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‘We do it to keep him alive’: bereaved individuals’ experiences of online suicide memorials and continuing bonds

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ABSTRACT *This paper presents draws on interviews with individuals who have experience of creating, maintaining and utilising Facebook sites in memory of a loved one who has died by suicide. We argue that Facebook enables the deceased to be an on-going active presence in the lives of the bereaved. We highlight the potential of the Internet (and Facebook in particular) as a new and emerging avenue for the continuation of online identities and continuing bonds. Our study offers unique insight into survivors’ experiences of engaging with the virtual presence of their deceased loved one: how mourners come and go online, how this evolves over time and how the online identity of the deceased evolves even after death. We discuss how Facebook provides new ways for people to experience and negotiate death by suicide and to memorialise the deceased, highlighting the positive impact of this for survivors’ mental health. Finally, we describe the creation of tension amongst those who manage their grief in different ways.*

KEYWORDS: Facebook; suicide; memorialisation; Internet; continuing bonds; grief; bereavement; online identity

Introduction

In this paper, we examine how the Internet generates new possibilities for continuing bonds represented in the online social media platform Facebook. We build on prior work to better understand how digital memorialisation on Facebook impacts surviving friends and family members in the aftermath of a suicide. For some mourners, this is an important part of the therapeutic process that provides a valuable way of managing trauma and keeping the dead ‘alive’. Our analysis, however, also highlights some tensions amongst those who manage their grief in different ways and the potential for conflict and confusion created by the public mediation of suicide deaths on Facebook.

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Continuing bonds

The theory of continuing bonds was first articulated by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) to highlight the continually evolving nature of relationships between the bereaved and the deceased, which do not necessarily end after death. More recently, Klass (2006) highlights the importance of the social element of continuing bonds within the bereavement process. The continuing bonds model is generally referred to as in keeping with the constructionist model of grief (Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006). Advocates of continuing bonds assert that the emotional relationship between the bereaved and the deceased is in continual flux. This creates social momentum that is key to driving the grieving process. As such, there is no end point or goal with regard to grief. Rather, grief represents a shifting social encounter and connection that is an ever-present aspect of the personal and social realm of the bereaved. Continuing bonds describe how individuals establish an inner representation of the deceased to maintain a link or some sort of relationship after the death. This bond is dynamic and ongoing and influenced by the belief system of the survivor.

Unruh (1983) describes the ways in which mourners preserve the identities of the deceased through the continuation of bonding activities and emotional attachments via meaningful and sanctified objects, such as gravestones and how the memories of the deceased thrive through these repeated social actions. Unruh's work offers a framework for understanding how Facebook expands the reach of mourning and provides a valuable insight into the continuing bonds between mourners and the deceased. More recently, Kearl (2010) has argued that the close of the twentieth century has witnessed an increase in the visibility and influence of *postselves* (Shneidman, 1973). He attributes this recent proliferation and transformation of *postselves* to extreme individualism, capitalism and technological innovations.

Alongside this, Maddrell (2012), in line with Walter (2001), Margry and Sanchez-Carretero (2011) and Wojtkowiak and Venbrux (2010), comments on the recent trend towards highly individualised expressions of vernacular memorial-making in Western culture arguing that their presence is now pervasive, especially in relation to untimely or tragic death. Such informal memorials incorporate popular culture and the idiom of everyday life. In this context, she argues, online interactive virtual memorials are becoming familiar cultural practices: a normal place for remembering the dead.

The Internet, mourning and memorialising

A growing body of work has explored the role of the online environment in contemporary bereavement and memorial practices (DeGroot, 2012; Forman, Kern, & Gil-Egui, 2012; James, 2014; Kasket, 2012; Leonard & Toller, 2012; Maddrell, 2012; Roberts, 2007; Williams & Merten, 2009). Taken together, this work suggests that online memorials can constitute therapeutic environments by providing space for action, interaction, narrative work, meaning

making and expressions and negotiations of continuing bonds with the deceased. The majority of these studies emphasise the individual character of the deceased and their interests and relationships (Maddrell, 2012). However, few studies have focused on the lived experiences of users of these sites. Notable exceptions are Carroll and Landry (2010) and Kasket (2012). These exceptions, however, are not specific to suicide bereavement.

The mourning process following a suicide is more complex and difficult than for other types of death (Jordan & McIntosh, 2011). The specific features that make suicide bereavement different to other types of death include the thematic content of the grief, which can often leave the bereaved confused, angry and burdened with guilt. Wider social reactions and processes serve to further stigmatise and isolate the bereaved. People might experience less social support because others may be unsure of what to say or how to respond to the death, or may actively distance themselves from the bereaved. This, in turn, impacts individual well-being and coping mechanisms as well as family dynamics and relationships (Jordan, 2001). Feelings of disconnection, interruption and incompleteness may be heightened in a parent who has lost a child to suicide due to the disruption caused to the generational order, which may exacerbate feelings of responsibility (Bell, Stanley, Mallon, & Manthorpe, 2012; Ellenbogen & Gratton, 2001; Jordan, 2001, 2008).

Online social networking profiles, such as those on the Facebook platform enable digital representations of the deceased to be stored and preserved in various forms. Thus, the Internet could be interpreted as a type of *digital heaven* where our loved ones continue their existence: a place from which they can reappear or be heard at any time, where the deceased become 'online angels' (Walter, 2015), where their images, behaviours, words, beliefs and accomplishments exist indefinitely in the electronic virtual world. Facebook in particular creates a new setting for death and grieving, one that is broadly public with an ongoing integration into daily life, heralding significant changes in the way that we grieve in the Internet era (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013). Indeed, the online personality changes and evolves even when the physical self has gone. New aspects of the self emerge, even if there is a limit to and framing of that development by the memories of friends and family. As suggested by Unruh (1983), it is the representation of the deceased that keeps the deceased 'alive'. The question of how the personality of the deceased evolves in the online posts and whether it comes to resemble a more idealised and fantasised version is especially pertinent for suicide deaths: there is potential to generate further confusion and anguish about the death. This can result in suicide contagion or transmission, a well-documented feature of suicide bereavement (Bell, Stanley, Mallon, & Manthorpe, 2015; Gould, Wallenstein, & Davidson, 1989; Hollander, 2001; Joiner, 1999).

A number of key differences distinguish online environments from memorial methods of the pre-digital age. Unlike diaries or photographs, which are kept in the possession of a small number of mourners, online technologies can be shared among a limitless number; they can be accessed anywhere, anytime. In addition, online communication is less inhibiting and inhibited than

face-to-face communication (Suler, 2004): people in online environments are likely to self-disclose personal intimate information more rapidly than in offline environments, increasing connection between ‘strangers’ and establishing a veil of trust and intimacy much more readily than in offline relationships. As such, ICTs and social networking platforms such as Facebook offer opportunities for those bereaved by suicide to share their experiences and to explore their grief with others in a similar position (who they might not otherwise meet). This is important in relation to grief from suicide, which can be stigmatising and disenfranchising. In encouraging the building of online relationships, the online environment can be said to provide a mechanism for alleviating disenfranchised grief (Hensley, 2012). Given that suicide deaths are especially complicated and difficult to grieve (Bell et al., 2012; Ellenbogen & Gratton, 2001; Jordan, 2001, 2008) and that online environments are increasingly used for memorialisation, this research focuses on better understanding of how digital memorialisation on Facebook in particular impacts surviving friends and family members in the aftermath of a suicide.

Method

Ethics approval for the study was granted by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Hull, UK. A call for participants was issued via the University of Hull website as well as two UK national charities – PAPHOS Prevention of Young Suicide and Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide. We recruited individuals who had set up or who managed online memorial sites (e.g. stand-alone websites or social networking pages) dedicated to the memory of a loved one who had died by suicide.

Eleven people (three men and eight women) between 20 and 60 years were interviewed. The participants included those who had lost a child, a sibling or a friend; those who had been recently bereaved (around 5 months), as well as those bereaved four years previously. Participants were asked about what motivated them to create their online sites; how they used the sites; how the sites have assisted them during their bereavement; their views about the role of the Internet for understanding and dealing with grief from suicide; and any negative experiences encountered when interacting online for the purposes of ‘managing their grief’.

In line with good ethical practice, interview questions with the most potential to elicit painful memories were asked near the beginning of the interview (Cooper, 1999; Hawton et al., 1998). The interview ended with questions that were deliberately designed to elicit fond and happy memories in order to neutralise any distress. Emphasis was placed on encouraging participants to ‘tell the story’ in a way that was important to them (Owens, Lambert, Lloyd, & Donovan, 2008).

Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. A coding frame was constructed and emerging themes were identified both within the context of each interview and across all the interviews. Data was subsequently analysed through

a qualitative interpretative approach, combining constant comparison techniques with thematic analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Green & Thorogood, 2004). The real names of participants have been changed to protect their identities.

Motivations for and uses of online memorials

Nine participants used the online social networking platform 'Facebook' for the purposes of memorialisation. Four participants set up a new profile account after the death of their loved one. Five participants maintained the existing Facebook profile page of the deceased – namely, an online profile that the deceased had set up. Of these five, some had chosen to convert the profile into a memorial page in order to keep the page as it had been left by the deceased. Some participants made visits to the deceased's 'in-life profile' in addition to setting up a memorial site. One participant closed his son's in-life Facebook account immediately after his death, but regretted doing so.

The Facebook pages and the stand-alone websites served a number of important functions, chief of which was for bereaved participants to maintain a relationship with the deceased. We have written elsewhere (Bailey, Bell, & Kennedy, 2014) about the importance participants place on still feeling emotionally and socially connected to the deceased. Facebook afforded a continuing social presence for the deceased, enabling continuing bonds between the deceased and the bereaved.

Consistent with previous research in the area (DeGroot, 2012; Kasket, 2012; Maddrell, 2012; Williams & Merten, 2009), the sites enabled participants to express their grief, to communicate their feelings to family and friends and to connect with other suicide survivors who had unique insights into their suffering. As such, the sites served to bring people together both in the immediate aftermath of the suicide and for many months, sometimes years, after the event.

In the sections below, we focus on six cases from our research, discussing the similarities and differences in the experiences of those who engage with the virtual presence of their loved one on Facebook. These six cases allow the exploration of how mourners come and go online over time, and how the online identity of the deceased evolves even after death.

How mourners come and go online

Julia's son Mark died three years prior to the research interview. News about his death spread amongst their community and his friends via Facebook and immediately people were posting on his Facebook site – messages, photographs and video clips. Julia explains how she and her family derived comfort from reading the page in the immediate aftermath of his death: 'Facebook ... enabled us to get together and laugh and ... share some nice memories ... we could look at things and laugh and cry'. They have maintained the site ever since.

Julia's motivation initially was 'to keep him alive, to ... still be able to talk to him, his friends' and also so that his friends could keep in touch with him – which they still do, three years on. It was important for Julia to see that others were remembering Mark, continuing to post mementos and visiting him at the site. It was also important for her to attend to the site 'I don't want others to see it's neglected, he's there but he's not there but I just want to keep it nice ...'

Briany lost her son Michael almost a year before the research interview. She set up a memorial site on Facebook for her family and his friends. Within hours people were posting on it. She estimated that around 120 people visited the site initially. A year after Michael's death, his memorial site is still active with around 60 people continuing to use it consistently and new content posted every few days.

Since Michael's death, two of his close friends have subsequently attempted suicide and a number of others have suffered depression. In response to this, Briany posts 'inspirational' material (e.g. supportive messages, quotes, poetry) on his memorial site, hoping that she will reach his friends who are vulnerable. Briany has more recently become involved with suicide prevention charity work via Michael's memorial site in order to fundraise and promote awareness:

... it's grown, it's evolving all the time I would say ... I would say it's become more of a practical tool, whereas, initially ... it was more ... led by emotions ...

Catherine helped with managing the Facebook site belonging to her friend's son Jacob after his death approximately 18 months before the research interview. In the immediate aftermath of Jacob's death, Catherine recalled outpourings of grief from friends on the site: 'I think lots of people gravitated there to try and make sense of what was happening'. Over time, however, Catherine began to see changes in the content and frequency of the postings. She noticed the gradual idealisation of Jacob, and a reckoning or reconciliation with his death in comments left by some of his friends, which began to take on a hopeless quality. Initially comments, such as 'rest in peace', and amusing anecdotes were becoming replaced with: 'you're in a much better place, I'll see you soon' and 'I can't function without you I understand why you did what you did ...'

It was via the Facebook site that Catherine and others were able to reach out to these individuals:

... it was used as an opportunity ... a way of working with the information that's making its way onto social networking in a way that's protected people from potentially ... further horribleness ... it was just something that felt that like we instinctively needed to do ...

Samantha set up a memorial page on Facebook for her friend Kate who died approximately 5 months before our research interview took place. The site

experienced a massive surge of activity in the beginning (it peaked at approximately 500 people) followed by rapid decline. For the first month, when the site was highly active, it kept her busy and served as a distraction from grief, reducing her own solitude and isolation. Then Samantha began to notice a gradual decline, which was distressing for her: 'have people forgotten? Don't people care?' She described feeling pressured at this point to add content to keep it going. Five months on and the activity had almost stopped. Samantha herself was reluctant in the face of all this to continue to contribute to the page: 'don't want to put anything in case nobody responds ...'

She laments

I think it served its purpose ... to tell people she's died, for people to outlay their initial grief and then for them to know about funeral arrangements ... to raise money ... now ... it ... doesn't seem to have a function for anyone ...

Lucinda lost her son Carl approximately two years prior to the research interview. About a year after his death she and one of his friends set up a memorial page on Facebook. She wanted Carl to be remembered and wanted friends and family to post things on it:

Because he left so little of himself ... also kind of like making up to him ... to acknowledge the pain he went through and just to say ... I'm doing this for you ... just so people know ... that he's not forgotten ... I ... thought people would ... post on it ... happy memories ... that sort of thing ... I thought ... it'll be as though he's still here ...

Lucinda also visited Carl's personal Facebook page after his death via his sibling's account where she was able to contact his friends. However, she was the only person in her family who accessed both the memorial site and the personal page of her son regularly and was the only one who posted.

The evolution of the deceased's personhood

Brubaker et al. (2013) argue that establishing a positive narrative and identity for the deceased can be an important part of the grieving process for the bereaved (Harvey, Carlson, Huff, & Green, 2001) emphasising strategies that enable survivors to maintain their attachments, including objects or spaces that signify the identity of the deceased. It is clear from our research that Facebook profiles serve as a useful platform for exactly this. Details of a positive narrative and identity were seen in how others contributed and responded to messages; in the communications, shared memories and continued connections. This development is a shared social activity mediated often by those closest to the deceased but also in contributions from those belonging to wider social networks.

Julia made a clear choice to keep her son's 'in-life' Facebook page active (as if he were still alive). For Julia, the importance of this lies in the fact that Mark

created this page: the timeline is visible (revealing Mark's life before his death, and afterwards) as are aspects of his personality (likes and dislikes, status, favourite quotations, songs, video clips and conversations). Therefore: 'It's more. It's still [Mark]. There's a difference ... and I can go on to it now, anywhere I am and I can just go on and read it'. Julia and her family are able to 'talk' to him, change his profile picture, add pictures, tag him into conversations and keep in touch with his friends. Similarly, Michael's memorial site set up by Briany reflects his eccentric, flamboyant and opinionated personality and sarcastic, satirical sense of humour. This was evident not only in the range of photographs, memories and other narratives constructed by mourners on the site, but also in personal communications to him. At times, Briany has expressed her anger and frustration at him online in a way that simultaneously honours his own humour and assumes his continued agency in death. She noted that many of his friends did the same and reflects on how this has helped her with her grief:

... something will have happened ... and they'll say, 'oh thanks a bunch mate, I bet you're responsible for that!' ... nobody's held back really ... because Michael was very truthful. I think a lot of people found that refreshing ... and for me that was very much a healing process.

For Briany, being able to express her thoughts and emotions, seeing things that she would never otherwise have seen (posted by friends), and finding out more about him after his death, all 'most definitely' helped her to focus on happy memories.

In life, Carl used Facebook a great deal. Lucinda visited his personal Facebook site (via his sibling's account) after his death:

... you kind of want something to touch ... I don't want to see the grave ... if you see the Facebook page you think oh, yeah, my son, he's still there ... the happy times ... pictures of him with his friends, the photos on the pages are photos that he's posted ... they're nice things ... there's nothing sad there ... it was a little bit of him staying on

Lucinda was also able to contact Carl's friends via his Facebook page. She described getting to know them as a means of

keeping him alive ... [Carl] was a very private person ... he kept his home life, his personal life separate ... I actually never knew about his personal life ... in a way it's enabled me to access his personal life ... to see the side of [Carl] that I didn't know about.

Samantha also reflected on how Kate's personality and life, as portrayed on the memorial site, was important for her mother to see: 'Her mum certainly had a snippet of her daughter's life and she found that very important ... Because she's never going to get any more years, to see the ... years what she'd been doing, I think was positive'.

Discussion

Overall, experiences recounted by our respondents above support the findings of previous work by Kasket (2012) and Francis, Kellaher, and Neophytou (2005). The broader online community gather on the social site and their postings add to the continuing online identity and biography of the deceased person. It is through this reconstruction that those closest to the deceased make sense of the deceased person's death and life. These continuing bonds between the deceased and the living continue to evolve and are shaped by the ways in which mourners come and go online and the everyday social realities of the bereaved. In Facebook, the past is always connected to the present and, with a few clicks, we can recall it in exact detail. Whether it is helpful to repeatedly engage in this recall process or not, however, is less certain.

Communicating with the deceased and maintaining a relationship with friends of the deceased via Facebook seemed to be helpful in the grief process. Lucinda referred to the value of Facebook as a way of working against loss:

It's like, not quite believing he's gone ... like somewhere, somewhere in the ether ... he might actually read it ... you're trying to hang on to him ... some sort of avenue through to him.

Some mourners became very attached to the virtual presence of their loved ones online, spending significant amounts of time interacting and re-visiting. This illustrates a need for mourners to establish the deceased's continuity through remembering the identity of the deceased (Kearl, 1999, p. 182). This may be beneficial in working against loss but how long can this last? Is it always beneficial to substitute the deceased for the virtual in this way?

At the time of the interview, Lucinda had been unable to find and access Carl's site for some time. The reasons for this were unclear. What was clear, however, was her distress at its disappearance. She described her grief as having been made 'doubly worse' as a result of the loss of his online identity: '... everything's gone ... the fact that the page has disappeared and that was kind of like ... my good happy memories ... makes it doubly worse really'. This shows how online memorials can become sanctified to such a degree that their loss is almost as tragic for the survivor as the death itself (Parkes, 1972; Unruh, 1983) and how the deceased's postself provides meaning for the mourners through persisting via being remembered (Shneidman, 1995). This raises the question of whether Facebook is starting to challenge traditional symbolic mourning objects, such as grave sites. Facebook contains personal histories and identities of the deceased which enable continued bonding activities whereby mourners can communicate with the deceased and with others who are mourning the deceased in one place. Can it therefore be considered a sacred object or, at least, containing sanctifying and meaningful symbols? If so, what implications does this have for the persistence of Facebook memorials?

The question of how long the virtual substitute can exist when the original no longer actually exists (Sherlock, 2013) depends, in large part, on the extent to which mourners come and go online. Some Facebook sites were still very active years after the death. This provided mourners with a positive legacy and longevity for the memory of a loved one being kept alive via these activities as the sites evolved. However, what happens when others start to ‘forget’, that is, when interest and activity on the page starts to wane? In the case of Samantha, witnessing a gradual decline in visitors to the site over time was distressing:

It brought people together, people have shared, people hadn’t been in contact for years but like I said it was very short term ... and that’s really how it’s been and ... I’m slowly quietly deleting people ... I feel very alone in the situation I’m going through. My grieving process feels very lonely even though I’ve got all these people I’ve met.

When mourners no longer visit the site, does the social identity of the deceased person expire? Is declining activity damaging to the identity of the deceased who died by suicide?

The establishment of a positive narrative and identity is particularly important for those who have died by suicide because of the disenfranchised grief – namely, the stigma, guilt, blame, shame and isolation – felt by others. Death by suicide implies a spoiled identity. Our participants have shown how, for some, the activity of building this identity on Facebook works against these negative effects. According to Martin (2010), such ‘identity work’ provides ‘a vehicle for reconstructing, rehabilitating, and maintaining a post-mortem identity in collective memory’ (Brubaker et al., 2013, p. 154). It validates and acknowledges the loss and allows mourners to talk about it, mitigating disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002).

For Philip, who lost his son Steven just over three years prior to the research interview, the fact that the site reflects Steven’s personality and identity is important:

Reams of photos of him partying, the sort of guy he was ... It helps me understand his life I met quite a lot of his friends who I never knew, I learnt so much about him that I didn’t know ...

Yet, paradoxically, it is also a source of torment, in that whilst it helped him understand his life, it did little to help him understand his death: ‘this is why it all doesn’t make sense ...’

This raises questions about what happens when the representation takes on a life of its own, what this means for how those who have died by suicide are remembered, and how they live on in the memories of loved ones. Traditionally, survivors from separate social spaces have developed these narratives in isolation. One of the shortfalls of Facebook in this context relates to the problem of arriving at a singular identity for the deceased. Brubaker et al. (2013) and Walter (2015) argue that this ‘identity work’ becomes increasingly difficult

when it is a collective activity with contributions from multiple others. Facebook ensures that the deceased are remembered by a wide penumbra of friends. However, as the number of contributors to the identity work increases, so does the potential for alternative narratives, conflict, and in the case of suicide deaths, the potential for suicide contagion.

Our participants highlighted tensions between public and private expressions of grief and emphasised a growing sense of uneasiness created by these new forms of memorialising/mourning between some who want those online connections and others who wish to disengage with the possibilities that the online environment offers. For example, those who wish to disengage may be motivated by a desire for private grief, and the fact that forgetting can allow wounds to heal. This process is thwarted by pervasive digital memory (Mayer-Schonberger, 2009), and constant reminders on Facebook, and is experienced as painful as in Lucinda's son's case: 'and it's like a pain, it's a painful memory'. Those who wish to engage with the online environment may be motivated by a desire for connectedness and lament the loss of public expressions (or 'forgetting') as Samantha does ('have people forgotten ... don't people care ... I feel very alone'). The pain of grief is here intensified by the loss of watching others withdraw from public to more private expressions of grief, or else 'move on' with their lives. In both instances, the retreat from a public sharing of grief served to isolate these participants, further compounding their grief experience.

For Walter (2015) potential for conflict can also arise as different ways of mourning become more apparent to others, but not necessarily more understood. In this extract, Philip expresses a need to mourn the death of his son with others, and honour him in a shared social space online: 'I'll never take it down I've got sixty-seven people in his life who I can share my grief with ... and they all understand where I'm coming from.' Others in his family did not. He struggled to understand this: 'I think [they] grieve in a different way I can't really understand how [they] can carry on as if nothing has ever happened.'

The Internet and Facebook in particular can therefore serve to widen the range of practices through which people grieve and choose to 'remember' those who have died by suicide. Briany explained how her grief was eased by Facebook demonstrating the enhanced affordances of online life for 'keeping the dead alive'. At the same time, she acknowledges the opposite effect that reminders and memories on Facebook has had on her parent: 'Ironically ... my mum, she won't go on the page because of that, she can't bear to look at a photograph of him ... so there's the flipside'.

These tensions between those who refuse to forget and those with a desire to forget illustrate problems presented by Facebook. However, Rosenblatt's (1983) work is helpful in reminding us not to confuse forgetting with being unable to confront pain. Thus, the fact that 'she can't bear to look at a photograph of him' may indicate that she simply cannot bear the pain of something as direct as Facebook: perhaps she is at a point where the pain is still too raw

for images to offer comfort and that the Facebook postself is too confronting. Grief itself is not a constant state and is often individually negotiated, coming in surges which are typically set off by reminders, especially reminders of the loss which have not yet been neutralised or redefined (Rosenblatt, 1983). This is more likely when Facebook expands the spatial, temporal and social reach of death (Brubaker et al., 2013). This is especially true of suicide deaths where the process of making sense of the death is more complex (Bell et al., 2012; Jordan, 2001) and therefore more difficult to ‘neutralise’ and ‘redefine’.

Conclusion

Our study has offered a unique insight into how digital memorialisation on Facebook impacts those bereaved by suicide, and the enhanced affordances and challenges of offline life for ‘keeping the dead alive’.

Facebook enables these continuing bonds and relationships with the deceased and their friends and family to thrive, and serves to integrate experiences of mourning for the bereaved. Facebook also encourages the bereaved to remember aspects of their loved one’s personalities and histories and to add to these memories through the collective sharing of photographs, comments and mementoes, which serve to shape the social influence of the deceased. Traditional mourning objects have not afforded the possibility to maintain relationships with friends of the deceased and to extend social influence in the same way. However, in contrast to older memorialisation technologies, the bereaved have limited control over how emotions and memories are framed. The bereaved and the deceased become actors in a wider social forum – private memories and expressions of grief become public displays with associated social responsibility for the well-being of others and for the censorship of thoughts, which changes the intentions and script for the bereaved. As such, our study has revealed how the public mediation of suicide loss on Facebook has the potential for both creating and alleviating disenfranchised grief.

The question of how long online identities can survive the deaths of those they represent (Brubaker et al., 2013) and whether (or why) users prefer to visit the ‘in-life’ Facebook pages of the deceased rather than dedicated memorial sites needs more research. We have explored questions about the negative consequences of people starting to ‘forget’ and what happens when they become overly attached to the sites, but more research in this area is important for understanding attachment and loss in the context of memorialisation and ICTs. The impact of suicide and potential contagion, for both intimate connections (friends, family) as well as ‘weaker’ connections (acquaintances and friends-of-friends) also warrants further consideration. What happens when the representation takes on a life of its own underscores the urgent need for further research into how to responsibly manage the continuing online (Facebook) presence of those who have died by suicide. What are the implications of this ‘second life’ for maintaining grieving communities and

safeguarding privacy, ensuring appropriate ownership, maintaining intimacy and trust and enfranchising and disenfranchising grief?

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