SECTION 8. DYNAMICS OF MODERN CULTURE

DOI https://doi.org/10.30525/978-9934-26-490-0-16

ONLINE MOURNING: ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN MODERN DIGITAL COMMEMORATIVE PRACTICES

Vatsyk Yu. R.
Ph.D. student,
Hryhorii Skovoroda Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine
Kyiv, Ukraine

Mourning, grief, commemoration – these human practices are socially constructed in the worldview we call culture. Different cultures utilize different practices to cope with the loss of their members, based on ethics and aesthetic norms approved in a particular culture. As with everything in the modern world, these practices tend to go online, adding or subsidizing traditional forms of mourning and commemoration. The global web has transformed how people spend their leisure time, make friends, work, and, of course, grieve and remember deceased people. As with every new ritual in human culture, these new practices have raised new ethics questions.

'What happens to your account if you pass away' is a routine setting among many others in Facebook account settings. It allows people to either delete their account forever or keep it, making it a virtual memorial. And it makes a huge shift in traditional mourning, that's never been seen before.

According to Tony Walter's stages of evolution of mourning in the pre-industrial world, we may see community mourning, where a local community took care of each member and, thus, grief was shared, helping families to cope with their loss. With the destruction of local communities and urbanization, community ties got loosened. In the XX century, we can observe private mourning, where usually only the closest members participated in funerals and grieved alone. Today, thankfully to Facebook and others, we can see the most public mourning ever existed [3].

But it's impossible to leave this practice without critical reflection. Social media is one of the reasons for alienation in modern society and often creates a wrong feeling of closeness with people we barely know. In this case, a few ethical questions are raised. One of them is about how ethically it is to share someone's death with their followers, who might not truly know

the deceased but will get negative emotions because of this event. In any other previous era, it was impossible to consume such amount of information about deaths, that provokes people to feel fear and anxiety. Now it's not only our neighbor's or relatives' death but the death of the whole of humanity (both real and fictional), that is exposed every day to everyone from the youngest years.

Banning or moderating any kind of harmful content only creates new visual and linguistic languages to express the same meanings, which is even possible to observe today. Social media users have started using the word 'unalive' instead of 'dead'. It may provoke a feeling of safety and erase the hardship of the topic for some users, as well as provoke dehumanization for others, as such word use can trivialize human sufferings.

Online mourning etiquette is another source of ethical issues. Indeed, helping with chores, getting the body ready for the funeral, and bringing food or money to the family of a deceased was a part of etiquette in pre-Internet times. It was a habitus people learned; therefore, they knew how to behave or who is the medium of important knowledge if needed. However, online mourning requires different etiquette that hasn't been developed yet.

What could be the answers of two people to the questions regarding how close you should be to a deceased to know that you should post something about a deceased? Which level of closeness should be to repost the news or merely react to someone else's post? Can you type 'like' to the post with the epitaph? Can you have an ad post near the epitaph? All these social nuances are not codified, therefore they require extra attention when choosing how to behave, so as not to insult a community in the most vulnerable moment of losing its member.

As Wagner notices, people not normally included in social media won't act according to the unwritten rules of mourning, that you can only gain spending time online [2] and observing others in your circle. This type of etiquette is not easy to learn, and it is hard to find the medium of knowledge. Millions of Google pages will tell Internet users about different rules, without any verification or consideration of cultural differences. Considering the potential for ostracism on social media, it may make people more anxious about their interactions with memorial content. The main issue of the 21st century is whether to post or not to post. Both decisions can have major consequences for an individual.

The pressure to reveal information about a person's loss online can be overwhelming. In the past, only the deaths of politicians or celebrities were promptly published to notify the nation. Social media have made everyone a celebrity, which can add extra pressure on a grieving person, who should

not only care about choosing a casket for their deceased bellowed one but also about a picture and proper words to notify their followers online.

Walter argues that digital mourning helps communities to tie loose bonds and, therefore, it is in a way a specific return to the pre-industrial era [3], when a community could share the grief, mourn, heal psychologically, and support a family in a vulnerable state. Indeed, this can be the case for some members of society. However, it excludes others, who are not involved in the online web.

Another digital mourning phenomenon is online cemeteries. Roberts claims that her survey's respondents '…indicated that visiting the Web memorial was a regular activity' [1, p. 62], which proves the importance of such web memorials for grieving people.

Of course, web cemeteries lack some of the ethical issues of social media, but still require some exploration. Traditionally, cemeteries were used by limited communities. It was uncommon for crowds to walk around cemeteries to see the graves of people they had never heard of. One of the ethical problems of dark tourism along with cemetery tours raised from a feeling that we shouldn't bother the dead. Today it is much easier not only for grieving people to 'visit' their lost loved ones but strangers with less kind intentions can interact with a page of a web-cemetery as well. Online-cemeteries remove physical boundaries and allow everyone to scroll around to see the pictures, often more detailed information about a person, or even to alter the web page. How many of the people who are published on online cemeteries would give their permission for this? Is it considered bothering dead when you scroll around their online cemetery profile?

Roberts also provides statistics that 'unlike traditional memorials, Web pages can be updated and 91% of our survey respondents indicated that they continue to revise their memorial, much as one might put new flowers on a grave' [1, p. 63]. It also makes it easier to look after the memorial, unlike the physical grave. It raises the question of whether it will lead to abandoning the physical memorials when it is much easier to 'place' virtual flowers on a virtual grave.

We may put much effort into all the norms and rituals around digital mourning but what happens, when a server stops goes down and the online cemetery is not available anymore? From the Roberts' survey, it's clear that online memorials are important for people. She writes that 79 % of respondents said they definitely would not take online memorials down [1, p. 63]. How much pain and psychological harm deleting an online cemetery will cost the people who have lost their loved ones one more time? Isn't it the metaphor of the destroying of cemeteries, that is considered unlawful in many cultures?

The internet is an almost unmoderated field of social interaction. Although this is considered an asset in some aspects, in human practices – especially those involving emotionally charged and potentially traumatizing content – it truly lacks adequate moderation. Today, Ukraine faces a significant amount of grief and loss, and it is no surprise that we see more posts online about deceased compatriots. There are increasing numbers of online memorials, like online cemeteries, aimed to preserve the memory of civilian victims as well as war heroes. Therefore, researchers, religious leaders, and lawmakers must focus on these digital commemoration practices to provide a dignified space for mourning.

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