Publicly Private: Disclosing Grief on Facebook*

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Publicly Private: Disclosing Grief on Facebook

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Abstract: This essay examines the transition of the grieving process into the online realm of social network sites—specifically Facebook—through two prominent communication theories: social penetration theory and communication privacy management theory. The desire for both openness and human connection through the disclosure of personal information and the maintaining of privacy boundaries is made evident by analyzing this social phenomenon through these two theories. Disclosing grief on Facebook can be advantageous by developing relational closeness among mourners, but it can also create discomfort when acquaintances, or people with less intimate relationships with the discloser, view the personal feelings of loss. Additionally, disclosing such private information on Facebook calls into question matters of privacy ownership, boundary creation, and boundary turbulence. This social phenomenon broadens the scopes of these theories by transitioning them from simply traditional face-to-face communication to computer-mediated communication.

Traditionally, people share the loss of loved ones through obituaries in newspapers or personal phone calls to other family members and close friends. With the advent of social media platforms, the grief process is changing. People post tributes, obituaries, funeral information, and feelings of loss instantaneously to social media. Using social penetration theory and communication privacy management theory, this essay examines how social network sites (SNSs)—specifically Facebook—impact the cultural norms of the grieving process. These two theories highlight the tension between people's need to disclose information to develop closer relationships while at the same time maintain their privacy. Sharing grief through Facebook follows a linear progression of disclosure and provides opportunity for the reciprocity of that disclosure to build relational closeness. However, disclosing death online creates problems regarding the ownership of disclosed information, reluctant confidants, and turbulent boundaries.

Online Grief as a Social Phenomenon

The transition of the grieving process to the online realm is considered a social phenomenon (Lingel, 2013). Facebook is one of the main media platforms that influences this transition of grief into the digital realm. Users post their tributes to

the deceased, memorialize the deceased's profile, grieve as a community, and disclose their own feelings of loss. Facebook memorial pages allow mourners to honor their relationship with the deceased as well as develop closer relationships with other grieving individuals in order to find comfort. To some, it may seem wrong that grief is disclosed in such a public manner. It is not so much the actual death of someone that people view as a private matter, but the feelings of loss that result from the death of a loved one. Interpersonal relationships are important to the development of a person's self-concept. Therefore, when those relationships are severed by death, a person's sense of self is impacted by the intense feelings of loss. Sharing those feelings of loss seems appropriate only for the most intimate of relationships. As antithetical to the traditional grieving process online mourning seems, it is becoming not only an accepted social norm, but an expected one.

Wortham (2012) argues that the disclosure of grief through online mediums causes discomfort for users who view such personal posts. She says, "no one wants to see morbid thoughts and ruminations about death sandwiched between cheery updates about last night's party and celebrity chatter" (¶ 7). In opposition, Delaney (2015) argues that "online grieving might seem wrong—but we better get used to it" (p. 29). Her article summarizes research done on the advantages and disadvantages of online grieving. Social media allows people "to keep a connection to the deceased" (Delaney, 2015, p. 29), which Delaney views as an advantage of online grieving. However, this public form of grief allows strangers to learn personal information about both the deceased and the mourners, creating one of the disadvantages to this social phenomenon. Likewise, Zizzo (2009) writes in an article for the *Oklahoman* about the cathartic benefits of online grieving practices. "Leaving testimonials about a loved one is part of the grieving process" (Zizzo, 2009, p. 1C), and SNSs provide a convenient and available platform for people to do this more easily. Traditionally, the sharing of testimonials was restricted to the confines of a funeral or memorial. Even then, only a few people share memories with the public. Now, with the availability of social media, everyone who grieves has the opportunity to share memories in a public setting. They may also discuss the profound impact the deceased had upon them.

But this ongoing conversation made possible through the sharing of grief online lengthens the grieving process unnecessarily. Scrolling through numerous tributes to the deceased serves as a constant reminder of the loss, especially if the deceased was well known among a large number of a person's Facebook friends. Ultimately, with the increased availability to share these personal stories, people should realize and work to understand the risk posed to their privacy. A balance must be established between the open disclosure of these deeply personal matters and the management of these admissions.

Application of Social Penetration Theory

Social penetration theory was developed by social psychologists Irwin Altman of the University of Utah and Dalmas Taylor of Lincoln University. This

socio-psychological theory explains how relational closeness develops through the systematic and linear self-disclosure of varying degrees of intimate information (Schaeffer, 2010). A multi-layered onion is used to represent the varying levels of information disclosure. On the surface is information about a person's public self, such as age, academic major, gender, and hometown. The second layer contains information about the semi-private self like political views, goals, and preferences. At the core of the personality structure is the private self where information like deep-seated fears, concepts of self, and dark secrets resides. As discussed earlier, it is in this layer that the intense feelings of a tragic loss also reside.

Schaeffer (2010), in a summary of this theory, says "though pertaining initially only to face-to-face communication, today's onslaught of computer-mediated communication demonstrates similar relational characteristics" (p. 118). While it may seem that posts about grief appear to skip over the disclosure of the first few layers, these layers are generally already disclosed through Facebook. Users can post their hometown, school, major, and relationship status directly to their profile. The disclosure of private information in an online setting and its ability to build relational closeness is dependent upon the medium where the confession is shared. Facebook is set up so that users can disclose the information from the first few layers of the onion right from the beginning. The SNS has attempted to create this process of disclosure in a way conducive to the sheer volume of *friends* a user has. Therefore, this disclosure of the supposedly private information, the death of a loved one, does not violate the linear progression that Altman and Taylor determined in their pattern of disclosure. However, one factor in the online process of disclosure differs from the traditional face-to-face form. On Facebook, the *friends* of the user must actively seek out the disclosed information by reading through a person's profile. Only a handful of those people would do that depending upon their level of intimacy with and interest in the person.

It is important to note that "self-disclosure is reciprocal, especially in the early stages of relationship development" (Griffin et al., 2009, p. 99). In certain instances, the disclosure of deeply personal information on Facebook develops closeness between mourners and grants the opportunity for reciprocal disclosure. However, closeness cannot be formed with all the user's *friends* as it is typically limited to those who can reciprocate the feelings of loss. Facebook memorial groups or pages are ideal for reciprocal disclosure as they are often limited to those mourning the loss of a person. Posts in the Facebook memorial groups "are likely to include the opportunity for feedback" (Marwick & Ellison, 2012, p. 379). Options for feedback include commenting on other mourners' posts, reacting to the person's disclosure, or writing one's own posts about similar experiences (DeGroot, 2014). A recent feature that debuted with one of the Facebook updates was the evolution of the like button. Now, users can like, love, laugh out loud, cry, or gasp in reaction to another user's post. This new component makes a person's response to the disclosure of grief feel more personal. Instead of feeling awkward about giving a thumbs up to someone's grief, a viewer can instead respond with a sad face. A sense of communal grieving is created through giving

feedback or reciprocating disclosure to another person's original confession (DeGroot, 2014). Online grieving through Facebook has the potential to build relational closeness because the SNS gives users the opportunity to disclose to a multitude of people, as well as for other users to reciprocate that disclosure.

On the other hand, when a person discloses online, the number of people they are disclosing information to dramatically increases. Marwick and Ellison (2012) analyze the "large and diverse audiences" (p. 378) found on Facebook memorial pages. Their study references the concept of context collapse, described by Vitak (2012) as "the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one's social network" (p. 451). Essentially, a person's Facebook friends are a conglomerate of work friends, best friends, family members, and acquaintances. Online memorials are potentially viewed by Facebook friends who differ in their level of intimacy with the discloser. Marwick and Ellison's (2012) study also showed that "public memorial pages attracted people from many aspects of the deceased person's life" (p. 391). A person who discloses personal feelings of loss or memories of the deceased on the memorial page should realize he or she is disclosing information to a group of people with whom he or she shares varying levels of intimacy. But, as social media users, people must consider how comfortable they are in actually doing this. It is difficult for a person to consider all the potential viewers of their post.

Because a person has a varying level of intimacy with their Facebook *friends,* those friends will respond differently to the disclosure of personal grief. Some will respond to the individual's disclosure with empathy and/or reciprocal grief. For example, when a student at a local high school commits suicide, some members of their social circle may turn to social media to grieve the loss of a friend. This allows those who knew the person to grieve in a different setting, transcending time and location, bringing comfort to those struggling with an overwhelming sense of loss. On the other hand, some people experience discomfort when confronted with these deeply personal confessions of grief. Going back to the example of a young student committing suicide, being constantly reminded of the loss could feel uncomfortable for those who did not know the person well. Each Facebook user who chooses to grieve through the social media platform will more than likely experience both types of people. They will benefit from a larger community of grief, but make some of their Facebook friends uncomfortable in the process.

Social penetration theory says that people choose to whom they will disclose information. It could be argued, though, that people lose the right to choose who views that disclosed information when they post on SNSs. On the other hand, perhaps they choose who they disclose to by making the decision to post to social media. Facebook is upfront about how visible users' posts are from the start. A majority of Facebook users understand that the information they post online is generally visible to more than just their confirmed friends because often friends of friends can see the posts as well. If users keep this in mind, they can remain consciously aware of how many people may view the disclosure of their personal

information, retaining the choice of who they disclose feelings of grief to in the online realm.

Disclosing grief online, while seemingly foreign to older people, is going to become the new *normal* for the next generations. Delaney's (2015) article reminds people that "an awareness of this fast-evolving phenomenon and a framework for understanding it is important for any one engaged in bereavement support, particularly with younger people" (p. 29). People cannot change the fact that online grieving exists, but they can examine the ways it affects grieving individuals, both positively and negatively. An understanding of social penetration theory allows researchers to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of grieving online. One of the advantages provided by online grief is the increased opportunity for people to relate to one another through disclosing their feelings of loss to other mourners. Facebook enhances the reciprocal disclosure between those grieving as well. Yet, since those grieving are disclosing these extremely intimate feelings to a multitude of different types of friends and acquaintances, one disadvantage is that some viewers may experience discomfort at such private disclosure. Moreover, the prominence of this social phenomenon may prompt a reevaluation of the ways that social penetration theory relates to computer-mediated communication, broadening the theory's scope.

Application of Communication Privacy Management Theory

While people desire openness with others through self-disclosure, they also wish to maintain privacy. It is one of the contradictions in a healthy relationship. Individuals desire an open flow of communication along with a maintaining of their personal privacy. Privacy maintenance is an important aspect of interpersonal relationships. A theory conceptualized by Sandra Petronio, a communication professor at Purdue University, communication privacy management helps people manage private information disclosed to them. Communication privacy management theory is a privacy management system with three main parts: privacy ownership, privacy control, and privacy turbulence (Griffin et al., 2009). Privacy management becomes blurred when applied to a computer-mediated realm of communication full of SNSs such as Facebook.

In regards to the disclosure of the death on Facebook, three principles from this theory should be applied. First, people believe they own their private information (Griffin et al., 2009). The complex question of ownership colludes the management of private information on Facebook. In Lingel's (2013) essay, "The Digital Remains: Social Media and Practices of Online Grief," the social interactions through Facebook "are perceived as communal—rather than institutional or even personal—property" (p. 192). Therein lies the question: who controls the private information disclosed on Facebook? Often, Facebook users believe they own their private information. This sense of ownership displays itself most fiercely when users become aware of any changes Facebook makes to the privacy settings. The institution of Facebook, through its policies, attempts to control the private information of a deceased person's profile. Facebook used to delete the user's profile one month after death. But, now, if a user is proved dead,

the profile may be memorialized limiting access to only confirmed friends (Lingel, 2013). Problems surrounding the ownership of that private information arise from these strict policies.

Helen and Jay Stassen experienced those problems surrounding the ownership of a deceased user's profile firsthand. The Stassens' son, Benjamin, committed suicide and left no note giving his parents any explanation as to why he chose to end his life (Epstein, 2012). The crushed parents turned to their son's Facebook profile for answers. However, the SNS would not grant the parents access to their son's profile, per their privacy policies (Epstein, 2012). The Stassens obtained a court order, but found themselves locked into an ethical and legal debate with the company for access to an entire part of their lost son's life (Epstein, 2012). The Stassens feel that they own the information posted by their deceased son, but Facebook's policies disagree.

While the individual's profile contains content created by the individual, it also contains an archive of photos he or she was tagged in, videos posted to his or her timeline, and happy birthday comments. The profile is a record, or "kind of social artifact" (Lingel, 2013, p.193), of the deceased person's interpersonal relationships. For mourners, the profile serves as a link to the deceased or a reminder of their relationship. People struggling with the intense feelings of loss can revisit the page to feel somewhat connected to the person they lost. These pages serve as an online memorial to the deceased. This sense of intimacy found in online interactions creates a sense of ownership for the friends and family of the departed. Therefore, the fate of the deceased person's profile and the private information should be decided by not just the institution, but the family and friends of the deceased.

Facebook has attempted to adapt its policies surrounding deceased users to better accommodate friends and family mourning the loss. As mentioned earlier, the SNS used to delete the profiles of deceased members. The corporation has since changed its policy. Facebook depends upon other users to report a deceased person. Verified family members can request the removal or the memorialization of an account. According to Facebook's Help Center (2017), "memorialized accounts are a place for friends and family to gather and share memories after a person has passed away." Facebook has recognized the important part it can have in this new grieving process. In 2015, Facebook introduced the legacy contact feature. Users can select one friend to be their legacy contact when they pass away. A legacy contact has the ability to manage a memorialized account, doing things like updating profile/cover photos and posting funeral information. These policies attempt to manage ownership of a deceased person's profile, sharing it between both the institution and the friends and family.

Another question that arises from the advent of social media sites is if Facebook should alert other users about the death of someone in the same way it updates users about friends' birthdays. The addition of an alert could result in a larger grieving circle and be beneficial to mourners. It may also seem indecorous and insensitive to the family and friends of the deceased individual. This returns to the

idea of ownership. Facebook does possess the rights to the information posted on the individual's timeline, but the death of a user is sensitive information that the family of the dead may not want shared. The deceased's family might contest the idea of Facebook owning that information; and, therefore, not feel that the site has the right to share it.

The second principle to be considered is that the sharing of private information creates co-owners and "draws that person [the co-owner] into a collective privacy boundary" (Griffin et al., 2009, p. 155). When a person discloses the death of a friend or family member on Facebook, co-owners are created through the sharing and re-sharing of the post. Some confidants created by disclosing grief online are deliberate, while others are reluctant. A deliberate confidant purposely seeks out information through disclosure. DeGroot (2014), a communication professor at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, coined the term "emotional rubberneckers" (p. 79) for the Facebook oglers who deliberately search memorial pages to read the posts about the deceased person and write their own stories of loss. Reluctant confidants, on the other hand, are those who see the mourner's heartfelt tribute simply because they are scrolling through their newsfeed. The reluctant confidant did not ask for this private information, but is now a co-owner of the information and contributor to the privacy boundaries. A discloser must understand that once he or she discloses this deeply personal information, the privacy boundaries become fuzzy due to the public nature of Facebook. The information is viewable by more than just the discloser's confirmed friends.

Boundaries for co-owned information must be created by both the discloser and the co-owners, and "the individuals involved coordinate their boundaries so that the private information is co-owned and co-managed appropriately" (Durham, 2008, p. 132). However, Facebook grief-sharing creates fuzzy boundaries for private information. Boundary turbulence, the "disruptions in the way that co-owners control and regulate the flow of private information to third parties" (Griffin et al., 2009, p. 159), occurs because the flow of available information through Facebook is not controlled solely by the original discloser and intended audience. If a confirmed friend likes the discloser's post, that may show up on a friend of the liker's timeline. Therefore, the information is shared without the discloser's knowledge. A viewer of the post may choose to share the post against the wishes of the original discloser. This is not necessarily done with malicious intent, but the user sharing the post may wish to show support and love for their grieving friend or deceased loved one. The primary creator of the post cannot communicate with every single person who will view the post to mutually agree upon privacy boundaries. Therefore, "people [will] create turmoil by making mistakes" (Griffin et al., 2009, p. 160). These mistakes may damage the relationship between the discloser and the co-owner.

As Facebook progresses, the corporation must work with users to effectively manage private information in an ethical manner, particularly when it comes to death. Users must also balance the revelation of private information on a public SNS. This new social phenomenon of grieving online requires users to reevaluate

ways to construct boundaries and manage the inevitable turbulence that comes from grieving on a public platform such as Facebook. Communication privacy management theory is applied currently to verbal disclosure between people. However, the online realm of disclosure and privacy management constructs a new dimension of application for this theory.

Conclusion

Continued research of this social phenomenon is important and relevant as technology changes and online grieving becomes commonplace. As Facebook and other SNSs evolve, additional research should be done. There is currently a larger amount of research and discussion about grieving through Facebook; thus, research could be done about other SNSs such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. In DeGroot's (2014) article, she discusses the need for furthering the "limited research on online voyeurs" (p. 84). Additional research could answer the question of why people intentionally seek out Facebook memorial pages, potentially discovering the deeper psychological reasons why certain people feel the need to lurk on these online memorials.

People constantly use the disclosure of personal information online to build relationships. This practice illustrates the basic need for openness and human connection. However, due to the public nature of SNSs, people do not know to whom exactly they are disclosing information. Therefore, there is a need for privacy management of communication shared online. Individuals experiencing the trauma of losing a loved one, if they choose to share the information with their Facebook friends, must be prepared to manage their private information and handle the repercussions of grieving on an expansive, public network containing millions of *friends*.

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