



Grief in Digital Spaces: *How We Use Facebook to Grieve*

Christina Rizk
christina.rizk@gmail.com

Keywords: Grief, Facebook, social media, digital anthropology

A dull pain crept into my chest, throat constricting, tears welling up as I scrolled down her Facebook page in complete disbelief. I was having those hopeful New Year's feelings of fresh beginnings and curiosity about old friends. Kira was a close friend in high school, an athletic star, a role model and all around bright light— but over the years we had lost touch. On December 31st, 2017 Kira was trapped in an avalanche while backcountry skiing in her native Canada. Search and Rescue teams were able to get to her within minutes but she was in critical condition- she was one meter under packed snow, causing significant anoxia, loss of oxygen to the brain, which then stopped her heart. Lori Goodwin, Kira's mother, shared with me that her rescue was remarkably fast, given the circumstances, but not fast enough to save her. Terry, her parents and friends were able to restart her heart, giving them a week with Kira in the ICU. She was kept on life support, pain free, but after extensive neurological tests it became clear that there was no hope for recovery for her body. During that week, forty family members and friends arrived to say goodbye and to grieve together. Lori wrote to me, saying Kira looked like sleeping beauty and shared on her Facebook wall that just as Kira had been generous in life so she had been in death. On January 6th, 2018 Kira gave life to six others by donating her organs.

For days I wrestled with the grief. It somehow seemed irrational because I hadn't been told of Kira's passing over the phone or in person, I had read about it on Facebook. Caught off guard in between memes, random newsfeed updates and photographs, my instinct was to find out everything I could about what had happened to her. You could say that I was trying to control grief by examining the source of that pain (Jeong 2018). I spent hours scouring different people's Facebook pages trying to piece together this tragedy, trying to make sense of it.

Since I read about Kira's accident, it has been very difficult to stop thinking about it. We only knew each other as teenagers. Kira, originally from Canada, had only spent her high school years in Egypt, where I am from, but she left a lasting impression. We didn't have a chance to share our journeys into adulthood with each other, except digitally by following each other on social media and exchanging occasional messages. After high school, Kira went back to Canada to study pre-natal nursing and I went on to journalism school. Over time,

I have come to realize that social media gives a false sense of knowing someone and, now that she's gone, I regret not having made a more genuine effort to stay in touch. But grief is a strange thing especially when the loss seems so intangible.

In this paper, I will focus on better understanding how people use Facebook to grieve. I will specifically examine Facebook as a memorial, Facebook as necromancy- a space to communicate with the dead- and Facebook as a tool to bring grieving communities together.

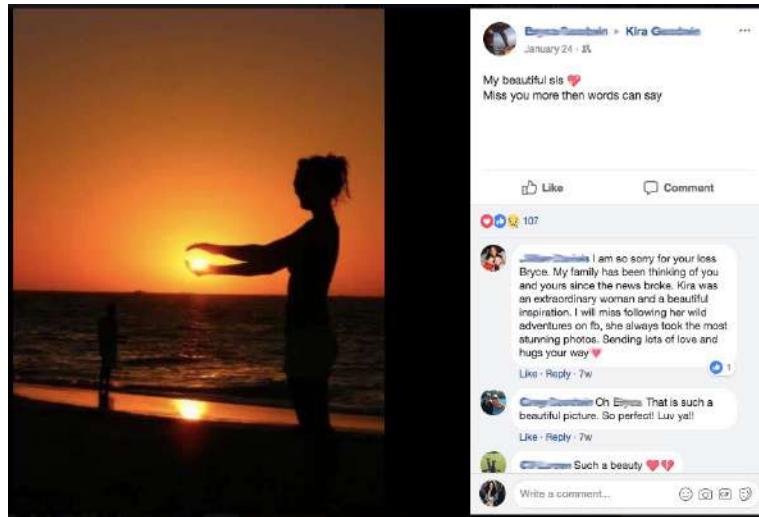


Fig. 1: The post I saw on my timeline, by Kira's brother, informing me of her death.

1 Introduction

As we become more globalized, Facebook not only changes the way we communicate, but also the way we mourn and express grief (Willis & Ferrucci 2017). We have created grieving spaces that aren't geographically bound, in the need to connect beyond physical locations. Facebook has revolutionized the way people communicate, breaking barriers and expanding social networks. With more than one billion active users, Facebook is the most dominant social networking platform in existence today¹.

Death is not a topic commonly discussed, but social media sites such as Facebook have changed that. Facebook has created a platform which enables users to openly express the pain of loss, recount memories, and grieve. Pages of those deceased can be used as solace or as a virtual cemetery for the living. They are an archive of images and words, in which interacting with the deceased has become a social networking norm (Willis & Ferrucci 2017).

Many Facebook users continue to interact with friends' pages after death. When I began researching the idea of Facebook after death, I found that little has been written on the topic, especially, what motivates people to publicly mourn.

¹ www.facebook.com

2 Methodology

The research and writing on this topic has not only been inspired by the death of my friend Kira, it also came from an ongoing skepticism of people who overshare on Facebook, specifically when someone passes away. It is a behavior I have generally found difficult to relate to until I heard about Kira, at which point I too felt the urge to publicly share a connection to her, to somehow validate my mourning. In this process, I have learned that grief is a form of validation; it says the wound matters. It matters. You matter.

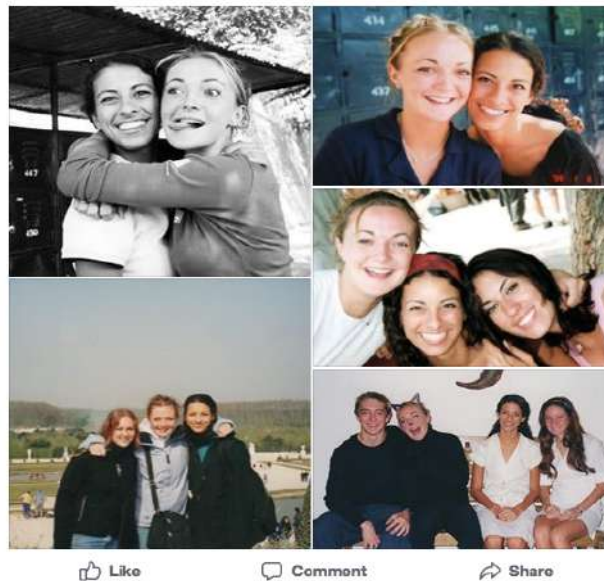


Fig. 2: Reposting memories: Photographs of Kira and friends in high school.

My research began by talking to five participants who lost family or friends in recent years. This was followed by phone interviews and email questionnaires. The next phase consisted of reading through various private and public Facebook pages, and collecting screenshots of posts that were relevant.

As the number of living Facebook users increases, so does the number of those which are deceased. Maintaining connections with a departed loved one in the virtual world has the potential to provide comfort, and be a powerful coping mechanism for many (Bouc, Han, & Pennington 2016). In 2009, Facebook added the “memorialization” option to accounts. This option locks certain functions of a deceased user’s Facebook page, but continues to allow friends and family to view the page, share memories, and leave messages, as well as provide a tangible place to maintain connections with the deceased. Memorialized pages are designed to commemorate and remember the deceased. They provide family and friends an outlet for emotional expression, reminiscing, disclosure, paying tribute, continuing bonds, sharing grief, and establishing community following a loss (Carroll & Landry 2010; Clark et al. 2004; Roberts 2004, 2006). When asked whether or not Facebook was helpful in processing grief caused by his mother’s death, participant A told me:

Just like any other means of communication, I find Facebook has helped me express my loss and pay tribute to my mother who has passed away. It somehow helps with processing grief. The photo albums also serve as a reminder, allowing me to revisit special memories as time passes.

Participants found Facebook both helpful, and unhelpful, when it came to remembering their loved ones who passed away. When asked if memories are comforting or overwhelming, the same participant added, "It depends on the memory. Sometimes there are memories you don't want to relive because they trigger emotions of grief, which makes it more unhelpful" His wife, participant B, who lost her father a few years ago said:

I haven't used Facebook a lot to process the grief of my dad but my sister really has. I do, however, appreciate people's grieving posts. For example, when a friend recently lost her dad, I reached out to her and we messaged back and forth for a few days sharing our experiences of loss. Her friends and family also posted supportive comments that I felt were helpful in my grieving as well.

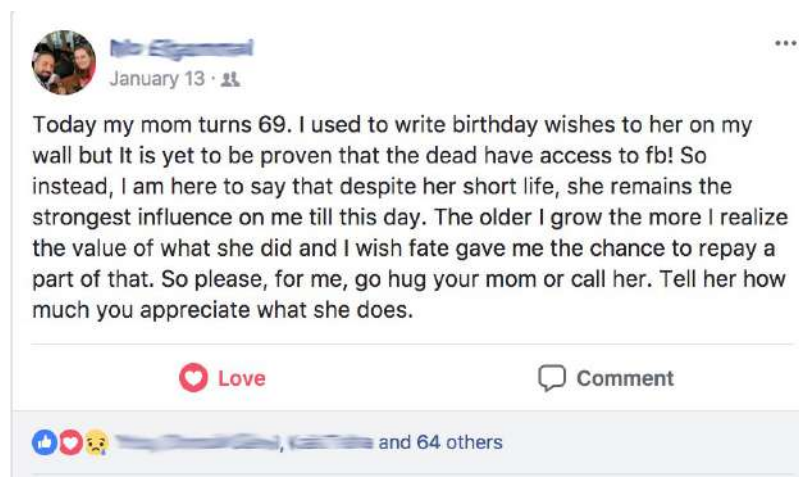


Fig. 3: A post by participant A, who finds Facebook mostly helpful in processing the death of his mother.

Facebook profile pages store years of user's thoughts and feelings. Especially in the earlier years, when there was less emphasis on news and events, posts tended to be more personal. This can serve as a digital diary, open to everyone. When someone passes away, it allows the living to go back and see glimpses of the past and relive experiences and memories.

In 2011, after the tsunami hit Japan, more than 19,000 people died and 25,000 remain missing. In the aftermath, of course, families struggled to figure out how they were going to move forward without the people they loved (Glass & Meek 2016). In the town of Otsushi, a man named Itaru Sasaki had been struggling to find ways to cope with the loss of his cousin. Not knowing how to talk about it, he went out and bought an old phone booth. The phone booth did not actually work but he put it in his garden and used it to 'talk' to his deceased cousin. Although he was talking into the wind, so to speak, the phone booth became a place for him to stay connected to the dead and

process his grief. The idea of keeping up a relationship with the dead is not such a strange one in Japan, where the line between our world and their world is thin (Glass & Meek 2016).



Fig. 4: Itaru Sasaki stands next to the phone booth he set up in order to stay connected to the dead.

While other online memorials such as funeral home websites, blogs, and support group pages enable users to process grief and speak about the deceased, the Facebook profile page provides a unique place for the bereaved to write directly to the deceased. Individuals are able to use the social networking site not only as a place to interact with friends, but also as a tangible place to maintain connections with the deceased (Bouc, Han, & Pennington 2016).

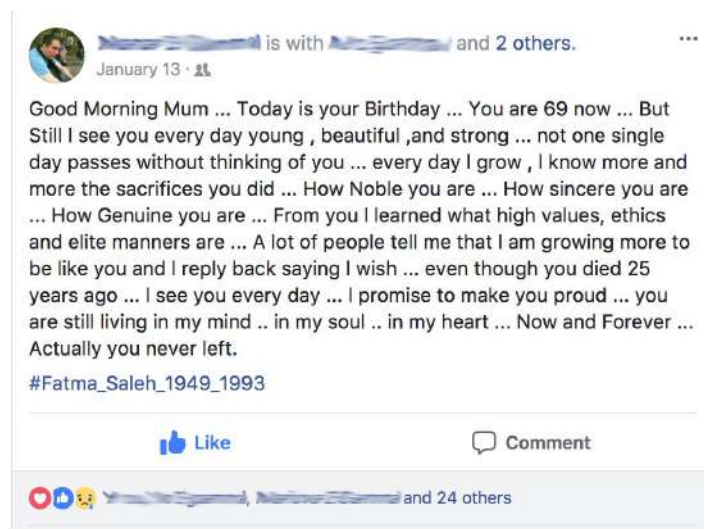


Fig. 5: An example of Facebook being used as necromancy; the practice of communicating with the dead.

Facebook helps some users maintain a connection to the deceased by allowing them to post on their walls, and view old comments and photos, fostering a sense of continued connection. “Even though she

has died, I still post on her wall, mostly that I miss her and love her very much. As odd as this sounds, I feel she can see her Facebook page in Heaven.” Others described how being able to address messages to the deceased on his or her *Facebook* wall provided a way to say “good-bye” to the person (Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman 2015)

“I’m not religious, but I do believe it makes people feel better to talk to their loved ones on Facebook or other social media just for the release, to get what you wish you could have told them out there” Participant C told me.



Figs. 6 & 7: Friends posting on Facebook walls of the deceased.

Social media can have positive effects, such as helping individuals overcome intense feelings of loneliness following a loss, especially when support networks are far away. The process of posting offers users opportunities to connect with others who may share similar experiences or offer messages of support (Lapper 2017). Facebook can be a way for individuals to get instant support in a digital environment, support that may not otherwise be available to them. This is done by updating statuses, which disseminates news to a large global network with general ease, or sending private messages. It also allows people to get quick responses, which gives the sense that others are bearing witness to their grief at a time when they may be more isolated than usual. Participant D shared these thoughts with me:

I feel that somehow it's easier to grieve on Facebook than 'real life' because you can say what you want to say in the privacy of your own home, without having to socialize. You tend to write more vulnerable things that you probably wouldn't have felt comfortable saying in the presence of people. And then the response you get, in comments and direct messages, is generally so supportive that it can also help you heal and feel connected to others in a time of your life that you may normally retreat to being alone. Because of this, I think grieving on Facebook may actually be healthier for most people.

Helpful witness to grief experiences were those that allowed participants to appreciate what the deceased person meant to others, to know how others were grieving, and to have an outlet for expressing their own feelings (Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman 2015). When I asked Participant B if she found Facebook to be useful to recount memories of her deceased father, her response was:

No, most memories of my dad are from ‘real life’, but I know my husband has learned new things about his mother since she passed away because of memories and stories people posted on his wall that he never knew before.”

Some participants described Facebook as a space they went to for communal support. They indicated that it was an especially useful tool in learning and sharing information about a death because it made it possible to disseminate information to a large, geographically diverse group of people quickly and with minimal effort (Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman 2015). After asking my participants if they felt a different type of support (better or worse) from their Facebook network as opposed to real life, participant A answered:

If you mean emotional support, then yes and no. The reach is wider and faster on social media, you can instantly communicate with your network to share your moments of grief, however, it can feel more superficial.

It seems Facebook can create a sense of community by quick news dissemination, serving a function similar to obituaries in a newspaper, that allows people to share or learn information about a death — but it can also depersonalize a user’s experience. Participant A added:

We receive comments and condolences on status’ of loss and the next minute a funny video pops up on the same wall. Taking the time and effort to meet people in person and talking to them one-on-one is definitely more genuine and more appreciated and helpful in the long run.

Depersonalization seemed to be an issue for several participants because of comments being left among ‘regular’ Facebook activity. It gave them the feeling that the death or the pain of the loss was not being taken seriously. Similarly, when I learned about Kira, I was caught off guard. Reading a status on Facebook almost a month after she had passed made it feel distant and intangible. In a way, it compounded the pain of the loss by not having someone to speak with directly. I was also acutely aware and thankful for the fact that social media allowed me to hear the news. If it were not for Facebook, I may have never known.



Fig. 8: Several updates posted on Kira’s wall by her mother allowed her global network to be reached.

4 Conclusion

Having the ability to communicate thoughts and feelings related to grief, as opposed to internalizing them, has proven to be therapeutic for those undergoing any kind of loss or trauma. For some people, it seems to be easier to process grief by writing rather than verbally communicating, in which case Facebook offers a place to do just that.

Based on my experience and research, the topic of death is not one often discussed neither offline nor online. People cope with death and express grief in different ways depending on their country of origin and cultural background. Facebook has allowed users to bridge the gap of those differences by becoming a common platform for the bereaved from all over the world to openly approach dealing with loss and death.

The results of my research suggest that using Facebook during bereavement can be both beneficial and challenging for bereaved users. The instantaneous nature of publicly expressing grief on social media paradoxically presents us as vulnerable to a wider audience, yet the technological distance somehow protectively shields us (Lapper 2017). Facebook is a helpful tool to easily disseminate news to a large social network without having to make individual phone calls or visits, which could possibly cause people to repeatedly relive the pain of their loss. It allows the bereaved to feel supported by a community from a distance especially when a local support network is not available to them. “The appeal of technology becomes clear when we are most vulnerable— in using this medium, as opposed to physical interactions—we have the ability to edit our content and present the self as we prefer to be seen. This could partly explain why, when announcing sensitive news concerning death, users find comfort and ease in communicating over sites such as *Facebook*, as the written form allows for better formulation” (Turkle 2012).

“Kira Goodwin lived a vibrant but short 32 years. She was taken from this world by an avalanche while backcountry skiing in the west Kootenay mountains on December 31st, 2017. She had a lust for adventure, was an avid traveler, exceptional athlete and a lover of nature and wildlife. She was passionate about living and had a smile and personality that were larger than life. She made family everywhere she went, not just friends. Kira loved her career in nursing and used her skills to serve in Neonatal Intensive Care, the Chemotherapy Clinic and the Operating Room. She was an ambassador to Canada everywhere she traveled and loved to immerse herself deeply in culture. She was generous and kind in life and death. Although Kira could not be saved, she was an organ donor and therefore directly responsible for supporting the lives of others.” —The Kira Goodwin Legacy Fund Facebook Page



For Kira. A bright light, one of a kind, never will be forgotten.

References

- Arendt, H. (1970). *The Human Condition* (Sixth Impression). Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Barnhill, J., & Owen, J. T. (2007, November). Virtual memorials: A place to grieve. In: *Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association*, Chicago, IL.
- Bouc, A., Han, S. H., & Pennington, N. (2016). "Why are they commenting on his page?": Using Facebook profile pages to continue connections with the deceased. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 62, 635-643.
- Carroll, B., & Landry, K. (2010). Logging on and letting out: Using online social networks to grieve and to mourn. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30(5), 341-349.
- Church, S. H. (2013). Digital gravescapes: Digital memorializing on Facebook. *The Information Society*, 29(3), 184-189.
- Clark, S., Burgess, T., Laven, G., Bull, M., Marker, J., & Browne, E. (2004). Developing and evaluating the Grieflink web site: Processes, protocols, dilemmas and lessons learned. *Death studies*, 28(10), 955-970.
- Connected, but alone* (2012) Sherry Turkle. TED video. 19:41.
https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together?language=en
- Facebook.com "Facebook newsroom, company info". <https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>
- Glass, I. & Meek, M. "597: One Last Thing Before I Go" Podcast aired September 23, 2016. www.thisamericanlife.org/597/transcript
- Lapper, E. (2017). "How Has Social Media Changed the Way We Grieve?", In: *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces*. Frömming U., Köhn, S., Fox, S., & Terry, M. (eds.) Bielefeld: transcript Verlag
- Roberts, P. (2004). The living and the dead: Community in the virtual cemetery. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 49(1), 57-76.
- Roberts, P. (2006, October). From my space to our space: The functions of Web memorials in bereavement. In *The Forum* (Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 1-4).
- Rossetto, K. R., Lannutti, P. J., & Strauman, E. C. (2015). Death on Facebook: Examining the roles of social media communication for the bereaved. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 32(7), 974-994.
- The Kira Goodwin Legacy Fund Facebook Page.
https://www.facebook.com/kiragoodfund/?ref=br_rs
- Willis, E., & Ferrucci, P. (2017). Mourning and grief on Facebook: An examination of motivations for interacting with the deceased. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 76(2), 122-140.
- Wired.com, "The Final, Terrible Voyage of the Nautilus".
https://www.wired.com/story/final-terrible-voyage-nautilus/?mbid=social_fb_onsiteshare