, 2013; Christensen & Gotved, 2015) has brought to the fore some of the key socio-cultural implications of the remediation of loss, including for instance the revival of public mourning (Walter, 2008), the creation of new communal spaces for the performance and sharing of emotion (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011)

and the increased affordances for mourners' identity and affective performances (Giaxoglou, 2015). However, the wider contribution of studies in this area to theorizations of networked emotions in digital cultures of participation and sharing has not been sufficiently emphasized in individual articles or published collections so far. The special issue seeks to fill this gap, calling for the extension of the study of emotion from the domains of everyday life (Gross, 2008), culture (Ahmed, 2004), and mass media (Döveling et al., 2011) to virtual online environments (Döveling, 2015) which are implicated in wider transformations of social and cultural practices. The articles selected for inclusion in this special issue collectively provide an interdisciplinary and intercultural lens to emotional communication in mediatized contexts of grieving, mourning, and memorialization and contribute to the understanding of the reflexive and social dynamics of sharing emotions online.



## Sharing Loss Online: Navigating a Spectrum of Visibility

The multi-layered contexts of social media entail intense impression management work on the part of users, that involves a set of interactional and attunement strategies mobilized to frame the situation and one's relationship with others (Goffman, 1959). Some people seek to minimize visibility by minimizing or controlling their sharing of emotions, while others look to increase visibility, by maximizing and sensationalizing their sharing, thus complicating their alignment to or disalignment from networked publics. For instance, a user's increased emotional sharing can prompt different reactions to networked audiences: some users may be prepared to acknowledge such emotional displays and engage in the exchange of emotional and support resources (Baym, 2010), while others could see such sharing as an instance of over-sharing and disalign themselves from such acts. It is in and through such acts of alignment and disalignment online that norms for displaying loss-related emotions emerge.

In networked mourning, this "spectrum of visibility" and its varied reception is further complicated by the involvement of different parties—often hierarchically organized as shown by Marwick and Ellison (2012)—in establishing, negotiating, or contesting the degree of publicness of mediated acts of sharing. For instance, in the case of the death of a loved one, the peers of the deceased may opt to increase the visibility of shared emotions by regularly posting memories, thoughts, pictures, and songs on the memorialized profile of the deceased. They may seek to further engage in co-constructing their friend's after-death identity in a memorial page, specially created as a public space for remembrance (Kasket, 2012). Bereaved parents, on the other hand, may prefer less public modes for their grieving and seek out "safer" modes and sites for sharing their emotions, as for instance the ones provided by specialized closed forums where interaction with other bereaved parents takes place in an affiliative and supportive environment. Finally, in the case of celebrities or public figures whose death attracts extensive media attention, visibility tends to extend and amplify on social media, often raising reactions or suspicions of inauthentic emotional displays and over-pouring of parasocial grief (de Groot & Leith, 2015). The above description

is, of course, schematic; it is possible for the death of a previously unknown individual to be highly mediatized under specific circumstances, and for the death of a well-known public figure to receive very limited attention. In some cases, parents can seek to increase the visibility of mourning for their child (in many cases linking such activity with specific types of social or charity action), while friends of a deceased or celebrity fans can form closed groups to continue performing their social identities of friendship or fandom. Lastly, individual users might opt for increased visibility or obscurity at specific stages or moments in their affective trajectory. To the above individual and social considerations, one should also add the technological affordances of the platform and users' own understanding of the ways in which publicness is mediated on specific sites: for instance, on Facebook, it can be more or less difficult to know who is seeing what and when, pointing to what Baym and boyd (2012) refer to as a "conundrum of visibility" which further complicates the nature of networked sharing.

In sum, there are diverse possibilities for visibility or obscurity online, which suggest the existence of a *spectrum of visibility* that users are expected to negotiate —and in some cases to struggle with. This depends on the circumstances of death, the type of loss involved, and the sociocultural practices users draw on in the process of remediating their grief. The significance of such factors as well as possibly additional factors are to be empirically identified drawing on a range of methods and frameworks, as articles in this special issue set out to do. This line of research focuses on networked emotions as acts of sharing and sheds important insights into how loss-related emotions are placed on a spectrum of visibility and publicness online, reflecting, magnifying, or minimizing the place of death, mourning, and grief in social life, both online and offline.



## Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Sharing Loss Online

The articles included in the collection deal with practices of sharing or managing loss from a range of disciplinary angles, including media psychology, media and cultural studies, and communication studies and report on case studies from Germany, Sweden, Denmark, United States, UK, and Australia. Collectively, they provide a much needed interdisciplinary and cross-cultural lens to the study of grief as a social emotion that enhances understandings of contemporary personal, public, and cultural repertoires of networked emotions more broadly.

Research presented in the collection contributes to three interrelated areas: (i) the exploration of links between forms of emotional communication and specific factors, such as time, tie strength, and type of loss (see Pennington; Döveling, this issue), (ii) the identification of key norms of sharing grief online and different perceptions of the appropriateness of that type of sharing in specific cultural contexts (see Sabra; Christensen et al., this issue) and (iii) the investigation of wider social and cultural implications and complications of the increased visibility afforded by digital mourning

and memorializing practices (see Nansen; Hutchings, this issue). Taken collectively, the articles contribute to the theorization of networked relationality and the networked self (Papacharissi, 2011) in the context of ongoing changes in the way private and public experiences are shaped, lived, and reacted to. This and contributes to the burgeoning work in the interdisciplinary field of death online. More specifically, studies in this special issue complicate consistent findings of earlier empirical studies of the remediation of loss online which have tended to foreground how social media, and in particular Facebook, constitute techno-spiritual spaces (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013), beneficial for mourners as spaces where they can continue their bonds with their loved ones and in addition, be supported in their grieving.

**Natalie Pennington** uses survey analysis techniques to assess the perceived supportive value of Facebook during times of grief in U.S. contexts. Her analysis of the factors of time passed since death, degree of user engagement on Facebook, and user's relational closeness to the deceased showcases the complicated relationship networked mourners report having with Facebook: in the case of mourning the death of a friend, users perceive the use of Facebook as both helpful *and* harmful. Pennington explains that frequency of use of the social network and identification with the site constitutes one of the most important factors in perceptions of grieving on Facebook as useful in the mourning process, whereas relational closeness to the deceased arguably gives rise to complex and conflicted attitudes to such practices.

**Jakob Sabra**'s research findings, which are based on a study among Facebook users in Denmark, point to similar conflictual perceptions of practices of grieving online. Based on attitudinal survey techniques used to ascertain social media users' perceptions of grieving on Facebook including participants with and without previous experience of engaging in digital mourning practices, Sabra finds both positive and negative attitudes to sharing loss-related emotions online. His analysis of participants' answers to the open-ended part of the distributed questionnaire, provides an insight into why such divergence in attitudes is attested. Sabra argues that participants' attitudes are grounded in evaluations of over-management ("feeling too much") or under-management of grief ("feeling too little") that are linked to "traditional" social understandings of grief as a private activity practiced offline. Understandings of the intensity and duration of grief are additionally found to depend on the mourner's relationship to the deceased. Sabra also argues that conflicting views reflect the emergence and establishment of divergent norms or netiquettes for different types of loss-related activity: networked emotions are considered to be legitimate acts of sharing and spreading in memorializing-related activities, while mourning-related emotions are seen to be less amenable to public expression.

**Katrin Döveling**'s content analysis of posts in five popular platforms in Germany further contributes to explaining the conflicting perceptions attested online, bringing insights from another cultural context and discipline. Her study examines emotion regulation patterns and different types of networked emotion shared in digital mourning contexts and points to the prominence of empathy sharing among users, irrespective of the age of the bereaved. Her findings corroborate to some extent empirical findings on the benefits of participation in digital grieving spaces for

mourners. Futhermore, the closer examination of users' orientation to types of emotional regulation through which mourners exhibit the way they cope with their grief brings to the fore differences in the emotional displays of groups of bereaved of old age and groups of bereaved of a very young age: adults are found to demonstrate an orientation to positive emotion regulation patterns online and horizontal, non-judgmental social comparison, while bereaved of a very young age show a predominant orientation to sharing despair, seeking out forms of social support not readily available in offline contexts. In sum, networked emotions are expressed in different ways depending on the type of sharing activity, the age of the bereaved, and the purpose of the sharing and can attract very different types of assessment and attentional focus from users.

Considered from the perspective of the visibility-obscurity conundrum mentioned in the previous section, the findings of the above studies on users' perceptions and assessments of others' online behaviors can be taken as implicit statements about their own preferred impression and visibility management norms of networked emotion in online contexts. Further research into their actual strategies would be needed to ascertain the degree of match between those implicit, reportable statements and practice.

Issues of the visibility spectrum are aptly illustrated in **Christensen, Segerstad, Kasperowski, and Sandvik**'s study, which examines mourning in the particular case of the loss of a child, drawing on case studies from Sweden and Denmark. The authors discuss uses of digital media for accommodating particular and complicated types of loss, such as the loss of a stillborn or an infant and show how social media affirm the importance of the paradigm of continuing bonds and the continued performance of parenthood after the loss of a child. In this case, practices and norms for grieving are found to develop across time and to depend on the particular conditions for participation in the online forums as well as on dominant ideas of grief in society. This study further foregrounds the complexity and dynamic nature of networked emotion displays and sharing in loss-related contexts and clearly shows how such practices are implicated in tabooizing, detabooizing, and retabooizing grief online as well as offline. Christensen, Segerstad, Kasperowski, and Sandvik's study highlights the need for social media research to consider the close interrelationships between the online and the offline and move away from an analytical divide of the two domains as separate spheres of activity. Such a move is important for shedding light into the wider social and cultural repertoires of emotion and mourning, in addition to individual ones. The last two articles contribute important insights into such wider contexts and interconnections between institutions and emotional genres and registers.

**Bjorn Nansen'**s study focuses on market institutions, sketching out the response of the funeral industry to the changing technological landscape in Australia, the United States, and the UK during the period 2014–2016. Based on a combination of ethnographic and content analysis methods, he discusses recent innovations in this domain including an "end of life planning tool" (DeadSocial), which provides DIY resources for navigating death, bereavement and commemoration online, a remote-

controlled Skype-enabled robot that enables funeral attendance and participation at a distance ("CARL," Orbis Robotics), and commercial memorial Web sites that incorporate social media aesthetics and features such as "social buttons" to share grief (HeavenAddress; funeralOne). The discussion shows how the funeral industry draws on the digital affordances of social media and the increasing vernacularization, individualization, and digitization of commemorative practices and how it is oriented to "translating" the ethic of participatory digital culture to the emotional labor of planning of death. In other words, the study shows that the increased digitization of grief has affected the funeral industry across Australia, United States, and the UK. Such advances call for the further study of the deceased's involvement in anticipating and planning for their own death, as well as for studies of emotion and participation frameworks in the case of mourning at a distance.

**Tim Hutching's** article draws our attention to the ways in which religious institutions, in this case the Swedish national church (*Svenska kyrkan*), makes use of digital media for sharing particular forms of loss-related emotions and discourses about emotion that serve its own purposes and mission. For instance, through a hybrid digital-physical installation in Swedish cemeteries and a series of Facebook posts on death and sadness, the Church constructs emotion as a universal shared experience unifying humans in an attempt to consolidate its emotional brand and also to address and attract religious and non-religious audiences. The study points to a much needed examination of emotional dimensions of death and digital media in the context of institutional frames, where the injunction to emotional openness and sharing becomes a vehicle for consolidating particular kinds of emotional regimes and ideologies. Hutching's study is grounded in an understanding of emotion as rhetorically and socially constructed and points to the political and social implications of such constructions in the case of institutions' emotional branding. This line of research is worth to be expanded to other institutional domains and bring forward the increasing mobilization of emotion as a commodity in everyday capitalist formations.



## Concluding Remarks

Articles in this special issue provide an interdisciplinary and international lens into the changing nature of emotion on social media with a particular focus on digital contexts relating to loss and death. It concentrated on gathering work from a diverse range of cultural settings, including the United States, UK, Australia, Denmark, Germany, and Sweden. In sum, articles in this special issue clarify how socially mediated publicness has impacted networked emotion displays and communication in contexts of remediated loss and how forms of sharing emotion afforded by technology are mobilized in identity construction as well as in the circulation of emotion as ideology. Taken together the articles point to three main shifts in research foci in the study of death online: (i) a shift from a concern with the "new" affordances of digital platforms for the expression and collectivization of grief to a concern with users' attitudes to uses of digital platforms as sites for mourning. This points to users'

growing awareness of the constraints and challenges that such uses entail, (ii) a shift from an interest in what users "do" in different online platforms for mourning and memorialization to what people "say they do" across platforms and across cultural contexts, (iii) a shift to interconnections between the online and the offline with a concern about individual, social, and institutional registers and regimes of emotion. Based on the findings of the studies included in this issue, it can be argued that while technological affordances of digital platforms bring out a widely attested "injunction to share" (John, 2013), the display of emotion as part of networked public experience is closely related to existing sociocultural norms about loss-related emotional expression and appropriateness at least at the level of evaluating such displays. Even though it is sometimes argued that social media have changed the way we mourn, there is evidence to suggest that in some corners, there is also a considerable amount of resistance and discomfort to particular aspects of loss remediation online and the increased publicness of grief (but cf. Döveling, this special issue). There still is scope for further research into sociocultural sensitivities to emotional displays in relation to ideas about the boundaries of the body and the boundary between life and death across different religions and different contexts even within cultures, seeking to avoid cultural essentialization and Western biases (Kellehear, 2007).

In addition, further study of networked emotions could develop a better understanding of cross-platform technological affordances and constraints that would take into account the polymedia environments users navigate in their everyday lives depending on their emotional and social needs (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Polymediality allows the expression of multiple, concurrent, and in some cases clashing acts of identity and emotional performance, depending on the types of interaction promoted on particular platforms; for instance, a user might post a R.I.P. message on the Facebook memorial of a friend displaying grief and a couple of hours later, post an update on their Instagram page sharing a picture of them enjoying themselves with friends. There is scope for examining such cases and explore what they tell us about the complexities and tensions in acts of performing networked emotions. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the politics of platforms and the way "data-bodies" including those of the memorialized dead continue to be sources of value in the context of data-mining interactions in current commercial models of social networks, such as Facebook (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013).

Finally, this special issue addresses key issues for individuals arising from the pervasiveness of uses of digital platforms for mourning and memorialization and considers the impact of such practices on innovations in the funeral industry and new Church initiatives. Future work will hopefully deal with innovations in the area of social robotics (Lifenaut, 2016), which promise a form of after-death existence and interaction with others based on uploading one's individual beliefs, feelings, and memories on a computer. Such technological advances open up important questions about the nature of networked humanness that extend currently developing theorizations of socially mediated publicness and emotionality.

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# Tie Strength and Time: Mourning on Social Networking Sites

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NETWORKED EMOTIONS

# Tie Strength and Time: Mourning on Social Networking Sites

**Natalie Pennington**

*Through the use of survey analysis (N =157), this research seeks to assess the perceived supportive value of Facebook during times of grief. By analyzing the relationship(s) between Facebook use, time that had passed since death, and relational closeness to the deceased, the results of this study showcase the complicated relationship users have with Facebook, wherein it is perceived as both helpful and harmful when mourning the death of a friend.*

Brown (2016) writes that by 2098 the number of deceased profiles on Facebook will outnumber those of the living. This may not be all that farfetched, as current data suggest that there are well over 30 million profiles for deceased users still on the site, with some estimates that there are 8,000 more users dying daily (Ambrosino, 2016). Given these growing statistics, it is not surprising that Facebook has taken active steps in the past few years to accommodate those who are grieving online. In Facebook's earliest days, there was little one could do to address the death of a loved one through the social networking site (SNS) if they did not have the password to login to the account. Later, the site would add verification through an obituary provided that would allow a loved one to "memorialize" the profile, closing it off to the public and removing personal connections (e.g., relationship status) so that it mimicked a page that one might "like" rather than an active profile of a living person, creating a private space for friends and family. If preferred, the profile could also be removed from Facebook in its entirety.

Recently, Facebook introduced what is called a "legacy contact", which enables a user pre-death to assign one person to be able to "run the profile" post-death (Facebook Newsroom, 2015). In their capacity as curator of the memorialized profile page a legacy contact can, among other things, write posts to display at the top of the profile, respond to new friend requests, and update the profile picture or cover photo. As a way to distinguish the word "Remembering" is added before the name of the deceased to highlight the commemorative function of the profile. This shift away from

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the old "memorial" profile enacts a distinction between the profile of the deceased and a memorial page created to honor or remember loved ones: even though closed to the public, a memorialized profile still allows for new connections in terms of friends or family who may join the site post-death (something the old version did not allow). A user can also still specify preference for the profile to be taken down if they do not wish to maintain a digital presence post-death (*Facebook Newsroom*, 2015). These conflicting approaches (to keep or delete the page) show a growing recognition from Facebook that different users see the affordances of the site as helpful or harmful when they are experiencing death and negotiating grief. This disconnect is also represented in past research, which on the one hand has found that users can feel supported by having access to the profile page of the deceased as a location to grieve their loss (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Pennington, 2013, 2014), yet on the other hand, loved ones have also argued that access to the profile page and its presence is more painful than helpful during the grieving process (Morehouse & Crandall, 2014; Pennington, 2013, 2014; Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015).

One possible explanation for this disconnect is the strength of tie, or relational closeness, of a user to the deceased. On Facebook, "friends" are not limited to the literal definition of the word, but instead can encompass a large variety of relationships. Parks (2010) found in an analysis of the composition of friend networks on Facebook that the majority of the connections (or "friends") are actually weak tie relationships (e.g., acquaintances). For these weak ties, the ability to engage in the mourning process may be limited, with sites like Facebook creating an opportunity for them to seek support that they might not otherwise get (Brubaker et al., 2013; Carroll & Landry, 2010).

Another potential indicator of perceived support is time, both in terms of that which has passed since the "friend" died, and time spent on Facebook. In terms of the first, a primary variable associated with grief is time—for some individuals who were extremely close to the deceased, research has shown that the freshness of that loss can influence their perception of the value of Facebook (Pennington, 2014). In line with the second part of the argument, those who spend more time on Facebook may see value in using the site to seek support in times of grief as it could be viewed as a norm for them. McLaughlin and Vitak's (2011) study of how norms evolve on Facebook suggest that these expectations of behavior are learned through time spent on the site and seeing how other friends behave or react to content online. In this case then, individuals who are on Facebook more see expressing grief online as a typical, if not an acceptable, behavior.

This research examines how several potentially mitigating factors (relational closeness, time since death, and Facebook use) can influence perceptions of support by those who are grieving the death of a Facebook friend. A quantitative survey analysis of perceived support, along with how regularly the participant uses Facebook, time since death, and relational closeness to the deceased are considered in order to provide insights into the role of SNSs in mourning. In the next sections, a brief assessment of literature on relational maintenance on social media and grief communication is provided, followed by a discussion of existing research on grieving online.

## Relational Maintenance Online

An affordance of SNSs, like Facebook, is the ability to connect to sometimes thousands of "friends" with the click of a button—letting them know "hey I got the promotion!" or, in the case of this research, that someone they may care about has passed away. While offline friendship may be centered around our immediate surroundings (*weak ties*) and past history (*strong ties*), online users are free to more easily "maintain" a range of relationships with little to no effort, so that when instances arise that require some degree of engagement or support, that relationship is there for them to determine if they want to connect and reach out.

Parks' (2010) analysis of the make-up of the average user's social network found that not only were users maintaining a high number of weak tie relations comparative to strong ties, but also that overall the number of relationships a person had online were relatively higher than what is often predicted for social network size offline. Parks provided thirteen possible relationships that a person might have online—some of which are arguably an affordance of SNSs: lapsed friendships (e.g., an old high school friend, a past classmate), friends of others, fans (e.g., musicians, celebrities, pages you follow that may not be mutual), online only friends, and familiar strangers (which are defined as someone whom a user obviously accepted as a friend as they appear on the list, but they do not currently remember who they are). Little research has followed Parks (2010) initial assessment to understand why users keep these relationships online; but they do become potential resources for support or capital (Baym, 2015), and in the case of this research, they introduce the potential for a user to be confronted with death by someone they were not that close to or is a public figure.

Baym (2015) writes extensively about the potential value of social support found within relationships online. It is no surprise that across the Internet there are support groups within forums dedicated to topics ranging from stay at home dads, to cancer, and depression. Beyond discussion boards, there are many outlets online users can go to for support. Baym writes specifically about the example of a mom who blogged about her premature daughter and subsequent death, and the overwhelming support she felt after, as connections made online donated over $20,000 to the March of Dimes in honor of her daughter (ibid., p. 93). Not everyone can build a following through writing a blog, therefore an affordance of SNSs is the built-in connections users already have to provide emotional, informational, and esteem support both online and offline.

SNSs ability to provide social support has been studied previously with Wright (2012) finding that just the perception of emotional support being available through Facebook could decrease how stressed a participant felt they were. This relationship between use of SNSs and social support is also documented in recent research from Seo, Kim, and Yang (2016) who report that the more someone engages socially online with others through Facebook, the more they perceived available social support, and as a result felt less lonely. Burke and Kraut's (2016) research also draws on this question of well-being, but note that it is one's engagement with strong ties (not weak ties) through Facebook that helps users to feel they benefit from

communicating online. The aforementioned research would point to the need to look at how often someone uses Facebook (i.e., regular users versus occasional) in addition to relational closeness (can weak ties benefit the same?) as factors in how one perceives they gain support during times of grief.

## Grieving Online

When a loved one passes away, the process of grief is not linear or easy. While earlier research (spearheaded primarily by Freud, familiarized as the Kübler-Ross model see: Kübler-Ross, 1969) contended that in order to work through grief one must "move on" and "let go" of the deceased, Silverman and Klass (1996) suggest that it is quite normal to maintain a tie to a loved one. Termed "continuing bonds," their theory puts forth that rather than pathological or wrong, it is normal and possibly even helpful for someone to maintain a connection to the deceased after they have passed away (Silverman & Klass, 1996). A good example of continuing bonds at work is a young adult who has a parent that has died. As that young adult reaches milestones in their life, or makes big decisions, they think about what their parent would want them to do—in other words, their parent's influence does not go away just because they are no longer physically co-present (Silverman & Klass, 1996). This example also speaks to the unique nature of the parent–child relationship, and how grief can play a role in sustaining it. Moody and Moody (1991) address this noting specifically the benefit of modeling, valuing, and normalizing the grief process. This is something that technology could help with, as it makes grief more visible rather than a strictly private conversation.

Continuing bonds can also manifest in other ways: visiting the grave or other places that help the bereaved feel "close" to the deceased, talking to other friends about the deceased by telling stories about them to construct a shared identity of who they were, and for some, maintaining an inner dialogue with the deceased is seen as helpful, wherein individuals have talked about writing a letter to the deceased or calling their old phone number to feel a sense of connection (Silverman & Klass, 1996). All of these examples have correlates to technology, and more specifically, Facebook: visiting the profile (visiting the grave), posting on the page to share memories (talking with friends), and sending private messages to the profile as opposed to a public post to the profile page (an inner dialogue with the deceased). Pennington's (2013) work on continuing bonds and Facebook suggests that each of these behaviors play a role in providing support for the bereaved.

Each of these behaviors also show how the bereaved attempt to renegotiate their bond to the deceased post-death. This process is referred to as "meaning reconstruction," which without any sort of action on the part of the bereaved, could prolong the grieving process (Neimeyer, 2001). An example of meaning reconstruction is when loved ones come together at a wake or funeral to discuss memories of the deceased, what they (the deceased) would want for the future, and how they themselves (the bereaved) are coping now that their loved one is gone. Failing to accept that the deceased is actually

gone and talking through that loss is where meaning reconstruction fails, and continuing bonds is seen as unproductive, and if anything, unhelpful to those who are experiencing grief (Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008). Keeping with the above example, for someone who is not able to visit a funeral, Facebook can serve as a unique outlet to allow for meaning reconstruction and the support needed while grieving. Additionally, while past research has shown that funerals may help the bereaved in the short-term (Hayslip, Sewell, & Riddle, 2003), there is little known benefit to the bereaved in the long-term. This is where the development of online locations for grief can be perceived as particularly useful over time—whether it be a month, a year, or even five years later, the persistence of the Internet can provide an outlet that the bereaved may not be able to find in their local community, helping them in the process of meaning reconstruction.

Existing research on the potential value and effects of engaging with the process of grief and mourning online is extensive. In particular, research related to the SNS, Facebook, has doubled in the past five years (Bouc, Han, & Pennington, 2016; Brubaker et al., 2013; Church, 2013; DeGroot, 2012; 2014, Kasket, 2012; Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Pennington, 2013, 2014). Equal attention has been paid to the personal profile page and memorial sites created in honor of the deceased, with key distinctions highlighted below.

Marwick and Ellison (2012) note that attributes of the memorial site include a focus on the page creator, posts and comments, and the use of "likes" for the memorial page. Marwick and Ellison also write in their analysis of memorial pages that strangers can visit and contribute to the conversation on memorial pages in both positive and negative ways, and that strangers had the capacity to be the creator of the memorial page, too. A potential folly of memorial sites is this question of accessibility of the site for strangers, which can lead to what DeGroot (2014) refers to as "emotional rubbernecking" and at other times, as seen on other sites such as MyDeathSpace where anonymity is possible, trolling (Leonard & Toller, 2012). Ultimately, family and close friends are viewed as more "legitimate" when it comes to accessing and having conversations on memorial pages, as compared to acquaintances and strangers (Marwick & Ellison, 2012, p. 385).

This raises the question as to the inherent benefit of a memorial page, and places value on the profile page as protected for those who knew the deceased, and were accepted as "friends" by them prior to their death, from those who may engage in emotional rubbernecking or trolling. That said, those who were not close to the deceased but met them may only have the memorial page to turn to—Carroll and Landry (2010) in particular note how Facebook helps those who feel disenfranchised, wherein they can go and read and get support online without feeling judged for mourning someone they may not have been "as close" to compared to other users on the site. This gives credence to the question of studying relational closeness to further understand the potential value of grieving through Facebook dependent on strength of tie.

Another way in which Facebook profile pages are distinct from a memorial page created to remember the deceased is that one must actively "add" the in memoriam

page, but the profile page is the same space that the user maintained prior to death and keeps shared memories with other users on the site even after death (Kasket, 2012). Research that used qualitative interviews to question the maintenance of connections through the profile page suggested that despite frustration or unhappiness that may stem from viewing the page, all participants maintained their virtual connection to the deceased, arguing that it would be wrong to "de-friend someone just because they died" (Pennington, 2013, p. 625). This work was extended in Pennington (2014) who discussed how users felt varying degrees of support by connecting through the profile page, in particular relying on relational closeness and time as factors. Bouc et al. (2016) also draw on time, finding that discussion and engagement with profiles of the deceased tended to peak immediately in the months following the death, with posts later trickling to occur on major celebrations, if at all, as years passed.

Research suggests that Facebook group pages and profiles are particularly useful for individuals with a large social network who may not be able to go to the actual grave to feel a sense of closeness with the deceased and to cope with the loss, in line with continuing bonds theory (Kasket, 2012; Pennington, 2013). In her research, DeGroot (2012) found that an affordance of Facebook was that it allowed members of the social network to make sense of the death in their own terms, and work through their grief as they see fit, all while renegotiating what it means to be tied to that person they have lost, highlighting those key components of both continuing bonds theory (Silverman & Klass, 1996) and meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer, 2001, Neimeyer et al., 2008).

Rossetto et al.'s (2015) research on how the bereaved can use Facebook highlights the coping paradox that the site creates for those in mourning however: while some participants found that the site could mitigate grief and provide support, others found that the site actually impeded the process, leading in some cases to complicated grief. Similarly, Morehouse and Crandall (2014) note that grieving virtually prevents the bereaved from using existing ceremonies and rituals that allow them to reconcile grief and death, prolonging the process of mourning and preventing that "meaning making" process that Neimeyer (2001) views as crucial to coping effectively with grief. Indeed, it is possible that SNSs, like Facebook, may not afford the benefit of support for all users equally making this work valuable to understand possible distinctions in the grieving process—what makes the site particularly helpful (or harmful) as one copes with grief?

Sites like Facebook draw attention to how the grieving process for centuries has been highly privatized in western cultures, raising questions as to what is and is not deemed as the norm when confronting this emotional experience through a social network online. Some may find that a continued bond is productive and others may not—but living in a mediated world, users are forced to confront this highly personal reality online as well as offline. By analyzing the relationship between use of Facebook, perception of support, time that has passed since the friend has died, and finally, relational closeness, this research hopes to shed additional light on this growing trend online.

# Method

Survey analysis was selected for data collection. This method was deemed preferable as the existing variables have been testing qualitatively (Pennington, 2013, 2014) but had yet to be verified through quantitative analysis. Benoit and Holbert (2008) challenge that as researchers we should strive to triangulate our research findings so as to speak to a broader audience. The majority of research to date on death online tends to come from a qualitative and critical perspective. This research seeks to bridge that gap by applying what has been previously found in qualitative analyses of grief in digital contexts to a quantitative study.

## Participants

Data collection was completed through a survey administered at a large Midwestern university in the United States through the use of a research pool of participants in the Communication Studies department. In order to take the survey, the participant must have had: (1) an active Facebook account and (2) experience with the death of someone they were connected to through Facebook. In all, there were 157 participants who each received partial course credit (<.05) for completing the survey. Sixty-five participants identified as male (41.4%) and 92 identified as female (58.6%). The participants were primarily Caucasian (82.2%) followed by African-American/Black (4.5%), Asian (4.5%), Hispanic/Latino(a) (3.8%), Bi-racial (3.2%), American Indian (1.3%) and Other (.6%). For "other" the text-based response provided was "Arab." Participants ranged in age from 18–41 years old ($M$ = 19.61, $SD$ = 2.89).

In terms of Facebook use, 50.3% indicated they spent more than 30 minutes on the site daily, with 22.3% selecting 30–60 minutes, 15.3% stating 1–2 hours, 7% selected 2–3 hours, and 5.7% believe they spend more than 3 hours each day on Facebook. Of the remaining participants, 35% said they spent 10–30 minutes on the site each day, and 14.6% said fewer than 10 minutes daily. The number of friends a participant had on the site varied greatly, ranging from 29 friends to 4,995 friends ($M$ = 668.90, $SD$ = 606.59).

## Procedures

Participants followed a link provided through the online research participation site to a Qualtrics survey that asked them to provide consent and indicate that they met guidelines for participation (i.e., at least 18 years of age, had a Facebook account, and experience with the death of a friend from Facebook). At the start of the survey participants were asked to think of a person they knew who had passed away that they also were Facebook friends with at the time of their death. They were asked a series of questions related to that person, followed by measures and questions related

to the relationship between the deceased and the participant, as well as the participants' own use of Facebook generally, and in the context of grief and support-seeking. These variables were selected based on past literature supporting their potential value in understanding grief and social support online. Those scales items are addressed in detail below.

## Measures

*Relational Closeness*. Relational closeness was measured using a modification of the Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale (2012) from Dibble, Levine, and Park. This scale was highly reliable (α = .97). The scale consisted of 10 items, including "when we were apart, I missed them a great deal," "we disclosed personal things to each other," and "my relationship with them was important in my life."

*Facebook Intensity*. Facebook use was measured with Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe's (2007) Facebook Intensity Scale, and was found to be highly reliable (α = .87). This scale consisted of six items including: "Facebook is a part of my everyday activity" and "Facebook is a part of my daily routine."

Time that had passed since the participant's loved one had died was measured via a single item which asked them to indicate how long it had been since the person they knew had died. The perceived support of Facebook was measured through several single items tied to specific actions related to the site and feelings of support. These items were derived from a discussion on the use of Facebook both as being helpful and unhelpful in Rossetto et al. (2015) and Pennington (2013, 2014). There were four "helpful" items: "I go to the page of the deceased to get support," "I write on the page of the deceased to feel better," "After reading posts on the page of deceased I feel better," "I like seeing pictures on the page of the deceased to remember them." In terms of unhelpful, the two items were: "I think the page of the deceased shouldn't be there" and "Seeing posts about the deceased make me feel worse."

# Results

In order to answer the question posed, correlations between perceived supportive and unsupportive actions and the variables of relational closeness, time, and the use of Facebook (Facebook Intensity) were run. As Table 1 shows, time that has passed since death is not significantly correlated to any of the variables, although it is approaching significance for finding that reading the page can make one feel supported. In contrast, Facebook intensity (frequency of use and identification with the site) was a strong predictor of every single dependent variable, showing that those who regularly use Facebook found it to be more useful in times of grief compared to those who engage with the site to a lesser degree finding it harmful to their mourning process. Relational closeness was significantly related to both positive

**Table 1**
**Correlations Between Dependent and Independent Variables**

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dependent Variables | | | | | | | | | |
| 1. Want Page Gone | — | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Feel Worse Viewing | .68*** | — | | | | | | | |
| 3. Go to Page | -.17* | -.22** | — | | | | | | |
| 4. Write on the Page | -.19* | -.22** | .61*** | — | | | | | |
| 5. Read Page | -.48*** | -.47*** | .38*** | .30*** | — | | | | |
| 6. View Pictures | -.33*** | -.33*** | .42*** | .23** | .52*** | — | | | |
| Independent Variables | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Rel. Closeness | .29*** | .13 | .18* | .15 | .00 | .06 | — | | |
| 8. Facebook Intensity | -.19* | -.17* | .25*** | .26*** | .36*** | .22** | .08 | — | |
| 9. Time Passed | .04 | -.06 | .03 | .05 | -.15$^{+}$ | -.03 | .01 | -.08 | — |

*Note.* $^{+}p$ is approaching significance (< .05); *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***p < .001

and negative opinions of the value of Facebook and its use during times of grief. More specifically, as someone indicated their relationship was closer they were more likely to want the profile page of the deceased gone, but they also appeared to like going to the page for support. Given that these are two drastically different feelings associated with the grieving process, additional tests were warranted.

A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the effect of relational closeness, time, and Facebook intensity on wanting the Facebook page of the deceased gone. The model was overall significant, $R^2 = .13$, $F(3, 153) = 7.66$, $p < .001$, with both relational closeness ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$) and Facebook intensity ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .01$) contributing significantly to the model. Time ($\beta = .02$, $p = .80$) was not a significant predictor.

A linear regression analysis was also conducted to examine the effect of relational closeness, time, and Facebook intensity on going to the Facebook page to receive support. The model was overall significant, $R^2 = .09$, $F(3, 153) = 5.11$, $p < .01$, with both relational closeness ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$) and Facebook intensity ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$) contributing significantly to the model. Time ($\beta = .04$, $p = .57$) was again, not a significant predictor.

## Discussion

The affordances of technology are many, and this study sought to consider whether specifically, having access to and interacting with a Facebook profile page of a deceased friend can help the bereaved find support while experiencing grief. The results of this study suggest that having this connection to the deceased on Facebook can be both a blessing and a burden. For as many users can go to the

page to gain support from fellow friends and family, others still remain conflicted as to whether the page should even remain on the site once their loved one has passed.

Interestingly, relational closeness only explained two of the six possible actions related to coping and Facebook. This makes sense insofar as existing research has shown how those who were close family or friends (Marwick & Ellison, 2012) but also simply acquaintances (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Pennington, 2014) find value in Facebook for seeking support. This would also support the idea that those who are "disenfranchised" can turn to SNSs when they lack other outlets for grieving. Research from both Brubaker et al. (2013) and Carroll and Landry (2010) highlight the importance of SNSs such as Facebook for those who might feel "marginalized" in their grief.

The propensity to do things like write on the page, look at pictures, and read posts regardless of relational closeness also shows how meaning reconstruction can occur in a digital environment. Neimeyer et al. (2008) write that the bereaved, in searching for meaning in loss, may do things like post messages on Facebook (p. 35). For those who find themselves outside that inner-circle, technology can be the only outlet for sharing this loss, showing a unique affordance of SNSs like Facebook. Further, meaning reconstruction may only be able to occur through technology, as they may lack the means necessary to communicate their grief offline, due to a variety of factors such as distance or tie strength.

Similarly, due to the inclusion of those who were not as close communicating with and towards the deceased through Facebook, past research also supports the significant relationship found for those who were in a close relationship to the deceased wishing the profile page was gone (Brubaker et al., 2013). This context collapse (wherein any and all members of the social network have equal access to the page), discussed in-depth by Marwick and Ellison (2012), likely creates the tension shown in these results: those who were closest to the deceased see value in going to the page for support, but also want it gone because they do not want to share that grief with the outer circle. Indeed, Lingel (2013) writes that, "In the context of online grief, Facebook pages become a contested site of ownership, meaning making, and social ties" (p. 194). The context collapse argument proliferates many avenues of research on SNSs, and it is no surprise that a topic viewed as private (grief) is a problem on this highly public site.

A final important contribution of this study is the focus on time, particularly in the context of time spent on Facebook. As users integrate the SNS into their everyday lives, there is a compelling argument that they are more likely to see the usefulness and also normality of Facebook in coping with grief. The results of this study would support the argument that there are some actions viewed as acceptable when someone is an active member of a community (i.e., writing on and reading the page of the deceased). Someone who is not already integrated into the "social network" of Facebook may simply not accept the cultural norms that play out on the site almost daily, because they do not view themselves as an active part of the Facebook community. Similarly, existing research on perceived social support and Facebook use (Seo et al., 2016) also shows how regular users may engage with Facebook as a means to deal with grief.

Despite past evidence to the contrary, time that has passed since the death of the Facebook friend in question had little to no influence on perceived support gained through Facebook. Pennington (2013, 2014) found in interviews with bereaved individuals that Facebook was viewed as supporting for those who had recently lost someone they did not know that well and those who were close to the deceased, but a significant amount of time (more than a year) had passed. Similarly, Bouc et al. (2016) and Carroll and Landry (2010) found that the majority of posts to a profile page of the deceased occurs immediately following the death, tapering off over time. This is supported by general literature on the question of grief and college students, wherein faced with mortality for the first time, and lacking additional outlets to turn to, technology can be a useful avenue for coping with grief (Neimeyer et al., 2008). The lack of relationship in this study may or may not be representative of the general population, as the variance in time that had passed for many participants was lacking (with many discussing a death that had occurred more than a year ago). Future work is needed to truly understand what relationship, if any, exists between time and feelings of support.

### Limitations

This sample consisted primarily of white, college-aged, females in the United States. As a result, the ability to generalize to the public as a whole is limited. As noted from the literature, how grief is conveyed differs from culture to culture, and it would be important to consider how this influences the perception of grief in this particular study. That said, the PEW Research Center's most recent statistics on the use of SNSs in the United States shows users to be primarily 18–29 year-old women who have at least some college experience (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden 2015). Additionally, this update shows that Facebook continues to be the most commonly used SNS in the United States by a large margin (71%). All the same, Facebook is just one of many possible online locations for users to grieve, and its affordances and policies should not be generalized to other mediated venues for mourning the death of a friend. For example, to date, Twitter only offers the option to de-activate the account (*Twitter Support*, 2016), requiring that a family member submits official identification and a copy of the death certificate. Conversely, Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, does have memorialized pages that appear to be quite similar to the structure of Facebook (*Instagram Help*, 2016). This research offers a sliver of insight into a subset of the whole; future research is needed to address potential similarities and differences across SNSs, and how each deals with the death of a user.

## Future Directions

Future research should continue to assess the value of different features associated with SNSs during times of grief. More specifically, as this research shows, certain elements (e.g., viewing vs. reading vs. posting) are perceived differently in terms of their supportive effects

for someone who is experiencing grief, and at times can complicate the process of coping with death. A secondary line of research to continue to follow involves the question of alignment with and preference for a given SNS. As this research showed, Facebook use (intensity) was highly correlated with almost every perceived supportive statement (and lack of support) provided in regards to mourning online. Interestingly, it was not only that those who used the site more found it more helpful, but that those who use it less found it less helpful. Finally, an expansion beyond traditional means of use on the site (the profile of the deceased, memorial pages dedicated to them) should be explored. What support, if any, do users receive through their own everyday use of the site? Does it make it easier or harder for a regular user of Facebook to share their own status update or pictures in memoriam through their own account? In the end, continued research into ways to make the site useful for all parties involved is still needed.

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# "I Hate When They Do That!" Netiquette in Mourning and Memorialization Among Danish Facebook Users

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NETWORKED EMOTIONS

# "I Hate When They Do That!" Netiquette in Mourning and Memorialization Among Danish Facebook Users

**Jakob Borrits Sabra**

*By analyzing online practices of mourning and memorialization on Facebook, this article identifies underlying norms behind Danish Facebook users' attitudes towards networked grieving and emotional displays on Facebook. Drawing on the concept "context collapse" and Jakoby's model for social rules of displaying emotions of grief, quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis are combined, through the use of survey techniques and grounded theory. The article helps explain contrasting attitudes to emotional displays on Facebook and significant differences between "netiquettes" of mourning and memorialization. The findings counter popular perceptions of Facebook as a desired online mourning platform.*

## Introduction

Social media platforms enable users to broadcast intimate information to online audience assemblages of friends, relatives and strangers. Users who draw on the affordances of social media find themselves sharing not only moments relating to life, but also moments relating to death. The pervasive utilization of social media affords changes to traditional mourning practices as they bring death and dying out of the private realms and onto public communication platforms. Social media enable the preservation of biographical identity legacies, giving the dead a future presence in digitally mediated societies.

These new forms of memorialization foster communication and continuing bonds with the deceased, de-sequester otherwise impermissible expressions of grief and enfranchise otherwise illegitimate loss (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011). The global social network platform Facebook provides users with a return to

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communal mourning, through its affordances of interactive, user-generated, and co-constructed expressions of emotions (Walter, 2014). The research objective of this article is firstly to understand the actual use of Facebook as a new social medium for sharing emotional expressions of grief and remembrance; secondly to identify potential netiquettes (rules and norms of online behavior and conduct) of mourning and memorialization on Facebook that might explain the apparent lack of social network media engagement around grief found in a previous research study of Danish Facebook users (Nielsen- Kudsk, Nilsson, & Sørensen, 2014). My purpose here is to establish whether or not this is a temporal phenomenon due to the novelty of grief in online social milieus or if this abstention is caused by conflicts between public-private relationships, the everydayness of Facebook and the complexity of the emotions involved.

## Mourning and Remembrance on Facebook

At the time of writing, 12 years into its development, Facebook provides a plethora of different ways and strategies to mourn and memorialize the dead. Facebook memorialization services have grown from a simplified restrictive memorialization policy residing in permanent suspension and lockdown of deceased users' profiles, to a nuanced attention to the "delicate social arrangements" (Odom, Harper, Sellen, Kirk, & Banks, 2010, p. 8) that surround the practices of owning, storing, and managing digital representations of deceased users in large networked social media environments. Where the funeral used to be the primary ritual space of social mourning expressions, now social media networks offer an expansion of sociality (multiple social milieus), spatiality (multiple spaces) and temporality (multiple timeframes). No longer fixed in tradition, time, location, or relationship proximity, mourning etiquette is both challenging the online social scene as well as being redefined by it.

Facebook affords four main interfaces for mourning and memorialization (Facebook, 2016);

1. People. The active profile page of the deceased, offering the same interactions from when the user was alive, now managed by assigned trusties or next of kin.
2. Pages. Separate memorial pages created post mortem or memorialized profile pages. In the latter case, the word "Remembering" ("Til minde om," Danish, ed.) is added next to the person's name on the profile.
3. Groups. Public or private memorial group pages constructed post mortem. Open-visible or closed-hidden 'In memory of' community pages and "R.I.P" groups.
4. Events. Pages for the celebration of birthdays, anniversaries, or dates in honor of the deceased.

The majority of qualitative studies on Facebook focus on active profiles, memorialized profile pages, or private-public memorial groups, in which people

communicate with the deceased and other bereaved users, keeping the dead socially incorporated and valued in the network. Methodologically, with a few exceptions of survey and questionnaire data (Af Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2014; Carroll & Landry, 2010; McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013) most studies of profile pages and memorial groups are based on interviews with mourners and page managers (Acker & Brubaker, 2014; Bell, Bailey, & Kennedy, 2015; Kasket, 2012; Pennington, 2014), or textual analysis of content and comments accumulated on the Facebook page (DeGroot, 2014; Giaxoglou, 2014; Klastrup, 2014; Marwick & Ellison, 2012). With the inclusion of the "Events" feature, Facebook has supplemented its application portfolio with a purposeful management tool for mourning and remembrance, affording the planning of temporary or continuing socially meaningful location based encounters with death. So far no research on Facebook's "Events" category has been conducted. Although beyond the scope of this article, such a study would make an interesting future contribution to existing research in this area.

## Complications and Concerns With Online Mourning

The public visibility of individual memorials on social network sites adds an "online dimension not to be ignored in our digital society" (Gotved, 2014, pp. 119–-120). As online open-access memorials publicly affirm social bonds and support being with someone as a continuing presence, Gotved (2014) argues they add a "communal dimension to the traditional studies of loss, grief, and bereavement." In societies where death has come to permeate digitally networked publics, Walter et al. (2011) argue, that the Internet and social network platforms offer the possibility for a de-sequestration of grief by supporting the free expression of emotions. However, the casualness with which open access memorials, such as public Facebook pages, are sometimes treated, conflicts with perceptions of such memorial sites as sacred, and the online digital presence of the dead is seen to "elicit confusion and discomfort in those who would prefer to bury their dead" (Ryan, 2008 in Walter et al., 2011, p. 293). As users of social media networks have become more exposed to death announcements and content related to issues of loss and grief, their everyday life has arguably become less protected from the fear of death and the pain of grief. On a similar note, the grief-stricken bereaved users too have become overly exposed to the profanities and mundanities of everyday life, which cause painful emotional experiences, for example by auto-generated advertisements, or meaningless, or even harmful, memorial posts. Similar to the constructive and favorable characteristics of online mourning, a review of research on Facebook as a platform for grief and memorialization, reveal a number of complications and disadvantages, with special regard to: the deceased (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Odom et al., 2010; Pennington, 2013), the bereaved (Bell et al., 2015; Brubaker et al., 2013; DeGroot, 2014; Gibson, 2015; Klastrup, 2014; Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Odom et al., 2010; Pennington, 2013; Walter et al., 2011) and the social network (Brubaker et al., 2013; DeGroot, 2014; Marwick & Ellison, 2012;

Pennington, 2013; Walter et al., 2011). These studies specifically highlight situations where grieving and mourning become emotionally complicated and contested or where grief-work and postvention support on Facebook pages, profiles, and memorial groups either delay, disrupt, distract from, or exacerbate the grieving process. To support the main argument that online mourning and memorialization is a complex affair for Danish Facebook users, in the following sections this article focuses on studies that explain both the practical and ethical complications of these processes as death expands into social online media domains. These concerns are summarized as conflicting understandings of privateness/publicness and the appropriateness of emotional displays (Walter et al., 2011), users' negotiation of "self" in the digital context of Facebook (Ess, 2010, 2011), unexpected encounters with death (Brubaker et al., 2013) and impression management issues as social contexts collapse in the wake of the sudden death of a Facebook user (Marwick & Ellison, 2012).

## Expansions and Conflicts of Mourning as Death Appear On Facebook

Walter et al. (2011, p. 291) predict "an increase in felt disturbance at how others deal with grief" as online condolence interactions in social contexts lack a set of social rules for appropriate online mourning and memorialization. The intimately bereaved disavow the behavior of private feelings being "paraded online" (Walter et al., 2011, p. 290) in public digital spaces and the distant mourners or peers further disapprove of death and everyday banality being mixed together. As wide audiences come together in online public or semi-public spaces, it is argued that the tensions between privately and publicly displayed grief compel negotiations of both individual and community freedom on Facebook. According to Ess (2010), Facebook represents a social network medium which affords widely distributed "relational selves," who, defined by their relationships, operate and interact through multiple network technologies, constantly interwoven with "others" in complex and technologically mediated communities (Ess, 2010, p. 116). As a medium, Facebook presents the relational self with such a digital online communicative forum presenting the freedom to reflect, express, and revise thoughts and sensibilities, open to voluntary, participatory, lateral surveillance of others; namely relatives, friends and depending on the privacy settings, also strangers (Ess, 2011, p. 17). Online mourning and memorialization on Facebook involves sharing information previously thought to be a matter of individual privacy; a mixed sense of "friend privacy," where especially younger users routinely reveal personal aspects of themselves among a defined circle of friend and relatives (p. 19). The understanding of "friend-privacy" is relevant to this study on Facebook mourning and memorialization as the concept represents the shift from a 20th-century individual sense of privacy to a much more relational self for whom "privacy" refers to a close circle of friends. In contrast to the strong relational ties usually found among family members and close-knit relationships (Granovetter, 1973), social media networks such as Facebook afford communities of both strong and weak ties, the latter designated by distant relationships or friendships based on a narrow set of interests or a minimal amount of communication (Harju, 2014). In this study, as mourning

Facebook users re-appropriate traditional Danish funerary norms in the online context, their emotional written expressions of grief often generate a sense of discomfort among those who only have weak ties with bereaved. The phenomenon known as "context collapse" occurs, when "individuals representing multiple social contexts (e.g., work, family, high school acquaintances, close friends) are 'collapsed' into the flat category 'friends' or 'contacts' on social media sites" (Marwick & Ellison, 2012, p. 379). Context collapse in communities around the death of a significant person is known from traditional spaces, such as funeral homes, memorial services, and the popular press, as well as new social media networks such as Facebook (Marwick & Ellison, 2012).

Marwick & Ellison (2012) found that context collapse among Facebook friends materializes, when the cultural values of a mourner suddenly conflict with other mourners' understanding of the deceased, generating confrontations over proper representations of the deceased, hierarchies of mourning and the perceived legitimacy of feelings. Displaying emotions to multiple and conflicting audiences engenders strategies of "impression management" (Marwick & Ellison, p. 379). Impression management techniques on Facebook range from creating multiple profiles, to coded language to sharing only banal content, an issue Facebook is currently attempting to circumvent (Griffin, 2016). Context collapse and impression management issues are handled with varying success by social and technical control mechanisms such as addressing and correcting mourners, silent management of friendships, changes in group membership settings, or muting notifications from grieving friends (Brubaker et al., 2013). This identification of conflicting online mourning interactions points to the tacit formation of norms guiding online mourning and memorialization and is the main research objective of this article.

## Social Norms and Rules of Grief

In most societies interpretations of loss, experiences of mourning, and emotional expressions of grief are shaped and regulated by cultural and social structures (Lofland, 1985). In her Integrated Model of Grief Jakoby (2012) proposed an understanding of grief as a socially constructed multi-dimensional emotion. Based on Hochschild's feeling rules (1979) Jakoby conceptualized grief as a cognitive-structural phasic process of framing loss, handling feelings and expressions, and coping with loss. On one side, this model shows how social structures and grief are connected by social norms of feeling, display and framing rules, and on the other, that coping with loss is socially patterned. Jakoby's model is useful for an analysis of individual users' interpretations of loss, grief, and social network platforms and for understanding the norms for mourning interactions between the living, the dead and the social networks of both physical and digital realities.

This article addresses questions put forth by a previous research study on young Danes experiences with mourning and memorialization on social network sites (Nielsen-Kudsk et al., 2014), but employs a different methodological framework for the analysis of participant responses. This article further adds to the growing body of

research on Facebook and networked grief by identifying underlying patterns behind survey responses. In doing so, this study takes a step beyond earlier approaches that focused on the content found on Facebook memorials or on consensus among interviewed online mourners, focusing instead on individual Facebook users' mourning trajectories, their attitudes to, and individual experiences of mourning and memorialization on social media networks.

## Method

Observing and researching private emotional expressions in public environments such as Facebook involves a set of specific challenges: being a sensitive subject it is rarely exercised in public and thus difficult to observe, and self-censorship as respondents are apologetic of critical statements regarding other users' mourning behavior, especially in non-anonymous environments (Brubaker et al., 2013). To circumvent these challenges the method of an anonymous Web-based survey was chosen. This data gathering method gives voice to both active participating mourning Facebook users, as well as those observing the mourning and memorialization of others, while offering all respondents anonymity and the liberty to express themselves, as free from self-regulated moral censorship, interpersonal or public constraints as possible.

The analytical framework is developed from grounded theory and a review of research literature and applied in the investigation of discursive statements and participant attitudes. The survey provides valuable empirical material and is analyzed qualitatively to understand the variety and diversity in opinions and attitudes towards the grief-related content on Facebook. To understand the functions of the specific discourses on attitudes, initial coding schemes were set up and in conclusion temporary netiquettes of grief, mourning, and memorialization behavior on Facebook were established.

The ethical considerations of this study warrant the continued anonymity of all respondents, as friend networks or the same online social community might affiliate them.

### Quantitative and Qualitative Empirical Data

The empirical material for this study stems from a web-based questionnaire using an online questionnaire tool called SurveyXact. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected in April 2014 over the course of two weeks. Research subjects were recruited to complete an online questionnaire by posting an invitation through the researchers' personal networks using email and social media to snowball the distribution process, encouraging peers to participate and further share the invitation. The full questionnaire (excluding demographic information) consisted of nine questions (Q1–9), of which 3 were qualitative questions, 1 quantitative, 1 yes/no, and 4 multiple choice questions with the option to

comment. In pursuit of the aforementioned research objectives, this article will report on participants' survey responses to the qualitative question:

$RQ_1$: What is your opinion on sharing mourning and remembrance on social media?

## Analytical Framework and Coding

The analysis of respondents' attitudes is based on a social psychological approach, which allows the close examination of the subjective psychological experiences of grief displayed on the social network site.

To study interrelations between the respondents' answers, personal preferences and their interpretations, notions, and previous interactions with mourning on Facebook, grounded theory and methods of coding and categorization were applied. The coding process included open-coding, selective (focused) coding, and axial coding using the NVivo10 software to find categories, concepts, abilities and different dimensions of the subjects in the responses (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010).

Case classifications and coding queries were run to separate the written qualitative statements from $RQ_1$ in six overall attitude categories; 1) Very good idea, 2) Good idea, 3) Neutral, 4) Bad idea, 5) Very bad idea, and 6) Don't know. Using selective and focused coding the statements were structured by eleven topical categories; 1) Caring for the deceased, 2) Caring for the bereaved, 3) Caring for the friends, 4) Legitimate practices, 5) Objectionable practices, 6) Mourning, 7) Remembrance, 8) Need of support, 9) Questionable Motivations, 10) Privacy, and 11) Publicness. In response to the second research objective, i.e., the identification of norms of Facebook mourning and memorialization, an axial coding process informed by other research studies, and relevant concepts drawn from the literature review was applied to find associations between the categorized statements and the participants' attitudes. This analytical process resulted in the creation of a new etic coding framework of 29 codes in 7 main categories. These reflect the accumulated concepts relevant to understanding the attitudes to mourning on social media: 1) Norms and emotions (Social norms, Netiquette, Framing rules, Feeling rules, Display rules), 2) Mourning and Grieving, (Mourning styles, Types of loss, Intentions of grief, Participation), 3) Memorialization (Memory, Identity, Co-construction, Representation), 4) Grieving process (Support, Detachment, Phasic grief, Continuing bonds), 5) Relational mourning (Strong ties, Weak ties, Privacy, Unexpected encounters), 6) Remediation (Technology, Publicness, Temporality, Everydayness), and 7) Social media mourning (Context collapse, Impression management, Avoidance, Awareness).

Throughout the analytical process, in accordance with the principles of grounded theory, category descriptions were continuously modified to more and more accurately represent the statements. Additional information drawn from the literature review was then used to fill the gaps in the categorization of statements. The final analysis of the respondents' answers ended up in three main coding frames: Context Collapse, Social Rules, and Netiquette.

# Results

All respondents who completed the first question ($RQ_1$, n = 166) have been included in the analysis. With regards to the general attitudes towards the use of social media for mourning and remembrance purposes, the respondents are divided into three main groups: positive attitudes (12%), negative attitudes (42.5%), and neutral attitudes (37.7%). A further subset of indecisive attitudes (7.8%) was also found, and their statements were also included in the coding process, as they too provided valuable insights. All respondents were fluent in Danish and possess digital capabilities as the questionnaire had to be completed through digital interfaces e.g. a computer, tablet, or smart phone. Citations from respondents are translated into English from the original Danish, and relevant demographic data is provided.

## Limitations of Using Survey Data

Due to the limited number of responses (n = 166), the study does not make claims of saturation or external validity and the conclusions are not viewed as representative of the entire Danish population. As a method for doing social research, the questionnaire approach has proven rigorous at times, and due to the lack of depth in part of the empirical material, attention towards misinterpretation and confirmation bias was given. A number of in-depth interviews would have supported the empirical richness regarding the respondents' opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and the specific use of Facebook.

# Discussion

## Context Collapse on Facebook

In the analysis of responses context collapse manifests in two main topics of respondents' concerns about grieving on Facebook: distribution of unwanted information and inauthentic grief expressions. The following section will discuss each of these in turn.

*Distribution of Unwanted Information.* Example 1: "I hate when they do that! Tasteless. Why must other people be meddled in this? To get likes? Empty comments from people who say they are there for you, sweety" (Participant 24, female, age 24, secondary mourner, long-term bereavement, negative attitude).

As illustrated in Example 1, when confronted by emotional displays of grief made by distant friends, respondents appear to be struck by confusion, indignation, or resentment, finding the comments apathetic and the participation both hollow and offensive. The potential for economic and emotional capitalization, i.e., "to get likes," integrated in the Facebook platform, makes respondents further question the

bereaved individual's motivation as well as the intentional support from participating friends. Such a critical stance towards grief expressions and emotions shared on Facebook needs to be viewed in light of context collapse, and the problems that people face when multiple audiences co-exist on the same site. A significant number of respondents (n = 58) explicitly state that online grieving is to be kept within the emotionally involved communities of close friends and family members. As one respondent further elaborates, to her Facebook is not intended as a diary for the public display of inner feelings, but rather as a place where distributed content demands no substantial social engagement from the network. Instead users are to be met by entertaining everyday contributions in a predominantly positive, humorous, and life-affirming atmosphere.

*Inauthentic Grief Expressions*. Example 2: "I would never do it myself since, in my opinion, social media in so many ways are impersonal! You can draw an inaccurate picture of yourself, together with the fact that often a Facebook friend is not a real friend at all" (Participant 70, male, age 24, secondary mourner, most recently bereft, neutral attitude).

When grief becomes distributed among mixed and contradictory audiences on a cursory media such as Facebook, respondents, as illustrated in Example 2, tend to focus on levels of privacy and norms of intimacy in mourning. Furthermore, the example shows concerns regarding Facebook's affordances for manipulation of a user's self-representation. Other respondents make note of how regulating a user's self-representation questions the integrity and sincerity of the grief expression. Such issues result in a decrease in the level of support otherwise expected from the network. When exposing emotions to the entire network, instead of only part of it, the mourner risks losing control of the reception of the shared content. The mourner is expected to manage multiple impressions and disparate attitudes within the network of friends, and in a difficult time of grief, to be able to display astuteness and etiquette, to prevent damage to existing relationships.

Example 3: "I think that too many, who do not know the person, suddenly want to support the bereaved, without that person being in need of support from someone from a distant relationship." (Participant 96, male, age 22, secondary mourner, negative attitude)

To the respondents, whether mourning is shared among a network of three hundred or three thousand friends, these relationships fundamentally lack necessary levels of intimacy, affection and integrity, especially if the individual user's Facebook friend network becomes too extensive over time and the relationships too disparate, as illustrated in Example 3. The following example (4) presents another complication due to context collapse; unexpected or unwanted attentiveness from distant friends in the network, whom in good faith, attempt involvement in the mourning process, causing frustration among primary mourners. Example 4: "Too many of the 'friends' who comment, don't really care" (Participant 142, female, age 27, primary mourner, long term bereaved, negative attitude). To

some, the participation of the majority of Facebook friends is viewed as inauthentic acts of mere politeness, not displaying the level of empathy implied in the online comments.

## Rules of Framing, Feeling, and Expressing Loss on Facebook

The following section highlights evidence of tacit social rules for grief expressions, interpretations and display of emotions on Facebook.

*Framing Rules and Interpretation of Loss.* Example 5: "When my close friend committed suicide at the age of 21, due to schizophrenia, it was very beautiful to share the grief on Facebook, but regarding my 74-year-old granddad I think it would be less appropriate. Dying at the age of 21 just seems more wrong, and I think you have a greater need to mourn this [premature deaths]" (Participant 86, female, age 23, secondary mourner, just bereft, positive attitude).

The unexpected and tragic loss of a close friend emphasizes the need for support and attentiveness in times of grief, which legitimizes online expressions of grief and the sharing of mourning. In contrast to the example above, other respondents claim that, e.g., premature deaths, are too intense and emotional to be shared on a predominantly cursory social media such as Facebook, as this may augment the vulnerability and pain in the bereaved. To this group of respondents, expected losses, e.g., death due to old age or terminal illness, are instead found more legitimate subjects to be publicly expressed on Facebook.

Example 6: "I think it is okay if it is a memory update or to inform why one is not so available … but for those people who keep going on posting and where it is about them and not the deceased, that I think really sucks, and for those people I end up turning off notifications" (Participant 5, female, age 24, secondary mourner, just bereft, neutral attitude).

As the above example illustrates, norms of grief and remembrance on Facebook differ. While grieving meets resistance due to questions of sincerity, motivation and intensity, constructing or participating in a Facebook memorial is an accepted practice and considered a positive "healthy" act of remembrance. One of the reasons why online grief is more difficult to interpret could be that networked audiences are given few clues to interpret the meaning of the distributed messages and their immediate context.

*Feeling Rules and Emotional "Wrongness."* Example 7: "If one day you are 'in grief' and express it in a ten line status update and the next day upload a picture of your delicious tuna sandwich, I, personally, find it difficult to take the first mentioned seriously" (participant 66, male, age 25, secondary mourner, recently bereaved, neutral attitude).

Respondents mention "false" expressions and a "light" handling of grief as digital mourners flaunt their emotions on social media. This is similar to Hochschild's concept

of "misfits in grief" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 63), characterizing issues regarding intensity, timing and the proper placement of grief expressions. Diverging from Hochchild's misfits in timing as the moment when grief is felt, Jakoby's (2012) emphasis on the duration and elongation of grief expressions better reflects the survey responses. As such the affordances of Facebook highlight discrepancies between how mourners 'do feel' and act, and how their peers think they "should feel" and act, what Hochschild (2003) finds to be a social sense of "wrongness" in emotion work. The "wrongness" stems from mourners, who display sad and light-hearted emotions within short time-intervals; a behavior that is interpreted as being less serious than is expected when grieving a loss. Despite a few positive remarks on the potential support from the use of social media, the general attitude among respondents remains that grief is to be kept as a private personal matter, not to be disclosed on Facebook, but to be kept within the close confinements of the family. Together the statements provide evidence of implicit feeling rules for grief emotions on Facebook followed by display rules to ensure legitimacy and support disenfranchisement of various forms online emotional expressions.

*Display Rules for the Legitimacy of Online Expressions*. Example 8: "I don't mind people writing a brief 'remembrance'-status, but I think it goes too far, when there are big emotions in the status, and you get in doubt whether people do it to get likes, which of course is out of line" (participant 156, age 22, Female, secondary mourner, recently bereaved, negative attitude).

One of the grief display rules that emerged was the legitimacy of sharing memories as illustrated by the example above. Legitimate memorial displays are those that predominantly focus on the deceased, the lived life or the experiences that various networked friends share. Expressions of mourning give rise to different interpretations, as they point more directly to the death of a person and the primary loss of the mourner. Displays of mourning entail a directional expression often with an unspoken expectation of support or response from peers in the network. These 'traits' make the majority of respondents object to mourning expressions on Facebook. Example 9: "It REALLY depends on context. It [the update] can be 'superficial,' so that values and feelings are debated among your closest relatives. There is no reason that a 'random' should get to know you as well as your closest relative" (participant 90, age 26, male, No loss experience, positive attitude).

Legitimate expressions of emotion are portrayed by respondents as formal funerary information, entertaining or life-affirming content or indications of successful grief work, content that instigate the perception that the mourner, despite his or her painful situation, is coping with their loss. Examples where expressions overstep the display rules for grief on Facebook, are situations where users perpetually write and share mourning messages on profiles, express emotions and thoughts too deep, sad, or sinister and hence violates the social etiquette of grieving and the social etiquette of Facebook.

## The Legitimate and Illegitimate Ways of Expressing Emotions on Facebook

In terms of social understanding, the emotional outcome (Jakoby, 2012) or the mourners' reactions to loss, is conditioned by social and cultural norms of framing, feeling, and expressing emotions, where only certain types of loss legitimize more intensely felt grief and candid calls for sympathy in the community. If a parent dies at an early age leaving small children behind (parental death), or a young adult is killed in crime (violent death), because of the severity of the situation of loss, the visibility and cultivation of grief is met with a higher degree of social tolerance among the respondents. Despite a common conception of grief as an individual experience and a popular consensus that mourners are to be supported through the difficult mourning process, the respondents show different views of what counts as appropriate in online mourning practice. Respondents suggest that mourning the death of a significant person on social network platforms is sanctioned if loss is unexpected, sudden, tragic, or violent. On the other hand if loss is expected or gradual, e.g., due to old age or a long terminal illness, online mourners are only enfranchised a modest grieving process and primarily one that concerns emotional displays of memorialization and remembrance.

Respondents report being left in uncertainty, to forge their own understanding of the shared content, the intention behind its publication and especially the active online mourners' status within the relational social mourning hierarchy. As in traditional communities, Facebook users affected by loss also represent different social positions within relational mourning status, i.e., primary, secondary, and tertiary mourners (Walter, 2015). The grief biographies of these individual mourners, their relational ties with the deceased, their social proximity to the loss and the felt intensity of the broken psychological and social bond, complicate the social meaning making of loss and a consistent model for appropriate emotional response strategies (Jakoby, 2012). In this case, Facebook and social network platforms provide sparse information useful for a social framing of the loss.

Within the mourning hierarchy, close family and kin are placed above more distant relations and strangers. The analyzed material shows that the higher the position in the mourning hierarchy, the greater the freedom for expressing grief and emotions on social network media. The stronger a relationship with the deceased is found to be, the more the respondents tolerated deviations from traditional etiquettes of grief and communication on social network media. This implicitly exercised behavioral system is traditionally found in local communities, e.g., at funerals or wakes, but the new digital social network platforms engender more complex scripts for this social grieving behavior. This complexity was evident as respondents highlighted the difficulties attendant to evaluating grief expressions on Facebook, leading to situations of doubt and disbelief in the mourner's motivation and sincerity.

Respondents gave further accounts of situations where they struggled with interpretations and the decision to "legitimize" or "reject" a Facebook friend's display of

emotions. When respondents find mourners to be displaying either too much or too little seriousness in their grief on social media, feeling rules were breached (Hochschild, 2003), grief was considered 'wrong' and thus potentially rejected. Grief for a person is considered 'over-managed', if it implies sharing deep emotional expressions online for a person who died a natural, expected death. In this case, the mourner was seen to "feel too much" compared to the social significance of the loss, and what is expected from a display on Facebook. In contrast the mourner was considered to mourn too "lightly" if feelings in relation to an unexpected close-relational loss was made public on a Facebook update. In this case, the mourner "feels too little" and "under-manages" grief. The framing, feeling, and display rules in effect here are a conveyance of social attitudes to the intensity and duration of grief and the commonly held opinion among the respondents was that mourning should have a limited duration, the shorter the better. This was supported by a majority of respondents who disapproved of deep-felt emotions being repetitively exposed on social media, as grief is too intense to publicize in a weak tie social network. Furthermore such displays of deeply felt emotions were considered an indication of a persistent state of grief and sadness entailing compound emotional and psychological complications that should be dealt with among family, close friends or by professional grief counselling and therapy.

Whether the purpose of sharing your emotions on Facebook is a coping mechanism involving online-networked grief work, or motivated by a wish to memorialize and remember, the respondents display fundamental concerns that necessitate a further discussion of grief expressions on social media such as Facebook. The remainder of this article will present a summary of the differentiated netiquettes of grief and memorialization on Facebook as they have been emerged in this study.

## The Grief-Netiquette: Rules for The Display of Grief on Facebook

In cases where the specific type of loss and the mourner's status legitimize deep-felt grief expressions, sharing these must be confined to limited and preferably private spaces, such as memorial pages or memorial groups. In these enclosed spaces mourners have the power to control participation in mourning, and the respondents emphasize the ability to prevent unintended friends and users from being impaired by information they do not want or need. According to the netiquette identified in this study, Facebook is the preferred social network medium for digital death announcements, where information about the cause of death, funerary details and invitations to wakes are fully legitimate for display on profiles and sharing within the network of friends. The same applies for acknowledgements, condolences and thanksgivings in the peri- and post mortem time intervals following the death of a person. The individual Facebook user is allowed to inform the network of his/her state of mind and emotional role as mourner, but in a regulated manner assuring the expression is neither presented as morbid or disturbing. With a few exceptions, respondents expressively reject sharing pictures from the funeral, of the coffin, of

the deceased post mortem and even from the gravesite. Mourners who repetitively display intensely, deep-felt feelings and thoughts counter the netiquette, as their practices incite too much attention to the mourners need for sympathy and support instead of the significance of the loss in the bereaved communities, such as kinship and close friends. A few respondents legitimize the publicly shared expressions of grief, when these were seen to have a particular relevance to the group or accommodate a learning outcome useful to the network. In this way the shared grief was seen as ensuring the provision of a social, cultural or emotional capital. Liking a grief update is not considered appropriate netiquette and suspicion arises from the use of Facebook's intimations of interest and emotional metrics of Likes and Shares. These features ameliorate uncertainty regarding emotional capitalization (Marwick & Ellison, 2012) and the candor of grief. With the most recent development of Facebook's social plugins and emotional barometers, such as Facebook Emoticons and Facebook Reactions, it is now possible to provide a more distinct annotation of interest, feelings and sympathy. Studies on these social emotional plugins and their use would be of interest to understanding grief and the use of symbolic emotional network metrics.

## The Memorial-Netiquette: Socially Accepted Remembrance

Respondents perceive the act of sharing memorial content a positive social gesture, as long as the participant contributes life-affirming accounts and well-meaning representations of the deceased. In these cases the netiquette of memorial pages, groups, and profiles in remembrance becomes less restrained than the expressive displays of mourning. Since memorials express a more modest expectation of emotional outcome, sympathy and support, respondents are more prone to accept their public distribution into the social networks. That is not to say that the majority of respondents necessarily advocate this practice. As Facebook memorials are influenced by the netiquette of everyday social network behavior, the majority of respondents find Facebook's affordances for communication too shallow to fit the emotional sensitivity around death, and the public sharing of content too insubstantial for appropriate memorialization. Where emotional updates emphasizing loss and longing contravene the netiquette, the display rules of Facebook memorials authorize updates that attend to the deceased, such as information regarding the funeral, celebration of anniversaries and shared content honoring the relations between the dead and the survivors. Contribution to memorial construction in the shape of biographies, tales of life and livelihood or stories and narratives in which the deceased play an active role, are welcome endowments to the enjoyment of the memorial community, whether it is found on a separate memorial page or in a public or private memorial group. Liking, sharing and contributing to the memory of a loved one is appropriate, unless the content has an objectionable character or strongly deviates from the language or the representation shared and supported by the closest relatives. For example, the netiquette prescribes that the memorial page contributors

and participants do not address the deceased directly, as if the person was still alive, since this is perceived inappropriate and as counter to the necessary acceptance of the reality of the loss. In a similar vein religious topics, belief systems or assumptions about the afterlife are found noncompliant with the netiquette of Facebook memorialization.

## Conclusion

The netiquettes of grief and memorialization on Facebook foreground the correlation among the social norms of feelings, the experience of loss and mourning expressions as they are perceived and interpreted by social media users. Surprisingly, the management of grief on social network media is met with significant resistance, as the network medium is considered an inappropriate space to display the intimate and personal subject of death and grief over loss. As social network sites are founded on the establishment of weak relations, coping and grief work are instead referred to the tangible and physically established relations between close family members, as they provide more control and security for those particularly grief-stricken. The entanglement of multiple audiences with miscellaneous viewpoints complicates the social interpretation of loss on Facebook, as well as the response behavior regarding grief and memorialization. The context collapse on social media sites is at the core of this problem, especially as mourners seek to stage private grief in public digital spaces. Here administrators, mourners and memorial participants all engage in complicated and entangled processes of memorial impression management, attempting to find resolution and remembrance in post mortem profiles, pages, and groups.

This article provides a snapshot of the netiquettes of grief and memorialization in the context of Danish Facebook users, but as digital platforms change rapidly, so published material in this area quickly becomes dated. The article states that traditional understanding of private grief to a large degree is dominant to social norms of public and semi-public grief on Facebook. This tendency is in dynamic change, as users of digital social environments, over time, attune to their relational selves, their preferred everyday media and get accustomed to increasingly digitized practices of mourning and memorialization. In the meantime, this article finds strong evidence, that digital social media, although situated in a "culturally secular" society (Walter, 2005, p. 182), have not yet replaced traditional established cultural practices, material technologies or places, but so far only supplement them. They provide interesting new and augmenting modalities for mourning and remembering, that bring comfort to some and confusion to others.

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# Online Emotion Regulation in Digitally Mediated Bereavement. Why Age and Kind of Loss Matter in Grieving Online

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NETWORKED EMOTIONS

# Online Emotion Regulation in Digitally Mediated Bereavement. Why Age and Kind of Loss Matter in Grieving Online

**Katrin Döveling**

*The study by media psychologists of emotional communication in online bereavement still leaves many questions unanswered. Previous research has identified similarities as well as differences in emotion regulation patterns of children, adolescents, and adults (Döveling 2015a). Extending that research, this investigation of digitally mediated bereavement goes one step further by exploring additional types of mechanisms within the emotion regulatory processes of coping online. A total of 4 different bereavement platforms, used by mourners of differing ages and kinds of losses, from young children to widowers, were examined in a quantitative content analysis of online postings (N = 1036), generating insights into shared emotion regulation patterns and intimacy online. The findings highlight interpersonal empathy, irrespective of age of the bereaved or type of loss, but also disclose age-based differences in emotion regulatory processes. Implications for further media psychological analysis are laid out.*

## Introduction

In today's digitalized world, global online communication provides a rich source of information, opinions, and attitudes. It equally yields considerable potential for emotional exchange.

In recent years, specifically designed online bereavement networks have evolved that provide opportunities for emotional communication among like-minded, but anonymous, mourners. Media psychologists are just beginning to understand the emotion regulation patterns involved in such bereavement networks (Döveling, 2015a, 2015b; Döveling & Wasgien, 2014, 2015). The study of online bereavement in these networks still leaves many questions unanswered; there is much we do not

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know about the bereaved who go online in an effort to resolve the anguished mix of emotions caused by the loss of a loved one. A previous analysis has shown that not only do children and adolescents go online in such circumstances, but also adults (Döveling, 2015a); it also revealed age-dependent differences in coping processes and a shared emotional transformation from loss orientation to restoration orientation (p. 110). But might there be further age-dependent differences we are not yet aware of in the use of these networks? And what role does the type of loss play? Do widowers, or parents who have lost a child, disclose different emotions online than do adolescents? Or is there a common pattern in all forms of bereavement online? Media psychologists are just beginning to understand some of these questions. Clearly, it is not only young adolescent mourners, highly familiar with the many options social networking sites offer, who are using the Internet to share their emotions (cf. social sharing of emotions, Rimé, Mesquita, Boca, & Philipot, 1991). In today's digital era, all age groups participate in virtual interaction processes (Döveling, 2015a). Furthermore, bereavement is a deeply embedded social process. As noted by Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides (2011), online bereavement in such social networks engenders communal activities and can be considered as a re-emerging, collectively shared practice in social networking platforms:

> Pre-modern societies tended to produce a bereaved community, modern societies tend to produce bereaved individuals, and post-modern mutual help groups (online or offline) produce a community of the bereaved, that is, connections with previously unknown others who have suffered the same category of loss . . . [Social networking services] such as Facebook . . . can produce what pre-modernity did: a bereaved community. (p. 289)

The authors look closely at whether the virtual world provides a suitable area for the free expression of grief and whether mourners are otherwise stigmatized and note that this may well vary by site, moderator, topic, country, age, and individual participant (Walter et al., 2011, p. 288). Previous research has disclosed that within online bereavement the sharing of emotions engenders transformational emotional regulation (Döveling, 2015a; Gross, 2008; Gross & John, 2003), which incorporates empathic interactions in social networking platforms (Döveling, 2015a). An increased level of self-disclosure online in specially designed bereavement platforms has also been found (Döveling, 2015b), as well as patterns of mutual support by online group members (e.g., Roberts, 2004; Walter et al., 2011) and continuing bonds with the bereaved (Döveling, 2015a, p. 112; Döveling, 2015b; Kasket, 2012; cf. Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Klass & Walter, 2001). Furthermore, findings have shown that online emotion regulation patterns reveal similarities as well as differences between children, adolescents, and adults (Döveling, 2015a), yet, not enough is known about the different kinds of inherent emotional processes in online emotion regulation. Therefore, from 2014 to 2015, four different bereavement platforms, addressing different age groups as well as distinctive groups of mourners—widowers, parents who had lost a child, children and adolescents

who had lost a parent—were examined in order to generate insights into shared online grieving processes.

The findings reveal differences and similarities in online communication patterns. Interpersonally communicated meaning structures in online emotion regulation are unveiled. Implications and suggestions for further research in this highly relevant field of media psychology are explicated.

## Emotion Regulation in Bereavement

Death as an elementary basic human fact is a central dynamic in the media (Bonanno, 2004; Neimeyer, 2006, 2016). It fills newspapers and invigorates fictional and non-fictional television series as well as international blockbusters. It would seem that death is palpable everywhere. Yet, when facing the passing of a loved one, the experience of loss can be a highly distressing situation. Habits of everyday life are abruptly interrupted by the need for review and revision (Neimeyer, 2015). Grief, a basic human emotion, can be overpowering. The distress of bereavement substantially disrupts our daily life. In search for (new) meaning, the social environment, friends, and family are essential (Jakoby, 2012).

These social ties are vital as they offer the possibility of understanding and consolation. In communication with others, the mixture of diverse emotions that the loss of a beloved person can evoke generates longer-term emotion regulatory processes in bereavement and ultimately may lead to coping efforts. As a part of this process, the ultimate goal for most is an amelioration of the enduring emotional stress as well as an end to or reduction of the intensive disruptions caused by the loss, e.g., changes in social roles, personal identity, economic situation, or familial configuration (Bonanno & Keltner, 2004; Lazarus, 1991; Neimeyer, 2006). It is here that sharing one's emotions is vital (Döveling, 2015a).

One notes that offline support groups have been a focus of research in diverse environments (c.f. Döveling, 2015a; Stylianos & Vachon,1993) and psychologists are also beginning to understand the potential therapeutic effects of online communication in personal empowerment for people in distress (cf. Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008). Yet, online communicative support of bereaved individuals in today's social media networks still leaves many questions unanswered. At the same time, bereaved individuals are increasingly turning to specially designed social networking sites when their social surroundings impose emotion rules (Döveling, 2015a; for the concept of emotion rules, see Hochschild, 1979) leading to disenfranchised emotions (Doka, 2008). As previous research shows: "A sense of diminished understanding in the offline surrounding thus causes a retreat to online communication" (Döveling, 2015a, p. 112).

As Ellison & boyd (2013, p. 74) define, these social networking sites are platforms, in which participants:

1. have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system provided data,
2. can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and
3. can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections of the site.

Such online sites may offer a beneficial alternative to traditional support channels, with people facing similar challenges and emotions exchanging not only information but communicating supportive messages in safe havens (Döveling, Hård af Segerstad, & Kasperowski, 2016). In light of this, this analysis provides findings into inherent interpersonal emotional exchange patterns in specifically designed bereavement platforms in Germany. Known from the field of psychoanalysis, writing about and venting individual distress aids in finding meaning by providing reciprocal compassion and engendering coping, thus successively decreasing psychological distress (cf. Pennebaker, 1997). These coping processes in bereavement are understood as:

> Processes, strategies, or styles of managing (reducing, mastering, tolerating) the situation in which bereavement places the individual. Coping is assumed to impact on adaptation to bereavement. (Stroebe & Schutt, 2010, p. 274)

To manage such situations, dynamic interpersonal and intrapersonal emotion regulation processes come into play (Döveling, 2015a; Rimé, 2007). These include conscious or unconscious strategies that modify the emotional burden of bereavement. As Gross (2008, p. 500) has found, emotion regulation may not only be caused by situation selection or situation modification. In such permanently altered situations as the loss of a loved one, an "attentional deployment" is essential (Döveling 2015a, p. 110). Facilitating an attentional shift and focusing of attention can thus influence emotions. These processes are directly linked with cognitive change and response modulation.

One mechanism in emotion regulation may be to compare one's experience and situation with those of others. Social comparison theory tells us that humans compare their feelings, values, and behaviors with the feelings, values, and behaviors of others (Festinger, 1954; Schachter, 1959; Suls & Wills, 1991; Wheeler, 1991). In the context of this study, it should be stressed that this comparison does not only refer to cognitive processes and situations, but that emotional processes are vital in social comparison (cf. Schachter, 1959; see Tesser, 2001). The central idea is that people in social interactions compare themselves with other people, mainly through:

1. Upward social comparison: This refers to comparisons with positive others, their feelings, and behaviors, which may help, as others may serve as role models. This comparison plays a central role in learning processes within human socialization.

2. Downward social comparison: Choosing persons with whom to compare ourselves who are less well-off, less successful, or unhappy (Wills, 1981) may help as a coping strategy—by empathizing with someone else's unpleasant situation and contrasting it with our own, we feel better in return; this may also lead to an improvement of one's own self-esteem.

Wills has noted that the analysis of downward comparison is quite complex and must differentiate between "fate similarity," "future similarity," and "personality similarity" (1991, p. 72). The result of the comparison process will vary, depending on how these three dimensions are assessed. In this framework, Tesser (1991, p. 141) emphasized that social comparison processes might threaten one's self-assessment, but may also prompt a boost in self-esteem, leading to positive emotions.

Sullins (1991) disclosed a link between social comparison and interpersonal communication as well as emotional contagion processes and stressed that communication is one of the most influential means for all sorts of social changes. Furthermore, Wills pointed out:

> A solution to this problem is to compare oneself with another person who is worse off; the favorable comparison between the self and the less fortunate other enables a person to feel better about his or her own situation. (Wills, 1981, p. 245)

Moreover, as known from offline bereavement literature, emotion regulation in bereavement is a non-linear process. The dual process model of coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010) identifies two types of stressors related to bereavement: loss-oriented stressors and restoration-oriented stressors and emphasizes an oscillation between the two poles. Loss orientation characterizes a

> person's concentration on, appraising and processing of some aspect of the loss experience itself and as such, [incorporating] grief work. It involves a painful dwelling on, even searching for the lost person, a phenomenon that lies at the heart of grieving. (Stroebe & Schutt, 2010, p. 277)

The other pole of restoration orientation, is to be seen as

> [t]he focus on secondary stressors that are also consequences of bereavement, reflecting a struggle to reorient oneself in a changed world without the deceased person. (Stroebe & Schutt, 2010, p. 277)

At the same time, in the context of online social support, Barak et al. (2008, p. 1869) found that classical

> [o]nline support groups might be considered a possible supplement to more traditional professional treatment; their contribution lies more in affecting people's general well-being than causing therapeutic change.

Thus, this article scrutinizes the diverse restorative effects of shared-online bereavement, in fostering personal empowerment (cf. Barak et al., 2008) and engendering meaning (cf. Neimeyer, 2000, 2016; Neimeyer & Sands, 2011) in coping processes. The analysis does not neglect the constant sense of loss that is felt by the bereaved (Stroebe & Schutt, 2010); yet it shows that the bereaved can write about various feelings in a "safe room" online without fear of rejection, thus fostering emotion regulation, which engenders healing processes through situational reappraisal and acceptance enablement. Little is known, however, about the effect of age (Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011) within these communicative processes online. Therefore, a look into findings of what influences emotion regulation offline will provide insights relevant to the discussion.

## Emotion Regulation Offline

In regards to the offline world, it seems there is abundant research on emotion regulation and specific variables. Owen, Fulton, and Markusen (1982) disclosed that children's age and that of the parent, as well as the closeness of their relationship, are imperative variables influencing the coping process in bereavement. The main point here is that the stronger the bond with a parent or other loved one, the greater and more distressing the loss. Sprang and McNeal (1995) emphasized that distress in young children may be manifested in their play as well as in recurring nightmares. Balk (2009, p. 17) found that death has "cascading effects" on adolescents that may impede their entire further development. McCarthy (2009, p. 25) has stressed the importance of social bonds and the sense of reality that is at stake, and that bereavement includes psychological as well as social aspects, which frame the experience; positioning it in a context by means of the support of others is crucial. In finding a meaning for the loss, and regaining a sense of self, the social environment is essential (McCarthy, 2009).

Likewise, analysis of post-traumatisms in children (Feather & Ronan, 2010) shows that the relief that is felt after communicating about a traumatic event is based on its function of allowing the child to "work through and understand what has happened to them" (Lewis, 1999, p. 53). Thus, the social environment is the essential key in supporting children and young adolescents in emotion regulation. However, what are the differences between child and adult bereavement? How does age affect online bereavement strategies?

With regard to age in offline emotion regulation, Garnefski and Kraaij (2006) found that adolescents had lower scores on cognitive emotion regulation strategies than adults, which led them to the conclusion that the extent of use for both in emotion regulation strategies shows an increase from adolescence to adulthood (p. 1667). Furthermore, studies have suggested that age differences in emotion regulation in people's reactions to negative events disclose advantages for older adults; older adults report better control over their emotional states than do younger people (Charles & Carstensen, 2007).

Other findings have underscored distress differences in response to major life events, including coping with the loss of physical health and social ties (Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, & Novacek, 1987; Lichtenstein, Gatz, Pedersen, & Berg, 1996), showing that older adults report less negative reactivity than younger adults. In regards to spousal bereavement, older adults perceive less distress than younger, middle-aged adults when faced with the loss of their spouses (Lichtenstein et al., 1996).

This is in line with a growing body of research indicating that older individuals experience less negative emotions and demonstrate a comparable or even higher level of positive emotions. Furthermore, older persons are better able to control their emotions than younger people (Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000; Lawton, Kleban, Rajagopal, & Dean, 1992; Röcke, Li, & Smith, 2009). Correspondingly, Yeung, Wong, and Lok (2011) have explained age variation in positive emotions in terms of the greater use of cognitive reappraisal mechanisms among older adults compared to their younger counterparts. Likewise, Orgeta (2009) reported that older adults revealed more ability in engaging in emotionally goal-directed behavior and holding back from impulsive emotional reactions; she also found that with increasing age, greater access to emotion regulation strategies and greater clarity of emotions were generated.

Analyzing gender influences in depression, Nolen-Hoeksema and Aldao (2011) examined offline emotion regulation strategies with a focus on rumination, suppression, reappraisal, problem-solving, acceptance, and social support. Their study investigated the differences between men and women; and between young, middle, and older age adults; and the relationships between the use of these strategies and depressive symptoms. They revealed that women were more likely than men to engage in several different emotion regulation strategies. The authors indicated that most strategies lessened with age, with two exceptions: (1) use of suppression increased with age for women, but not for men, and (2) use of acceptance did not decrease with age for women. Additionally, maladaptive strategies were associated with more depressive symptoms in all age groups and both genders. Moreover, Thayer, Rossy, Ruiz-Padial, and Johnsen (2003, p. 349) emphasized that "reports of gender differences in depressive symptoms are one of the most pervasive findings in the literature." Findings have suggested that women use rumination more as a coping style and this is related to greater depressive symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema, Morrow, & Fredrickson, 1993). Prolonged strain and rumination seem to be interrelated in feedback processes. Likewise, Thayer et al. (2003) found that highly depressed women displayed more attention to emotions and reduced anti-rumination emotional repair strategies than did men with high depressive symptoms. Furthermore, various studies have emphasized that women have a greater capacity to recognize, express, and interpret emotions; have more complex emotional structures; and use subtle differences to engage in emotional judgments (e.g., Feldmann Barrett et al., 2000; Thayer et al., 2003).

In this regard, Martinez-Pons (1997) stressed that attention to one's emotions is the first stage in emotional regulation, as it enables knowledge of one's emotions and consequently the ability to moderate one's emotional responses and potentially change negative emotional states. Thayer et al. (2003) provided evidence of both

the repeatedly reported gender difference in depressive symptoms and the frequently stated greater emotional sensitivity in women and argues that the two phenomena are related (see also Martin & Doka, 2000).

Based on the above findings that highlight gender as well as age-specific emotion regulation in the offline world, the analysis laid out here scrutinizes whether age and gender-specific emotion regulation online reveals parallel differences or similarities and whether the sharing of emotions depends on the kind of loss.

## Method of Study

Based on the aforementioned findings and extending the analysis, this investigation of digitally mediated grieving and memorializing scrutinizes the following questions:

1. To what extent do online emotion regulatory processes differ depending on the age of the bereaved?
2. Does the type of loss (bereaved parents grieving over the loss of their child; bereaved children and adolescents suffering the loss of a parent; widows grieving over the loss of a spouse) reveal different emotions online? If so, how?

The principle hypotheses, based on the theoretical background and findings acknowledged and laid out above, were:

$H_1$: Online social comparison as cognitive reappraisal in emotional regulation is used more by adults and engenders feelings of relief.

Post-traumatic children, it has been suggested, express relief after communicating about their traumatic event (Feather & Ronan, 2010; Lewis, 1999, p. 53), which leads to the second hypothesis:

$H_2$: Children who lost a parent disclose more despair online than bereaved of other age groups, and articulate a higher lack of support in the offline world.

In line with the principal research questions, an extensive quantitative content analysis of postings (N = 1036) shared on four large online social networking platforms for grieving in Germany from April 2015 to October 2015 was conducted. The sample consisted of a platform for widowers, Verwitwet Forum (VW), N = 208; a platform for parents who have lost a child, Maximilian Project (MP), N = 304; one for adolescents who have lost a parent, YoungWings (YW), N = 309; and one for children who have lost a parent, Elternlos (ELS), N = 215. Each posting was coded by at least two coders, in order to ensure inter-coder reliability. The social networking platforms that were examined were all specially designed online sites for mourners as laid out above. Due to their nonrestrictive visibility, compliance for scientific

**Table 1**
**Gender in Bereavement Platforms (in %)**

| | YW | Els | VF | MP | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female | **70.2** | **67.4** | **95.7** | **96.4** | **82.4** |
| Male | 1.9 | 10.2 | 3.8 | 3.0 | 4.3 |
| Unknown | 27.8 | 22.3 | 0.5 | 0.7 | 13.2 |
| Total | Total children & adolesc. *n* = 524, 50.6% | | Total adults *n* = 512, 49.6% | | |

*Note*. YW = Youngs Wings; Els = Elternlos; VF = Verwitwet Forum; MP = Maximilian Projekt.

research was not needed. The content analysis provided a complete, unbiased sample and recorded the manifest content in a quantitative, systematic, and inter-subjective way. In accord with the theoretical background and research questions laid out above, the principal aspects of the textual material were scrutinized. The selection of these particular bereavement networks was based on the finding that they are the largest such platforms in Germany for the respective age groups of mourners. They addressed adults (widowers, VW), parents who suffered the loss of a child (MP), adolescents who lost a parent (YW), and children who lost a parent (ELS). In addition, the selected platforms revealed the most active users, which ensured topicality and correctness of data; moreover, these platforms were significantly more used especially by female bereaved (see Table 1).

The emotions were defined and operationalized. Empathy was coded as a universal feeling of understanding and experience of similarity, a feeling of community as a common ground based on emotional resemblance and compassionate concern. Despair was defined as an emotional state disclosing total hopelessness. Relief was understood as resulting from a change of emotional state from negative to positive that engenders alleviation.

## Results

As Table 2 reveals, the overall predominant aspect in all exchange platforms was empathy (39.0%), with the highest score in the platform for widowers (79.8% in VF). Additionally, when focusing on the individual platforms, the online social network for adolescents disclosed foremost relief (YW 14.2%) while despair was articulated in the social networking site for children (ELS 53.5%).

As the table also reveals, all platforms were used significantly more by female bereaved. Thus, online bereavement seems to be a female matter. Women and girls engage actively in all platforms and share their emotions online.

These findings highlight one central feature in all communicative patterns. Mourners share and exchange despair in grief and communicate empathy. This

**Table 2**
**Emotions in Bereavement Platforms (in %)**

| | YW | Els | VF | MP | Total | CV |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Despair | 12.6 | **53.5** | 31.7 | 34.9 | 31.5 | 0.314* |
| | Total children & adolesc. *n* = 154, 29.4% | | Total adults ***n* = 172, 33.6%** | | | |
| Relief | **14.2** | 23.7 | 51.0 | 25.3 | 26.8 | 0.292* |
| | Total children & adolesc. *n* = 95, 18.1% | | Total adults ***n* = 183, 35.7%** | | | |
| Empathy | 13.3 | 39.1 | **79.8** | **37.2** | **39.0** | 0.473* |
| | Total children & adolesc. *n* = 125, 23.9% | | Total adults ***n* = 279, 54.5%** | | | |

*Note*. YW = Youngs Wings; Els = Elternlos; VF = Verwitwet Forum; MP = Maximilian Projekt; CV = Cramer-V.*$p < 0.001$, highly significant.

result also demonstrates that platforms for children (ELS) displayed the highest scores on despair, while the platform for adolescents (YW) indicated the sharing of more relief online (14.2%). When comparing emotions by platform, it needs to be noted that the social network sites for parents who have lost a child (MP) shows an almost even share of despair, relief, and empathy, with empathy being the most frequently shared emotion (37.2%). It thus seems that adults reveal more empathy, and young children who have lost a parent more despair online (53.5% in ELS). The results reflect that the death of a parent clearly leads to enormous distress and despair. Children are found to articulate such loss-related emotions online. This finding is crucial, especially with respect to what it suggests about the role of social support, namely that children and adolescents articulate a lack of social support in the offline world (see Table 3).

Addressing the first research question, specifically the hypothesis that online social comparison as cognitive reappraisal in emotional regulation is used more by adults and engenders feelings of relief; the results show that acute despair was articulated on all platforms together with relief and empathy, which are the predominant emotions in all such social networking sites (see Table 2). The findings also reveal the acuteness of emotions caused by the loss of a loved one, an event that disrupts daily life in a dramatic way. Furthermore, the focal point is that comparing one's experience to that of the other was vital and is linked to relief. Focusing on age-dependent social comparison, the findings show that both children and adolescents (43.3% in ELS and 12.9% in YW) and adults (25.0% in VF and 45.1% in MP) use horizontal social comparison (see Table 4). Thus, the findings disclose active emotion regulation online, guided by an attentional shift: The focus of attention turning

**Table 3.**
**Social Support in Offline World (if Mentioned; in %)**

| | YW | Els | VF | MP | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social Support | 5.2 | 12.1 | **23.1** | **27.6** | **16.8** |
| | Total childr. & adolesc. *n* = 42, 8.0% | | Total adults ***n* = 132, 25.8%** | | |
| No Social Support | **11.0** | **22.3** | 8.7 | 12.2 | 13.2 |
| | Total childr. & adolesc. ***n* = 82, 15.6%** | | Total adults *n* = 55, 10.7% | | |

*Note*. YW = Youngs Wings; Els = Elternlos; VF = Verwitwet Forum; MP = Maximilian Projekt. Cramer-V 0.203; $p < 0.001$, highly significant.

**Table 4**
**Social Comparison in Bereavement Platforms (in %)**

| | YW | Els | VF | MP | Total | CV |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Upward social comparison | 3.6 | 11.6 | 3.4 | 7.9 | 6.5 | 0.132* |
| | Total children & adolesc. ***n* = 36, 6.9%** | | Total adults *n* = 31, 6.1% | | | |
| Downward social comparison | 5.8 | 8.4 | 0.0 | 2.3 | 4.2 | 0.150* |
| | Total childr. & adolesc. ***n* = 36, 6.9%** | | Total adults *n* = 7, 1.4% | | | |
| Horizontal social comparison | **12.9** | **43.3** | **25.0** | **45.1** | **30.9** | 0.307* |
| | Total children & adolesc. *n* = 131, 25.0% | | Total adults ***n* = 189, 36.9%** | | | |

*Note*. YW = Youngs Wings; Els = Elternlos; VF = Verwitwet Forum; MP = Maximilian Projekt; CV = Cramer-V.*$p < 0.001$, highly significant.

toward the other in search of help was directly linked with response modulation in a process of comparison of one's own experience of loss versus that of the other as highlighted in the second hypothesis. Thus, social comparison plays a vital role in all communication patterns. In addition, horizontal comparison, understood as a non-judgmental comparison of similar experiences, is the most widely used communication pattern online in all platforms (see Table 4).

Turning to the first hypothesis, the findings reveal that for widows who compare themselves with others who also lost a spouse, relief is engendered (see Table 5, 56.9%). Also, as seen in Table 5 in the social network for adults, the score is higher than those for children and adolescents, with social comparison leading to relief (29.4%). Thus, the first hypothesis is confirmed: Online social comparison as cognitive reappraisal in emotional regulation is used more by adults and engenders feelings of relief.

The analysis reveals age-specific emotion regulation patterns that correspond to the body of literature pertaining to adults' more effective use of emotion regulation techniques.

Addressing the second research question, regarding potential differences depending on type of loss, the data clearly reveal that it is mostly young mourners who have lost a parent that suffer from despair and an absence of social support. The young mourners articulate the lack of social support in the offline world in their communication, whereas in both platforms for adults, mourners reveal that they receive social support (see Table 3).

The second hypothesis, which states that children who lost a parent disclose more despair online than other age groups and express a higher lack of support in the offline world, is also confirmed. Here, the data suggest that the online world is more vital in finding social support for young bereaved who disclose a lack thereof in their social surroundings. This is also relevant to findings (Owen et al., 1982) that have shown that children's age as well as the closeness of relationship to their parents are crucial variables influencing the coping process in bereavement. As shown, the younger the bereaved, the more despair is articulated. This corresponds to findings on offline emotion regulation and has to be interpreted, based on the close bonds that young children in particular feel with their parents.

Intriguingly, in contrast, on both adult social networking platforms the bereaved articulate that they receive social support offline. The bereaved who lost a spouse disclosed that the social surrounding was supportive (VF 23.1%) and parents who lost a child (MP 27.6%) stressed that they sense support offline as well. Thus, this leads to the conclusion that for adults such social networking sites are used as a complement to offline support, whereas for young mourners they are primarily used to obtain the needed support online that is lacking offline.

## Summary of Findings, Discussion, Limitations, and Implications

The findings above disclose a common pattern for all bereaved. Bereaved individuals compare themselves and their experiences with others online in a horizontal, nonjudgmental way. Adults were the most active and articulate in social comparisons and displayed the greatest feeling of relief thereafter (see Table 5). Yet, the findings also disclose age-dependent differences. The older bereaved seem to use beneficial emotion regulation patterns online, comparing themselves horizontally more than younger bereaved, while at the same time obtaining more social support

**Table 5**
**Emotions of Relief Revealed When Socially Compared to Others (in %)**

| | Social Comparison | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No Comparison | Comparison | Total | |
| | Total ($n$ = 651)<br>YW ($n$ = 249)<br>Els ($n$ = 101)<br>ch. & ad. ($n$ = 350)<br>MP ($n$ = 151)<br>VF ($n$ = 150)<br>adults ($n$ = 301) | Total ($n$ = 385)<br>YW ($n$ = 60)<br>Els ($n$ = 114)<br>ch. & ad. ($n$ = 174)<br>MP ($n$ = 153)<br>VF ($n$ = 58)<br>adults ($n$ = 211) | Total ($n$ = 1036)<br>YW ($n$ = 309)<br>Els ($n$ = 215)<br>ch. & ad. ($n$ = 524)<br>MP ($n$ = 304)<br>VF ($n$ = 208)<br>adults ($n$ = 512) | |
| *Emotions of Relief* | | | | CV |
| Total | 23.5 | **32.5** | 26.8 | 0.098* |
| YW | 12.4 | 21.7 | 14.2 | 0.104 |
| Els | 16.8 | 29.8 | 23.7 | 0.152* |
| ch. & ad. | 13.7 | 27.0 | 18.1 | |
| MP | 21.2 | **29.4** | 25.3 | 0.095 |
| VF | 48.7 | **56.9** | 51.0 | 0.074 |
| Adults | 34.9 | 37.0 | 35.7 | |

*Note.* YW = Youngs Wings; Els = Elternlos; MP = Maximilian Projekt; VF = Verwitwet Forum; CV = Cramer-V.*$p < 0.05$, significant.

offline and articulating less despair than bereaved of a younger age. Furthermore, older adults who have lost a spouse disclose more empathy online. In light of this, the findings reveal not only a difference in emotions between adults and young mourners, depending on the type of loss, but also similarities as well as differences in patterns of coping online. The differences found are directly relevant to and confirm the literature on emotion regulation offline. Yet, a new intriguing finding is that online social comparison processes in bereavement do not vary as much as originally presumed. Contrary to findings that comparing oneself upward and downward, relieves one's burden, the findings of online emotion regulation reported in this study suggest that the bereaved compare their situations and feelings horizontally, not judgmentally upwards or downwards. The mutual ground is emphasized, not one's better or worse situation.

Furthermore, taking into account that the social networking platforms examined are mostly used by females, the phenomena seem to be gender-specific (see Table 1). Women and girls actively use specific social networking sites for help in an active emotion regulatory way. This corresponds to the literature on offline emotion regulation revealing that women are more likely than men to engage in several different emotion regulation strategies. By going online, girls and women actively manage their despair through an attentional shift and problem solving in online interaction.

The analysis scrutinizes a new topic of research in the field of communication analysis and media psychology. On one hand, the communication discloses a new finding, as well as an under researched topic of horizontal social comparison, which enables relief and support across platforms. A virtual shelter is generated within online interactions on bereavement platforms (Döveling et al., 2016). On the other hand, the communicative patterns identified revealed age-dependent specifics such as the verbalization of social support, and disclosed differences in emotion regulation depending on type of loss. Furthermore, the underlying common pattern in online interaction, irrespective of age, is the need to feel understood. Empathic reactions online thus ameliorate distressing moments of solitude. Hence, online communication relating to loss-related emotions bears the potential for restorative actions and can be a vital source for recovery in traumatic, distressing events. The study also showed that online bereavement forums in Germany are actively used predominately by female bereaved, who engage in effective patterns of emotion regulation. Some limitations of this study need to be taken into account. Methodologically, the challenge in online communication is always the fact that user participation is anonymous. Therefore, it was not possible to clearly identify each posting as originating from a female or a male writer. Nevertheless, the combination of previous qualitative results with the quantitative analysis enabled an identification of variables that disclose vital results and implications for communication studies and media psychology as well as health communication. Future research ought to scrutinize the diversity of topics of discussion within the various message threads and include their functions on the individual. By generating further insight into communicative patterns, we can better understand how online bereavement can be a beneficial and supportive resource for the bereaved. In addition,

differences and similarities between the various social networking sites need to be understood not only in regards to age, kind of loss and gender groups. Factors such as the option in bereavement platforms to use private chatrooms or closed Facebook groups (Giaxoglou, 2014; Hård af Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2015) might influence the interactive communication in open discussions and need to be equally understood. In addition, cross cultural analysis promises further insight into culturally dependent as well as independent variables. In sum, this analysis provides insightful findings into emotion regulation online, a new and promising field of research that bears fruitful potential for further investigation in a broader cross-cultural perspective.

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# Bereaved Parents' Online Grief Communities: De-Tabooing Practices or Relation-Building Grief-Ghettos?

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NETWORKED EMOTIONS

# Bereaved Parents' Online Grief Communities: De-Tabooing Practices or Relation-Building Grief-Ghettos?

**Dorthe Refslund Christensen, Ylva Hård af Segerstad, Dick Kasperowski, and Kjetil Sandvik**

*This article presents results from case studies of online grief communities for bereaved parents in Denmark and Sweden, analyzing how development of practices and norms for grieving and mourning online are related to the conditions for participation in the online forums, and to dominant ideas of grief in society as such. Rooted in contemporary research on grief and mourning, we discuss practices of tabooization, de-tabooization, or even re-tabooization in the different online forums and how norms and traditions are performed, challenged, and negotiated in the various formats.*

## Introduction: Shifting Grief Paradigms and Tabooization

Studying bereaved parents' *grief work* (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Lindemann, 1944: Rando, 1985; 1986; Stroebe, Shut, & Stroebe, 2005) in dynamic communities online enhances

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our understanding of contemporary grief work (the ways in which people deal with the strong emotions in relations to suffering loss of loved ones) and contributes to a nuanced theoretical understanding of parental grief. Knowledge about experiences among community members may enable us to discuss hypothetically whether these practices lead to a softening of prejudices against mourners, i.e., de-tabooing the loss of a child, or if they lead to new biases and misconceptions as displayed in popular media (often fueled by layman understandings of Kübler-Ross' (1969) stage model and the idea that grief processes are confined to a specific time-frame), casting online communities for bereaved parents as *grief-ghettos* (Christensen, Hård af Segerstad, Kasperowski, & Sandvik, 2015).

While most people still share the mundane idea of grief, that its endpoint is to let go of the dead and move on in life, both the practices we are empirically observing and discuss in the present article, as well as research within death sociology (cf. Walter, 1999) and palliative care (Stroebe et al., 2005; Taubert, Watts, Boland, & Radbruch, 2014) have moved towards a more nuanced and more profound understanding of grief processes not merely as a matter of "letting go of the relations to the deceased" and "moving on" in life, but rather "keeping hold" as a basic condition for moving on. In the logic of this new *continuing bonds* paradigm, grieving is not time-specific (a period of mourning), but rather *a mode of being* re-occurring with various intensities and durations in the continued life of the bereaved (Christensen & Sandvik, 2016).

Through our work during the last decade, we have observed significant changes when it comes to practices related to grief work expressed in support groups (offline as well as online) and on online memorial sites and other online forums and maybe most visibly when it comes to the graves of stillborn and children who died very young. Children's graves are, contrary to adult graves (most prominently graves for people dying of age), *not* places of rest but of continued life, of parental loving and caring, which necessitates new communicational practices (Christensen & Sandvik, 2014). Parents' performances in, e.g., closed support groups on social media are—similarly—paving the way for new practices addressing the silence and tabooization surrounding the death of a child (cf. Hård af Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2015, p. 39).

Klass, Silverman, & Nickman (1996) introduced the concept of "continuing bonds," proposing that the continuing bond that the bereaved maintain with the deceased is an adaptive part of the grieving process (Scholtes & Browne, 2014). Even though this new grief paradigm has been around for a couple of decades (Klass et al., 1996) and seems to match actual bereavement experiences accounted for in various empirical studies, the "letting-go and moving-on" paradigm is still prevalent. Continued connections with the deceased is regarded as an abnormal way to deal with bereavement (Scholtes & Browne, 2014), and this view is still the standard interpretation in the latest *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder 5th edition, DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). According to DSM-5, it is now possible to diagnose bereavement as a major depressive disorder if symptoms persist more than two weeks. In her research on parental bereavement, Rando (1985; 1986) was one of the first researchers to challenge the prevailing thought regarding emotional detachment from the bereaved. Rando found that the bereavement

experience that was considered abnormal or labeled as "unresolved" grief was actually a part of most parents' experiences.

However, we still find research particularly within the fields of psychology and palliative care in which continuing bonds and performing parenthood and practices relating to *living with the dead* are being contradicted by concepts such as problematic grief and unhealthy mourning, often with reference to Freud's concept of melancholia (see, e.g., Cherny, Fallon, Kaasa, Portenoy, & Currow, 2015, p. 346). Furthermore, we find that in academic and journalistic writing as well as in general understandings of death, dying, and bereavement, we have not yet moved beyond the influential stage model-based understanding of grief (cf. Kübler-Ross, 1969; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1994) that implies that first comes grief, then comes the everyday. We will suggest that this "old" letting-go paradigm conditions tabooization, while the continuing bonds paradigm may enable a more open approach to parents losing a child and their needs for performing parenthood and communicating about their child in present and not only past tense, even though these potentially de-tabooization strategies also may facilitate re-tabooizations as we will explain in the following section.

The grief practices we present in this article reflect the continuing bonds paradigm in the sense that the parents we are investigating are all engaged in grief work; mourning their dead children. What is very clear from the different types of material that we have studied is that a very central part of their grief work is constituted by sharing and exchanging strategies, practices, and thoughts with peers concerning how to keep the child present; of how to live on while keeping the dead child in one's life. At the same time, the material also makes us question, how, and even if, the paradigm is embedded in the general societal response to child death, as well as within the grief communities themselves.

One way of approaching this might be through the concept of *taboo*. It's a common saying that death is a taboo in late modernity, however, this might be conveyed more accurately by stating that death, in every culture and epoch, has always been a taboo; what has changed in contemporary Western, Protestant culture is the societal responses to death in general and to the dead in particular—or, maybe rather—the *lack of* such collective responses. Let us look into this briefly:

Within anthropology and the phenomenology of religion, a *taboo* (from Tongan *tapu* or Fijian *tabu* ("prohibited," "disallowed," "forbidden"; Dixon, 1988, p. 368) denotes a prohibition of performing certain actions; speaking of certain subjects; of going certain places (otherwise normal) based on the belief that certain places are sacred or accursed and that it is dangerous to approach them. Following a taboo, a number of modifying actions are provided, that is, culturally embedded actions that can be performed in order to meet the challenges or dangers from the taboo: spatial and temporal practices or rituals; social, moral, and emotional regulations, rules of conduct based on central, religious, cultural, and communal norms and values.

As Walter (1999), among others, has pointed out, a number of developments in Western Protestant society throughout the last couple of hundred years has led to a shift in responses to death and bereavement where "socially required mourning [regulated in a number of ways such as formalized mourning periods, prescribed

practices of condolences etc.] has given way to privately experienced grief" (Walter, 1999, p. 131) where everybody has to find his or her own ways. In other words taboos of death and bereavement endure, but actions to meet such tabooing are no longer a communal issue. Moreover, most people's first hand encounters with death have diminished: while most of us experience the death of others through fiction and media, due to the progresses of, for instance, public health systems, people live longer and child mortality rates have decreased radically (see Jacobsen 2016). Death as an integrated part of basic human reality has thus been marginalized.

In this light, it might be productive to consider parents' grief work in various support groups as de-tabooing practices. Using Catherine Squires' concept from her theory on various kinds of publics (Squires, 2002), parents, in the online grief support groups that we have studied form social *enclaves*, where they can experiment and negotiate meaning in a safe social environment without being contested by the public. Enclaves might develop into *counter*-publics, "which can engage in debate with wider publics to test ideas" (Squires, 2002, p. 448), however the communities we have studied do not necessarily seem to have ambitions beyond the personal level and thereby do not contribute to a de-tabooization. In fact, these groups might themselves contribute to a confirmation of present taboos because they confirm the segregation of grief practices and society, and furthermore, by adding new restrictions on how grief can be shared even in a peer-to-peer support group, especially in closed groups with a high level of moderation.

The focus of this article is to display and analyze two co-existing logics in bereaved parents' uses of online media for communicating about their dead child, the sense of loss and pain, the role as parents and so on; one of these constitutes closed communities with their own rules of conduct, their own norms, vocabularies, and aesthetics of grief practices; the other constitutes communicational practices insisting on re-claiming the public sphere as a place for communicating about death, loss, and processes of grief.

In the next section, we will present analytical examples from our case studies of online grief support communities for bereaved parents in Denmark and Sweden, introduced with a brief overview of the methods and material constituting our respective studies.

## Analytical Examples of Tabooing/De-Tabooing

*Methodological Remarks*. The material analyzed in this article is taken from different types of resources for grief support for bereaved parents online in Sweden and Denmark. These online resources have different conditions for participation, for example in being open vs closed, but the main function of grief support for coping with the loss of a child is the same. The Swedish data were gathered by Hård af Segerstad and Kasperowski, and Christensen and Sandvik collected data from Danish contexts. Hård af Segerstad and Kasperowski have studied a closed grief support group on Facebook since 2012. Data consist of surveys and interviews with members and administrators in the community, observations of the postings in the group, as

well as close analysis of postings of particular relevance for the present article. All data collection has been subject to informed consent and anonymization.

Christensen and Sandvik have conducted field study observations of the open-access Web site Mindet.dk since 2008 with a special focus on the memorial pages for dead children and stillborns and the related practices, debates, and exchanges of the parents throughout the years. During the same period, they have conducted field observations and photo documentation of a number of children's graves at a Danish Cemetery (Nordre Kirkegård, Aarhus) as well as informal conversations and interviews with bereaved parents.

*The Closed Community: Vi Som Förlorat Barn*. Our first analytical example is taken from a closed community online for bereaved parents in Sweden. This case illustrates practices that are associated both with de-tabooization and tabooization of expressions of grief.

The closed community is the Facebook presence of the Swedish peer grief support association *Vi Som Förlorat Barn* (in translation, literally, *We Who Have Lost A Child/Children*). The Facebook community was established in April 2011 by the physical grief support association. It is maintained and moderated by administrators and prospective members have to apply to them to get access. A necessary condition for participation is that all members share the experience of having lost one or several children. Before admitting new members, the administrators make certain that applicants are in fact bereaved parents due to having previous bad experience of trolls and impostors trying to get access. Only after this process are the members admitted and able to read, post, and interact in the group. This community now has around 1,500 members (as of August 2016) that actively interact. In the closed group we find a great diversity of experiences and stages of grief. Among the members, the loss of children of all ages and from all conceivable causes are represented, spanning as little as only a few days up to 40 years since the loss. The community also encompasses a wide range of demographic backgrounds with geographic representation across Sweden.

Members of the community acknowledge that important functionalities of the online group is the closed nature, the wealth of experiences shared, and the possibility of constant and immediate access through digital and mobile technologies. The affordances of social media become vital resources for their coping with grief (Hård af Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2014; 2015).

Surveys, interviews with members and administrators as well as content from the interaction in the Facebook group show that bereaved parents regard the closed community as a safe haven which is crucial to them as a resource for coping with their grief (Hård af Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2014; 2015). In this sense it can be compared to the positive connotations of a ghetto from the perspective of its inhabitants. In the group, the bereaved parents are allowed to express parental care and continue bonds with their deceased children, for as long as they wish and in ways that would not be acceptable outside of the community. This aspect is repeatedly expressed by our respondents.

> It is closed and there you can spew out exactly everything; there you are allowed (Interview 1).

> [In the community I get] Understanding that no other than us who have lost children can have. We understand each other and can write about anything we feel like. It also happens very often that one gets an eye-opener, something that had not been thought of before. Consolation of sharing the grief. (Survey)

The closed nature of the community and the shared experiences of its members make them feel secure in posting status updates concerning their dead children, their grief and despair. For most of the members, the closed community seems to function as a safe haven, in which norms and practices are different compared to what is accepted in the majority culture, such as sharing photos of your dead child.

> [The community is] A breathing hole. I can say what I want and not risk being judged. It is also a relief to know that there are others sharing a similar experience. (Survey)

However much the norms in the closed community differ from the majority culture norms for the expressions of grief are from time to time explicitly negotiated within the group. An example of this is an episode of intense and heated debate which occurred in the fall of 2015, originating from the posting of a photo of a deceased child. Photos of deceased children are by no means uncommon within the closed community, and debates on whether or not this should be allowed have occurred previously, but according to the administrators seldom with this "intensity and bitterness." The controversy was stirred by a photo of a child on its deathbed posted by a newly bereaved parent who had recently become a member in the community. The photo was a close-up portrait of the face of the dead child in isolation, accompanied by a lengthy text in which the bereaved parent shared their story. In the text, the parent described newfound religious beliefs, and expressed hope that they will meet again ("[my child] has just traveled before me"). This can be interpreted as an expression of continuing bonds. At the same time the posting is also a test of what is allowed to share within the group, as the parent ends with an expression of hope that s/he would not be "expelled" by the community for sharing the photo and the thoughts. The posting resulted in 105 comments, the majority of which consisted of compassionate comments, support, and recognition. However, it seems that the photo was what sparked the debate. In comments to the posting, a few members explicitly objected to the photo saying that they did not want to see pictures of dead children as this practice "stirs up memories that I don't want to be brought back." Whether or not it should be allowed to share photos of dead children was intensely debated in several separate postings during the days that followed. The reactions to the photo and its accompanying text illustrate diametrically different standpoints. For some members the practice of sharing photos of dead children is what makes the community a safe haven (in the positive sense of a ghetto) different

from the rest of the world, while others regarded the same practice as making it impossible for them to use the community as a secure resource. As an analytical example, from the perspective of continuing bonds, this episode of heated debate thus illustrates practices of both tabooization and de-tabooization. The dispute took place both "frontstage," to use Goffman's concept (Goffman, 1959), in comments to the original post and in new separate postings on this topic, as well as "backstage," through messages from individual members directed to the administrators. The debate threatened to dissolve the function of the closed group as a safe haven for bereaved parents, and led to several members leaving the closed group. The moderators in the group tried to calm things down, referring to rules of conduct set by the grief support association which is maintaining the community. The discussion was finally put to an end by the moderators stating that any post or comment not respecting the norms would be deleted.

The case illustrates that norms and practices associated both with de- and re-tabooization of expressions of grief are from time to time negotiated in the community ("But where if not in here [in the closed group] in here we must respect each other despite different views on things, as long as you don't cross the line"). It should be pointed out, however, that opinions that are opposed to sharing certain expressions of grief (thus in a sense "re-tabooing") are not representative of the majority in the community, even though these negotiations occur from time to time. A tentative speculation is that this depends on individual mourners and their individual experiences and conditions. In this study we have not saved any photos for analysis, but from our observations it seems that photos of dead children in isolation, as it were, are less acceptable than photos depicting dead children in their parents' arms, or showing other connection to the living by, for example, also depicting the hand of a sibling on the dead child thus, in a sense, manifesting a continuing bond with the deceased. Photos are rarely, if ever, posted in the group without accompanying text. Further analysis into photos of dead children and the texts accompanying them posted in the group might thus shed light on how norms are negotiated in a community.

As we have seen, some members expressed that they can share "anything" in the community. However, what constitutes "anything" here must be understood in relation to taboos encountered in the majority culture, for instance performing different expressions of continued parenthood. The negotiation of norms and practices can be described as boundary-work between the safe haven and the majority culture. Taboos that are upheld in the majority culture, in our case exemplified by sharing photos of deceased children—which is a practice that many members express as impossible to do outside the closed community—can in some instances simultaneously both threaten and enforce the practices of expressions of grief in the community.

As we have seen from the analytical examples from the closed Facebook group, practices of both de- and re-tabooization are negotiated from time to time. The closed group that has been studied here is to a large extent invisible to those who are not admitted as members. In fact, members have expressed this in terms of the community being "a club you don't want to be a member of." Members in this club, or inhabitants of the ghetto, as it were, perceive of it as a safe haven, while those that

the members describe as "unafflicted" (in Swedish: "odrabbad") perceive of the practices of continuing bonds as something problematic and unhealthy. Bereaved parents' practices can be seen as internally de-tabooing expressions of grief and continuing bonds within the community. Within the community, they are allowed to share things that they experience are not acceptable to be shared outside the group. However, in a larger perspective, consequences of compartmentalization of behavior might contribute to maintaining a tabooization in the long run, even though de-tabooization is also about the practitioners themselves learning to cope by sharing their grief.

The purpose of establishing the community was not explicitly to contribute to the de-tabooization of the grief of a child in the majority culture, even though such issues are sometimes independently pursued by individual members of the community. However, according to the rules of conduct set down by the grief association that maintains the group, these activities have to be pursued in other venues. The community was founded to meet the needs of bereaved parents who often experience a lack of social support and understanding of their situation in their everyday encounters. The function of the online community, which is to a large extent invisible to outsiders, is to provide a safe haven in which mourners can interact with peers and learn from the experience of one another. However, the grief support association maintaining the Facebook group are lobbying for the recognition of the needs of bereaved parents and a nuanced understanding that would lead to increased and relevant support from health care and social security systems. This ambition is not what drives the interaction in the online community. The members use the closed group as a resource to continue bonds, while simultaneously being in a surrounding environment that advocates letting go. However, many of the members also account for manifesting continuing bonds with their deceased children outside the Facebook community, both on- and offline, for example by way of maintaining blogs, memorial tattoos, or performing continued parenthood through decorations on children's graves.

Within the community we notice the practice of special language use to describe and talk about the deceased children to enhance the connectedness with peers in the group and to demarcate the difference from "outsiders." We see very frequent use of euphemisms to soften and make bearable the state as parents to children who have died, exemplified by expressions such as "änglamamma" or "änglaförälder" ("angel mother," "angel parent") or in referring to their children as now being "angels." We also find examples of euphemisms that are common in everyday language use, such as we found in the heated debate above: "[my child] has just traveled before me," rather than putting it harshly as "my child is dead." We see it in the reassurances to other grieving members in compassionate expressions such as "I'm sure that our sons are happy now playing together in the children's summer meadow" (in Swedish: "barnens sommaräng")." We also find expressions used to demarcate the difference between "us," i.e., "we who have the experience of having lost a child" and "them," by the use of neologisms such as "odrabbad" ("unafflicted"). Other new uses are "aldrigheten" ("never-ness") and "efterlivet" ("afterlife") to describe the irreversibility of death and life as it came to be after the death of one's child. By using special

language within the community, it seems that positive connotations of the "grief-ghetto" are enhanced and the connection and support between its members strengthened. Further studies of these practices would nuance the continuing bonds theory as well as our understanding of the continuous process of bereaved parents' grief work.

*Open Community: Mindet.dk.* Over the past 10–15 years a variety of open-access eb sites have appeared facilitating the process of grief and commemoration for people who have lost their loved ones (children, lovers, siblings, parents, friends). Social network sites such as MuchLoved, Forever Missed, and Gonetoosoon serve as platforms for individual performances of online bereavement practices and peer-to-peer support. Mindet.dk ("mindet" means "memory") is a Danish online memorial site (established in 2000 by a private person, in 2010 overtaken by a Danish newspaper, and in 2016 by a private company), in the same category as the above mentioned sites. Online memorial sites like Mindet.dk are to some extent closed because in order to have a memorial profile users need to register (and also pay), but as communities they are not closed like the Swedish Facebook group: they can be accessed by "outsiders" who can see the profiles, light candles, and actually also pose greetings in the diaries attached to each profile.

What we find, regardless of the site's open-access, is that Mindet.dk is conceived by its users as a marked place affording intimate relations among users and characterized by a solid and narrow social framing: a demarcation of an inside and an outside with certain social rules enforced inside and totally independent of physical proximity, though not independent of the perceived close proximity of the community. Statements like "on Facebook I live my life, in here I mourn" and "in here I can spend time with my dead child, outside I have to perform, e.g., an employee" demonstrate the importance of perceiving Mindet.dk as a segregated as well as a sacrilegious space in which bereaved parents can spend time engaging in their loss and processes of grief and commemoration in a compassionated and understanding community of peers. We find the same type of statements—almost verbatim—in the Swedish material.

Important functionalities constituting Mindet.dk as a grief community include the guestbook embedded in every memory profile for other members of the community to write greetings to the bereaved as well as to the dead, the "light-a-candle" function and the forum. The "light-a-candle" function may be used for short messages, such as the mother lighting a candle at bedtime for her dead child or another member of the Mindet.dk community sending a greeting on a red-letter day. The forum contains debates on a variety of topics dealing with loss and grief. This forum plays an important role in constituting Mindet.dk not just as a place for individuals' processes of grieving, but also as a place for peer-to-peer compassion and caring among people sharing similar experiences and going through the same processes of restoring meaning in one's life. The quality of Mindet.dk as an online community lies in its affordance as a forum in which bereaved parents with similar experiences can meet and communicate in the same "language" (as in the Swedish forum). They share the same mode of understanding in contrast to what is experienced from non-bereaved

people who often display a lack of understanding that a child is a child, connected to hopes and dreams and feeling of love, also when the child is stillborn; that the pain is devastatingly real even if "we did not have her," as one mother states. As stated by another mother of a stillborn daughter: "Mindet.dk has helped me finding someone to talk to—someone in the same situation as me. It is good to know that I am not the only one to feel loss and sorrow, and it is good to hear how others feel and how far they have come in their process of grief and be able to help them" (Christensen & Sandvik, 2013 p. 101–102). Again, the same type of expressions, almost verbatim, are found in the Swedish material. By enrolling themselves in this community the bereaved parents commit themselves to an ongoing communication with the child they lost and with other parents in the same situation as themselves. And this continued dialogic practice accentuates the feeling of still being in close contact with the dead child and being allowed to do grief work without any time limits: "In short, Mindet.dk is a place where you get to feel sorrow indefinitely; everyone here has experienced great losses, you are not alone… and most important: [with] the great compassion expressed by everyone, you feel that you are really being taken care of" (ibid.).

The ritualizing practices at Mindet.dk are aiming at maintaining the child not only as a being who was here briefly and left the parents devastated, but also as a being who in fact is still present and can be kept in close relation with this life through the performance of certain rituals such as the lighting of candles and, at the same time, ritualizations in which, e.g., the mother performs "mother of somebody" thereby negotiating her role as a mother and her identity as a "broken mom" (Gustavsson 2011, p.144). These ritualizations occur most importantly, as we see it, through the parents' lighting of candles for their own child and for other children and also through postings in the forum and writing in other parents' guest books or getting appreciative messages in their own guestbook. These seem to have a double social quality: firstly, parents enroll themselves in the sociality of Mindet.dk, befriending parents to other "angels" (a term often used to refer to the dead children specifically, but also when it comes to commemoration in general, see Walter, 2011) and secondly, parents continuously perform parenthood, not only through their signing of postings ("Camilla, mother of Lucas") but also when commenting on the other children in their guest books ("a small greeting since it is 9 months since you lost your lovely Damian. From Birthe, Andre's mother"), thereby performing the practices of any new mother receiving and giving compliments (in cultural history in general [Walter 1999, p. 119] and in our material in particular we find that it is women who explicitly conduct the grief work).

As we observe the practices of mothers, there seem to be two dominant and interrelated (normative) strategies for being *a good mother* at Mindet.dk. Through the lighting of candles a mother both demonstrates to other mourners that she cares about her child and at the same time she "reassures" her child (and herself) again and again that it will never be forgotten as she engages in the narrative process of constructing new memory fragments. Especially with stillborn children we observe this kind of narrative processes in which the child is implemented into the

continuous life of the parents and the family in new ways as time goes on and the child gets older: Things that could have happened in the child's life had he or she lived are narrated into little episodes, for instance: "Today we went fishing. Couldn't help thinking that a boy like you would have loved that."

The repeated ritualizations of lighting a candle or other actions stress how Mindet.dk constitutes a time-space for performing negotiations of new narratives and life practices, while still trying to find one's feet in the world and 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 bereaved parents), part of this "establishing relations to/with the dead" is also about "establishing relations to/with the living" by ways of supporting, comforting and sharing.

*Out of the Grief Ghetto.* The societal context of bereavement in relation to the death of a child is very complex: on the one hand, at least in the Nordic countries, death in general, and children's death in particular, are still subject to silence and alienation. Even though there are changes, most people are still reluctant to talk about death and have great difficulties relating to people who have lost, for instance, a child. At the same time, it seems that the practices of bereaved parents are at the forefront of new ways of performing and sharing grief in public. Notable practices include breaking the isolation of the individual by reaching out to the community and being very explicit in their grief, and, at the same time, more socially inclusive. They take up more social space, both online and offline. This development is apparent at children's graves and also in networks and peer-to-peer associations and, in particular, in the establishment of online networks and sites for grief and commemoration on social media. Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are examples of media alive with discussions, comments, and personal recountings dealing with topics like illness, disease, death, and dying (Gustavsson, 2011; Taubert et al., 2014; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011). In fact, one might argue that humans share death, loss and grief like never before and, furthermore, that this sharing of death and mourning is a central example of how *both* offline and online practices can creatively constitute new communal spaces for designing and performing rituals of grief and commemoration empowered by the use of media.

Christensen and Sandvik (2013; 2014; 2015a; 2016) have demonstrated how media (like online memorial sites) or materialities functioning as media (like objects on children's graves) function not only as means for "making death visible," but also as means for relation-building and relation maintaining when it comes to the dead child and—more significantly within the framework of this article—as means for inventing vocabularies through which bereaved parents can communicate about their dead child and about their loss and pain. As Michael Hviid Jacobsen notes, the increasing presence (representations and mediations) of death in late modernity may seem to "de-taboo death in public" but at the same time it may reinforce "its sting in private life" (Jacobsen, 2016, p. 17). The de-tabooed death in today's society is a death that we "witness at a safe distance but

hardly ever experience upfront" (ibid., p 10). When it comes to close encounters with death—experiences of loss of loved ones by oneself or others—there still seems to be a lack of "a coherent language for discussing death" leading to "conversational unease" (Walter, 1991, p. 293, see also Corless et al., 2014). This seems also to foster misconceptions when it comes to understanding the processes of bereavement and the significance of continuing bonds as well as performing parenthood. Parenthood does not begin with the birth of a child; parents to a dead child or stillborn are parents: they have already been living a life with the expected child, thus being parents with hopes, joy, expectations, dreams of what their family will become. As such, the inadequate language and the conversational unease resulting in remarks like "a good thing that you've got other children," "a good thing that you can have other children," or "a good thing that the child died now and not later" display both a lack of sensitivity and lack of understanding when it comes to the parents losing their child and with it the future life planned, expected, and hoped for. This is something to which members of both the Swedish and Danish communities testify.

Our material includes numerous examples of how bereaved parents struggle not just with mourning the loss of a child, but also with claiming their right to do so. We observe how bereaved parents' strategies reflect still existing norms and expectations from the surrounding society concerning the appropriate intensity and duration of a mourning period (Walter, 1999, p. 24ff.). But contrary to "closed-circuit" communication in the peer communities on online memorial sites analyzed above, the strategies for inventing new vocabularies and new explicit ways of performing parenthood and continuing bonds, we find that parents are insisting on talking about "the child we have," in the present tense, rather than "the child we had." We find this practice both in open online forums and in offline ones, e.g., on children's graves. We further see it in the use of memory tattoos that some parents are profoundly explicit in their attempt at re-appropriating the public sphere as a place for talking about death, loss, and processes of grief. Beside the uses of social media as described above, we observe that online forums like Min Mave (My Belly) for pregnancy and expecting mothers have discussions initiated by parents who have lost a child and tell their stories of loss, pain, and difficult times re-conceptualizing their roles as parents and getting compassionate responses not only from other bereaved parents ("angel parents") but from a large number of different users. The same practice can be observed in a Swedish context, for example in separate discussion threads such as "Känsliga rummet" ("The sensitive room") in the open forum "Familjeliv" ("Family life").

As demonstrated by Christensen and Sandvik (2014), children's graves—opposed to adults' graves with their characteristics as final resting places—communicate through colorful uses of objects such as toy cars, dolls, and teddy bears, plastic animals, windmills, mobiles, dream catchers in constantly changing constellations that this is a place for keeping the bond to the dead child alive and evolving. This practice has often been criticized, both in Sweden and Denmark, for being "messy" and "noisy" and completely inappropriate, the children's graves challenge our

conceptions of the grave as a place for (quiet) commemoration reserved for the bereaved alone. The children's graves insist on communicating to the surrounding world the love and care for the dead child performed by the parents as well as by siblings to the dead child. We observe graves that literally invite us to come in and sit down by introducing benches or chairs by the grave, thus facilitating the possibility for even complete strangers to spend a few moments in the presence of the dead child. On one of the graves, observed by Christensen and Sandvik since 2008, this invitation includes reading a diary on the grave and engaging in the process of grief, of loving, and caring and performing parenthood put into words by the child's mother. The text on the cover of the book clearly expresses this invitation: "The book is hanging on this tree because you are welcome to "sit on [the] bench and read it" (Christensen & Sandvik, 2014 pp. 266–267).

The same insistence on "talking about the child we have" and the identity as parents "to a child that died" is noticeably in the practice of bereaved parents getting memory tattoos (Christensen & Sandvik, 2015b). Parents do establish the child as well as their status as parents by carrying the beloved but absent child not just in their minds but as permanent marks on their bodies. As stated by one of the parents in the exhibition "Mindesmærker" ("Memory Marks"): "The tattoo is about giving the children presence and having them with me always" (Hejler, 2015, p. 93). As such, the memory tattoo both functions as a physical expression of the parent's continuing bonds to the dead child and as media for communicating to the surrounding world: "when I go by the cemetery but do not have the time to go in there, I can give a kiss to my wrist. The tattoo also enables that other people can see that I have a son even though I cannot walk with him holding his hand" (p. 15).

## Conclusion

Online forums for bereaved parents are part of the ways in which our conceptions of bereavement are changing towards a more nuanced understanding of grief and mourning, which acknowledges that these are not limited to a specific time-period after which the bereaved are able to let go of the deceased and move on in life. Online forums for bereaved parents demonstrate how parents communicate about the bond to the dead child and how this bond is kept alive and developed as an important part of the parents moving on in life. As such the communication in online forums contributes to de-tabooing death and bereavement and to challenging norms and conceptions that are still prevalent in today's society. However, we observe that the online forums take on shape of grief ghettos, which exhibit positive qualities: the forums are safe havens for the bereaved parents' grief work and continuing bonds practices. On the other hand, the ghetto may also function as a place for inventing new restrictive norms for how these practices may be shaped and expressed.

The example from the Swedish grief support community described above, with the heated debate following the posting of photo of a dead child, indicates that this may take place. It turns out that the closed group in this example is not just a safe haven,

but also a community harboring restricting and tabooing practices and—as some of the comments in the debate demonstrate—almost returning to the letting-go paradigm: we do not want to be reminded! Posting of quite detailed close-up pictures on Mindet.dk is common but according to our material never criticized. This is also true for the majority of images posted in the closed Swedish grief support community. They are appreciated as performing parenthood strategies (see also Gustavsson, 2011). And also outside the ghetto—in open forums on, e.g., Instagram—the posting of dead children are primarily met by acknowledging compassionate comments, not by normative critical judgment.

In online communities of grief, bereaved parents are not able to completely compartmentalize their behavior and to separate themselves from habits, practices, and norms of the society and culture they live in.

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# Social Media in the Funeral Industry: On the Digitization of Grief

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NETWORKED EMOTIONS

# Social Media in the Funeral Industry: On the Digitization of Grief

**Bjorn Nansen, Tamara Kohn, Michael Arnold, Luke van Ryn, and Martin Gibbs**

*This article explores how innovations in the funeral industry borrow from the technological affordances, commercial logics, cultural norms, and affective registers of social media platforms. Based on ethnographic research of funeral industry conventions, we analyze examples of funeral planning tools, funeral service mediation, and digital memorialization products. We consider how these products aim to capture forms of data, affect, and value as part of the funeral industry's efforts to shore up their historically intermediary relevance in the face of potential "disruption" from technological innovation, and threats of marginalization posed by shifting norms of networked grieving and commemoration in digital culture*

Social networking sites are increasingly incorporating features to enable the bereaved to commemorate their dead and share their emotions associated with loss. While much research to date has focused on social media in the context of grieving affects and practices, in this article we extend this work to explore how the funeral industry is adopting and adapting the technological affordances, cultural

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norms, and affective registers of social media to remediate "traditional" sites, rituals, and relations of grieving.

This analysis is drawn from our ongoing ethnographic work investigating the digital mediation and transformation of the funeral industry. The research has involved participant observation at funeral industry conventions held in Australia, the United States and the UK between 2014–2016, key informant interviews with representatives of the funeral industry and funeral technology start-ups in those countries, participant observation at crematoriums and funerals in the UK and Australia, as well as analysis of trade publications and their coverage of digitally mediated funeral sites and materials (e.g., *Connecting Directors* magazine; the National Funeral Directors Association Innovation Awards).

In this article we discuss several digital funeral products, including: an "end of life planning tool" (DeadSocial), which provides DIY resources for navigating death, bereavement, and commemoration online; a remote-controlled Skype-enabled robot that enables funeral attendance and participation at a distance ("CARL," Orbis Robotics); and commercial memorial Web sites that incorporate social media aesthetics and features such as "social buttons" to share grief (HeavenAddress; funeralOne). We explore how these innovations draw on the culture, technology, and commerce of social media (Benkler, 2006; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; van Dijck, 2013), by: (i) translating the ethic of participatory digital culture to the emotional labor of planning for death; (ii) enabling mediated presence to remotely participate in funeral services; (iii) appropriating interfaces used to express emotion on social media sites and repurposing them for the context of grief. We argue that these innovations demonstrate the funeral industry's efforts to remain relevant and viable as commemorative practices become increasingly vernacular, individualized and digitized.

## Background: Social Media Remembers the Dead

Digitally networked forms of commemoration emerged as the World Wide Web made the Internet more accessible and integral to people's day-to-day communicative practices. Defined firstly by static memorial Web pages, these 1990s bricolage Web practices have largely disappeared, replaced by professionally managed memorial Web sites and the increasingly popular practice of memorializing existing social media profiles on commercial platforms, most notably Facebook. This embedding of commemorative practices within mediated spaces that are ostensibly "living" and "social" has produced new customs and rituals of grieving, as well as new concerns and anxieties around commemorating the dead.

In western societies the medicalization and institutionalization of death and the dead has shifted its cultural positioning through the post-industrial era (Earle, Komaromy, & Bartholomew, 2009). Bodies that were routinely laid out for final visitation in the family home in the United Kingdom and in the United States for example, are now laid out in funeral homes. Deaths that occurred in domestic

settings now occur in institutional settings (Laderman, 2003). This is not to say that death and the dead have been removed from daily life; the mediation of death through popular culture ensures that it is present on a daily basis. The use of social media to commemorate and memorialize the dead continues this cultural move to mediate death and the dead, and reposition the emotional experience within the flow of daily life (Hutchings, 2012).

The increasingly popular use of social media sites for commemoration raises a number of issues around the networked expression of grief at an interpersonal level, but also at a broader level of policy and governance. Problems of management are particularly acute for large social media platforms such as Facebook, whose user base includes one sixth of humanity. Facebook's design and management teams have a huge ongoing task to create, maintain, and adapt software controls to deal with an enormous and ever-growing "dead" population among a wider social network of living "friends." The site was initially set up, after all, as a place for young people to meet and socialize, not as a place for memorialization and grieving.

Facebook's policy on how to manage the profiles of the dead has shifted over time through both planned development of the service and in response to particular incidents (Chan, 2009). For a long time the only options were to simply leave the profile as it was when the person was alive, or have the account deleted, which required a family member to provide legal documentation such as a death certificate. A variety of motivations have been expressed for not deleting the profile of a dead loved one. In some cases the profile is retained as a reminder of the deceased, to be left unaltered, like clothes might be left in the wardrobe. In other cases, friends and family would continue to post to the site, often using the site to pay tributes to the deceased, to emote, and to express condolences to others.

With the realization that they must deal with the dead as well as the living, the designers of social networks have factored the mortality of their users into the architecture of their platforms, amending and updating policies and affordances to accommodate shifting demographics and demands. Facebook's policy ("Memorialized Accounts," 2015) now allows the next of kin to "memorialize" the profile. This adds the word "Remembering" before the deceased's name on the profile, deactivates automated links to and from the profile, and permits existing friends to continue to post in accordance with the deceased's privacy settings. Memorialized Facebook accounts cannot make new connections, and the dead person's social circle is closed, but they remain an active node in the social network. Critics argue that the "data-bodies" of the memorialized dead are perfectly preserved in this option, allowing Facebook to continue extracting value from data-mining interactions with and through memorialized profiles as part of the networked connections, or social graph, of Facebook and its commercial model (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Karppi, 2013).

Facebook also has enabled profile owners to nominate a "Legacy Contact" who would assume responsibility for the profile in case of the owner's death ("Memorialized Accounts," 2015). Alternatively, people can set up a Facebook memorial page—not a "profile," but a "page," or "group"—that is open to the public. The memorial page is rather different in its construction and tone: it is far less personal and often established for

celebrities, or to commemorate tragic deaths captured by the media (Kohn, Gibbs, Arnold, & Nansen, 2012). Clearly, the affordances built into memorial profiles, memorial pages and the like, steer users of social media towards particular modes of expression and social participation (Gillespie, 2014; van Dijck, 2013). Yet users of social media platforms have over time developed their own forms of posting and have thereby shaped the "platform vernacular" of online memorialization (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015, p. 257). For example, grieving practices on social media often involve vernacular forms of expression such as directly addressing the deceased with the second person pronoun "you" (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Giaxoglou 2014). The tone of these forms of direct expression is at one level intensely personal and even private, often about experiences only shared by those two people. At another level though, there is a public witnessing of this interaction, which is by default visible to the deceased's friends. Vernacular expressions of emotion also include the particular informalities that are communicative currency on particular sites (e.g., Williams & Merten, 2009). For example, spelling will often not conform to standard English, swearing may be permitted, sub-cultural slang might be used, memes familiar to a sub-group will be referred to, and so on (for examples see Nansen, Arnold, Gibbs, Kohn, & Meese, 2016).

Memorialized profiles continue to be appended and modified through the collaborative expressions, actions, and interactions of the social networks they remain embedded within (Nansen et al., 2015). As a result, the dead are also open to different networked publics—and to emotional conflict as much as collaboration—with researchers suggesting a need for posthumous profile and impression management (Marwick & Ellison, 2012), or a stewardship function in the management of the deceased online (Brubaker & Callison-Burch, 2016). Such preservation practices situate the deceased within social media's normative reference to connection (Burgess, 2015; Light & Cassidy, 2014), which is bound up with commercial agendas, with social imperatives to connect and network, and with personal and culturally variable expressions of grieving. The incorporation of memorialization into social media spaces has clearly influenced practices and norms of commemoration, a space historically defined, organized, and managed in the developed world by the funeral industry, which we turn to now in the remainder of this article.

## Social Media and the Funeral Industry

Just as social media platforms have adapted to accommodate the dead and practices of bereavement in their networks, the funeral industry is adopting and adapting social media as a response both to public demands and to the growing understanding of how new technologies can be used to support funeral planning, family grieving, and remembrance of the dead. The range of devices and services offered within the funeral industry is diverse and growing, and includes technologies such as memorials that link headstones to Web sites via barcodes and mobile devices, funerals that deploy Web casting, 3D printing to produce special commemorative urns, and cemetery management systems that use drone mapping or virtual

reality tours. These digital commercial products intersect with "traditional" funeral providers in a number of interesting ways. They have to navigate the gatekeeper role of the funeral director, historical tensions within the industry around the commodification of death-related services, and a longstanding distrust of the scope of commercial activity surrounding a death (Sanders, 2009, 2012).

Our description in this article of "the" funeral industry is not intended to homogenize the work of funeral professionals across different contexts. In the UK, the United States, and Australia for example, the funeral industry is comprised both of family companies that have been servicing relatively small, tight-knit communities for generations, and of multinational companies such as Service Corporation International and Invocare, which are expanding in this field, and eroding national and community specificity. In the UK, the United States and Australia, practices vary widely according to sensitivities that may be religious, age-based, ethnic, environmental, aesthetic, and so on. Cremation, for example, meets with markedly different responses across the UK, Australia, and the United States. In the United States, where cremation without a funeral service has been used by the funeral industry as a "loss leader," it is widely regarded by funeral providers as a "second best" option (at least within the industry), whereas in the UK and Australia cremation combined with a full service funeral is accepted as a perfectly appropriate first choice. Nor should we neglect the diversities illuminated by research in other developed countries such as Japan (Suzuki, 2000) and France (Trompette, 2013), and of course diversity across the developing world, which is still more marked. Indeed, the increasing but uneven use of social media in the context of death is a direct reflection of this diversity.

The examples we discuss below were encountered at industry conventions, in trade publications, and during our ethnographic research. The interdisciplinary research team bring together backgrounds in media studies, anthropology, philosophy of technology, and human-computer interaction studies to research how digital media in the funeral industry is becoming "embedded, embodied, and everyday" (Hine, 2015), and to analyze these products through a techno-cultural and socio-economic lens developed in critical platform and interface studies (Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). We conducted field visits to four large funeral industry gatherings in Australia, the UK, and the United States. in 2014, 2015, and 2016. We talked with dozens of professionals, including funeral directors, funeral home and cemetery owners, arrangement consultants (i.e., salespeople), funeral celebrants, cremation workers, owners of death industry start-ups, and other death industry entrepreneurs. We sought out industry people who seemed to have interesting services and products on offer, and pre-arranged interviews. We met many others by happenstance as we "hung out" and chatted with people at industry conventions, seminars, and social gatherings. We also conducted more formal semi-structured qualitative interviews with our industry informants, in both face-to-face settings and over Skype. We listened to their formal and informal presentations, and conversed with front-line workers, industry leaders, and educators. Informal discussions were written up for analysis as soon as practicable after the event, and more formal discussions were recorded for full transcription and analysis.

Our place at these gatherings was privileged in that we were researchers from an Australian university with an interest in learning about the industry. As outsiders we were unencumbered by the competition around sale and purchase, so our interlocutors could relax somewhat in our company. They appeared pleased by our interest in their work and in the significance of their industry.

The funeral industry conventions are spaces for displaying and promoting innovation in the death industry; they showcase services and products as their vendors imagine them, but they also provide a space of friction where "tradition" and "innovation" rub up against each other. Digital technologies displayed at these conventions are typically part of enterprise (business-to-business) services directed at funeral homes or directors. Funeral directors and funeral homes are also the first point of contact for members of the public seeking to find and purchase items for commemoration, and play a critical gatekeeper function. Therefore, in order to succeed with either enterprise services or services to the public, start-ups and entrepreneurs need to work through the funeral director or home, each of which has historically been resistant to change. At the same time they need to convince the gatekeeper that the industry should change—at least to the extent of accepting the entrepreneur's new product. In relation to innovation, funeral directors, homes, and entrepreneurs also need to address the public relations difficulties inherent in profiting from death, and the broader industry's struggles to maintain a balance between "genuine concern" and commercial opportunism (Emke, 2007).

The funeral industry has long had to deal with problems balancing its interests in caring for families and its commercial interests. Sanders (2012) has written about how the funeral industry through the 20th century developed a moral discourse around care. As part of this enterprise, people within the industry positioned themselves as moral entrepreneurs who were there to preserve the key social good associated with providing personal service. Sanders' research hones in on consumption more generally (2009), to show how the modern funeral industry in America has responded to (and encouraged) personal service through providing for expressions of individualism. New technologies play a key role in this process. By adopting technological innovation within their suite of products and services, funeral directors are able to demonstrate personal care by enabling consumers to engage in this increasing co-production and personalization of funerals (Sanders, 2012, p. 266).

While for the time being digital entrepreneurs need pay due deference to the commercial and cultural intermediation of funeral directors, there is a sense at these events that the director's historically powerful economic and cultural intermediary function is under threat from the inevitability of "digital disruption." For example, this is expressed in presentations such as: "Adapt or die: Technology trends disrupting consumer behavior" from the President and Founder of funeralOne—a digital service company offering Web site design, funeral Web casting, memorial Web site and funeral tribute video software—at the 2016 International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association (ICCFA) convention. The adoption of new technologies can then also be seen as a reaction to the "disruptive" potentials of the Internet, in which the circulation of information, the emergence of new products and services, and the

formation of new social relationships around death, commemoration, and grief are able to circumvent the more traditional gate-keeping function of the funeral industry. These discourses are significantly shaped by organizations like funeralOne, who are best placed to benefit from digital adoption in the industry.

While the industry and the Internet continue to operate in parallel with one another in terms of the distinct kinds of services they offer for dying, death, and memorialization, they are also becoming entangled in novel ways. In particular, and as we argue in this article, the aesthetics, affects, and operations of digital media intersect with the funeral industry at different points in grieving and memorialization processes, but also in terms of the degree to which they are *contested, adopted*, or *adapted* within the funeral industry.

## Contesting the Industry's Gatekeeper Role

In Australia, the UK, and the United States, the idea of "shopping around" for the right product and the best deal is not at all novel, but shopping around for a funeral is not an activity most people are comfortable with, nor is it encouraged by the industry. For generations, funeral providers have attempted to position themselves physically and socially in the life of the local community, in such a way that locals would not have to think twice about whom to call. Yet the Internet is changing information-seeking activities, and the funeral industry, which is fully aware of the risk of industry inertia, particularly in large urban centers, has developed a number of Internet-based strategies for communicating with their potential customer base before death.

Most commonly, cemeteries and funeral homes develop a Facebook presence to build their brand and profile within social and community networks, while avoiding overt references to death. In Australia, for example, the Tobin Brothers' media manager maintains a very active Twitter feed, mostly tweeting and retweeting comments about sporting events, interleaved with occasional tweets on funeral insurance, new cemeteries, personnel changes at Tobin Brothers, celebrity eulogies, "wacky" funerals, and other industry-related matters. Mount Sinai Memorial Park in California is a very large Jewish cemetery which maintains an active social media presence built around content related to Jewish heritage and religious and cultural traditions. Larger funeral companies such as Tobin Brothers and Mount Sinai commonly employ in-house media managers tasked with using social media to integrate the business in their self-defined community, while many of the smaller to mid-range companies outsource media management to social media marketing companies, such as DISRUPT media, which specialize in servicing the funeral industry.

These social media strategies aim to position the business in the everyday consciousness of a community that sees itself as suffering from weakened intergenerational commitments, and to use online media to harness a community and to integrate with potential customers. Typical media strategies to build a social network around the business involve detailed analytics, especially through Facebook's

Insights analytics dashboard, which measures affective engagement through statistics such as clicks, Likes, Comments, Shares, post popularity, as well as some basic demographic, and timing information about page visitors.

In addition to an online social media presence Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is also promoted by social media services. SEO services aim to optimize Webpages so that searches for cemeteries, funerals, or cremation come across the "right" Web sites at the top of the search-return list. For example, funeralOne advertises, "Our SEO experts have made the f1Connect Website platform to please both your client families and the search engines. Your firm will rank high when families search for funeral homes in your area, every time. Guaranteed" ("Transform Your Business," 2016).

The kind of sophisticated use of social media described above is of course not universal within the industry sector. Many small funeral directors and homes, particularly in rural settings in the United States, Australia, and the UK, still see themselves as very much embedded in their town or village, and see little use for computers, let alone social media.

Yet, the participatory qualities of the Internet offer opportunities for new enterprises outside the industry to intervene, despite resistance from those the innovators refer to as "the traditionalists." For example, at the 2014 Australian Funeral Expo, a company called Funeral Studios offered software developed in part to circumvent the aforementioned resistance to shopping around for a funeral. The system partially automates the decision-making process and steps the bereaved through all the decision-making and purchasing steps that need to be made to personally arrange a funeral, without the presence of a funeral director. In a nearby booth a competitor presented a "recommender system" Web site, modeled on hotel or airline booking aggregators. Using this site, a visitor can "click to select" a location, date, mode of disposal, coffin, hearse, celebrant, and so on, and the system recommends a funeral director or home to deliver the package at the best price. Given its potential to disintermediate the funeral directors' traditional advisory role, it is not surprising that this product has at time of writing not received cooperation from the industry.

Thus, while many services aim to work with or complement the funeral industry, others are less deferential and offer digital media as an alternative to "traditional" commemoration methods. A clear example is the "end of life planning tool," DeadSocial, which aims to provide DIY resources for planning, organizing, and commemorating a death:

> The way in which we plan for death, grieve and remember has changed forever. DeadSocial provides free tools, tutorials, and events to help the general public understand and address death in today's ever changing world. ("About DeadSocial," 2015)

This Web site confronts the role of funeral directors and homes by providing online resources and information to assist people managing death, grief, and commemoration by providing relevant and free advice, resources, tools, and tutorials. Some of these are focused on digital affairs, assets and inheritance, including: a

"goodbye & legacy builder tool" to send posthumous social media goodbye messages; guides to preparing different social media accounts for death through platform policies about data deletion, downloading, or bequeathing; a digital legacy checklist; and a social media will-writing guide.

In addition to Internet-related death planning, the site also includes a range of resources and tutorials for planning for death, funerals, and legacies more generally. The site offers advice and guidance about aspects of legacy planning such as arranging your own funeral, creating a bucket list, organ donation, and creating an ethical will. These resources also include the use of digital technologies at funeral or memorial services; instructions on "how to create a memorial video from photos using PowerPoint," "Using iTunes playlists to decide what songs should be played at a funeral," and "sending funeral invitations by email." Another offers the "tagging of physical photos," which translates social media features and norms of tagging (assigning people's names to photos in which they appear for purposes of search and organization) into the contexts of physical photos and albums. The advice offered by the site centers on people writing names or descriptions of photo content onto the back of any photo to ensure social and family histories are remembered—a practice that surely predates the Internet, yet is interestingly reconfigured in this DIY context through the vernacular norms of social media.

DeadSocial draws on a DIY ethic rooted in digital culture's history of open-source and peer-production (e.g., Benkler, 2006) in order to enable planning and managing death in terms of minimizing costs, circumventing the gate-keeper function of the funeral director, and empowering users to customize and control their own experience. The potential of such services points to a future in which the funeral director may be removed from their privileged position as "cultural intermediary" (Maguire & Matthews, 2012). This shift is undergirded by an ethos associated with Internet use as shared experience that invites increasing vernacular and individualized expressions of emotion.

## Industry Adoption of New Technologies

What the bereaved determine they need or want for disposal, interment, and commemoration is significantly led and constrained by the choices offered by the funeral industry; choices the funeral provider arrives at through a complex mix of commercial, legal, and sociocultural considerations. To a lesser extent, the bereaved's choices may be affected through direct advertisement, news features, and online searches.

The diversity and competition among innovative products in the funeral industry is variously embraced and resisted by forces of tradition, innovation, regulation, and commercial interest. Change is often associated with uncertainty, and differences of opinion surround the use of screens in making funeral arrangements in the U.S. funeral industry, where some worry about their potential for depersonalizing the process and undermining the gravitas around death. Several vendors displaying

funeral management software at the U.S. trade shows claimed that "arrangement management" software ought only to be used "back of house" never "front of house" alongside the bereaved as decisions were made. Others, however, suggested the exact opposite: screens are here to stay, are the way of the future, and are indispensable tools. One advocate is Brad Rex, who owns many cemeteries and funeral homes in the United States and who presented the keynote at ICCFA 2015 entitled "The Funeral Experience of the Future…. Today!" Brad uses large wall-mounted screens to take clients through various packages and personalization options using visual images. His staff also travels with mobile media using a tablet screen to conduct funeral arranging in the homes of clients.

In Australia, the United States, and the UK many people opt for a biographical multimedia show at commemorative ceremonies. In Australia these shows tend to combine photo stills and a music soundtrack on a PowerPoint loop, and these are usually put together by family members and modestly displayed on a temporary pull-down screen. Other such shows, particularly in the United States, can be more elaborate professional productions displayed in high-definition using professional cinema projection systems. Multimedia presentations may help to evoke a rich lived life in commemorative proceedings. For others, however, the emotive deployment of multimedia shifts the character of the funeral away from the communicative efforts of living speakers, and towards the media spectacle, hollowing out the emotion and meaning associated with coming together for this shared ritual.

Live Web casting is also increasingly offered as a service by some funeral homes for the benefit of friends or family distributed around the world. Again, such funeral mediation is received with ambivalence, with some funeral homes receptive to the inclusive possibilities these technologies offer for bereaved family and friends and unable to attend in person, while others express concern about the potential for such broadcasting to detract from the event, reducing live memorials to the equivalent of televisual representations of grief and mourning. Such mediated services and Internet connected funeral attendance are, however, not always initiated by funeral directors and homes, nor are they purely driven by commercial service provision. As discussed above, users of social media have over time brought their own platform-specific vernacular practices to funerals and memorial services.

In an era of mobile media and smartphones, which feature networked cameras and image-sharing software platforms like Instagram and Snapchat (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015), vernacular practices of recording and mediating funerals are increasingly visible (Gibbs et al., 2015). For example, the ways people share photographs on the photo-sharing platform Instagram, which are made visible to networks through the "#funeral" tag, shows that there is a clear tension between the casual and affective photo-sharing conventions of social media and the social expectations about how one should behave at a ritual focusing on grieving for the deceased (Gibbs et al., 2015; Meese, Nansen, Arnold, Gibbs, 2015). Many of these images conform to vernacular conventions of self-presentation found in social media use, emphasizing for example, the happy appearance of the user. Yet photographs are often captioned with comments about trying to maintain composure, often for the

benefit of others, which suggests an awareness of the tension between different affective registers expected in these different social contexts, as well as efforts to manage such emotional expectations.

The act of sharing photographs associated with funerals through Instagram is about a form of affective communication to absent others (van Dijck, 2008). This vernacular practice is communicative "presencing" that co-locates the "person" at the funeral within the social network and the social network at the funeral (Gibbs et al. 2015). Images shared around the hashtag funeral are about reaching out to signify presence and to communicate an important and emotionally significant event to a wider social network. It is to be expected that such visual and affective communication practices will be extended through the adoption and use of live-streaming applications, such as Periscope or Facebook Live, to broadcast funeral or memorial services to a social network as part of a vernacular practice that operates alongside or even to circumvent commercial funeral streaming services.

The controversies that circulate around selfies at funerals indicate that such funeral social media use is not yet widespread or accepted as part of more established norms or rituals of commemoration. Yet they represent an informal and personalized use of social media platforms within memorializing contexts and a response to difficulties with physically attending a funeral. To affirm a connection with the deceased, to express affinity with the bereaved, and to fulfil social obligations requires attendance at a funeral, but sometimes the cost and time of long distance travel make it hard for some of the bereaved to be there. A radical way to manage the problem has been introduced by Orbis Robotics, which manufactures telepresence robots for mobile video conferencing across a range of contexts and sectors, including one specifically designed for funeral attendance. The robot not only allows people at a distance to witness the funeral, but also enables a form of interactive real-time funeral presence and participation.

The robot, named "CARL," which was displayed at the 2015 ICCFA trade show, has an electric motor enabling it to be mobile, a flat screen that is equipped with camera, microphone and speaker and sits on top of an extendable "neck" (which can be raised or lowered to talk to a person who is standing or sitting), and through Skype software, enables a remote user to see and be seen, and to speak and to hear. Someone sitting at a computer at a different location operates the robot remotely, and so the robot offers opportunities for interactive attendance not afforded by streaming or recorded.

Andrew Philips, a Funeral Director at Farnstrom Mortuary shared a story of how effective and affective this form of participation is:

> The most meaningful use of CARL that I have experienced was the time it allowed me to offer a grieving sister the opportunity to remotely attend a private viewing for her brother. She had been considering a last-minute 1,500 mile flight in order to spend a few minutes with him, but cost and logistics were prohibitive, and she was facing not being able to say goodbye. Through CARL, we were able to give her the opportunity to attend the viewing remotely and

> spend some time with him. Her tears, words of love spoken to her brother and gratitude toward our funeral home were evidence enough for me that we were able to give her the tools she needed in order to walk through her loss…

At the time of writing, however, few funeral homes offer the Orbis Robot service, perhaps wary of the cost or the disruption or distraction that might ensue from the presence of the robot. The companies who are producing these and the directors who buy or lease them see robots as a way to facilitate participation and a form of co-presence in an important ritual, for a globally dispersed generation. Yet, how such hardware driven technologies and funeral industry specific services play out in an increasingly digitally dense environment characterized by "connected presence" (Licoppe, 2004, p. 135–6) with distributed others, and expectations that everyone is "always on" (boyd, 2012, p. 71) and available for online interaction through more general purpose mobile social media networks, remains to be seen. CARL did not attend the 2016 ICCFA.

## Adapting Social Media for Memorialization

At trade shows many memorialization technologies were on display. Applications of technological innovation and augmentation could be found in a range of artifacts, including a range of Web-page memorials. While some memorial Web sites are promoted directly to users online, at the trade shows these services were generally part of enterprise (business-to-business) services directed at funeral homes or directors. The online memorials were often packaged for incorporation into funeral home Web sites to leverage the existence of the "long tail" that extends from the peak period of death by facilitating branding and driving online traffic. Interestingly, many of these services are promoted as remaining in perpetuity or never expiring; dubious claims in a digital environment where platforms and technologies can rapidly become obsolete or disappear. Nevertheless, it is the idea of a tribute's permanence that makes it seductive and marketable.

Tributes.com is one of the more commercially successful sites and is used by hundreds of U.S. cemeteries and funeral homes and hundreds of thousands of end-users directly. Their Web memorials are an example of a paid commercial service enabling:

> unlimited text and photos; custom music; stunning full-screen backgrounds; enhanced guestbook and social features to connect with family and friends; custom video integration; Web links, and more ("Place a Memorial," 2016).

These types of memorialization products tap into desires to preserve a loved one's digital memory. These sites often import symbolic memorial materials from offline spaces, such as obituaries, candles, flowers, and condolences, which are then re-presented within an online space to emulate the affective sensation of a dedicated

memorial which is "peaceful," "dignified," and "comforting." In doing so, these dedicated memorial sites position themselves as being more sensitive to the specific contexts of death and memorialization than platforms like Facebook, which include options for the deceased but are oriented to a broader living public. Yet, many of these memorial platforms look and operate more like 1990's Web homepages. Aesthetically, their interfaces are often busy and loud, with information organized spatially rather than temporally, spread over the page with banner advertising and links creating a messy appearance. These sites are dynamic in the sense that users are able to add content, especially text and photos, but these pages often don't incorporate social media functionality such as buttons that allow content to be shared across platforms.

An alternative model for online remembrance is offered by Legacy.com. Rather than constructing a memorial specifically for Web publication, Legacy.com "scrapes" and repurposes obituaries from more than 1,500 collaborating newspapers for their Web site, thus bypassing cemeteries and funeral homes. For this reason, the company's acquisition of Tributes.com in May 2015 was an industry controversy (Thogmartin, 2015).

There are examples of more "social memorial websites" which borrow from the affordances, features, and functionality of social media sites, such as funeralOne's "f1Connect" Web site platform and HeavenAddress's "online memorial community." FuneralOne, for example, draws heavily on the aesthetics and platform vernacular of Facebook in their memorial pages, with posts organized in a reverse chronological timeline on a "Tribute Wall" which is easily scrolled through, and sharing buttons or plug-ins are attached to the site for sharing memorial pages across other social media platforms. By explicitly borrowing from and connecting to Facebook, such features can be seen as an attempt to make such sites more familiar, user-friendly, and accessible for a wider demographic of users. FuneralOne's memorials are, however, disaggregated as part of their funeral platform package, which locates them within a specific funeral home URL and branded page.

In contrast, HeavenAddress extends the affects, aesthetics, and logics of commercial social media platforms in subtler and diverse ways. HeavenAddress, Australasia's largest Web memorial site, with over 1.5 million pages of memorials, is available through Web access and mobile applications on Android or iOS, so that as they advertise you can "Keep your loved ones by your side" ("HeavenAddress," 2016). By archiving and accessing a memorial on a mobile app the deceased is taken out of a specific geographic place of sequestration and situated within an embodied and proximate relation and living social network. Such online memorials are evolving concurrently with informal, relatively temporary vernacular memorials such as those that appear on roadsides, and practices in which a traditional place of rest is replaced by scattering the person's remains at sites of personal significance and meaning (Clark, 2007; Doss, 2008). Similarly, by archiving and accessing a memorial on a mobile app, the deceased is taken out of a specific geographic place of sequestration and situated within an embodied and proximate relation and living social network.

HeavenAddress memorials also include features such as a "memory cloud" generated from aggregated user posts, sharing buttons in order to connect the separate memorial site to social networks, and "miss u" and "love u" buttons, which visitors can click on to express their feelings. The founder of HeavenAddress argued in an interview that these features offer convivial affordances for a generation that is more comfortable with spontaneous "clickable" expressions of emotion and empathy, rather than the more labored forms of expression evident in more traditional commemorative composition of text. In this view the site is not trivializing condolences (cf. Harnett, 2016) but is providing a culturally and technically attuned means to enable expressions of grief, emotions borrowed from vernacular forms of affective engagement learned through social media.

These buttons resonate with the affective regime of social networking interfaces that Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) dub "the Like economy." Facebook's worldwide release of the "reactions" feature in February 2016 offers an expanded repertoire of emotional engagement (featuring emotions such as "laughing," "sad," or "angry"), while nevertheless aggregating and bracketing the kinds of responses that are possible, proper, and profitable (Krug, 2016).

Finally, HeavenAddress also borrows from the commercial functionality of social media. Unlike funeralOne, which positions memorials within dedicated funeral home URLs, HeavenAddress aggregates all memorial pages within their Web address. The pages are co-branded and linked with the relevant memorial funeral director, but they are all hosted within the HeavenAddress URL with the aim of leveraging Google's' PageRank algorithm. This aggregation increases the scale of traffic to HeavenAddress' Web site, and by association to the page ranking of linked funeral director Web sites. This operation mimics, admittedly on a much smaller scale, the network effects of large commercial social media platforms. By leveraging this algorithmic operation in terms of organizing the relationships between HeavenAddress and funeral Web site linking, this optimizes the search ranking and prominence of related funeral directors within local Web searches as part of the link economy (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013).

These various features and operations can be understood as a form of "platform politics" in which companies such as Google, Microsoft, Nintendo, or Facebook compete to position themselves as the primary locus of digital activity (Gillespie, 2010, p. 348–352). In this context HeavenAddress discursively positions itself to different constituencies of users, both mourners and commercial funeral service providers, by repurposing the look and feel of social media within the contexts of grief and memorialization.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed how innovations in the funeral industry are borrowing from the culture, technology and commerce of social media. Based on ethnographic research at funeral industry conventions, key informant interviews, and analysis of

trade publications and presentations we have found that the aesthetics, affects, and operations of social media intersect with the funeral industry at different phases of the death and commemoration process. The examples we have provided include online planning tools, services to enable remote funeral attendance, and digital memorialization products. These examples were analyzed in terms of the ways (i) the ethic of participatory digital culture was translated into planning death; (ii) the ways technologies for mediating presence were adopted at funeral services, and (iii) the ways vernacular expressions of emotion familiar to users of social media interfaces were adapted within various online spaces of memorialization. In turn, we have found that these services have been variously contested, adopted, or adapted within the funeral industry depending upon the perceived value they offer funeral directors in maintaining their service role in balancing care and commerce. These technologies borrow from the social practices, affective registers, and cultural conventions of social media. Adopting these can be understood as part of the funeral industry's efforts to shore up its historically intermediary role, social status, and economic relevance in the face of potential "disruption" from technological innovation and shifting norms of networked grieving and commemoration in digital culture.

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# "We are a United Humanity": Death, Emotion and Digital Media in the Church of Sweden

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NETWORKED EMOTIONS

# "We are a United Humanity": Death, Emotion and Digital Media in the Church of Sweden

**Timothy Hutchings**

*This article seeks to bring together the study of death, digital media, emotion and religion, using a Christian organization as a case study. The Swedish national church (Svenska kyrkan) has a large but declining membership and uses digital media extensively. We will analyze two of its attempts to respond to grief through media: a hybrid digital-physical technology installation in Swedish cemeteries and a series of posts about death and sadness on Facebook. In both projects, the Church presents emotion as a universal shared experience that unites all humanity, using this discourse to bring together its religious and non-religious audiences.*

## Introduction

The study of death online involves scholars from media studies, death studies, HCI, law and many other disciplines. To date, however, there has been relatively little engagement with this topic from scholars of religion. This is a surprising oversight, because religion and death have historically been closely intertwined. Death is a focal moment of religious ritual and a major theme of religious cosmology, and popular Western understandings of the afterlife are still influenced by symbols, ideas, and practices that had their origins in religious contexts. Religious organizations are also heavily involved in the management of funerals and burials in Western countries, even where secularization has considerably reduced the social influence of Christianity.

This article focuses on one Christian denomination, the Church of Sweden (*Svenska kyrkan*), and seeks to establish the role played by emotion in the Church's attempts to respond to death through digital media. The denomination operates around 3500 churches in Sweden, and around two-thirds of Swedes are

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members (Svenska kyrkan, 2016a) —although membership does not necessarily entail regular church attendance or a claim to Christian identity. The Church must therefore address multiple audiences in Sweden, both religious and non-religious, and this layered communicative context poses a considerable challenge.

Digital media have become increasingly important for the Church in recent years, and this study examines two examples. The first is a candle project that combines digital media with physical technology installations to promote reflection on grief and loss during the annual Allhelgona (All Saints) celebration. Analysis will focus on English and Swedish press releases produced by the Church in 2014 and 2015 (N = 9). The second is the Church of Sweden's Facebook page, facebook.com/svenska-kyrkan, which is used to distribute prayers and Church information in Swedish and has 45,000 followers. Analysis will include all status updates published by the Church in May and June 2016 (N = 45), including reactions and comments and paying particular attention to 10 posts focused on death and grief.

To interpret these cases, we will apply three theoretical concepts: emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), emotional regimes (Riis & Woodhead, 2010) and the circulation of affect in online networks (Kuntsman, 2012). These represent only a small part of the valuable work undertaken in the sociology of emotion (for a survey of the field, see Turner & Stets, 2006). However, the tension between socially enforced emotional regimes and unpredictable circulations of affect is particularly crucial to understanding digital emotion. A social network profile is a persona, a construction of the self and its achievements, produced for multiple overlapping audiences (Androutsopoulos, 2013; Papacharissi, 2010). Social media brings groups with different feeling rules together in the same communicative spaces, including peers, family members, and work colleagues, a condition often referred to as "context collapse" (Marwick & Ellison, 2012), and it is easy for content to travel through and between these spaces in ways that provoke unexpected emotional reactions (Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013).

This article will argue that appeals to emotion are being used by the Church to establish common ground with its diverse audience. The Church is attempting to use digitally mediated emotion to maintain its central position in Swedish society, reconstructing understandings of its institutional purpose—and of Swedishness itself—in the process. This project is inherently risky for the Church, because any social media persona remains a vulnerable body, as Amanda Lagerkvist has emphasized, inescapably "implicated" in the acts of others (Lagerkvist, 2017, p. 18). As we shall see, the online presence of the Church is vulnerable, subject to feeling rules and unexpected circulations of content and affect.

This study seeks to challenge death online research in three ways. First, attention to religion reminds us of the diversity of online mourning. Religious practitioners draw on their own distinctive values, goals, and practices when developing new technologies and media projects, as researchers in religion, media, and culture have demonstrated (Campbell, 2010), and this distinctiveness can shape unique and sometimes surprising mediations of death and emotion. Online engagement is always shaped by wider cultural contexts, including religion, and cross-cultural and comparative research will be urgently needed as the study of death online continues to mature.

Second, religion is not just a source of diversity but a topic of particular interest in its own right. Religion has often been referenced but rarely analyzed in research on digital death, and this inattention can be problematic. Jed Brubaker and Janet Vertesi, for example, observe that American mourners refer online to the dead living in heaven, and state that these comments "express religious convictions" of "commitment to the Christian afterlife wherein believers will be reunited" (Brubaker & Vertesi, 2010, p. 3). A religious studies perspective is needed here. There is no one "Christian afterlife": different understandings of heaven have been debated throughout Christian history, not least between the "Protestant/Evangelical Christians and Mormons" in Brubaker and Vertesi's sample (2010, p. 4). Religious attitudes to death and emotion are more nuanced than is sometimes assumed in the field of digital media studies, and we need research that explores that complexity.

Finally, this study draws attention to the role of organizations in the circulation of grief online. Most research on the emotional dimensions of death and digital media currently focuses on networks of mourners (see, for example, Döveling, 2015), analyzing individuals rather than institutions. This study takes a different approach, focusing instead on the work of an organisation that is trying to use the emotions of grief, loss, and memory to support its own goals and ambitions. This kind of attention to organizational and institutional uses of digital grief is long overdue.

## A Brief Introduction to the Church of Sweden

The Church of Sweden is part of the Lutheran Protestant tradition, and was the official state church until 2000. Its current membership of 6.2 million includes almost 65% of the Swedish population (Svenska kyrkan, 2016a). Despite this, actual participation in the religious ideas and practices of the Church is low. An international Gallup poll in 2015 ranked Sweden second among the world's least-religious countries (Noack, 2015), and a 2010 survey found that only 15% of Church of Sweden members say they "believe in Jesus" (Bromander, 2010, p. 7). Weekly church attendance among members is even lower, at "just a few percent" (Jonsson, 2016, p. 52).

It became possible to resign from the church without joining another religious denomination in the 1950s, and any scandal or controversy—or, indeed, any other unexpected reminder of membership (Radio Sweden, 2013)—is now often followed by a surge in departures. Membership incurs an annual tax of 1.1%, so unhappy members have a financial incentive to formalize their departure. Around 50,000 people (0.8% of members) resigned in 2015 (Svenska kyrkan, 2016b).

Attendance at Sunday services may be low, but other forms of engagement with the Church remain popular. Another recent survey found that "almost a quarter" of members and non-members "attended church at some time during the year when there was no activity there, to seek calm or light a candle" (Jonsson, 2016, p. 59). The Church also continues to play a role in major life events, particularly death: in 2015 the Church carried out 76% of all funerals (Svenska kyrkan, 2016b).

For Grace Davie, the continued popularity of the state churches of Scandinavia is a prime example of religion functioning as "a public utility" (Davie, 2006, p. 280), a tax-funded institution available to the whole population regardless of personal belief or practice. These churches exist to be called upon in moments of crisis to represent the values and identity of the nation. Eva Reimers has also suggested that the continuing popularity of church funerals reflects "the symbolic value of the Church of Sweden": "the funeral is conducted in a similar way as were funerals of one's ancestors, which implies that the deceased and the mourners become incorporated into the community of others who bury this way, i.e., the Swedish community" (Reimers, 1999, p. 157).

This overview shows that the national church is in a somewhat precarious position. It receives a substantial tax income, claims the majority of the country as members and is still involved in major life events, but membership is declining and almost entirely inactive. To ensure its future, the Church must find ways to encourage the non-attending, non-religious majority of the country to remain members, to continue paying taxes, and to baptize their own children into the church in the future. We will encounter some of the Church's strategic responses to this situation in the cases below.

## The Rules and Regimes of Emotion

In her seminal book *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild demonstrated the importance of "emotional labor" in many professions, particularly those that require contact with the customer. A warm and reassuring smile can be work: "the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself" (1983, p. 5), expected by the customer and demanded by the employer. This work requires a significant internal transformation, because a convincing smile is not easy to maintain without cultivating the corresponding inner state (p. 7). Companies demanding emotional labor must therefore train their workers in strategies and practices to deploy to ensure obedience to "feeling rules" (p. 18), so that the correct emotional display can be maintained through even the most trying of circumstances.

Religious communities like the parishes of the Church of Sweden are filled with demands for emotional labor. Worship events often include music, prayers, recited liturgies, and long periods of attentive listening, and appropriate emotional display is expected throughout. Believers may also be expected to demonstrate the sincerity of their faith through their emotional responses to the trials of everyday life, both as a consequence of the spiritual blessings they expect to receive from God and as a performance for non-believers to witness. Leaders are expected to perform emotional labor, too, because they publicly embody the community's values—a point demonstrated both by the continued demand for church funerals and by the intense public interest in clergy misbehavior. That embodiment requires considerable flexibility, including rapid and high-stakes shifts in emotional performance: how would parents feel if their pastor "allowed the grief he experienced upon learning of a beloved

deacon's passing to dampen the joy he is expected to display at their infant's baptism?" (McCauley & Gardner, 2016, p. 370).

Feeling rules set firm limits to the range of behavior deemed acceptable in a given context. This idea can be applied easily to digital media, because online networks, spaces, and communities develop their own emotional norms and enforce them on participants. As Nina Jakoby and Simone Reiser demonstrate, for example, online memorials are spaces in which traditional feeling rules can be reproduced, challenged, or replaced with new social norms (Jakoby & Reiser, 2014).

William Reddy argues that these rules are integrated into an "emotional regime," a set of expectations that includes "ideals to strive toward and strategies to guide individual effort" (2001, p. 62). Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead have applied this concept to the study of religion, and they explain that an emotional regime "holds together a repertoire of different emotions, and specifies their rhythm, significance, mode of expression, and combination" (Riis & Woodhead, 2010, p. 11). In doing so, a regime guides "how adherents feel about themselves, one another, and their wider circumstances," and shapes "how they can feel it, the way they can express their feelings, and hence the forms of social relationship and courses of action that are open to them." Through emotional regimes, members "learn to sound the emotional notes approved by the religions to which they belong, and to do so in ways that are authorized by their communities of belonging" (p. 11). These regimes have considerable persistence, fixed by the internalization of feeling rules by participants, and also by the structures and objects around them, including architecture, dress, and music.

## The Circulation of Emotions Online

This discussion of emotional labor and emotional regimes has emphasized structure and social control, analyzing emotions as patterned feelings subject to regimes enforced by social groups. Studies of digital emotion have analyzed rules and regimes, but they have also considered less predictable movements of emotions. Adi Kuntsman calls our attention to motion using three helpful concepts. First, feelings "*reverberate* in and out of cyberspace" (Kuntsman, 2012, p. 1), changing in the process. As content passes through online networks it can accumulate stronger emotional resonance, or emotions can be defused and dissolved. Second, Kuntsman proposes the idea of "cybertouch" to address the emotional, material, and informational interlacing of online content with our embodied experiences. When an image of violence unexpectedly appears on our screens, it generates an emotional response, calling up memories and shaping future perceptions. These connections build up Kuntsman's third concept, "affective fabrics," defined as "the lived and deeply felt everyday sociality of connections, ruptures, emotions, words, politics, and sensory energies," both structured and ephemeral (p. 3). When we encounter that image of violence, our response is conditioned by our awareness of the fraudulent possibilities of Photoshop and by our political understanding of the kinds of victims

who deserve our empathy. There is still an emotional regime at work here, but its construction is less controlled, more complex, and more vulnerable to the unexpected than the approaches considered above might suggest.

Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kristy Gorton observe that the idea of circulation is a rhetorical construction with considerable political significance. New technologies promise "simple tools, simple design, simple messages, and simple communications," but that simplicity conceals the uneven global distribution of technology and information (Garde-Hansen & Gorton 2013, p. 9). Our effortless ability to share content that engages us emotionally can persuade us that "affect is what ought to/should/could bind individuals to each other and to their mediated environment" (p. 2), but this emphasis on common feeling glosses over real differences between audiences around the world. Garde-Hansen and Gorton's argument should encourage us to be cautious about over-emphasizing circulation, because it may often be in the interests of the powerful—including religious hierarchies—to conceal their involvement in the maintenance of social norms behind imagery of spontaneous reverberations. This tension between emotional regimes and circulations of affect will be a key dynamic in the case studies considered below.

## Methodology

This article considers two digital projects: an installation of electronic candles for Allhelgona (All Saints), and a series of messages posted to Facebook (/svenskakyrkan). To analyze the first example, this article considers press releases issued by the Church in 2014 and 2015. I searched the Swedish press release Web site mynewsdesk.com, using terms in English ("Church of Sweden All Saints") and Swedish ("Svenska kyrkan Allhelgona"). This produced 2 results from 2014 in English, 3 from 2014 in Swedish and 4 from 2015 in Swedish. I translated Swedish results into English using Google Translate, and asked a Swedish-speaking colleague to check my translations.

To analyze the /svenskakyrkan Facebook page, I sampled all wall events initiated by the page in a 2-month period from May to June 2016 (N = 45). Jannis Androutsopoulos proposed the term "wall event" to refer to the multi-authored unit made up of an initial post and the likes, reactions and comments it receives (Androutsopoulos, 2013, p. 193). In May and June, /sven skakyrkan published 21 prayers (messages addressed to God) and 24 updates about religious events, charitable work and building restorations. This sample included responses to three national and international events: the Swedish festivals of Midsummer and Mothers' Day and the terrorist attack on the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. I used the number of reactions each post received to compare the level of engagement attracted by prayer posts and posts about church activities. 10 of the 45 wall events mentioned death, grief, or bereavement, and to make sense of these I analyzed both the initial post itself and the comments. Informed by the theory of feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983) and cybertouch (Kuntsman, 2012), I looked particularly for any

comments that showed approval of or resistance to the emotional content of the initial post. Again, I used Google Translate and assistance from a Swedish-speaking colleague to translate texts into English.

I have quoted comments in this article, without contacting users to ask their permission, and this decision requires ethical justification. The Church of Sweden's Facebook page has 45,000 followers, and posts are already likely to be seen by a large public audience. On the other hand, Facebook users usually comment under their own names, making them identifiable. Risk is a key factor identified by the Ethics Committee of the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), and my approach focused on minimizing risk to commenters. I consider these comments to have been written with the intention of reaching a public audience, and I have not quoted information that could identify their authors. Since I have translated these comments from Swedish into English, they are not searchable. I believe that any danger posed by this use of Facebook material is therefore minimal.

This present study is restricted to a small range of publicly-available online materials. It does not include analysis of online messages posted using the *#mittljus* hashtag created by the Church as part of its Allhelgona project, or interviews with users. This article includes discussion of comments on the Church's Facebook posts, but not messages posted directly to the page wall by visitors. A future study could expand this work by undertaking a quantitative content analysis of all Facebook wall events over a longer period of time, or a critical discourse analysis of Church statements and exchanges between staff and visitors. Valuable insight could also be gained from interviews with staff involved in both projects, or an office-based workplace ethnography.

## First Case Study: Lighting Candles on All Saints' Day

In 2009, the Church of Sweden launched a new Web site called Bönewebben ("The Prayer Web," be.svenskakyrkan.se). Visitors could write a prayer or light a virtual image of a candle, and these could be displayed online or sent to a local church of the visitor's choice. As noted above, lighting candles in churches is popular in Sweden, even among those who have no interest in attending Sunday services, and Bönewebben tried to tap in to that interest. A key part of the project was the insistence that prayer and candle-lighting are available to everyone, regardless of their beliefs. At one Bönewebben launch event, curate Katarina Johansson explained that "prayer is a universal human phenomenon, no matter what church you belong to, or even if one is religious at all" (Sjögren, 2009). Online prayer, she suggested, could "become a little breathing space in life, a way to reduce feelings of inadequacy." This account constructs the practice of prayer as a nonreligious tool for self-care, relaxation, and emotional support, accessible to the whole nation.

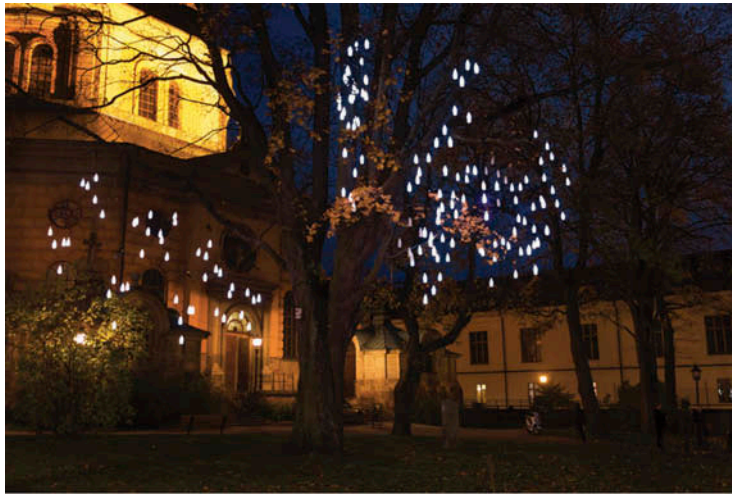
Candles can be lit at any time of year, of course, but there are certain candle festivals that attract special Swedish interest. One of these is All Saint's Day (Allhelgona) at the start of November, when Swedes travel to local cemeteries to

light candles on the graves of their relatives. This custom is extremely popular, and the Church claims that around half of the population now takes part (Church of Sweden, 2014a). The sea of bright grave-lights (*gravljus*) is a beautiful sight in the darkness of a Swedish winter, and large crowds visit major burial grounds to see and join in with the spectacle. At the Skogskyrkogården woodland burial ground in Stockholm, large areas are now set aside for candle-lighters who have no family graves of their own to visit.

The tradition in Sweden is not actually very old, and nationwide popular involvement dates back only to the 1940s (Rehnberg, 1965). Its origins lie in Catholic and Orthodox immigration, not in Lutheran theology. Today, however, the Church of Sweden is trying to use digital media to encourage new forms of participation in the candle-lighting ritual and, through the ritual, in the Church.

In 2014, five years after the launch of the Prayer Web, the Church decided to launch a special Allhelgona event in which visitors to Bönewebben would be able to light a physical "candle" in an actual graveyard. 900 lamps were created, each including a bright white LED set in a glass bottle, and these bottles were hung from trees in four church cemeteries (see Figure 1). Using a webcam, visitors could watch their candles light up across Sweden. According to a press release produced by the Church after the event, these electronic candles were lit 24 000 times—so often that the actual candle devices could not keep up with demand (Church of Sweden, 2014b).

**Figure 1**
**Lights at Hedvig Eleanora kyrka in Stockholm, 2014. Photo: Per Myrehed**



KBefore the event, a priest called Kristin Molander explained that lighting candles would be a way to "express what can't be put into words," and an opportunity "to express grief, longing, and hope" (Church of Sweden, 2014a). Molander promised that the project would "create a new opportunity for a moment of reflection, prayer, and closeness" and demonstrate that "we are a united humanity, both online and in the physical world" (2014a). Afterwards, Gunnar Sjöberg, Head of Communications for the Church of Sweden, reported that the Church was "overwhelmed and moved that so many people chose to express their grief, longing, and gratitude by lighting candles via the prayer website" (Church of Sweden, 2014b). For Sjöberg, "Prayer breaks through all boundaries," so that we can "meet in the depth of our humanity and spirituality," united and yet still "entirely unique" (2014b). These statements emphasize shared emotions as the forces that unite people, but they remain at the most general level, avoiding any language that might limit participation to a specific religious tradition.

The project was repeated for Allhelgona 2015 with the name #mittljus ("my light" or "my candle"), using artificial "trees" set in 15 locations across Sweden (Figure 2). Each tree consisted of a black metal frame with eight horizontal arms, each of which supported a number of dangling light bulbs. These trees were set up in churchyards and in public places, and one was also erected at the Swedish Church in Berlin (Svenska kyrkan, 2015). As before, visitors to the Prayer Web could watch the lights turn on in response to their prayers.

**Figure 2**
**A "Tree" for #mittljus, 2015. Photo: William Spore (Creative Commons)**

This time, the project's goals were more specific and more confrontational, aiming not just to connect with universal emotional experiences but to challenge the emotional norms of Swedish society. The 2015 press release claims that 70% of Swedish people avoid discussing their grief with others, quoting a Church-sponsored survey (Svenska kyrkan, 2015). Hospital chaplain Ingrid Edgardh explains that the All Saints tradition of grave-lights "gives us opportunity to show that we grieve, miss, and love," and so "unites people regardless of who we are and where we come from," and the press release explains that the new trees will expand this moment of united emotional display beyond the cemetery. The installations in public places offer "a way to let grief take place in the everyday, as a natural part of life," to "make space for grief" instead of limiting mourning to the graveside (Svenska kyrkan, 2015).

Once again, this press release describes emotions as universal and unifying experiences. However, the relation of the Church to emotion has now shifted. Instead of sharing in an activity that is already widespread and unifying, as the 2014 press releases suggested, the Church of Sweden now positions itself as an agent of national liberation, freeing Swedish people from their emotional restrictions. The choice of a hospital chaplain as spokesperson, rather than a communications officer or parish priest, reinforces the construction of the Church as an expert in emotional care, guiding the nation towards healthier emotional expression.

For researchers interested in death studies, the Church's new position will seem very familiar. This is the classic thesis of Geoffrey Gorer (1965) and Philippe Ariès (1974), who argued that modern Western societies had sequestered death in hospitals and cemeteries, hiding the dying and the dead and professionalizing their care. In the 20th century, Ariès claimed, death had become something "shameful and forbidden" (Ariès, 1974, p. 85), a secret to be kept even from the dying. The most unacceptable kind of death was that which "embarrasses the survivors because it causes too strong an emotion to burst forth. . . One does not have the right to become emotional other than in private, that is to say, secretly" (1974, p. 89). Mourning dress disappeared, outward expression of grief was to be suppressed, and visiting the grave of a loved one became unusual. According to Ariès, this separation of death from life "aggravated the trauma stemming from the loss" (1974, p. 89), encouraging the suppression of emotion and a quick recovery from any time of mourning. By calling for grief "to take place in the everyday" (Svenska kyrkan, 2015), the Church of Sweden aligns itself with this longstanding critique of modernity and offers itself as a solution.

## Second Case Study: The Church of Sweden on Facebook

The Church of Sweden's Facebook page (Svenska kyrkan, n.d.) also engages with grief, emotion, and national identity. The page has been liked by more than 45,000 people and posts new content every one or two days. Page updates typically include an image or video, a brief written prayer, and the Church of Sweden logo. The first comment on each post is a written description of the image and its overlaid words, to

make the update accessible to visually impaired users with text-reading software. Page content is created by a small editorial team, who also reply to at least some of the comments posted by page visitors. Each reply includes the name and role (priest or editor) of the writer, personalizing answers while distinguishing respondents who have ordained authority.

The /svenskakyrkan page initiated 24 wall events in May 2016 and 21 in June. Almost all posts received at least 300 reactions, while 23 posts received more than 1,000 and 7 of those received more than 2,000. Facebook allows users to tag posts with a range of "reactions," including tearful and angry faces, but the overwhelming majority of responders in this sample chose to use the simple thumbs-up "Like" button. Twenty-one of the 45 posts were prayers or hymn quotes, including 18 of the 23 most popular. The remaining 24 posts were messages about church activities, charitable work, and building restoration. God is frequently named in prayers, but their religious content is otherwise as broad as possible. The words "Jesus" or "Christ," for example, only appear in 3 of the 21 prayer posts.

The most popular update in this two-month sample was a prayer posted on 6 June 6, to mark the important Swedish festival of Midsummer. "Thank you God," the post began, "for all the things that make us proud of our country." Three examples are identified: natural beauty; human creativity; and human love, tolerance, and understanding. The post was accompanied by a collection of Swedish images: a girl wearing a crown of flowers, a red wooden wall, a ship in Stockholm harbor, a sunset, and a packed church. Swedishness is defined here in terms of land, culture, tolerance, God, and Church membership. This update received more than 7,100 reactions, almost 650 shares and 100 comments. Comments were mostly enthusiastic, praising the prayer and the country and asking God to bless Sweden, but a few were unimpressed. "The Swedish Church or the church in general has always tried to control what people think and feel!" One commenter wrote, "God has nothing to do with the church!"

Ten-page updates mentioned death or grief, including 3 of the 7 with more than 2,000 reactions. On May 19, for example, the page posted an image of clasped hands overlaid with a Bible verse: "When my heart was filled with worry, your comfort made me glad (Psalm 94: 19)." The accompanying message (1,100 reactions) reminded readers that the Church could help and asked them to share their stories: "Maybe life was too painful, maybe hope was extinguished. Then you meet someone who listens and the downward spiral can be broken." On 29 June, another update (1,800 reactions) included a prayer "for all who have lost someone" and "for our hate-filled world." The post was accompanied by an image of a man sitting alone on a bench at sunset, under the words "Come with your love to us, God!"

One post that provoked particularly high engagement was published on 13 June. "Come to the God of life when all is dark," it read: "Let light win over darkness. Let love win over hate." These words were overlaid on a background of blurred hearts and raindrops, and received more than 3,200 reactions, 550 shares, and around 30 comments. This message was posted the day after the mass shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, but does not explicitly mention the attack, terrorism, sexuality,

or the religious roots of homophobia. Instead, the post universalizes, emotionalizes and depoliticizes the tragedy, which becomes simply an act of "hate" to be opposed by "love." Most commenters simply responded "Amen," but a few were critical, accusing the church of showing either too little or too much sympathy to gay people. One commenter announced that any suffering, for people or animals, disproved the existence of God, and a page team member engaged this commenter in a philosophical debate about the problem of evil.

Two more specific posts appeared on 29 May when Sweden celebrated Mothers' Day. The Facebook page initially tried to celebrate this event by posting a cheerful message, accompanied by a picture of a mother and laughing baby (alongside the church logo): "Congratulate a mum! Do you know a mum who needs encouragement? Take the opportunity to give her a little pep talk today! #mothersday." By the standards of the updates we have just been considering, however, the response from the Church's Facebook audience was disappointing: the post received only 600 reactions. Eight of the ten comments reframed the day emotionally as one of sadness, mentioning four categories of grief: mothers whose children had died, mothers who were estranged from their children, those unable to have children at all, and those who had lost their own mothers. "My mother-in-law, son and mother died last year," said one commenter. "It is not a very cheerful day of the year for us. No, Church of Sweden, think a little longer before you put things out on Facebook." Church staff responded to four of these comments, acknowledging the validity of each kind of grief.

This first update was not deleted, but the Church posted a second prayer later the same day. The accompanying image was now sombre, showing a hand clutching a small green paper heart against a forest background (Figure 3), and the post now included all the categories of grief that commenters had identified:

> We pray for all mothers.
> We pray for those who wished for it but never became someone's mother.
> We pray for mothers who miss their children,
> And children who miss their mothers.
> Lord, you know that relationships are both difficult and wonderful,
> And all love has a tinge of pain.
> Thank you for staying with us though all of life's stages.
> Surround us tonight with your love,
> You who know the secrets of each and every heart. Amen.

This prayer was published in Swedish and English, and the English version (quoted above) is a little more formal than the Swedish original: *mamma* (mom or mum) has been replaced by "mother," for example, and *Gud* (God) has been replaced by "Lord." Nonetheless, the basic themes are clear. The focus throughout is on the emotions of longing, pain, and love, which are presented as binding mothers together. Religious references are kept as broad as possible, emphasizing God's love, presence, and understanding. Someone familiar with Christian theology might

**Figure 3**
**"We pray for all mothers," Facebook post, 29 May**


interpret the idea of God's own knowledge of pain as a reference to Christ's Incarnation and Crucifixion, but this is not made explicit.

This post was exceptionally popular, receiving 5,600 reactions—second only to the Midsummer prayer in this sample. The post received more than 850 shares and a total of 194 comments, only 14 of which were written by men. Responses were extremely enthusiastic. 80 consisted only of one or more heart symbols, or the word "Amen," while longer comments included frequent praise for the beauty of the prayer itself: "the best prayer I've heard in a long time, thank you." Some commenters shared their own experiences of loss, particularly child loss (referring to children in heaven) or childlessness: "I haven't been lucky enough in life to be a mother," one wrote, adding "thank you for giving me a place in the prayer." The idea of being given a place was important to many commenters, and several stated that women without children can still be "mothers in their hearts." A few added extra categories of sadness—"don't forget to pray for the mothers who have real children who don't want to come home or call them"—or expressed their thanks for older female friends who had acted as mothers to them.

Strikingly, and unusually in the sample we have considered, these comments include no criticisms of the Church at all. There were no critical references to the more cheerful earlier Facebook post. Instead, the Church's decision to acknowledge

pain on Mothers' Day was hailed as an act of resistance to society's emotional norms: "Finally," one woman wrote, "some thoughtful words today!"

## Discussion

Emotion is key to both of these case studies. The Church addresses itself to Swedes who are not necessarily interested in religion, and so the details of Christian belief and identity are rarely mentioned. Instead, the Church suggests that religious and non-religious audiences are already united by shared emotions of grief and sadness. This universalizing approach is extended to the practices the Church wishes to promote. In press releases about the Bönewebben Web site and the Allhelgona project, for example, prayer and the lighting of candles are presented as acts of reflection and emotional self-care that are accessible to anyone. At the same time, these universal experiences are also presented as areas in which the Church has particular and unique expertise. Emotion is presented as connecting the religious to the non-religious and the spiritual to the charitable sides of the Church's mission, thereby justifying the Church's continued place in an increasingly non-religious Swedish society. As Garde-Hansen and Gorton put it, "affect is what ought to/should/could bind individuals to each other" (2013, p. 2)—an idea they argue is both popular and misleading.

As Hochschild pointed out, in many occupations "the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself" (1983, p. 5). In the case of these Facebook posts, the emotional service on offer includes a kind of universal empathy. The page team prayed for all mothers in every condition of sadness, and responded to the Orlando attack by generalizing it to encompass all forms of hate and darkness. This empathy is expressed through affirmation: every commenter's emotion is recognized and accepted, even when responding to criticism.

Enacting this affirmative empathy requires emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), and page staff must shift from joy to sorrow and back again as context demands. When the first Mothers' Day post received a series of negative comments, staff members affirmed each emotion of grief. When a new, more somber post was created and attracted a more positive response, staff made no attempt to apologize for or adjust the earlier message. Instead, the team simply moved on to the next required emotion.

While all emotions are affirmed, the willingness of the page to change its emotional tone on Mothers' Day suggests that sadness is perceived as a higher priority for response than joy. This emphasis on sorrow was also clear in the Allhelgona candle campaign, which emphasized "grief, longing, and hope" (Church of Sweden, 2014) as emotions that unify humanity and called on Swedish society to "make space for grief" (Svenska kyrkan, 2015).

These examples suggest that empathy with sorrow is part of the Church's emotional brand, and analysis of Facebook comments supports this interpretation. Members expect the Church to listen to and to affirm their emotional experiences,

which is one reason why the first Mothers' Day post met with such disapproval. "Think a little longer," one commenter instructed the Church, clearly signaling that a feeling rule had been broken.

The Church particularly encourages emotional openness, as shown in the Allhelgona electronic candle campaigns. Participants were encouraged to express their grief, and strong emotions—grief, longing, hope, gratitude—were cited as evidence of project success (Church of Sweden, 2014b). At the same time, however, it is worth noting that Church representatives never expressed strong emotions of their own in their press releases or Facebook messages. As we might expect, the emotional regimes in operation for staff and members are not quite the same.

To support the 2015 candle campaign, the Church quoted surveys and hospital workers to argue that Swedes hide their grief in everyday life. This evidence was used to show that Swedish society needed help from the Church to provoke open conversations about emotion. The second Mothers' Day post did not explicitly criticize the national emotional regime, but many commenters still interpreted the post as a critical act, a praiseworthy rebellion against a culture of compulsory celebration. For at least some respondents, the Church had given permission to escape from the emotional constraints of Mothers' Day in Swedish society, an affirmation that created space for them within a day of otherwise impossible emotional demands.

The Church projects considered in this study often sought to encourage online circulation of material and affect, one of the major themes of digital emotions research (see for example Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013; Kuntsman, 2012). The Allhelgona candle projects promoted the hashtag #mittljus, for example, while the first Mothers' Day post instructed Facebook followers to "congratulate a mom" with "a little pep talk." Nonetheless, virality did not seem to be a major aspect of the Church communications analyzed here. On Facebook, the number of shares on a /svenskakyrkan post rarely exceeded 10% of the number of reactions, although there were a few exceptions—the Orlando prayer was shared 550 times (17%) and the Mothers' Day prayer was shared 850 times (15%). The Facebook page appears to function less as a generator of circulation than as a focal point where the Church speaks to its online followers and gathers their replies. The page acts as an emotional interface between the Church of Sweden and its public audience, a space where the Church performs itself and members come to air their grievances.

Another concept from the study of digital emotion is more helpful for our analysis. We can see both Mothers' Day Facebook posts and the 2015 version of the Allhelgona candle project as "cybertouches" (Kuntsman, 2012). Each was an unexpected invasion of digitally mediated (and, in the case of the tree, also physically mediated) affect that engaged the memories, attitudes, and perceptions of its audience. Each was designed to provoke healthy emotional conversations, but the first, unsuccessful Facebook post provoked unforeseen anger and hostility. As Garde-Hansen and Gorton (2013) point out, online content can easily provoke these kinds of outbursts of emotional resistance, revealing divisions between audience members that might previously have gone unnoticed.

## Conclusion

This study shows a number of features that are specific to the religious and cultural context of Sweden. As noted above, the Church of Sweden retains a high membership and receives a tax income, but attracts only the smallest fraction of those members into regular events of worship. Affirmation of Christian belief or identity is rare, although participation in certain practices, like funerals, is higher. The tradition of lighting candles on graves at Allhelgona also has its own unique history in Sweden, adapting imported customs into a distinctive form. Without this context, we cannot understand the Church's efforts to promote itself as an integral part of Swedish national identity, or its attempts to downplay the importance of religion for its members. While previous research has reported frequent mentions of heaven and the afterlife, particularly in North America (Brubaker & Vertesi, 2010), the case studies considered here avoided such ideas completely. Close attention to the online work of religious organizations and communities can produce surprising findings, offering a helpful reminder of the diversity of online expressions of grief.

This research has a number of other useful implications for scholars interested in death and digital media. The Church's candle-lighting projects draw our attention beyond the digital to include the use of physical devices, materiality, and design experiments to mediate emotional expression. The /svenskakyrkan Facebook page shows us that digital media can be used both to promote and to criticize social institutions, including religious organizations, and that emotion plays a key role in these engagements. The Facebook page also demonstrates how easy it can be for digital communications to encounter unexpected emotional resistance.

Most importantly, these case studies remind us that emotion is rhetorically and socially constructed, and that understandings of emotion have political and social consequences. By stressing the emotional experience of loss, the Church of Sweden is able to claim special expertise, to defend its social, cultural, and financial capital, and to construct itself as indispensable and even central to Swedish society. Emotional norms are part of emotional regimes which are closely tied to social hierarchies, and so it is always worth asking who benefits from them.

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