The Digital Graveyard:
Online Social Networking Sites as Vehicles of Remembrance[1]
by Jenny Ryan

This is the use of memory: for liberation-
not less of love but expanding of love
beyond desire, and so liberation from the
future as well as the past.
- T.S. Eliot[2]

Only the Lonelyhearts of the world expect a personal reply from the movie, phonograph record,
or radio program. Or to be more precise, we are all Lonelyhearts inasmuch [as] we
'interact' with books, pets, infants, or distant correspondents.
- John Durham Peters[3]

In October of 2007, my grandmother was diagnosed with the cancer that led to her

eventual death the following spring. A devoted mother of 14 children, they together grappled

with many difficult spiritual and medical decisions throughout her illness. One evening, I

witnessed firsthand the incredible unity and strength that comes about in the toughest of life's

challenges, and the capacity for technology to extend our possibilities for collectively coping

with them. Ten of my aunts and uncles took part in a conference call to discuss plans and

options: my mother, a nurse, gave medical advice; my uncle Joe, manager of a medicinal supply

company, arranged the delivery of a special bed; my aunt Mary, who works for an insurance

company, discussed insurance options; my uncle Jack, a devout Christian, had been researching

spiritual healing centers; my grandmother herself interjected often with words of love, faith, and

strength. Fueled by a desire to help, I realized that I could tap into my specific area of expertise,

online social media. In a matter of hours, I set up a public wiki and encouraged my family

members to write in the communal blog, help in the creation of an extensive address book, and

arrange visits on a digital calendar.1 The wiki was quickly adopted by a substantial majority of

my family, including the many out-of-town grandchildren. It became a source of ongoing

updates about my grandmother's condition, and the calendar proved particularly useful for organizing a continuous stream of visits and appointments. When she passed away, my family continued to regularly update the blog with tales of their daily struggles, fond memories of the past, inspirational quotes and Biblical passages. They also posted photographs and videos. The site became a living memorial, a collective archive of personal remembrances, simultaneously shaping and shaped by their very inscription.

The Internet is a complex new medium that allows for the intimacy, interactivity, and casualness of speech as well as the permanency and permeability of writing. Despite popular discourse that perpetuates a distinction between "virtual" cyberspace and "real life," it is evident that people are integrating technologies of the Internet into their lives as extensions of everyday communication and identity performance, shaped by changing cultural conditions that are in turn affected by these new technologies. Drawing from the methodological approach of existential anthropology, the principal aim of this project is a phenomenological exploration of the ways in which these unique facets of the Internet have enabled mourners to expand upon the process of remembering the dead.[4] Specifically, I have examined examples of "online shrines" on the social networking sites MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe.net, positioning them as vehicles for individual and collective remembrance of the dead.

While skimming my Facebook News Feed[5] one afternoon, I came across a headline informing me that 36 of my Friends had joined a Group entitled "In Memory of Mr. Burns."[3] Shocked, I clicked on the name and navigated to the Group's homepage, where I discovered that my beloved 7th grade Social Studies teacher had recently died of cancer. Hundreds of his former students had already joined the Group, the Wall of which was littered with touching recountings of remembrances both funny and profound. In the discussion threads, a student proposed that

members create a book of their fond memories for his family. I immediately joined in the conversation: "That Social Studies classroom was the safest place in the world during lunch in 7th grade. Thanks for providing solace to a shy little nerd. A superhero amongst mere mortals. What was that banana song he played in class?" Later that day, an old classmate responded on my Wall: "YES WE HAVE NO BANANAS, BANANAS IN SCRANTON PA! (the banana song in mr. b's class. fucking great)." I found myself digging through old photo albums until I found two photos of Mr. Burns, taken nearly 12 year ago, which I promptly scanned and uploaded to the Group.

Jose van Dijck (2007: 16) writes that, "[a]t once a means of inscription and an external repository, media are seen as apparatuses for production and storage, modeled after the mind's alleged capacity to register and hold experiences and impressions." Online social networking practices entail both the inscription of personal identity, cultural tastes, and social relations as well as their archival. As such, they provide a rich framework for understanding the complexities inherent to new technologies, which blur pre-existing boundaries of space, time, privacy, communication, representation, and memory.

Digital Traces, Virtual Places

> *Memory… is in a manner the twin sister of written speech [litteraturm] and is completely similar [persimilis] to it, [though] in a dissimilar medium. For just as script consists of marks indicating letters and of the material on which these marks are printed, so the structure of memory, like a wax tablet, employs places [loci] and in these gathers together [collocat] images like letter.*
>
> *-Cicero[6]*

In Remembering: A Phenomenological Study, Edward Casey describes what he calls the "primary traits of remembering": *search, display, encapsulment, expansion, persistence*, and *pastness*. These traits are strikingly paralleled on the Internet. Because most of the information

available on the Internet is archived by *search* engines such as Google, the medium significantly enhances one's capacity to remember. Social networking sites such as Facebook *display* individual identities through the construction of dynamic member profiles. These profiles serve to visually and textually articulate various aspects of one's personality (such as interests, favorite books and movies, and photographs), one's social network, and social interactions via the medium (such as comments, "Likes" and group discussions on Pages and Events). In the event of a member's death, this online presence becomes frozen, a potentially permanent *encapsulation* of a life as it was being lived online. Loved ones of the deceased often find that the existence of this encapsulated online identity reveals aspects of a life they may have been partially or wholly unaware of, and thus it enables the *expansion* of remembering. These online shrines, created through repeated visitation practices marked by the nostalgic public messages of loved ones, allow for the *persistence* of the deceased in memory, which simultaneously and inevitably evokes her very *pastness*.

In his book discussing the impact of electronic media on social behavior, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985: 7) writes that "one of the reasons Americans may no longer seem to 'know their place' is that they no longer *have* a place in the traditional sense of a set of behaviors matched to physical locations and the audiences found in them." Modern communications technologies have altered our perceptual fields by extending them beyond the realm of direct, face-to-face interaction. In turn, the perceived relationship between physical place and our social environment has been expanded into the seemingly nebulous virtual realm, allowing for the emergence of new pathways and horizons of experience. Casey's (2000: 213) discussion of place memory is an especially apt paradigm for understanding online social networks as a kind of place:

> It is in providing outward display for things and pathways as they exist within the horizons of landscape that places enable memories to become inwardly inscribed and possessed: made one with the memorial self. The visibility *without* becomes part of the invisibility *within*.

As previously noted, the primary function of online social networks is the explicit display of an individual's social connections, self-expression, and interactions within the medium. To become a member of such sites is to construct a meaningful horizon, oriented about the self, within the vast cybernetic landscape. Within this horizon, memories are literally "inscribed and possessed"; the site serves as a container of past events, preserved and accessible through one's personal profile.

All technologies extend the possibilities of humankind, and in turn, they become humanized and embedded in everyday experiences. Thus, the notion of "embodiment" must be reconfigured in light of the highly participatory and immersive nature of online interaction. Just as the telephone evokes a sense of co-presence, so too can viewing and interacting with an online profile make one feel as though the other is in some way "there." It is common to observe continued interactions with the frozen online "presence" of the deceased in the form of conversational messages, as if the profile were a medium that enables active communication with those who have departed from the physical world. However, such acts often elicit confusion and discomfort in those who would prefer to bury their dead. Furthermore, the casual and at times superficial character of online communication introduces a new set of issues concerning proper respect for the dead. What follows is a more nuanced exploration of the practices and attitudes surrounding this contemporary form of commemoration.

My(Death)Space

MySpace was the most popular social networking site until 2006, when it was overtaken by Facebook. The site's original niche membership was primarily composed of musicians, 20-somethings, and high school students. For teens in particular, the site serves as a medium through which they can "hang out" with their friends and express themselves freely. The design of the site is such that member profiles can be fully customized, prompting many to plaster their pages with videos, photographs, music, and coding that is oftentimes poorly executed (a common complaint of viewers). In the event of a member death, friends and family members will often continue to post Comments on the MySpace profile of their loved one. The overwhelming majority of the "MySpace shrines" I found were instances of young and often tragic deaths, such as murder and suicide, perhaps modeled after spontaneously-created physical shrines commemorating sudden, unexpected deaths (such as the Princess Diana tragedy and the victims of 9/11). In nearly every case, such profiles continued to serve as active sites of commemoration by family and friends even years after their creators' deaths.

Online profiles are far more than merely textual representations. Typically, one's online persona includes photographs of oneself, one's friends, and past experiences. The power of visual representations is best exemplified by their capacity to evoke visceral memories, enabling one to remember another with the immediacy and presence of the visual in tension with the very pastness of the person it represents: "Damn B! Itz takin me so long to even click onto ur page kuz of all the tears that wanna come out from just puttin the curser on ur pic," writes one grieving friend. A photograph provides proof of the existence of its contents, lending credence to what are otherwise the untenable shadows of the forgetful mind. On the other hand, photographs are also open to subjective interpretation, and thus online profiles may be judged in unintended and potentially negative ways. Given the increasing ubiquity of online social networking in the

everyday lives of youth, the public archival of personal information has become a normative practice. MySpace Profiles are often rife with highly personal information, such as revealing photographs, online diaries, and emotionally fraught conversations played out through Comments. This can challenge the spirit of communication, confusing the boundaries between the informality of social relationships and the "sacred" nature of memorializing the deceased.

Death undoubtedly provokes some of the deepest fears and fascinations. Some, driven by fascination, seek out open and safe spaces on the Internet to discuss issues surrounding death with others who share their frank curiosity. In searching for the MySpace Profiles of the deceased, I was led to the controversial site MyDeathSpace.com. This popular "death networking" site serves to catalogue obituaries that include links to the MySpace Profiles of the dead. MyDeathSpace maintains a heavily active message board, home to a solid niche community teeming with camaraderie. The vast majority of message threads on the site are found in the "Off-Topic" forum, where it is made evident that the community is composed of a diverse group of individuals drawn to the site for myriad reasons. Despite their relative anonymity and geographic dispersion, members of MyDeathSpace demonstrate a collective bond through shared norms of communication and behavior, exemplifying many attributes of the kind of "virtual community" described by Howard Rheingold[7].

As the name "MyDeathSpace" implies, there is certainly a dark and morbid element to the community, whose members would be the first to acknowledge. This dark side can be found in the second most active forum, "Article Discussions." Here, conversations center around reactions to specific obituaries posted on the site, particularly those pertaining to murder, suicide, and stories considered to be of "public interest" (such as the Virginia Tech shootings and the death of Anna Nicole Smith). Such public "chit chat" about the dead frequently provokes outrage

in grieving individuals discovering that their departed is a matter of public interest and, oftentimes, hurtful gossip. The anger and confusion that may result from coming across casual public discussion of the deceased is exemplified by the following post, titled "Confused, Help Me Understand":

> I really don't mean to offend anyone but I wonder if I am the only person that discovered this site and felt as though someone stabbed me in the heart. I was searching Yahoo for my best friends obit the other day to send to a friend out of state. I simply typed in her name and noticed that a link to this site came up. I was horrified to see her name as the topic of a discussion board. Not only that, but there were blogs and poems taken from her friends and family's MySpace pages. After taking a hard look at the site it is obvious that suicide seems to be the favorite topic. Now, I understand that the psychology behind suicide can be extremely interesting but when I read comments like "suicide is my favorite" and "I like the ones where they inhale dustoff or some other cleaner, because those are ones I can laugh at," I feel so frustrated. There are friends and families that are grieving and feel that there is no reason people half way across the country needed to be speculating "what sent them over the edge." Unfortunately, the family is having her MySpace page removed and the memory page turned to private after reading this. I can't even begin to tell you what it felt like seeing what I saw today or what her mother did when she saw it. Like I said, I don't mean to offend anyone and I don't want to get in a name calling heated debate. I just want you to remember what your comments and jokes can do to grieving loved ones. If it was up to me this site would not exist, but it is not, all I ask is that you have respect and I would assume that if a family member requests you to remove a death you do so. Thank you for your time.

The community nature of the site manifests itself in times of unity in defense of their actions. Some argue that the MySpace Profiles of the dead help to humanize life and death, providing a window for understanding the greatest of mankind's mysteries. Others take a less romantic perspective; as one member put it, "MySpace has given dead people their 15 minutes." Nevertheless, it is generally agreed upon that "if you don't want certain aspects of your life to be made public, then YOU have to keep it out of the internet. If you project yourself as a 'bad ass gangster' or such, chances are that's how people are going to remember you when you are gone." Thus, it is important to note that, though Profiles are often publicly accessible, they are frequently made publicly *visible* in the event of their owner's death.

The extremely public and promotional nature of MySpace also allows for a high level of spam, which may (however inadvertently) intrude on the "sacred" Profiles of the deceased. As one MyDeathSpace member put it, **"**My deal I have since I have been on here, is all the spam left on these peoples Profiles after they have passed...that is a blight to see on any page, but it just seems wrong to see it…" It is not uncommon to find Comments left by spam robots promoting pornography sites and diet pills in the midst of the heartfelt messages of Friends. This comes across as egregious and disrespectful to those seeking to preserve and respect the "living memory" of the dead, a sentiment paralleled in cases of desecration of monuments and cultural artifacts. MySpace's policy[8] on the issue states:

> We're very sorry to hear about your loss. If you're the next of kin (mother, father, spouse, legally registered domestic partner, son, or daughter) of the deceased, we can delete or preserve the Myspace profile for you.
>
> For the sake of our users' safety and security, however, we'll need you to email us proof of death, such as an obituary or death certificate at accountcare@support.myspace.com. Please write us from your personal email address and tell us how you're related to the deceased, and include the deceased user's Myspace friend ID along with your specific request to either delete or preserve the profile, or to remove content.
>
> Unfortunately, we can't let you access, edit, or delete any of the content or settings on the user's profile yourself, but we'll be sure to review and remove any content you find objectionable.

For the most part, however, the Profiles of the dead become sites through which loved ones express their love and grief. Such messages are nearly always directed to the deceased, often as if she was still checking her profile from beyond the grave. For example:

> miss u b. just havin a long nite i guess. cant sleep. or dont want too.. workin on my future interview questions. & was thinkin of u in them. watcha think of them? you can help me remember wat to say when the time comes hopefully. cuz you know you were my memory since i dont have one as good as yours...

The above message is representative of the way in which many MySpace natives communicate through the medium, reflecting the manner in which the internet, like remembrance itself, transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries of the physical world. Communication within online social networks is unlike other forms of online communication (such as instant messaging and e-mail) in that reciprocity is not always expected. For instance, earlier today I posted words of encouragement on a friend's profile, simply to let her know that she's not alone in spending her final weekend at school writing papers. Messages posted to online Profiles are often intended as public displays of connection, serving primarily to affirm and maintain social bonds.

For family members and friends, viewing the online Profiles of the recently departed is often both comforting and painful. In an online news article about the trend, a grieving father articulated his experiences of regularly visiting his deceased daughter's MySpace profile, much as one would regularly visit a grave: "Some days it makes me feel she's still there," he said. "And some days it reminds me I can never have that contact again (as cited in St. John, 2006)." These sentiments are made apparent through the public messages inscribed on the online Profiles of the deceased, which tend to express a mix of pastness as well as a sense of continued co-presence:

> I was listening to some salsa... and of course u came to mind my dude!!!! The song finished just as i started thinking about u teaching me how to dance salsa wit a little more style..... And then "Vamones Pal Monte" comes on..... Damn bro... I miss ur ass bee.....
> [Comment on MySpace Profile]

The above message exemplifies the cognitive process of remembrance: external reminders follow internal mental pathways, evoking emotional memories that find their fulfillment in external, outwardly-directed expression. It is through language that we represent and understand our experiences; they take on meaning through the conversational process of articulation. In this particular form of articulation, these experiences become archived in a place that serves to encapsulate the identity of another. In this way, online social networks serve as both extensions

of our memory – tangible pathways that connect us to the past – as well as potential vehicles for immortality, introducing a new form of active resistance to the needs of forgetting.

Death in the Tribe(.net)

Individual Profiles are but one way in which online social networks allow for remembrance of the dead. On Tribe.net, most communication occurs through participation in the message board forums of various online groups, called Tribes. A substantial population of the site consists of intimately connected but geographically dispersed members of communities revolving principally around the annual Burning Man arts festival. In the absence of face-to-face communication, Tribe.net becomes a crucial platform through which this community communicates. When a member of this community dies, she is often commemorated in forum threads of the Tribes she was a member of. Friends share stories, personal feelings, images, and links to artwork created in honor of the deceased. Unlike the default option for MySpace Profiles, public messages posted to individual Profiles (called "Testimonials") must be approved by the owner in order to be displayed, and thus individual Profiles themselves are unlikely to become sites of collective commemoration or personal communication.[9]

It should also be noted that Tribe.net is generally community-centric, as opposed to the ego-centricity of MySpace and Facebook. "The original thesis of Tribe," states co-founder Paul Martino (personal communication, 2007), "was to marry Friendster and Craigslist- or as one of our focus group members said, 'Craigslist with a face.'"[10] Though the classifieds feature is active and based on widely-shared principles of trust, the most popular activity on the site is found on message boards based around shared interests, values, and beliefs. Like MyDeathSpace, these forums teem with camaraderie and intimate, long-distance friendships that have developed an

online momentum independent of their offline origins. In the event of deaths among the Burning Man Tribe, which is the most popular group on the site with nearly 21,000 members, this forum is used for disseminating news about memorial services, expressing condolences, passing on words of wisdom and support, sharing cherished memories of the deceased, and providing links to groups and websites formed in their honor. Through such forms of collective remembrance, many find a renewed sense of community:

> Something that Spyral points out, that really resonates with me, is the way in which an event such as this lays out so clearly how very deep and good the people in this community are. You see really good things in people and it does make you proud to be connected to them.

Tribe.net's emphasis on community is further exemplified by the fact that the site owners themselves personally post messages such as the following: "To Shoshana and Nathan, their families, friends, and everyone else effected by this accident, the prayers and well wishes of all the Tribe staff are with you."

The culture of Tribe.net is such that "alternative" lifestyles and viewpoints are normalized and encouraged. Those connected through Tribes like Burning Man have often come together through underground happenings that promote shared values of creativity, generosity, acceptance, and collective ecstatic experience. The nature of their remembrance often reflects these sentiments:

> Doing stuff for BM [Burning Man] and talking to people about my experiences there has made me think of her alot as she invited me to her camp and was so tied up in so many happy experiences there for me. I was used to not seeing her for months but I don't think you ever get use to not seeing someone forever. I still keep expecting that I will see her.

Many of the deaths reported on Tribe.net forums serve to highlight pertinent issues for the communities involved. For example, deaths at Burning Man are often the result of unsafe practices: bicycle and 'mutant vehicle' collisions, drug overdoses, dehydration and other

potentially avoidable accidents. Exemplifying how the deceased "live on" in the collective

memory, these stories can teach valuable lessons that are passed on to the wider community

through their dissemination online. In a similar vein, deaths may also serve to strengthen

community by enabling new relationships to form on the basis of shared grief:

> I woke up this morning with a terrible sinking feeling and the image of a large black hole amidst a vast spider's web. The hole is where Allison used to be. Frayed threads hung and pulled against the stark darkness. Limp, dim strands extended all around.
>
> I've had a notion which I'm throwing out there for everyone's personal consideration.
>
> That is, the healing that can come from recognizing and honoring Ally's connective force by looking around this tribe and choosing even just one new person to get to know. As part of this, we should each remain receptive and open to anyone who approaches us in the same light.
>
> Forever changed, we can mend this broken web.

Members of Tribe.net often form relationships online with those they physically interact with

only occasionally or never at all. While many friends would be unable to travel cross-country for

a traditional memorial service, some may simply be unable to leave their comfort zone.

Nevertheless, online mourners find support in commemorating the dead through a medium that,

for much of the Tribe.net population, is well-known and comfortable for them:

> i attended the memorial, but left just before it started b/c i felt disconnected from the crowd. i didn't know allison very well, but she still touched me and i am mourning her loss. the thing is, i wasn't comfortable being upset in a large group of people i didn't know and thought it best to leave and be alone for a while.

Upon visiting the site, loved ones of the deceased may discover an entire community of grieving

friends they weren't aware of:

> I'm not sure if Mary [the mother of the deceased] is in this tribe, but she has created a tribe account. She would like to stay in touch with Allison's friends as a way to feel connected to her. If you have positive stories to share about the way Allison touched your life, or even just a fun or funny story, or have time just to say hello I would ask that you please send her a note.

Unlike MyDeathSpace, where anonymous strangers often casually engage in what could be construed as disrespectful and "profane" conversation about posted deaths, discussions of the deceased on Tribe.net are typically more intimate in tone. When strangers do contribute to these threads, I have observed only words of respect and sympathy. Because the site is not well known and most members identify themselves by nicknames, many of the problems that arise in more public sites (such as MySpace) are negated. Such a contrast exemplifies the manner in which small, niche-based online communities differ greatly from massive and high-profile sites such as MySpace.

Specters of Facebook

With over 500 million active users[11], Facebook has rapidly become embedded in the social practices of high school and college students around the world. As one student informer put it, "you don't exist if you're not on Facebook." For many, checking the site has become as routine as checking one's e-mail. The site serves as a container of information pertinent to the offline social worlds of its members, and is a fairly accurate representation of "real-world" social networks. Members are able to find old high school acquaintances, create event invitations, upload photo albums, and interact with others through private messages, public postings on the Walls of individual Profiles, and Group message boards. Many of these activities are then published to the "News Feed," made up of streaming "headlines" that are displayed on a user's homepage upon login. This feature enables the spread of social information that would otherwise be relegated to more active and unilaterally directed forms of communication, such as face-to-face conversation and telephone calls. For instance, personal messages posted on the Walls of those in one's network may appear as a "headline," as well as newly-formed Groups created or

joined by friends in honor of the deceased, As such, it is possible that geographically distant friends may learn of a common friend's death upon logging into the site.

Unlike MySpace, individual Facebook Profiles are typically inaccessible for strangers. Thus, I was unable to personally view more than a few memorialized Profiles. Nevertheless, secondhand accounts attest to the fact that friends post messages on the Facebook Profiles of the deceased in a manner quite similar to that of MySpace. My friend Celia related to me that she regularly comes across new messages posted on the Wall of her brother's girlfriend, nearly two years after her tragic death. These messages, depending on one's News Feed settings, may appear on the Facebook homepages of those in her social network, and thus serve as reminders for the remembrances of others. Through permanently encapsulating the dead and providing an outlet for the expression of their ongoing presence in the minds of the living, social networking sites become a vehicle for individual remembrance.

Groups, on the other hand, are more often than not publicly accessible, and it is a common practice for friends to create Facebook Groups in memory of the dead. These Groups encourage collective remembrance much like those on Tribe.net. Due to the ease with which Facebook makes the sharing of various forms of media possible, I regularly came across an expansive plethora of homemade videos, photographs, and shared news articles that serve to commemorate the deceased, encapsulated within the online shrine of a Facebook Group. Additionally, Group members will often comment on these individual objects of memory, as well as share memories, poems, and other sentiments on the homepage of the Group itself. Such Groups, like those on Tribe.net, provide a means of collective remembrance that serves to strengthen community bonds (though rather than communities based on shared interests or

lifestyles, communities on Facebook typically represent "real-life" networks, such as university affiliations and family relationships).

It is clear that many feel strongly about the medium as a way of honoring the memory of the deceased. Facebook's policies regarding the status of deceased members' Profiles have been the subject of much controversy. Originally, their policy was to "memorialize" such Profiles, removing them 30 days after becoming aware of a member's death (Walker 2006). However, following the murders of 32 students at Virginia Tech, this policy was revoked, allowing Profiles to remain (in a "memorialized state") indefinitely.[12] The campaign behind this change was spearheaded by John Woods, a friend of the fallen students, who organized a Facebook Group entitled "Facebook Memorialization Is Misguided: Dead Friends Are Still People" that amassed 2700 members in two weeks. Despite the change in policy, the Group continues to be quite active with 1,334 members (as of June 2011). The Group description lists the following current issues:

> Firstly, their interests, favorite books, favorite movies, favorite television shows, "about me," and quotes are gone.

> Secondly, we who were their friends cannot say that we met someone through them. This information is gone. (I, for one, met many people through Maxine before and after she was killed.)

> Thirdly, their groups are no longer listed. These groups reflect the things in life about which they cared, the things that made them laugh, and the ideas that moved them.

The founding principle behind the Group is that dead people deserve to "live on" through Facebook, just as they do in the memories of others. Furthermore, many Americans believe that those who have died continue to look after those they have left behind from heaven. "I went to it and saw how many people are still leaving comments about missing her, wishing her happy birthday, and just saying random things that they would say if she were still alive," Lewis wrote.

"I find this so touching and I'm sure that she does to, up there in heaven."[13] Interestingly, I rarely

came across instances of communication *between* members of these Groups, whereas

interpersonal support is prominent on Tribe.net. This is likely due to the fact that Facebook

networks are frequently spatially-bound representations of offline communities, and thus

grieving friends need not express their support for one another online.

Following the outrage expressed by users concerning the new 'Suggestions' feature –

particularly reports that Facebook had 'Suggested" that they "reconnect" with a deceased Friend

– a Facebook employee (Kelly 2009) published a blog post concerning the updated

memorialization policy:

> We understand how difficult it can be for people to be reminded of those who are no
> longer with them, which is why it's important when someone passes away that their
> friends or family contact Facebook to request that a profile be memorialized. For
> instance, just last week, we introduced new types of Suggestions that appear on the right-
> hand side of the home page and remind people to take actions with friends who need help
> on Facebook. By memorializing the account of someone who has passed away, people
> will no longer see that person appear in their Suggestions.
>
> When an account is memorialized, we also set privacy so that only confirmed friends can
> see the profile or locate it in search. We try to protect the deceased's privacy by removing
> sensitive information such as contact information and status updates. Memorializing an
> account also prevents anyone from logging into it in the future, while still enabling
> friends and family to leave posts on the profile Wall in remembrance.

Among the hundreds of comments in response to this post were two prominent points of

discomfort and contention; namely, that those who were not Facebook Friends with a deceased

friend or family member should be able to view her Profile and post messages to her Wall, and

that removing any of the content posted by the deceased (especially status updates and Wall

posts directed to others) was not only unfair, but downright painful:

> Important information and years of past posts by my son were removed from his page
> when it was memorialized. His page was stripped down to almost nothing. I would have
> loved to have had the chance to at least copy the things he had written, before they were
> gone forever. This has been very upsetting to me. Shame on you, Facebook, for inflicting

a "secondary wound" on an already grieving family because of your not very well thought out policy on this.

In describing her experience with viewing the Facebook Profile of a deceased high school acquaintance, my friend Anna expressed discomfort with the "strangeness" of others' use of the medium to continue communicating with the dead. However, it would seem that communication within online social networks is simply more comfortable for some, particularly those who regularly interact electronically. The relationship between "native" users of the Internet and one's interactions with the medium can be likened to the habitual nature of "body memory," which Casey discusses at length. For example, as I sit here writing on my laptop, I find myself instinctively responding to the "ding" that signifies a new e-mail, and in moments am clicking on a link that sends me to my Facebook Profile. Drawn down this familiar pathway, I reflexively scan the News Feed, where the faces of my friends peer back at me, reminding me of their existence. Scarcely a day goes by without communication through this medium, which does not require the immediate presence of others, nor their reciprocity. The simple act of pressing "send" is a fulfillment of the intention behind this particular communicative act, for seeing the message displayed on the screen confirms that communication has occurred. For "digital natives," it is often more comfortable to communicate with unseen others through the online medium than it is to communicate with the dead in more traditional ways, such as kneeling in prayer or lighting a candle. Thus, it seems only fitting that those accustomed to this form of communication may continue to post messages directed to a dead friend, reinforcing a habitual act that serves to express the ongoing presence of another in one's memory.

On Living On Online

The trace that I leave signifies to me both my death, either to come or already past, and the hope that it will survive me. It's not an ambition of immortality, it's structural; it is

the constant form of my life. Every time I allow something to go forth, I see my death in the writing. The extreme test: one expropriates oneself—one gives oneself away—without knowing to whom one confides the thing one leaves. Who will inherit it now and how? Will there even be inheritors?

<div align="right">

- Jacques Derrida[14]

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Through this elucidation of the myriad ways in which the dead are commemorated in the "online shrines" of MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe, it is clear that the Internet extends and reconfigures the possibilities for the persistence of memory. Though Casey's traits of remembrance remain pertinent (if somewhat altered), I contend that his emphasis on physical "place" in the process of remembering must be extended to include "virtual space" as well. As the term "cyberspace" implies, people conceptualize the abstract realm of the Internet metaphorically, relating it to more familiar domains of embodied experience and physical place. However, at times technologies may seem alien and incomprehensible, instigating fear and a sense of powerlessness. Through modern technology, our experiences of the social world are increasingly disconnected from the physicality of the body and the place it is located in. On the Internet, we are everywhere and nowhere at once. Online social networks expand one's horizon of social interactions, simultaneously blurring the pathways between them. As a result of these new formations, a whole new set of anxieties and possibilities arise, challenging preconceived notions regarding the boundaries between public and private, respect for the dead, rituals of mourning, and the persistence of individual identity.

In his theory of *sur-vival* ("on living on"), Jacques Derrida (1987) asserts that all written correspondences are inevitably subject to scattering. While Derrida was referring specifically to postcards, the public and persistent nature of online identities applies this notion quite literally. Our digital traces serve as artifacts of ourselves; the dead *live on* in the public and persistent realm of the internet, enabling ongoing dialogue between their memorial traces and those left

behind in the land of the living. When even the dead can join the dialogue, today's social networking sites come to resemble a haunting electronic nebula populated by everyone you've ever known, interacting in new modes of spatiality and temporality.

Though death is a universal inevitability of humankind, and though it may come at any time, it is precisely for these reasons that we go about our everyday lives without consciously factoring in its imminent possibility. If we did, we would forever be locked in existential stasis. To act, at least in American society, is often to direct oneself toward some future possibility – of happiness, reward, prestige, love, security, and on and on. Thus, when we "type ourselves into being" online, we are motivated by such possibilities and often fail to factor in that we are creating traces of ourselves that will outlive their creators. However, just as traces of a deceased individual persist to exist in the remembrances of others and through objects such as graves and photographs, so too do they persist in the ethereal realm of the Internet. Like traditional memorial services, the sites of these traces can serve to connect previously unaffiliated individuals through their shared loss. The Internet expands this possibility of connection, for it is in many ways easier to articulate deeply felt feelings to strangers through the anonymity, convenience, and delocalization of online communication. Despite the concerns of those still not comfortable with the medium, online social networks enable grieving friends to share stories, mediated memory objects, and words of support at any time, regardless of the distance between them. Though it is not particularly pleasant to ponder the traces we leave of ourselves after death, this chapter has hopefully illuminated the ways in which online Profiles evolve into ongoing sites of commemoration, suggesting that we take into consideration how we choose to represent ourselves through them.

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[1]**ENDNOTES**

 This chapter is based on the final chapter of my Master's anthropology thesis, *The Virtual Campfire: An Ethnography of Online Social Networking* (2008).

[2]   "Little Gidding" (4 Quartets).

[3]   *Speaking into the Air*, p. 150-151.

[4]   Jackson, Michael. 2005. *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects*.

[5] Throughout this chapter, the ordinary language terms used to describe official features of these sites will be capitalized as proper nouns.

[6] As quoted in Carruthers (2008: 18).

[7] The term was coined in 1993 by Howard Rheingold, specifically in reference to his experiences with the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), a message board community much like MyDeathSpace.

[8] "How can I access or delete a deceased member's profile?" Retrieved 16 June 2011 from: <http://www.myspace.com/help>.

[9] This may not always be the case, as evidenced by the following post on a Tribe.net forum: "Back in the Day, tribe would also let customer service approve testimonials for people who had passed. I'm sure they still will, if asked."

[10] Friendster was the top social networking site until it was overtaken by MySpace in 2004. Craigslist, a free, text-only site made up of classified ads organized by city, was founded in 1996 and has remained one of the most popular sites on the Internet today.

[11] According to Facebook's 'Factsheet,' there are more than 500 million active users as of 16 June 2011. "Active users" are users who have returned to the site in the past 30 days (Facebook 2011).

[12] Certain elements of Facebook profiles designated as "memorialized" are hidden, such as contact info and personal information (interests, favorite books, favorite movies, favorite television shoes, favorite quotes, and "about me" section). However, friends are still able to view photo albums, basic info, education info, and can post messages on the public "wall" of these profiles (Hortobagyl 2007).

[13] As quoted in Stelter (2006).

[14]   As quoted in Butler (2005: 31).