

**Death and the Virtual:  
Memorialization on Social Networking Websites**

MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

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## Introduction

The shift towards online communication has impacted many aspects of our lives, in that we increasingly use the internet in ways that have a lasting impact on our lived experience. One of the ways this impact occurs is through the virtual manifestation of phenomena related to death. Customs related to death - such as funerals and memorials- are being remediated on the internet in ways that are varied and complex. Remediation, a term introduced by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, involves the reinvention of previous forms of media using new media technologies.<sup>1</sup> In this way, every form of media is understood to be a new version of a form of media that already existed. Looking at sites of memorialization of all kinds through the framework of remediation illuminates the ways that the manifestation of issues related to death and memorialization on the internet has and will continue to both complicate and enhance the ways these sites are experienced and conceptualized by those that visit them. While traditional physical memorial sites have always existed - and will continue to exist - sites of remembrance that appear on the internet are emerging as a complementary medium of memorialization.

In a world where our daily lives increasingly involve the use of the internet, it is not surprising that it is a place that we sometimes turn to in times of need. The death of a loved one can often lead to the use of the internet for various memorial purposes. User profiles on

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<sup>1</sup> Bolter and Grusin described remediation mostly in regards to the production of media such as films, videogames and works of art, however this concept can be applied to any re-production of content within a new and different media framework. The authors describe this process, saying that "Media are continually commenting upon, reproducing and replacing each other" (14).

Social Networking Websites (SNS), and more specifically on Facebook, are emerging as important sites for memorialization. User profiles are self-created pages that are a virtual “face” for the creator of the profile. These home pages are places where the user can both create an identity and broadcast information. User profiles include personal information of a person’s choosing, such as: photos, birth date, location, political and religious affiliation, entertainment preferences, and much more.<sup>2</sup> User profiles differ from regular online or virtual memorials in a fundamental way because they are created by the person who has died prior to their death. Virtual and online memorials are created after the death of the person by someone else.

This paper explores the ways in which people conceptualize the space of Facebook profiles of the deceased as a memorial space that serves functions that both overlap those of traditional physical memorials, and go beyond them. The paper investigates the previously unexplored space for memorialization that is created upon the Facebook profiles of deceased users. While the funerary-type functions on the page would occur soon after the death of the Facebook user, the profile is permanently transformed into a memorial space by the actions that are carried out on the profile, mostly in the form of comments left by acquaintances. The conceptualizations that people hold about this memorial space will be examined through the use of interviews with people who have visited the user profiles of deceased users. I will show that the space of the user profile offers a meaningful, personalized site where mourners can

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<sup>2</sup> Other aspects of identity that can be published on User Profiles include such things as language, place of birth, reason for being on the site, gender, sexual orientation, relationship status, family members, sports (both those played and teams supported), educational and occupational history and status, activities, and contact information. They also often feature a space for other people to post comments. On Facebook, this space is called a “wall”.

gather and interact in different ways than they could at traditional memorial sites. User profile sites offer unique opportunities for types of memorialization that do not exist in physical memorial sites or in other virtual memorials. The conceptualization of the uses, functions and meanings that are bound up in deceased user profiles by visitors to these pages will shed light on this developing medium of remembrance. The research project documented within this paper informs the areas of study that exist at the intersections of the fields of media, culture, and communication. It is also, more broadly, relevant to those fields that deal with death processes, such as religion, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. This paper is written from the perspective of media, communication and cyber-studies, and will explore the issues from a point of view of documenting the phenomenon of memorialization on user profiles, and the ways in which those that engage in this memorialization conceptualize the space of the profile as a true memorial space, rather than attempting to frame it within the grieving process.

This paper provides background information on the digitalization of our daily lives, virtual memorials, Social Networking Websites, the relationship between death and photography, physical memorial sites and memory. While there is currently no research on memorialization on Social Networking Websites, the bodies of literature on the above-mentioned topics will inform the framework of the research project and provide a useful backdrop for looking at these issues; each of these bodies of literature informs one aspect of the project. The study detailed in this paper examines the conceptualization of memorial spaces on Social Networking Websites by those that have encountered them, illuminates the potential of these sites to offer unique opportunities for remembrance for those that use

them. The motivation for this study is to show that memorial opportunities provided by Social Networking Websites are valid memorial spaces that differ from and go beyond those of other virtual memorial spaces and physical memorial sites. An examination of technicalities and difficulties that emerge when user profiles are used for memorialization purposes highlights the limits of this forum for memorialization purposes. Data collection and analysis are outlined prior to a discussion of findings. Finally, conclusions about the conceptualization of the space demonstrate the ways in which these virtual places are true memorial sites that offer unprecedented opportunities for remembrance. This study will contribute to the existing field on virtual memorial websites, and expand the realm of these studies to include Social Networking Websites as a virtual forum where memorialization takes place.

## Digitalization

Many aspects of our daily lives have been at least partially digitalized. Blogs are a virtual form of diary, emails are a virtual form of letter-writing, and dozens of online photo hosting websites replace actual photo albums in the virtual sphere. In his article about the online afterlife, Vincent McDermott points out that “photographs go on Flickr, personal movies are on YouTube, blogs have replaced diaries and the number of headshots scored in Halo could be considered a personal memento by some” (12)<sup>3</sup>. Processes related to death are also re-imagined on the internet, and these range from virtual memorials that serve as digital

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<sup>3</sup> Halo is a science fiction video game produced by Bungie Software Products Corporation and owned by Microsoft Game Studios. Halo centers around a war between humans and an alien “Covenant”, and has been praised as one of the best first-person shooter games ever created (Glenday, 29). The term “Halo” refers to the ring-shaped structures upon which the fighting takes place.

graveyards or cemeteries to SNS profiles upon which funerary functions can be identified. A brief discussion of traditional death processes through a broad look at the field of death studies is necessary here. Generally, literature about death falls into four main areas of study: the treatment of the dying; the disposal of human remains; the responses of survivors and the conceptualization of the afterlife (Houlebrooke, 1). Each of these areas of study have been looked at from a multitude of perspectives, including religious studies, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Of all the aspects of death that have been studied, the responses of survivors and, in some ways, the disposal of human remains are of concern for this paper. Aspects of the response of survivors are both practical in nature, as seen in the funeral ritual, and less tangible, as witnessed in the emotional state of mourners. The funeral ritual has been widely studied because of "the great range of purposes they have been designed to fulfil in different cultures. Perhaps the most important is to secure the happiness, or at least the tranquillity of the departed" (Houlbrooke, 1). Thus funeral rituals vary greatly between religious, social, and ethnic groups. As for the emotional response, the bereaved are commonly thought to go through grief-stages, and these are viewed in diverse ways by different theorists (Davies, 31). We can see many aspects of the responses of mourners narrated and remediated on the internet, especially those that are rooted in the social sphere, such as bereavement and memorialization.

The transformation of virtual space into memorial space makes visible the potential for the virtual sphere to become an even more integral part of our meaning-making in regards to our every day life narrative and life stages. As the internet plays an increasingly significant and relevant role in our lives, we will undoubtedly notice that deaths too will become part of the

landscape of the digital world through online memorialization. The ways that themes of death, dying and grief have appeared on the internet are manifold, and I argue that these appearances are not only a reflection of previous mediums that existed, but that they also reflect the transformation of virtual spaces into spaces that offer great potential for memorialization.

## Virtual Memorials

One of the most basic and fundamental ways in which themes of death have appeared on the internet is through virtual or online memorial websites. Virtual or online memorial websites fall into many different categories. These are loosely defined, and are constantly evolving to meet the needs of different types of mourners. These categories are defined by various factors, such as the way in which someone died, or perhaps the role that that person played in the life of the visitor to the site. For example, some online memorials are host to profiles of people who have died of cancer. Other examples would be the many websites dedicated to soldiers of a given war (such as the Vietnam War) and memorial websites specifically for deceased children. In all of their variety, these websites are symbolic of a move towards virtual memorialization. Virtual memorials are one piece of evidence of the remediation of processes related to death on the internet.

A typical example of a memorial website is Virtual Memorials ([www.virtual-memorials.com](http://www.virtual-memorials.com))<sup>4</sup>. This website allows one to create a profile for a deceased loved one, search for existing profiles, or interact with other visitors to the site in a forum. The forum includes

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<sup>4</sup> Other examples of typical online memorials are Remembered Forever ([www.rememberedforever.org](http://www.rememberedforever.org)) and Memorials Online ([www.memorialsonline.com](http://www.memorialsonline.com)).

sections on specific types of losses such as the loss of a child and sections on specific holidays such as Mother's Day. Many of them feature daily death anniversaries on their home page, lending to the viewing of profiles of strangers. One website featured a daily profile of a person whose birthday it would have been, as well as a profile of a baby whose "angelversary" was on that date ([www.virtual-memorials.com](http://www.virtual-memorials.com)).

There are many ways in which online or virtual memorial websites mirror traditional physical memorial sites or graveyards. They are sites where many profiles of deceased persons are hosted, much in the way that graveyards contain many graves of individuals. The profiles of the deceased that are hosted on these websites are sites that family members and friends can visit when they want to remember the dead without a visit to an actual graveyard. As with gravestones, the sites detail information specific to the person who has died. Both places also allow visitors to the site to strengthen their bonds and connect with other people who are grieving in much the same way as going to a funeral would. Virtual memorial websites contain components that are reminiscent of the functions of traditional physical memorials.

Another interesting parallel between physical and online memorials is the visitation of each by strangers. Much as one would go through a walk in a graveyard or cemetery, it has been documented that people who do not know the deceased, and sometimes people who have never set up an online memorial for a deceased person they knew, visit these websites (Marshall 3). This kind of visitation is done for the same kinds of reasons that one would walk through a cemetery; the websites have been described as "a quiet place on the internet", that lends to the reflection upon one's own life and mortality, much as a graveyard would be a quiet place to walk and do the same kinds of emotional thinking (Marshall 4).

Despite the many similarities that virtual memorials and traditional memorials share, there are distinct and important differences that exist between them. Conventional memorials are physical sites where one can visit to reflect upon and remember the deceased. These include sites like graveyards, roadside memorials, tombs, other burial grounds, and monuments. Many sites of mourning, such as cemeteries or graveyards, are the sites of burial of human remains. J.S. Curl defines a cemetery as a “burial ground, especially a large landscaped park or ground laid out expressly for the deposition or interment of the dead” (78). The inclusion of the body at some physical memorial sites is a significant difference between physical and virtual memorials. Despite the embodiment of the deceased user within their user profile, the absence of the physical body is a lack that cannot be reconciled. The addition of a gravestone or marker designating the burial plot as belonging to a specific person serves the purpose of demarcating a particular site at which loved ones can gather and reflect on the deceased person’s life. Thus, the site “carries the purpose of enshrining the identity of the deceased as an individual” (Rugg, 261). Physical memorial sites are often for many people who have died in the same event, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982), known simply as “the Wall” in Washington D.C. This monument contains the names of Americans who died or went missing in the Vietnam war.

The differences between virtual and conventional memorials go beyond the materiality of each, however. The literature on virtual memorial websites has shown that these websites serve similar functions to those that have been attributed to Social Networking Websites, in that they can be used for the nurturing of real life connections between people and for the hosting of important narrative creation. Additional benefits and characteristics of SNSs will be

further discussed in the next section. The body of work on online or virtual memorial websites suggests that these websites provide a space for the formation of relationships with others, and that important and meaningful work on closure can occur on these websites. Much of this work is situated within scholarship on the virtual sphere, and the intersecting fields of computer science, technology, media and culture because it relates to human behaviour in relation to computers. Other literature on virtual memorials can be found in the fields of study on death, dying and memorial practices. Within these fields, memorial websites are viewed as a potential new venue for issues that these authors have long been studying.

In speaking of this phenomenon, Pamela Roberts, who has written extensively on virtual memorials says that “online memorialization allows the bereaved to construct a memorial that can be created or shared with others and either process may foster dialogue about the deceased” (65). She also points out that these websites allow for a space for people to “find common ground in loss” (71). In her study on the virtual cemetery, Roberts found that 91% of her survey participants “indicated that they continue to revise their memorial, much as one might put new flowers on a grave” (63). This kind of updating also included the addition of pictures or stories, which is just not possible with a traditional physical memorial. These are functions that are not met by traditional memorials—we can see how in this example, the remediation of traditional memorial sites on the internet expands and enriches their function. While these websites differ from the user profiles of deceased individuals on SNSs in that they are created by next-of-kin rather than by the deceased person themselves, their importance and functionality can speak to us about the potential of SNSs to play a similar role.

Memorial websites are just one place on the internet that people can turn to for

support after the death of a loved one. They offer an important place where people who have experienced a loss can gain a sense of community and connection to the dead as well as the living. Online support groups can also play a large part in the memorialization process of bereaved individuals. Support groups on the internet have become more and more common, and are widely diverse. They exist both for people who are terminally ill, those who care for them, and for people whose loved ones have died. These kinds of support groups mimic the functions of “real life” support groups in many ways and are an example of one way that memorialization is being carried out on the internet.

The literature on online support groups shows similar benefits to those of online memorial websites. Meeting other people in similar situations can be comforting, and can also be an opportunity for the transfer of knowledge and information (Roberts, 43). Roberts points out that online support groups provide these very services. She says “for the bereaved, one of the most important web resources may be access to a community of other bereaved individuals. In some cases, that community is composed of people who experienced the same loss” (44). Roberts found that these online support networks were in some cases more helpful than traditional support groups in that they provided access to a community with whom the visitor would identify. She also points out that for some people, the only place that they can find people in similar situations is on the web. Illnesses that are very specific, or situations that are very specific, sometimes makes it difficult to find others facing the same difficulties. Additionally, online networks can connect these people across large distances. An example of such a network is National Students of Ailing Mothers and Fathers (National Students of AMF). This organization provides online support to college students that are coping with terminally ill

or deceased parents. The needs of students in these types of situations are specific, and would not be accommodated for in as complete a way by more generalized traditional bereavement support groups. Dealing with schoolwork and less-than-ideal living situations are added burdens on students dealing with loss, and these groups can help to lighten that burden by providing an outlet and resources.

While online support networks serve many of the same purposes that traditional support groups do, the ability of online support networks to cater to the specific needs of bereaved individuals can make them even more effective tools of support. Additionally, it has been shown that individuals are more willing to self-disclose through interactions that are computer-based than in real life interactions (Roberts, 64). This means that users of these networks may find that their interactions in this “safe” online space might be more meaningful due to the fact that they can be more forthright about their emotions than in every day communication. These discoveries allow us to understand that Facebook profiles of deceased individuals, which do serve as a point of interaction regarding the death of an individual, could serve as an important site of interaction, memorialization, and ultimately of closure.

The literature on online memorials and online support networks shows that these spaces are important sites of memorialization that serve functions that both mirror and go beyond their physical counterparts. Unlike physical memorial spaces, online memorial websites can be visited from anywhere at any time, can be expanded upon in personalized ways that are meaningful to the visitor, and most importantly, allow for communication and interaction that may be more useful and meaningful to the visitor than they might experience at a traditional physical memorial.

## Social Networking Websites

Many of the benefits that can be reaped from visiting online memorial websites can also be obtained through Social Networking Websites. As previously discussed, one aspect of SNSs is that they allow for individual profiles of not only the living, but also the deceased. In this way, SNSs have begun to play a role similar to that of online memorials for those that use them for memorialization. Ellison and boyd define SNSs as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” (2). Geocities, launched in 1994, is the first website that displayed these features. Through the late nineties, SNSs continued to develop and began to place emphasis on user profiles and visible friend lists. They were originally intended to connect people in both the business and dating fields, but were eventually broadened to connect people across various social lines or networks. They cater to either the geographical area a user lives in, or an aspect of shared identity or personal interest that the users have.

Facebook is an SNS launched in 2004, however, it was originally only available to Harvard students. Its scope was widened to all university students, then to all students in general, and was eventually expanded to other networks such as corporations and cities. Eventually it became available to everyone. According to Facebook’s public “press room” on the website, there are over 500 million users.<sup>5</sup> This number far exceeds the amount of users of any

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<sup>5</sup> Facebook’s Press Room is a page where official Facebook blogs, press releases and information such as statistics,

other SNS.

While the physical memorial can be understood to be remediated upon online memorial websites and also on SNSs, there are also specific processes related to death that are enacted on SNSs. The funereal process can be seen to be remediated on SNSs through several mechanisms that occur on these sites. As such, SNSs will serve as the primary example of the remediation of these phenomena. Profiles of the deceased function as sites for many aspects of funerals. These are that they act as a beacon for the bereaved to enact their grief and become a public space for loved ones to express their grief and memorialize the person. People post comments, much as they would speak a eulogy, which speak to their relationships with and memories of that person. These outpourings of grief also serve to bring the community of loved ones together, as people can read the thoughts of one another and engage in a dialogue with them. In this way, they also function as a type of guest book, such as one would find at a funeral.

As previously discussed, the funeral itself is a common ritual that follows a death. As mourning ceremonies, funerals have been thought to repair the “damaged social fabric” caused by a death in addition to reuniting the surviving members of a group (Van Gennep 147). They have also been understood to function as “communicative symbolic practices that construct and express individual and collective...cultural identity” (Reimers, 147). Ritual is very often associated with death. In their article about the connection between the media and mourning rituals, Mervi Pantti and Johanna Sumiala conceptualize ritual as “a form of action that includes

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a timeline, and factsheets are posted.

a dramatic symbolism and arouses emotions through which individuals might think, feel and act as members of society.”

User profiles on SNSs become permanent sites for the expression of grief, binding of community, and ultimately a site through which mourners can come to terms with the event of a death. Interestingly, it is not only the community of loved ones that can be strengthened through the use of profiles on SNSs as sites of mourning. The user profiles belonging to celebrities that have passed away illustrate this same phenomenon on a larger scale. The profile page of Alexander McQueen on Facebook is an example of this phenomenon. A famous fashion designer, McQueen’s profile gained 80,000 “fans” in the week following his death. Comments such as “It’s been 5 days, I actually miss you as tho I knew you...sleep well” quickly poured in. The flocking of people to this profile page as well as their willingness to expose their grief publicly can be interpreted as evidence of community uniting in their grief.

As we can see, profiles on SNSs of deceased persons host many of the same functions that traditional funerals do. They allow people to express their grief, unite loved ones and society at large, serve as sites for the processing of these events, and a source of closure for loved ones. The profiles themselves also act as virtual funeral cards that can be visited and updated. They provide an online memento that can serve many of the functions that funeral cards traditionally would. It is important to note that the remediation of the funeral into the virtual world has of course not resulted in the abandonment of the funeral. These processes happen alongside of and in addition to traditional funerals.

The scholarship surrounding SNSs is grounded in diverse disciplines and many methodological traditions are employed in their study. Boyd and Ellison detail many of the

current areas of study surrounding SNSs, some of which include: impression management and friendship performance, networks and network structure, bridging online and offline social networks and privacy. The further study of these aspects of SNSs will require longer term studies and larger scale research to illuminate the long term effects of the use of these websites.

On the surface, SNSs might seem like a means for mere entertainment, but there is evidence that using Social Networking Sites has a positive effect on the lives of the users of the sites. Many authors have shown that teens, new immigrants, and the elderly are all examples of groups of people whose social capital has been improved through the use of SNSs (Arjun et al, boyd & Ellison, Brantzaeg et al). According to these authors, these websites appear to provide a space for the bridging of relationships, and can even help to balance some of the disadvantages that some people in these groups would face (Elias and Lemish, 533).

In addition to serving as an important relationship builder, SNSs also function to host narratives of peoples' daily lives in various ways. These narratives are not necessarily historically significant, however, they are part of the archive of a person's whole presence and thus bear the weight of their memorialization. On the creation of such narrative, Pierre Nora - a foundational thinker on memory - writes: "who, today, does not feel compelled to record his feelings, to write his memoirs-not only the most minor historical actor but also his witnesses, his spouse, and his doctor" (14). SNSs have been instrumental in the increase in the publishing of people's personal information and narratives. Many studies in the field have centered on the publishing of these aspects of our personal lives and the ways that doing so affects the way we understand ourselves. Identity creation, self-representation and self-reflection have been the

focus of much writing about SNSs. Jill Walker Rettberg writes that these representations of ourselves “connect to larger cultural templates, which we adopt, adapt or reject” (453). These templates include narratives of falling in love, getting married and having a baby. Walker Rettberg gives yet another example of a cultural template being a person who works hard and succeeds. These templates allow us to see ourselves within specific roles in society, and it is easier than ever to participate in these mediums. Jason Ohler points out that the “development of social networking tools such as MySpace, Facebook, and numerous blogging services, creating Web narrative is within everyone’s grasp” (32). Mark Deuze points out that “all aspects of everyday life in highly industrialized modern societies are to some extent influenced by, and implicated in computerization” (43), and we will see that narratives of death are no exception as memorialization continues to occur in virtual spaces.

## **Photography and Death**

Narrative creation and accommodation is only one example of the material that can be hosted on SNSs. One of the most widely used features of SNSs is that they allow for the uploading of photos. Since we are looking at SNS profiles as memorial sites, the hosting of photos on user profiles warrants a discussion on the intersection between photography, death and memorialization. Literature on death portrait photography shows that it has been an important aspect of memorialization since the camera was invented. Death portrait photography is the photographing of the deceased in such a way that attempts to make them appear as though they are sleeping. Photographic memorials of this kind, and others, first

appeared in the 1860's. That photographs were used for memorialization purposes so early on in the era of photography truly makes visible the connection between the camera and death. Many authors have drawn connections between death and photography; Judith Goldman writes "Death pervades the landscape of photography, for cameras are weapons that steal life and magical machines that defy death. They can preserve the past, promise the future, and transpose yesterday into tomorrow" (129). In a similar vein, Susan Sontag says that "Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction and this link between photography and death haunts all photos of people"(47).

The connection between death and photography does not simply exist within itself. It reaches out to the viewer and can provide closure and understanding of a death. Barbara Norfleet writes about this phenomenon, and states that "Photography from its beginning played an important role in helping people come to terms with the devastating rupture caused by the early death of loved ones" (112). Jay Ruby, also states that "One of several memorializing devices available to us is a photographic representation of the dead" (113). It is this aspect of death portraiture that is so relevant when thinking about user profiles on SNSs. Both online memorials and Facebook profiles feature photos of the deceased; the difference between the two would be that on a Facebook profile, the featured photos would have been chosen by the deceased individual prior to their death. Without these photos, online memorials and Facebook profiles would be lacking an important signifier of the person being memorialized. These visual signifiers are the part of the reason that people connect the profile to the actual person, and are a source of the embodiment of the deceased. In a way, they make up a virtual and less complete version of the body that would exist at physical memorial sites. As we will

see through the research study, many visitors to the Facebook profiles of deceased acquaintances report that the photos were the first thing that they looked at, and that the photos remain as the most salient part of the profile for them when doing memory work.

## Physical Memorial Sites and Memory

Literature on physical memorial sites and memory is helpful in providing a framework for looking at the memory work and memorialization that can occur on user profiles. James Young is authoritative on the subject and relevant to the topic at hand. In his book *The Texture of Memory*, Young sets out some definitions that will be helpful in thinking about memorialization and memory in a broad sense. He speaks about the difference between memorial and monument, and states that monuments are merely the physical aspect of a memorial site: "I treat all memory-sites as memorials, the plastic objects within these sites as monuments" (4). This definition encompasses user profiles within the realm of memorials, as they can certainly be classified as memory-sites. Young discusses the permanence of the physical monument, and in this light, defines it "as that which by its seemingly land-anchored permanence could also guarantee the permanence of a particular idea or memory attached to it" (3). Pierre Nora, another authoritative source on memory, echoes the concept of permanence in memory sites in saying that "Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects" (9). He further develops his definition of the "*lieux de memoire*", or "places of memory", by saying that their fundamental purpose is to "stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the

immaterial...in order to capture a maximum of meaning in a minimum of signs”(19). In this way, both authors show that although new visitors to the monument or memory site bring new meanings with them, the physical essence of the site remains unchanged in its materiality. The attachment of new meaning to existing memorials calls into focus the adaptability of web-based memorials of all kinds.

Nora’s definition of modern memory will also provide a foundation for thinking about issues of memorialization on SNSs. He says: “Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image” (13). Nora’s ideas about the need for archiving, or the “obsession with the archive that marks our age” (13) allow us to see SNS profiles as sites of these kinds of actions. Nora introduces the concept of the “responsibility” of remembering, and the ways that this responsibility “sheds its signs upon depositing them there [at the archive], as a snake sheds its skin” (13). We can understand the responsibility of memory as existing within the SNS user profile as an archive.

Nora identifies three aspects of memory, all of which we can identify within the memory site of the user profile. These aspects are archive-memory, duty-memory and distance-memory. Archive-memory speaks to the phenomenon noted above regarding the intrinsic need to archive one’s present. Duty-memory involves the guilt or weight of remembering the past, and distance-memory refers to the space between the past and the present during which one remembers the past. These three aspects of memory each play a part in the memorial process that is remediated on SNS profiles.

An additional aspect of Young’s work that is particularly helpful within the realm of this

project is his conceptualization of gathering at memorial sites. We can draw a parallel between gathering at physical memorial sites and the “virtual gathering” that occurs on user profiles. He says that “memorials provide the sites where groups of people gather to create a common past for themselves, places where they tell the constitutive narratives, their ‘shared’ stories of the past” (7). We can certainly observe this occurring on Facebook pages, and his additional statement that “at some point, it may even be the activity of remembering together that becomes the shared memory; once ritualized, remembering together becomes an event in itself that is to be shared and remembered” echoes the experiences that people have in writing on and interacting with others on the walls of their deceased loved ones. Lastly, Young points out that the memorial is always understood “in the midst of its geography, in some relation to the other landmarks nearby” (7). That user profiles of deceased individuals exist on websites that were originally intended to host the profiles of living people cannot be ignored. These profiles exist in a sea of profiles of living people and the juxtaposition between the two is an important element in the way that they are conceptualized.

The nature of the space of user profiles as existing within the realm of digital media warrants a brief discussion on memory as it relates to this sphere. According to Jose van Dijck, “The activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, present, and future of ourselves in relation to others” can be considered “mediated memories” (21). Van Dijck describes the shift from what he calls the “shoebox” of memories to the objects of memory that are mediated in some way, such as audio and video recordings, and digital photos. The use of computer and internet technology for memorialization certainly falls under this definition. What is important here is that the

divisions traditionally drawn between “real” memory and mediated memory expose a paradox whereby media are “defined as invaluable yet insidious tools for memory”(16). The insidiousness of media is conceptualized here as “a threat to the purity of remembrance” and as such is a filter for the reality of the actual memory. Van Dijck reconciles this by saying that “Media and memory...are not separate entities-the first enhancing, corrupting, extending, replacing the second; media invariably and inherently shape our personal memories, warranting the term ‘mediation’”(16). Van Dijck’s exploration of the mediation of memory allows us to situate user profiles as mediated sites of memory.

The work of James Young and Pierre Nora can be pushed forward to inform the work on the virtual memorial. Concepts such as the permanence and functions of memorials, archiving of memory, gathering at memorial sites, as well as these authors’ definitions of memorials and memory provide a foundation for looking at issues of memory and memorial in any venue. Van Dijck’s work allows us to understand that once death-related phenomena such as memorials are pushed into the virtual sphere, that they become mediated by the technology that allows them to exist there.

The bodies of literature on digitalization, Social Networking Websites, online memorials and support networks, death portraiture and physical memorial sites and memory, all provide differing viewpoints through which we can conceptualize the user profiles of deceased individuals on Facebook. Each of these bodies of knowledge provide us with background on the media that are involved in these profiles, and situate them within the realm of memory-sites. The literature on digitalization provides us with evidence of a shift towards many life processes being remediated on the internet, and allows us to see how death processes can exist there

also. The literature on Social Networking Websites provides background on the importance of SNSs as a communication tool and site for relationship-building and the hosting of life narrative. Literature on online memorials provides a foundation for thinking about memorialization on the internet and the functions it can serve, and the literature on the relationship between death and photography allows us to understand why photos on SNSs of deceased users are so important. The body of work on physical memorial spaces and memory allow us to view user profiles of deceased individuals as sites of memory and memorialization that mimic and yet go beyond traditional memorial sites. These websites can host evidence of an individual that allows them to be meaningfully memorialized in unprecedented ways.

## **Technical Aspects of Memorialization on User Profiles**

While the popularity of Facebook was a factor in the choice to focus on it, the primary reason for this choice was that all participants in the study exclusively spoke of their experiences on Facebook without prompting. There are several technicalities that arise when dealing with the Facebook profiles of deceased individuals. Facebook was originally intended to provide networking services to its users. It used to be that when a person died, they were no longer considered in need of the service; once Facebook was informed of a death, the user profile would be deleted. After a high-profile shooting at a college in Virginia in 2007, Facebook changed their policy regarding deceased users. Elizabeth Linder, a spokeswoman for Facebook stated: "We first realized we needed a protocol for deceased users after the Virginia Tech shooting, when students were looking for ways to remember and honour their classmates"

(Faure, 51)<sup>6</sup>. Facebook realized that user profiles on the website were being used for memorialization purposes, and that deleting the pages was causing grief to people who wanted to visit them. Prior to this change, one would have to attempt to copy the information from the page into one's own files for saving. Thus, a "memorial" status was created, which would allow the profile to exist in perpetuity but would not allow anyone to log into the account, nor would Facebook provide anyone with the password to the account.

Facebook has taken the additional step of increasing the privacy settings for the account when it is changed to a memorial state. This means that if one was not Facebook friends with someone prior to their death, that person would not have access to the profile. This presents a problem for people who have lost contact with the person and want to visit the profile. While this problem can prevent some people from being able to do the kinds of memory work that visiting the profile would provide, it is truly the best way that Facebook can protect the rights of its users. One way around this is the creation of a memorial "page", which is separate from the profile. A memorial page can be joined by anyone, and anyone can post to the page and add pictures. I see these kinds of pages as less intimate than the memorialized Facebook profile since they were not originally used by the person who has died, thus they are not as representative of the person. The pages are also less intimate because they are open access to anyone and therefore would not include only the deceased chosen circle of friends.

In general, the user profile of a deceased person on a SNS can certainly seem out of the

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<sup>6</sup> The Virginia Tech massacre, committed by Seung-Hui Cho at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, took place on April 16<sup>th</sup> 2007. Thirty-three people were killed, including Cho. The incident remains the deadliest school shooting in American history.

ordinary, as networking websites were not created with narratives of death in mind. People do not necessarily associate SNSs with the kinds of outpouring of grief that can occur on the profiles of the recently deceased. People join these websites to interact with their friends and acquaintances; SNSs were originally meant for light-hearted connections and frequently involve various games and other fun activities. This is reminiscent of Young's assertions about the physical memorial monument appearing in relation to its surroundings. To be confronted by a death in this type of venue creates a juxtaposition of sorts, as the morbid is inserted into the mundane.

One way that Facebook has addressed the issue of the interruption of user profiles of the deceased into an environment that is meant to be light-hearted is that they prevent any action that happens on a deceased user's profile from leaving that space and showing up in the news feeds of their Facebook friends. It also prevents that profile from showing up on the sidebar of friends' Facebook feeds, in a section that rotates between a function called "Suggestions" and a "past memories" module. Seeing the deceased user's profile in that space would be shocking to other users, and would be an unsolicited reminder of the death, and as such, Facebook made the decision to eliminate that function from the profiles of deceased users. This elimination allows for the incorporation of user profiles of the deceased into the website in such a way that attempts to minimize the shock that would be experienced by other users of the site.

Another technicality that is encountered as death related phenomena appear on the internet is the fate of user accounts after death. The future of online assets of any kind (email addresses, blogs, hosted photo albums) after the death of their user is increasingly significant

because of the growing popularity of these services. Facebook is one of the only companies that has written a comprehensive and definitive policy on these issues. Other companies are slowly following suit-for example, Twitter<sup>7</sup> is beginning to put policies in place around the issue of the death of Twitter users-but they are, at the time this paper is being written, yet to be finalized.

## Data Collection Process

A study to examine the user profiles of deceased people as a memorial space is undertaken. The purpose of this study is to better understand the potential for user profiles on SNSs to provide a venue for memorialization, and to investigate the ways that these sites are used and understood by those that visit them. These sites have not been included in previous studies of online memorialization.

The recruitment of participants for the study was conducted both online and in real life. The requirements of the study were that participants had to have visited the user profile of a deceased acquaintance on an SNS. Seven successful interviews were conducted. Due to the small sample size, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to a larger population. There is, however, value in the findings as each of these interviews represents an experience that was had by an individual using SNSs for memorial purposes. These individual experiences can speak to the different ways that memorialization can potentially take place on SNSs, as well as the

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<sup>7</sup> Twitter is a "micro-blogging" and social networking service created in March 2006 by Jack Dorsey. It is a text-based website that enables users to "Tweet" posts of up to 140 characters, which then appear on the user profile. Users of the site can "follow" other users, creating a newsfeed of tweets.

challenges that can be encountered in doing so.

A public Facebook page for the study was created, and it was “suggested” to students in the Communication and Culture program at Ryerson University in Toronto in order for them to pass it along to both random people and anyone they felt might be interested themselves or know someone else who might be interested. This solicited eleven respondents, of which six were actually eligible for the study. Of those six people, five were interviewed. The respondent to the Facebook page that was eligible but not interviewed was unable to arrange a time to be interviewed.

In addition to the Facebook page, recruitment posters were posted in the mens’ and womens’ changerooms and in the public flyer rack at the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre (MNjcc). The MNjcc serves people of all religions, ethnicities, and creeds, with its primary demographic being people that live nearby, in the Spadina and Bloor area of Toronto. The MNjcc hosts many events such as lectures, films, and theatre productions that attract a wide range of attendees from all over Toronto due to the diversity in its programming. The posters solicited four participants, of which two were eligible. Both of these participants were interviewed.

The participants that were not eligible were people who had only visited the memorial page of a deceased person rather than their actual profile. In some cases, these respondents thought that they were eligible because they had interacted with other people about a death on an SNS. Some of the people who responded to the recruitment efforts were unable to visit the user profile of their deceased acquaintance because they had not been Facebook friends with the person before their death. What was important for the study, however, was that it

was actually the deceased person's self-made profile that was visited. This was important because it is the space of the profile as a site that was previously used as a communication tool for interaction between the participant and the deceased user, and a host for narrative created by the user. A memorial page would not have served either function. This led to some confusion, as the language that at least one participant used implied that it was the user profile that they had visited. Near the middle of the interview, it was discovered that in fact it was only a memorial page that was being visited and the interview was not included in the findings of the project.

Although one interview was rendered unusable due to the participant not actually visiting the user profile of their deceased acquaintance, one interview was purposely conducted with someone who was unable to visit the deceased person's user profile after their death. This person instead visited a memorial page set up for the person. The deceased person's user profile was taken down off Facebook because of military involvement, and as such, the memorial page in a sense, replaced the user profile since it was all that existed. Because the person was Facebook friends with the deceased user prior to their death, I deemed it appropriate for her to be included in this study, and in fact, her insights about being forced to use the memorial page forum rather than the user profile were very useful for the study.

The study was approved by the Research and Ethics Board at Ryerson University. Each of the participants were required to sign a consent form (Appendix A). This form guaranteed the anonymization of the participants' answers, and stated that if needed, pseudonyms would be created. I have not assigned pseudonyms, since a consistent identity for each of the participants is not necessary. They are sometimes referred to as "him" or "her" but no other

identifying factors are included.

The interviews were conducted in person, by phone, and with Skype<sup>8</sup>. An interview guide was followed (Appendix B), however I attempted to keep the tone conversational in order to make the interviewee feel comfortable and to allow for some discussion around things that they would bring up. The interview guide was created with the purpose of gaining a general understanding of the person's experience with and understanding of the user profile of their deceased acquaintance as a memorial space. The participant was first asked how long after hearing of the death of their acquaintance did they first visit their user profile. This question was followed with questions about the reasons that drove them to visit the profile, as well as their experience upon arriving there in terms of whether or not others had already acknowledged the death on the profile. The interviews focused on the interviewee's behavior once on the profile, such as whether or not the participant chose to interact with the profile, either publicly or privately, and the ways in which they navigated their way around the profile. Their conceptualization of the public nature of the profile and whether or not they thought about other people seeing their activity on the profile were examined. If the participant said that they did send a private message to the deceased person, they were also asked if they felt that they were sending a message to the actual person.

The interviewee's experiences with any physical memorial sites that they might associate with that person were then explored. The participants were asked to describe both

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<sup>8</sup> Skype is a peer-to-peer software application released in 2003. It allows for voice and text chatting over the internet.

similarities and differences that they conceive between the deceased person's user profile on Facebook and the physical memorial sites for that person. They were asked about whether they prefer to do their memory work on either the user profile or at the physical memorial site, and were finally asked which aspects of each they prefer over the other.

At the end of the interviews, I would often leave some room for casual discussion in order for the person to unwind after talking about their experiences with their deceased acquaintance's user profile. The participants seemed glad to "debrief" and in a few cases, seemed to not want to end the conversation. The subject matter is inherently difficult to talk about, and I attempted to make the discussion as comfortable as possible for the participants.

## **Data Analysis**

The transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed for patterns that occurred, and for themes that emerged. Using an approach borrowed from grounded theory, themes regarding the different ways in which memorialization on the space of user profiles on Facebook held meaning for the participants emerged from the data. In grounded theory, the analysis of data depends largely on the data that is collected. This methodology was first introduced by Glaser and Strauss in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). Since its inception, the methodology has evolved many different branches, however there are characteristics that each hold in common (Dey, 80). Each piece of data is sorted into a category, and when no new categories are being created, the model for analysis is complete. In this way, the information speaks for itself and allows for a reading of the information that is not tainted by opinions held prior to the collection of information (Dey, 80). One limitation of this theory as it was used in this study, is

that it can only analyze the information that is collected, which depends on the questions that are asked. A more thorough approach to grounded theory would be to ask one introductory question, and allow the interviewee to guide the rest. This was not feasible for this project so a less strict approach was taken. This approach, as a method for data analysis, appealed for this project as no studies that measured similar phenomena on SNSs had been previously carried out. It was important that this project explore what people thought about these places without imposing assumptions about what memorials ought to be like upon the information that was collected. Whether these spaces were actually considered to be true memorial spaces by those who visit them is the question at hand for this study, and so I was prudent not to word the questions in a way that assumed that the visitor to the space had previously conceptualized the space as such.

While the answers to many of the questions were very different depending on the situation that the individual had experienced, there were still thematic similarities that could be observed in the content of the answers. This allowed me to extract categories of conceptualization into which the data could be sorted. That different answers emerged within similar thematic thrusts show that the conceptualization of Facebook profiles as sites of memorialization depends on the differences between the individuals who visit the profile and, although the interview questions did not investigate this, the circumstances that surround the death that is being mourned. The circumstances of the death would often come up during the discussion (always initiated by the interviewee), and were of course widely varied. The thematic similarities that emerged from the answers show that the Facebook profile is a contained site where there are limits on the activities that can be carried out there.

An unanticipated aspect of the data that emerged was the “closeness” of people to the deceased whose user profile they were visiting. There were no questions included to attempt to ascertain the nature of the relationship between the two people; however, I found that the urgency of visitation and the salience of that visitation seemed to correlate to the depth of the relationship. While this pattern is a logical result, by the time it was concretely observed, it was too late to make this aspect measureable.

Overall, grounded theory provided an adequate data analysis framework for this project, as it allowed themes to emerge from interview answers in a way that was both flexible and meaningful.

## Findings

Through analysis of the information obtained through interviews, several conclusions can be drawn about the memorial space provided by user profiles of deceased individuals on Facebook. We can consider the broad conclusions to be that user profiles on Facebook are important memorial sites as they provide access to information about both the person and their death, they allow people to commemorate collectively in what could be considered an “online funeral”, and they stand in as a place for people to connect with the deceased in their absence. These functions indicate that the user profiles of the deceased on Facebook provide a memorial space that goes beyond that of a physical memorial in multitudinous ways.

The *first* theme that emerged in the interview data was that of the user profile of a deceased individual being used as a source for timely information about the death. All of the individuals interviewed reported that they visited the profile upon hearing of the death of their

acquaintance. Only two participants waited longer than 24 hours after the death to visit the user profile, one of which believes they visited within a month of the death. In this case, the person was not as close to the deceased, and did not hear of their death until a few weeks after it occurred. However, even though a considerable amount of time had passed, they still went to the profile as soon as they heard of the death.

The immediate visiting of the profile was, in most cases, to find out more details about the death or to verify the death. One participant explained that they “actually lacked so much information about how he died, and it was like trying to piece together the whole scenario-I felt like there were clues on the Facebook page”. Another wanted to verify the death itself, saying “I kept checking her Facebook page to see if anyone else had said anything-I figured it was the most public way, you know, that’s how people usually get news”. Another responded that they wanted to see what their peers were saying about the death. The idea that the profile is a public space and would be a source for news for other visitors to the profile was definitely of concern to several of the participants, in that they were mindful of being the ones to first acknowledge the death on the profile. In one case, an participant was careful not to post news of the death until they knew that all the relatives had been notified. These statements highlight the use of the user profile as a source of information in the days after hearing of a death.

Over time, the need to gather information about the death became less urgent and the reasons for visiting the profile shifted. All of the participants reported that as time went on, they became more interested in visiting the profile to further expose themselves to various aspects of the deceased person’s life rather than to get information about the death (such as time of death, cause of death and subsequent funereal arrangements). The use of the profile

for this purpose is the *second* theme that emerged from the interview data. For many, visiting the profile became a way to reconnect with the person who had died, and to broaden their knowledge about the things and people that were important to that person. Of this shift, one participant explained that the profile went from a source of news to a more meaningful space. She says: “I guess it was to fill in the missing information first of all, and then it became something different after that-it became a place to mourn more”. Others found themselves using the profiles to complete the picture they had in their mind of the person. One participant says that “memory is a funny thing, and you sometimes need to flesh out the shadows”. This person cited a music video that another friend had posted on the deceased person’s wall as triggering a memory of the three of them all loving the song as kids. The fact that a Facebook page can contain information that would fill in the cracks in someone’s memory is an important concept here. It shows that Facebook profiles can be an important memory tool and offer a meaningful site for exploration of memory.

Other people reported learning how much the person meant to other people. One person said “it made me feel like he was the same person across the board to everyone”. In an interesting twist, one participant talked about their need to show others what the person had meant to her, recognizing that her posts on the profile would serve this function. She wanted the deceased person’s friends to “acknowledge that she had friends outside of her friend circle”. Seeing what other people had written, and using that writing for her own memory work, had exposed her to the idea that what she would write would also have meaning to others.

Expanding on the idea that others would see what one had written leads us to the *third*

theme that emerges, that of interaction with other mourners on the profile. The same person who felt the need to show others how much the deceased person meant to her stated that she knew that a lot of the people who would see her statement were not people with whom she would be able to interact at the funeral since she did not know them very well. The wall thus became a venue for interaction with other mourners that would not have occurred otherwise. The kind of interaction that was occurring were instances of people commenting on other people's comments, saying things like "I really loved that memory, thank you for sharing that", and the showing of appreciation for comments by "liking" them.

Several of the participants stated that they visited the profile in order to see what other people were saying. This kind of viewership is, in some ways, reminiscent of a eulogy, in that there is an audience for what is being said. It also brings the mourning community into a public space, as the comments and interaction make visible the individual mourners. One participant stated that "the grieving community is more visible on Facebook". They contrasted the activity that was occurring on their deceased acquaintance's wall with people in their homes being silent and not seeing others in the same position they are in. In this way, people are brought together as mourners in a visible public space. One participant even likened their deceased friend's Facebook profile to an open, public "wiki"<sup>9</sup> of grief and shared memories.

While the nature of public interaction on the user profiles of the deceased offered an opportunity for meaningful interaction amongst mourners that would not have occurred without the profile, it did also create certain anxieties for some visitors to the profiles. While

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<sup>9</sup> A wiki is an open source collaborative website that allows for the addition and edition of information by its users.

four participants stated that they did not think about the fact that others would read what they had written, three others indicated that they did think about it, and that it made them feel self-conscious in their writing. This self-conscious approach to interacting with the user profile is the *fourth* theme that emerges in the interview data. Being aware that others can read what you have written can have both positive and negative consequences. As stated above, some people felt a strong desire to have their thoughts become part of the discussion. However, the people that responded that they did think about others' perceptions of what they had written felt a trepidation that in some ways hindered their ability to join the conversation and interact to the full extent that the venue would have otherwise allowed them to.

One participant described this tension. She says:

"it made me so self-conscious, because all of a sudden it started to feel like it was this big spectacle-am I trying to prove something by putting this publicly-it really make me think a lot about-who is this for? Because on one hand, I didn't want to be the person who never posted anything, but I also didn't want to be the person that just posted so that they would post."

This person also expressed that they felt "a bit paranoid," while posting on the page that belonged to the brother of the deceased's for a few months afterwards. Another responded that she didn't actually write on the deceased person's wall because she felt that she would be intruding into space that should belong to people that were closer to the deceased. This kind of trepidation falls is similar to the ways that one might not join in and converse with others at a funeral when one doesn't know people or feels out of place. The conceptualization of the Facebook profile as a public place shows that it can only provide for more candid communication only to a point, and that there are limits within this space as well.

One person went so far as to describe a “voyeuristic element” in the profile that he visited. This profile in particular belonged to a person who was famous within various communities and as such the volume of both visitation and interaction on the wall was very high. The visitor to this profile reported that although he would periodically contribute to the profile, he mostly went to there to “watch” the communications that occurred there because doing so felt more comforting than actually participating. The Facebook profile, for some, becomes so imbued with meaning that contributing to it becomes almost unbearable. That people have different conceptualizations about what the public space of the profile is “supposed” to be used for, and that it somehow belongs to certain people shows that not everyone approaches the public space of the Facebook profile of a deceased user with the same assumptions. Contributing to this space is conceptualized in different ways for different people, depending on the nature of their relationship with the deceased and other mourners; depending as well on their perception of the viewership of the page by others.

The fear surrounding publicly interacting with the profile could potentially be somewhat alleviated by the choice of the visitor to privately interact with the profile, were it not for concerns surrounding the privacy of the message. Only two of the interview participants reported that they chose to send a private message to the profile. One person sent their deceased acquaintance’s profile a message describing “what was going on”, and another sent a message saying a few things that they would have wanted to say had they known they would not be able to speak to the person again. Both of these participants described this process as cathartic. One of the participants likened the experience to writing a note to someone then lighting it on fire. She said : “It felt sort of like catharsis, to know you can put your words out

there in a tangible way instead of just speaking to the air or speaking to yourself. It's a physical representation of how you actually feel about the situation even though you know they're never going to read it". This statement emphasizes that some people do conceptualize the space of the Facebook profile to actually exist in the physical realm. For this person, the "reality" of the space meant that she could participate in it in a meaningful way. The other person who wrote a private message said that they felt "calmer" about the situation, and that it was like an "outlet" for his emotions about the death that had occurred. Both of these participants reported that they felt as though they were actually sending a message to the person to whom the profile had belonged.

This is the *fifth* theme that emerges from the interviews; that the Facebook profile becomes a potential site of symbolic communication with the deceased. One of the two people who had sent a private message to their deceased acquaintance's profile pointed out that Facebook had been the medium through which they had communicated with their friend when he was alive, and that it was a natural way to "be in touch" with him. Despite knowing that in a practical sense, the deceased people would not read the messages, both participants that did send a message felt in some capacity, that they were sending a message to the person. These claims make visible the fact that user profiles are conceptualized not only as spaces that exist in some reality, but also as containing some essence of the person that owns them. They created it, and existed within it when they were alive, and that essence remains to some extent after their passing.

Both participants also reported that they had only sent the message because they knew that no one else would ever be able to read it. Their trust in the privacy settings that Facebook

would have instituted after the deaths of the individuals allowed these people to have an experience that they valued very much. Of the participants who did not choose to send a message to the Facebook profile of their deceased acquaintance, all responded that they were unsure as to whether or not the account had truly been set to a memorial status, or if perhaps the family were doing upkeep with the profile and other online assets that the person had left behind. The fear that someone would read the message prevented them from writing it. Only one person reported a different reason, and that was because, in her case, she had access to a memorial page instead of a profile, and these pages do not have messaging capabilities. Even if they did, memorial pages are managed by a living person and this person would receive any communications sent through the page. Perhaps if there were a way to verify that a Facebook account could not be logged into, more people would choose to send a message to the profile. Being that the people who did this reported positive outcomes, it would be a boon to other visitors to Facebook profiles of the deceased to have the conditions that would allow them to send a message without the fear that someone would read it. This would allow more visitors to have experiences similar to what one participant likened to “talking to the burial plot”.

As mentioned above, the person to whom a Facebook profile belongs seems to be embodied in the profile. This becomes especially significant after their death for the visitors to the profile. All of the participants stated that the profile was different from the physical memorial site because it was a better reflection of who the person actually was. That these profiles are a more personalized space for remembrance is the *sixth* theme that emerges from the responses to interview questions. Of this, one participant said “it just gives such a colourful picture of his life to go to the Facebook page, because I can see everything...it’s just so

multidimensional". She then talks about all of the photos and inside jokes posted on the page, and expresses that she was really able to reconnect with the deceased through looking at these aspects of the page. She contrasts this with her description of the gravesite as being "dreary" and "nondescript". Another participant describes his deceased friend's Facebook page as a more "personal" place to visit as it contained the "essence" of his friend, and contrasted this with the "impersonal and cold" gravesite. Another participant described the gravesite of her deceased friend as having "no bearing on their personality" whereas their user profile manages to "encompass" their personality. This person also pointed out that to visit a gravesite you are going there on purpose and that the event is inherently "shrouded in sadness", whereas when you are on Facebook, you can visit the profile on a whim. This brings to mind Young's assertion that monuments must be considered within their context; perhaps the inclusion of these memorial spaces on a medium meant for recreational networking means that they are in some cases more easily digested by their visitors.

While the Facebook profile of a deceased person can be conceptualized as an important and valid memorial space, the importance of the physical sites of mourning is not diminished as these new places for memorialization are developed. Even though participants felt that the Facebook profiles of the deceased better represented the people that they were remembering, physical places that they associate with the deceased were still of equal or greater importance in terms of the long term memorialization. This is the *seventh* theme that emerged during the interviews. While all of the participants visit the profiles of their acquaintances when they want to remember them, they also include physical memorials as significant sites of remembrance. Of physical sites, not all of the participants wanted to talk about the actual memorial

monuments (such as grave stones) that had been set up. For many, there were other places that they felt better reminded them of their acquaintance. One person reported that she has memories that are tied to several physical places, and of this, she says “when I pass by places that I remember that we had been to, I feel more comfort than if I go look at her profile, because now it’s been so long”. Another participant echoed that sentiment, explaining that the profile, while it did provide a rich source of memory, did not hold the same weight as physical spaces did in terms the longevity and depth of the memory. He said “the profile mostly makes me feel good in a sad sort of way, it reminds me that he was a well loved individual. The physical places I think harbor much sadder memories and I’m more protective of them”.

A third participant expressed that the physical sites had a deeper meaning to her than the Facebook profile. She said “I can go there with my own relationship to him, which is from many years ago, and I can think of him on my own terms, whereas when I go on the Facebook page, I’m inundated with all these messages from people who knew him so much better”. For her, the profile serves a purpose that is different from the physical sites of remembrance. She found comfort in being able to connect with the person through pictures and other kinds of information, but ultimately, it is the physical memory sites that she locates as more important memorial sites. There is clearly an aspect of physically being somewhere that is impossible to recreate in the virtual sphere. This is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s assertion that the “aura” of an object is what makes it important to the viewer. While he is speaking of works of art, this concept can apply as well to physical memorials in that the virtual ones are a reproduction of the physical. He says that the reproduction is always lacking in “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (50). Having one’s body in the

presence of a memorial monument is an experience that cannot be replicated online. However, for some, the physical site is not easily accessible, and the Facebook profile can serve as a stand-in for a physical memorial. In one case however, the participant stated that “actually, if there was a physical site in town, I would still prefer to go to that”. It appears, that in some cases, the physical sites remain as the more salient places for memorial experiences.

This is another example of the way that these virtual memorial spaces are situated within their context of recreational socialization. When visiting a Facebook profile, although one is often alone inside one’s house, there is a lot of evidence of other people and one is not so much alone as one would be while visiting a physical memorial site. I believe that the “background noise” such as the inundation with messages that the participant described above, might prevent the quiet reflection that can be achieved at a physical memorial site. As such, although the Facebook profile does contain an essence of the person being remembered, it cannot replace the physical memorial sites for those that are doing the remembering.

For others, the significance and meaning of the Facebook profile as a site for memorialization changes over time. This temporal aspect is the *eighth* theme that emerges through analysis of the interviews. The perception of the permanence of the Facebook profile can have a bearing on the weight that it carries. The perception of permanence was viewed differently amongst participants. For some participants, the profile was seen as a permanent record of the loss of the individual. This conviction that the profile would be there forever, and that they could access it from wherever they were was an attractive aspect. One person explained that to him, the deceased person was “immortalized” within the pictures of him on his profile. Another explained that the Facebook profile was a more accurate record of the grief

that had occurred, saying “with a grave site someone might leave flowers there, but a week later the flowers might be taken away-with the profile you can go through visits from years ago if you want to”. There is a tension in this idea of permanence however, as even the understanding that it would be there forever was not necessarily viewed in a positive light for some participants. Two participants expressed that the profile served as a kind of “time capsule” in that it was “frozen in time” and thus meant less to them as time passed. One person said that the profile “doesn’t connect me to those memories anymore”. Another participant even reported that they left a memorial group that had been created as an addendum to the user profile of the deceased person. She said that she was just “cleaning up her profile” and that it no longer had the same meaning for her. For others, the profile was conceived as an ephemeral, quickly changing place, and as such they felt the desire to make aspects of the profile “permanent”. To do this, they saved and printed out photos and quotes from the profile. In this way, they took what they needed from the profile, and were able to do their memory work away from Facebook. That different people conceive of the permanence of either the Facebook profile or the physical memorial sites in different and in some cases opposing ways is not surprising. This is a reflection of the relationships that people have to technology and the internet in general.

It is perhaps also helpful to return to the metaphor of the Facebook profile as being host to a sort of online funeral in understanding the temporal shift that occurs for people in their conceptualization of the significance of the Facebook page. More than one participant used the term “online funeral” when talking about their experiences on the user profile of their deceased acquaintance. This is the *ninth* theme that emerges through the analysis of the

interviews. One person said “when you’re on these profiles, it’s like you’re at a funeral”. She then talked about the fact that the social etiquette for these places is as of yet undefined. She points out the contrast between the usual superficial arguments that often occur on SNSs, and expresses how odd she feels that it is that once you are on a deceased user’s profile, the rules suddenly change even though one is technically still on the same website. The person who left the memorial group for her friend also said that “Facebook kind of functions as more of a funeral kind of aspect, like it’s an online funeral for the person, but then it’s over, the same way a funeral would be”. This points to the temporal nature of the user profiles, in that perhaps it is the interaction that immediately follows the death that holds more significance for the visitor. Once the urgency for information and comfort diminishes, the profile might become just another virtual space in the realm of many other virtual spaces that a person would visit on a given day.

While the significance of the user profile might change for the visitor over time, one thing is for certain: the photos within these profiles are overall the most salient and important aspect of the profile for those that visit. Each participant was asked what part of the profile was the most compelling for them, and without exception, each answered that the photos spoke to them the most. There was one person who also included a quote that the deceased had posted on her profile. This quote was important to her because it held extra meaning once the person had passed away due to the nature of their death. Even so, this person reported that she spent the most amount of her time on the profile “combing through the photos with a fine tooth comb” and reading the comments that people had left on the photos. The cardinal importance of the photos is the *tenth* theme that emerged from the interviews. As mentioned

before, one participant explained that his friend was “immortalized” within the pictures on his profile. For another participant, the photos played a large role in being able to reconnect with the person that had died. She had fallen out of touch with the deceased over the past several years, and being able to picture him in her mind had become difficult. The photos helped her to recreate her image of him.

One participant revealed that they helped another family member access the photos that were on the user profile of their deceased acquaintance. This person had become estranged from the family, and thus no longer had access to family photos. The photos from the profile became instrumental in their grieving process because it “gave her a window into stuff that she really needed to process”. That someone was able to use the profile in this way truly speaks to the potential that Facebook holds in terms of functioning as a memorial space. I argue that it is primarily the photos that function to “embody” the user in the space of their profile since that is the part of the profile that is most salient.

The literature about death portrait photography is helpful in understanding why the photos would be the most important aspect of the Facebook profile of a deceased user; in this literature, we find examples of the ways that photographs can connect us to the dead. I am reminded of Susan Sontag’s assertions that the “link between photography and death haunts all photos of people”. Looking at photos of a deceased acquaintance reminds us that we, too, are subjects in photos that one day might be looked at after our death. Van Dijck points to this idea in his assertion that “while taking a picture, we may yet be unaware of its future material form or use” (7). The use of photos and user profiles that were not originally intended for the project

of remembrance holds a mirror to our own virtual objects and shows us that it is inevitable that our own virtual spaces will be transformed into memorial ones upon our passing.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study illustrate the importance and meaning with which user profiles on SNSs can become imparted with upon the death of their owner. Interviews with the visitors of Facebook profiles of deceased acquaintances show that these profiles are valid memorial sites and are visited as such. While many of the functions that occur at traditional physical memorial spaces are overlapped by those that occur on Facebook profiles, these profiles also offer a space that serves functions that are widely differentiated from those that physical memorial sites and online memorials of other kinds serve. The ways in which they differ include making the mourning public visible and encouraging interaction that would not necessarily occur at a physical memorial site. Additionally, visitors to the profile report that they are more personalized than physical memorial sites.

User profiles of deceased individuals on SNS's differ from profiles on other kinds of virtual memorials in that the profile was created by the deceased person before their death. This aspect of the Facebook profile is the crux of many of the conceptualizations that people hold about the profile as a space. These conceptualizations include the way that the user is considered embodied within the profile through their choice of photos and other profile information. The fact that the deceased used the profile as a means for communication is also important here, as it contributes to the idea that the person's essence remains within the profile. In this way, the user profile is set up as a potential site for symbolic communication

with the deceased person for those visitors that have confidence in Facebook's privacy settings and feel that the messages they send to the profile will not be received by anyone.

An interesting link between Facebook profiles of deceased users and a physical memorial site is the conceptualization of the former as a public memorial space. This lead participants in the study to either feel more comfortable communicating with people they normally would not be able to, or to feel self conscious in their communication efforts much in the way they might at a public funeral. The communication that people did have on the Facebook profiles of their deceased acquaintances was reported to be meaningful since it allowed a deeper bond with other mourners.

The conceptualization of the space of user profiles of the deceased as a public space further ties it to the realm of physical memorial sites. This study also makes clear that the events that occur on a Facebook profile do mimic those that occur at a funeral. This theme reinforces the literature on the digitalization of our daily lives and presents evidence that life narratives of all kinds are appearing on the internet in ways that are meaningful for their creators and consumers. Additionally, this project provides evidence of the potential for web-based relationship building and the deepening of social connections.

In addition to the understandings of the space of user profiles on Social Networking Websites as memorial spaces that this project provides, it also reinforces the impossibility of replicating on the internet the very specific effects that an actual physical site can have on memory. The longevity of the memory of physical spaces appears to be greater than it is with virtual spaces, however a longer term study on this would be needed in order to better understand the ways in which these spaces are conceived over time.

The element of temporality was an important theme that emerged in the interviews, as the user profiles are simultaneously conceived of as both “frozen in time” and as an ever changing place. This is an interesting tension that speaks to the duality of virtual spaces. The meanings bound up in these profiles change over time for their visitors; the understanding of these conceptions would be enhanced by a study that would track the meaning of the profiles as it changes for individual participants.

The limits of this study are primarily its relatively short-term duration and small sample size. Another limit is the self-reporting method used in the interviews. Studies that track the actual visitation to these spaces would allow for a more concrete analysis of the sites. As mentioned above, longer term studies would be helpful in gaining a more complete understanding of the conceptualizations of these spaces over time. Larger scale studies would allow for the generalization of findings to a larger population of SNS users. This study was also limited by my field of study-the intersection of media and culture. As such, this study investigates only one aspect of this new venue for memorialization. The conceptualization of this space as a valid memorial space by its visitors is merely a starting point for further research, and studies on the psychological impact of visiting these sites would be helpful in ascertaining whether or not they play a significant role in the grieving process. These kinds of studies could address the question of closure, and whether or not these spaces are helpful in working through grief over a death. Another research question that could be addressed is whether or not these pages have a measurable effect on the building of offline relationships with other mourners. It would appear that online relationships are strengthened, but the real-life affects of this relationship building remain unknown.

The conceptualizations that visitors to Facebook profiles of deceased users hold in regards to these profiles firmly situate Facebook profiles of deceased users within the realm of memorial sites. These spaces offer opportunities for memorialization that go beyond those that are available at physical memorial sites, and yet are limited by their venue on the public space of the internet. One limitation of these sites that was not introduced by any of the participants is the idea that perhaps Facebook won't exist in all of perpetuity. Social Networking Websites have been evolving since their inception, and there is no guarantee that Facebook will remain the most widely used. The question of the ultimate future of these memorial spaces is left unanswered.

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**Ryerson University  
Consent Agreement**

**Interacting with User Profiles of the Deceased**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This study is being done for the requirements of a Major Research Paper in a Master's program in Communication and Culture at Ryerson University. Before you give your consent to be a volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

**Investigators:**

Sarah Curtis, BA, Candidate in Communication and Culture Master's Program, Ryerson University  
Dr. Shelley Hornstein, BA, MA, PHD, Department of Visual Arts, York University (Research Supervisor)

**Purpose of the Study:** This study will investigate the experience of interacting with the user profiles of deceased persons. Approximately 10 subjects with experience with this topic will be recruited. The only requirement of participants is that they have had such an experience.

**Description of the Study:** You will be asked a series of open-ended questions about the topic, and will be asked to speak to your experiences regarding your viewing and interacting with the user profiles of deceased acquaintances. The research will be conducted in quiet places at your convenience, most likely classrooms at Ryerson University. The interviews will last approximately one hour.

**Risks or Discomforts:** As a result of participation, you may encounter renewed feelings of grief regarding the loss of the person whose online profile you interacted with. You may discontinue participation at any point, either temporarily or permanently should you wish to.

**Benefits of the Study:** This study will shed light on the ways that these virtual spaces take on a memorial function. It will clarify whether or not this new space for grieving serves funereal-type functions and whether or not these sites hold similar meaning to the physical sites of remembrance associated with the person. The researcher cannot guarantee any direct individual benefits.

**Confidentiality:** The interviews will be recorded using a voice recorder only. Only the researchers will have access to the recordings. Selections from the recordings may be transcribed as quotes. Quotes will not be attributable, and pseudonyms will be used. Confidentiality will be maintained during the project and no identifying information, including names, will be published. The recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the research project.

**Incentives to Participate:** There is no financial compensation for participation in this study.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are allowed.

At any particular point in the study, you may refuse to answer any particular question or stop participation altogether.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact:

Researcher: Sarah Curtis  
sarah.curtis@ryerson.ca  
416-917-0914  
Supervisor: Shelley Hornstein  
shelleyh@yorku.ca

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information.

Research Ethics Board  
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation  
Ryerson University  
350 Victoria Street  
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3  
416-979-5042

**Agreement:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

# Social Networking Sites and Death-Investigating Interaction with User Profiles of the Deceased

## Interview Guide

How long after the death of your deceased acquaintance did you visit their user profile?

Can you describe the reason that you chose to visit their profile?

Had other people already acknowledged the death on the profile?

Did you choose to publicly interact with the profile (i.e. write on their wall or comment on a picture or previous post?)

If yes, how?

If yes, why?

Were you thinking about others seeing your interaction with the profile?

Did you choose to privately interact with the profile (i.e. send them a message that would not be seen by other visitors to the profile?)

If yes, how?

If yes, why?

If yes, did you feel that you were sending a message to the person?

How did you explore the profile (i.e. did you look through the pictures, read comments, read notes written etc.)

What part of the profile was the most salient to you?

Did you attend any public memorial services for the person?

Have you visited any physical memorial sites for the person?

What are the main differences that you perceive between the physical memorial site and the user profile?

Do you see any similarities between the public memorial services and physical memorial site and the user profile?

Do you prefer an online memorial site to an actual physical site?

What aspects do you prefer or not prefer?