#funeral

Marcus Carter
Computing and Information Systems
The University of Melbourne
marcusc@unimelb.edu.au

Martin Gibbs
Computing and Information Systems
The University of Melbourne
martin.gibbs@unimelb.edu.au

Bjorn Nansen
Computing and Information Systems
The University of Melbourne
nansenb@unimelb.edu.au

Michael Arnold
School of Historical and Philosophical Studies
The University of Melbourne
mvarnold@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

In this paper we highlight preliminary findings from a study at the intersection of Instagram use and funerary practices. This study analyses photographs tagged with "#funeral" and contributes to research into death and digital media by extending the focus from social networking sites such as Facebook to consider the photo-sharing application Instagram, and how different media platforms are connected with the physical event of funerals. By categorizing photos tagged with "#funeral" on Instagram we show how media architecture and use shapes a complex ecology of grieving practices, with distinct differences from practices that have coalesced around other social media platforms. We consider the collision of digital culture and traditional memorializing practices, and suggest the need for further work that attends to the variety of social media being mobilized in death, grieving and commemoration, as well as to the ways platforms become entwined with physical places and rituals.

Keywords

#funeral, Instagram, social media, commemoration, grieving, selfies

Social media and the dead

There is a growing body of research addressing issues around the dead in online environments. Following the emergence in the 1990's of online memorials, or so-called 'virtual cemeteries', and the more recent popularity of memorialized profiles on social media platforms, researchers from a range of disciplines have become increasingly interested in the digital mediation of death and commemoration. In turn, platforms like Facebook have responded with memorialization policies (Bellamy et al 2013, Gibbs et al 2013). Research has focused particularly on Social Network Sites (SNS) and their affordances for maintaining a connection to the deceased, including how social grief and support takes shape in online networks (e.g. Moss 2004; Williams and Merten 2009); and how the dead continue to persist and participate within the platforms and protocols of SNS (e.g. Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Karppi 2013; Marwick and Ellison 2012).

To date, research studying death and digital technologies has predominantly focused on the meaning and practice within particular SNS, especially Facebook, while other popular platforms have been neglected. Similarly, there is much less attention paid to how media platforms intersect with physical environments and traditional practices, such as funerals, with few exceptions (e.g. Walter et al 2011). This suggests the need to consider the shifting boundaries, ecologies and contexts of media platforms in shaping emergent cultural practices around death, grieving and commemoration. Consequently, in this paper we continue our studies of emerging practices associated with death and new digital media (e.g. Gibbs et al 2012; Kohn et al 2012) through an exploration of the use of Instagram – a social, mobile photo-sharing platform – to mediate funerary practices. Our preliminary results analysing photographs tagged with "#funeral" highlight the evolving use of digital platforms for mediating death, grief, remembrance and mourning and we consider the collision of digital culture with traditional memorializing practices.

Methods

We downloaded all #funeral images posted to Instagram over two 24 hour periods on the 9th and 15th of February, which resulted in a data set of 525 images. We then sorted these images into categories based on themes around practices that emerged through inductive analysis.

The hashtag is a word proceeded by a hash symbol (#), a form of metadata that allows messages to be grouped and searched. Originally from Twitter, hashtags are commonly conceptualised as creating a "*hashtag conversation*" (Bruns et al 2011), however Instagram's "*like economy*" (Gerlitz et al 2013) has resulted in #hashtags #being #used #like #this, #not #necessarily #to #engage #in #conversations #but #as #a #linguistic #style as much as it is about engaging in a '#funeral conversation'. The implications of this like economy for our analysis meant we needed to filter out a number of images utilizing #funeral. These discarded images included the commemoration of dead animals (6), or the "death" of inanimate objects (such as a spilt ice cream) (10), pop culture (47), or death themed artwork (5). Another forty-seven images were meme-like re-shares, such as "*I wear black when I exercise, it's like a funeral for my fat*".
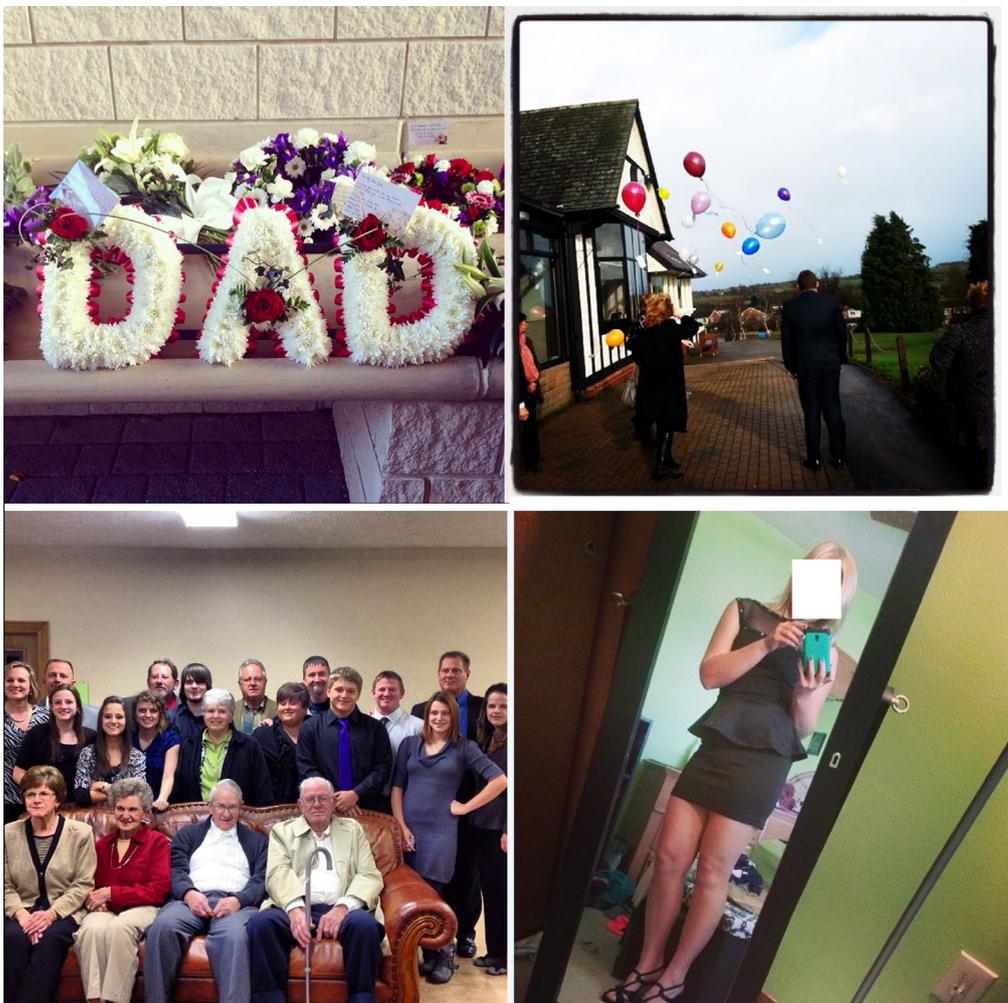

Figure 1. Images from #funeral of (clockwise): a funeral flower arrangement, a moment from a funeral service, a family photo of those who had come together and a selfie, depicting the user's funeral outfit.

Findings for #funeral

Our review identified a complex ecology of commemorative and grieving practices around the #funeral on Instagram. Of those that related explicitly to the passing of a loved one, common photographic themes were of family or togetherness featuring multiple people (46), funeral flowers

(31), older photos of the deceased (12) and the funeral service (43). There were also numerous photos of landscapes, buildings or even weather forecasts (25) that the associated text indicated were meant as a sharing of their personal situation, such as being on the way to a funeral service or the weather at a funeral's location. There were a number of photos of text documents (6) of information about a funeral time and location, or messages from the deceased's family. Only 3 images were overtly religious, while there were 2 photos of an open casket.

Eclipsing the frequency of any of these individual categories were 'selfies' (photographic self-portraits) taken at and/or in the context of attending a funeral (135). Similarly, there were also 30 photos of individuals, often uploaded by the person in the photo, but not taken by them. Based on the text and associated hashtags, we felt these were very similar to those categorised as selfies. We also categorised selfies with multiple people (27), a category with substantial thematic overlap with family photos; the attention in these examples was typically on togetherness, rather than the individual.

Discussion: Practices around death, grieving and commemoration

Instagram is structurally different from other digital platforms that have previously been the dominant focus for thanatological research on digital domains. SNS, such as Facebook, allow for profiles to be memorialized, and thus provide a locus for networked publics to converge around a marker of the deceased and share in remembering the dead. In contrast, Instagram has no convergent spaces where people can share memorializations. Instead, users are restricted to posting things to their own public space (which others cannot post to), connected to other users through #hashtags and @user connections. The implications of this platform architecture for emerging cultural practices of sharing in grief and commemorating the dead can be found in the ways different users engage with #funeral, particularly through the diverse and sometimes competing content connected to the hashtag, and in turn, how #funeral and hashtags more generally are understood in mediating interaction.

While photos of the funeral service were common, it was very rare that these photos captured individual mourning. Rather they focused on the material culture and metonymy of mourning such as flowers, graves, or funeral service cards. Similarly, the many images of landscapes, places or buildings emphasized the atmosphere of remembrance, often on the way to the funeral to share the situation rather than personal grief with others. Family photos or images of gathered groups taken at funerals often featured smiling faces, and appeared to shift from an affect of loss or mourning to one of celebration of the life of the deceased, the conventions of photography, and the social network the event of their passing drew together.

The most frequent category of #funeral photographs was the selfie. We are aware of recent controversy and media attention surrounding *"selfies at funerals"* (Fiefer, 2013) and their exemplification of supposedly narcissistic and insincere youthful practices (see also Gibbs et al., 2014). Indeed, many instances of the #funeral photographs we categorized as selfies were associated with overtly narcissistic hash-tags such as "#likeforlike"; "#sexy", "#fashion" or "#follow me" and seemed to be more about presentation of the self and self-promotion rather than acknowledging the solemnity and gravitas of funeral rites. In contrast, family photos or photos for togetherness were typically accompanied by more respectful hashtags (such as "#RIP") which do not have an expectation of strangers searching and liking personal photos (as "#sexy" might). Rather, comments and compositions of these photos typically highlighted shared mourning and sadness, or the reunion of extended family.

However, not all selfies can be interpreted as narcissistic self-aggrandizement. Many selfies appear to be an attempt to share grief, placing emphasis on the context in which the image is taken, and the message in the accompanying text, rather than the person in the photo. For these users, we suggest that the selfie is drawing on, and constrained by, the architecture and rhetorical style of Instagram use: a smart-phone based platform that only allows users to engage by sharing photographs. Quantifying the division between these types of selfies proved difficult, but the two genres were clearly evident. We felt this demonstrated both a problematic collision of selfie culture with existing memorialization

practices, and an appropriation of new media practices to help teenagers and young adults express grief and mourning.

Conclusion

A discussion of categories of photos tagged with "#funeral" on Instagram has highlighted how the use of this social media photo sharing application forms part of a complex ecology of grieving imagery and practice. Instagram is a digital, social media platform that differs from other SNS, such as Facebook, that have previously been the dominant focus for thanatological research on digital media. Our initial study of the use of photo sharing social media suggests that the emerging practices associated with these platforms differ from the practices that have coalesced around other SNS platforms. Platforms have implications for practices. This suggests that future work in this space needs to look beyond Facebook and attend to the variety of social media being mobilized in practices associated with death, grieving and commemoration as well as attending to how these various platforms interact within a complex media ecology that also intersects, mingles, supports and appropriates traditional practices.

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