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Mourning the Commons: Circulating Affect in Crowdfunded Funeral Campaigns

Tamara Kneese

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Abstract

This article focuses on the role of circulated affect in crowdfunded funeral campaigns, which have attracted little scholarly attention so far. This study is based on content analysis of online campaigns ($N=50$) and qualitative interviews ($N=10$) with campaign supporters and initiators. Its aim is to connect crowdfunded funeral campaigns to the larger digital-sharing economy. The findings of the study suggest that in order to gather sufficient funds to cover funeral costs, individuals share emotionally evocative narratives and images with their social networks and an imagined Internet audience with the expectation of attracting compassion. The study shows that political movements, media coverage, and sharing on social media platforms are integral to the success of campaigns for socially marginal individuals. The article contributes to the growing study of crowdwork and finds persistent structural inequalities in crowdfunding campaigns, thereby contesting the ethos of the digital commons.

Keywords

sharing economy, affect, mourning, digital platforms, social media

Introduction

On 9 August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, a white police officer shot and killed an unarmed African-American teenager named Michael Brown. The fact that Michael Brown's body was left on the pavement for hours after his death is well known, but the story of how Brown's family buried him is perhaps less so.

Adner Marcelin, a clerk working for the Brown family's lawyers, initiated a GoFundMe crowdfunding campaign to "cover funeral and burial expenses, travel and living expenses of the parents as they seek justice for their son, Michael Brown, Jr" (Marcelin, 2014). GoFundMe is one among many crowdfunding platforms, where financial backers, whether they are close friends or Internet strangers, can contribute to causes. In the case of Marcelin's campaign, the collected funds fell short of the \$400,000 goal, but 11,000 people donated, 42,000 individuals shared the crowdfunding page via Facebook and Twitter, and over \$340,000 was raised for Brown's family (see Figure 1). The campaign accrued more donations as Ferguson entered the national consciousness through news reports and activist movements, although legal aid campaigns for Darren Wilson, Brown's killer, raised even

greater sums of money before they were removed from GoFundMe (Pearce, 2014).

Ferguson sparked a wave of protests in the United States and catalyzed national awareness of movements like Black Lives Matter. First created and employed by queer women of color activists in 2013, Black Lives Matter began as a hashtag on Twitter and social media use has been one ongoing organizing strategy within the movement (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Garza, 2014; Lindsey, 2015). As in the case of Michael Brown, supporters have circulated crowdfunded funeral and memorial campaigns on social media in the wake of other police shootings. Black Lives Matter has, thus, made the political potential of crowdfunded funerals especially visible. Circulating financial and emotional support through social media platforms is seen to provide dignity in death for those whose lives were taken by a system that devalues them.

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Figure 1. Screenshot of Michael Brown Memorial Fund.

Christina Sharpe (2014) describes “wake work” as a process of mourning and remembering the dead in a racist world that is still negotiating the afterlives of slavery (p. 60). Crowdfunding funerals may constitute one iteration of wake work, as loved ones circulate narratives and images in order to seek compassion and, along with it, the requisite capital to bury the dead.

Still, some ethical questions are raised by crowdfunded funerals, where corporate platform owners profit from heartache and tragedy. For instance, GoFundMe takes 5% of every donation it receives (Han, 2015). Money for funerals and memorial services is raised on general crowdfunding platforms like DonationTo, IndieGogo, YouCaring, and GoFundMe, as well as funeral-specific companies like FuneralFund and GracefulGoodbye. It is difficult to verify where money raised by such campaigns goes, since sites like GoFundMe do not investigate cases of potential fraud (Han, 2015). While Michael Brown’s family was, indeed, connected to the crowdfunding campaign mentioned above, there were 19 separate crowdfunding campaigns for Eric Garner’s family when he was killed by a police officer’s chokehold in July 2014. Despite widespread charitable interest and the backing of a strong political movement, the Garner family has yet to see any of the money donated to them (RT, 2015). These infamous cases lay bare the complexities embedded in crowdfunding platforms.

This article aims to show how funerary crowdfunding practices rely on circulated affect and compassion, while also reproducing structural inequalities. Discussions of inequality are not often the focus of studies pertaining to digital mourning and memorialization rituals. The more utopian yearnings of the sharing economy, that is, the belief that they are democratic platforms open to everyone, are muddled by uneven access to them. If the treatment of the dead, or “mortuary politics,” is revealing of cultural values (Brown, 2008, p. 5), then the varied successes and failures of crowdfunded funeral campaigns could demonstrate how the lives of some individuals and groups are deemed more valuable than others.

This article seeks to answer the following research questions: How are affect and compassion strategically circulated on crowdfunding platforms? What do emerging digital mourning practices reveal about precarity and structural inequalities in broader online cultures?

Although memorial services commemorate one person’s life, crowdfunding funerals turn the accumulation of the necessary funds into a collective, collaborative effort. If individuals cannot pay for their own burials, then costs are typically deferred to loved ones or to compassionate volunteers. While churches or other social organizations also take up charitable collections for impoverished neighbors’ funerals and entire communities provide food, music, or emotional support, and engage in other forms of public mourning (Holloway, 2002), crowdfunding platforms can now act as middlemen and profit from donations. Family members make emotional appeals to their social networks and an imagined online audience, relying on such attention to gather enough money to bury their loved ones in a way they deem acceptable.

First, I outline my methods and contextualize crowdfunding as a socio-digital phenomenon. Then I describe the ways that crowdfunded funerals relate to other online mourning practices. Next, I describe the politics of the circulation of affect in crowdfunded funeral campaigns. I then show how compassion is a form of affective currency within crowdfunding practices and go on to argue that the notion of the digital commons ignores structural inequalities and others forms of precarity. Finally, I summarize my findings.

Methods

This study builds on other ethnographic and theoretical analyses of digital death and mourning practices (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Carroll & Landry, 2010; Karppi, 2013; Lagerkvist, 2016; Leaver, 2013), as well as on scholarship on the digital-sharing economy (Irani, 2015; John, 2017; Kittur et al., 2013; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). While scholars are beginning to study the use of crowdfunding platforms in healthcare and other facets of everyday life, crowdfunded funeral campaigns have received little to no attention in academic papers. This gap exists despite the fact that funeral campaigns are the fastest growing segment of crowdfunding campaigns (White, 2016). I am interested in how precarity and structural inequalities are reproduced by the digital sharing economy using the case of crowdfunded funerals as a point of analysis. Thus, this project bridges my interests in digital mortuary rituals and the care work needed to sustain digital afterlives (Kneese, 2016b; Kneese, 2017) and my previous work on emerging labor practices and the sharing economy (Kneese, 2016a; Kneese, Rosenblat, & boyd 2014).

Given the difficulty of studying an emerging cultural phenomenon, this study follows grounded theory as a guiding principle, acknowledging that anything, no matter how mundane or apparently transient, can potentially

be considered data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather than gathering data to fit a particular theoretical framework or initiating a qualitative study with an overt hypothesis in mind, grounded theory begins with “observations, interactions, and materials” relating to a topic (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). In the context of crowdfunded funerals, the specific interfaces and settings of crowdfunding platforms, news articles about crowdfunding practices, comments, and images posted by visitors to funerary crowdfunding campaign websites, and tweets or Facebook posts circulating the campaigns are all rich data sites, especially in aggregate.

Using content analysis, I examined public crowdfunding campaigns for funerals on general crowdfunding platforms (DonationTo, IndieGogo, YouCaring, and GoFundMe) and funeral-specific companies (FuneralFund and GracefulGoodbye). I visited the sites on a weekly basis from June 2014 until October 2014, marking the status of different campaigns.¹ I engaged in web ethnography, thickly describing individual pages in memos and taking screenshots while analyzing websites’ terms of service, instructions or tips for users, and layout and design. In this way, I rely on the established methods of digital anthropologists from Hine (2000) to Horst and Miller (2012). I gathered data from 50 campaigns to assess the language and images presented, as well as the nature of comments and responses posted. To more effectively understand how crowdfunding campaign initiators and commenters or potential donors circulate affect on these websites, I looked at the type of language and images they employed, coding them according to particular tropes. For example, many campaigns included childhood photographs of the deceased and featured the social media profiles of the campaign initiators. Along with conducting content analysis and qualitative interviews, I also closely monitored news stories regarding crowdfunded funerals from June 2014 to March 2016, tracking the kinds of language used to describe both crowdfunding platforms and the people who were using such platforms to pay for funerals and other burial rites.

In order to contextualize my online findings, I conducted preliminary qualitative interviews with individuals who initiated crowdfunding campaigns for funerals ($N=4$) and those who donated money to such campaigns or circulated them on social media ($N=6$) to better understand the sociocultural, political, and affective motivations behind online practices. Interview subjects were selected after responding to public posts on Facebook and Twitter. For the purposes of this article and to protect informants’ anonymity, I will focus on several key examples that are (1) public and covered by the news media and (2) especially relevant to my research questions. In conformance with standard social scientific research ethics, all of my interview subjects are referred to by pseudonyms and I have refrained from using any other identifying information.

This study is limited because of its reliance on public postings to crowdfunding websites and a small sample size.

Future researchers might engage in more extensive qualitative interviews and prolonged participant observation to investigate the ways that crowdfunded funeral campaigns intersect with actual burial and memorial services or other forms of online memorialization.

Inequality and Crowdwork

Articles in the popular press and Silicon Valley-based technologists connect terms like sharing, peer, or gig economy with utopian narratives about resurrecting collaboration, collectivism, or the equal access and distributed control of the commons through platforms, which allow peers to more directly exchange services. Individuals are told that they can become “micro-entrepreneurs” by renting out rooms in their apartments through Airbnb, getting coffee for their neighbors using TaskRabbit, or driving people to the airport via Lyft or Uber (Kessler, 2014).² In the eyes of sharing economy platform CEOs, individuals who start crowdfunding campaigns are entrepreneurs, using platforms to raise money for any kind of activity they desire. Crowdfunding is also linked to other forms of crowdwork. In addition to receiving money for piecemeal services or tasks, individuals may engage in crowdwork on websites like Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, CrowdTap, and Cloudcrowd in exchange for tokens or money (Sherman, 2011).

As highlighted by Tarleton Gillespie, the ambiguity of the term “platform” invokes entrepreneurialism and political empowerment, obfuscating the fact that companies like Facebook and YouTube wield great power and can influence legislation in order to advance their own interests (Gillespie, 2010). Structural inequalities are often perpetuated in these platforms, as shown in the case of the Uber enterprise, which does not grant employee status and benefits to its drivers, but nonetheless subjects them to algorithmic management (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). This kind of inequality also exists in the case of Amazon Mechanical Turk workers who are reviewed by requesters but unable to seek recourse (Irani, 2015), or in the context of Airbnb, where researchers have found that African-American hosts have a more difficult time attracting guests (Edelman & Luca, 2014). Oftentimes, crowdwork is nothing more than assembly line piecemeal in digital form. While global crowdwork can offer opportunities for social mobility, crowdworkers are subject to new forms of hierarchy and control (Kittur et al., 2013). Structural inequalities also persist within the apparently democratizing context of crowdfunding (Spencer, 2016). Although GoFundMe has been used to crowdfund medical costs, funerals, and even Darren Wilson’s legal fund, a crowdfunding campaign supporting a woman’s abortion procedure was removed from the site after right-wing protests (Farah, 2014).

As Nicholas John (2017) emphasizes in his recent book about the sharing economy, sites of resistance and altruism can overlap with online spaces associated with exploitation. Crowdfunding campaigns are both associated with the

sharing economy's more utopian connotations and connected to a crowd-based activity. Strangers and community members alike donate to causes in order to receive tokens like T-shirts and stickers or public recognition in exchange for giving money. Some individuals donate a dollar, while others give thousands. Micropayments allow anyone with extraneous resources to donate to causes. In theory, anyone can raise ample money to fund any imaginable cause.

Crowdfunding campaigns on popular websites like GoFundMe, Kickstarter, and Indiegogo raise money for a wide variety of issues. According to *Forbes*, crowdfunding platforms raised over \$5.1 billion in 2013 (Barnett, 2014). Crowdfunding campaigns cover every aspect of human life, including illness, reproduction, and even death. Users seek money to fund their video game ideas, honeymoons, or music albums. Other campaigns raise money for chemotherapy treatments or major surgeries not covered by health insurance. As with other aspects of the crowd-based or sharing economy, participants are seeking ways of coping with general scarcity, relying on third-party platforms and the notion of the collective to make up for inadequate social and economic resources.

Given the exorbitant cost of traditional funerals in the United States, some families use crowdfunding campaigns to cover funeral expenses. According to the National Funeral Directors Association, the median US funeral costs \$8,508 due to the high costs of corporatized funeral homes and expensive embalming practices (Mitford, 2000).³ As a result, families and communities use crowdfunding platforms to pay for their loved ones' burials and memorial services. This is especially common in instances where a person dies suddenly or accidentally, or when individuals are not covered by life insurance. On GoFundMe, "there are more than 22,000 open funeral, tribute and memorial campaigns, which have collectively raised \$40 million to date," while YouCaring reportedly has 30,000 open funeral campaigns (Kulp, 2014). Because of the pervasiveness of crowdfunded funerals, there are also several funeral-specific websites, including FuneralFund, I'mSorryToHear, and the short-lived GracefulGoodbye.

Mourning, Affect, and Social Media

The potentially public nature of social media memorials and their particular spatial, temporal, and networked affordances facilitate more widespread participation in mourning practices. Social networking memorials on sites like Facebook tend to be "dynamic and inclusive," as opposed to physical memorials or obituaries (Carroll & Landry, 2010, p. 348). Practices associated with social media platforms continue even after users' deaths (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011). Posters on MySpace memorials, for instance, address the dead directly (Dobler, 2009). On sites like Facebook, digital mourning practices become integrated with everyday public life (Brubaker et al., 2013). For individuals accustomed to interacting on social media platforms, mourning is yet

another facet of online experience. As crowdfunding websites have become mainstream, they too have been integrated into networked mourning and memorialization practices. Crowdfunded funeral campaigns allow disparately located family and friends, as well as acquaintances or Internet strangers, to contribute to a person's memorial fund, facilitating widespread, public participation.

General participation in mourning practices can lead to disagreements and other markers of difference. Alice Marwick and Nicole Ellison (2012) examined dedicated Facebook memorial pages rather than the memorialized profiles of dead users, finding that mourners negotiated with each other over how the dead should be remembered. Marwick and Ellison also remark on affect-based metrics: strangely enough, dead people's memorial pages often accrue "likes." To garner a large number of likes and other forms of attention is a calculus for popularity after death, as well as during life.

Social media metrics are useful to advertisers, corporations, and government agencies, but they also have affective value. Social networking websites rely on servers in order to collect vast amounts of data, while users engage in what Robert Gehl (2011, p. 1230) calls "affective processing." Social networking information is valuable long after a person dies, as profiles of dead individuals attract attention from other living users in a network (Karppi, 2013; Leaver, 2013). On social media websites, profit extraction and affective logics often collide. For example, Facebook uses "like" buttons, emoji, and targeted algorithms in order to gauge users' emotional responses to the specific content. More active, engaged users yield greater advertising revenue for the company, and so encouraging mourners to revisit the pages of the dead is a business strategy.

These logics are also evident in crowdfunding campaigns, which can be employed to raise money for burials or memorial services. Social media memorials are sometimes public, but may also be visible only to established networks, that is, Facebook friends. By contrast, crowdfunded funeral campaigns are *intentionally* public, as their main objective is to raise money and tangible support for the loved ones of the deceased. Crowdfunding is a particularly compelling example of what Nancy Baym and danah boyd (2012, p. 320) refer to as "socially mediated publicness," in that campaigns require the creators to take into account the specific mechanisms of the platform, an imagined audience, and social contexts. Practical knowledge of social media practices and other forms of online or marketing savvy are applicable to crowdfunded funerals, where the creators of campaigns must employ learned skills and circulate affect in order to be successful.

Digital mourning practices and burial rituals often blend together in contemporary funerals. Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter (2014) and Meese et al. (2015) have pointed to the ways that online forms of mourning now intersect with material funerary practices using funeral selfies as

one example. Crowdfunding campaigns for funerals do not just relate to memorialization practices but they are also associated with social and cultural practices of handling the dead body itself.

Crowdfunded funerals are a recent phenomenon, and academics are just beginning to study crowd-based care. Lauren Berliner and Nora Kenworthy (2017) have written about the ways that crowdfunding is used to overcome structural gaps in healthcare and deficiencies in the Affordable Care Act. Individuals must prove that their illnesses and lives are worthy of receiving aid.⁴ Their critiques about access are especially relevant amidst fears of cuts to the Affordable Care Act. The sharing economy is assumed to be democratic and open to all individuals, but the discrepancies between different crowdfunding campaigns indicate that this is not the case. This article seeks to contribute to this new and growing area of interest, offering a critical angle on the digital sharing economy as it specifically relates to mortuary rituals.

The Politics and Work of Circulating Affect

Crowdfunded funeral campaigns are sometimes directly related to political causes. In one example, a baby who was famously photographed dressed like former Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Hundreds of online supporters contributed money to pay for his burial. The GoFundMe campaign accumulated \$25,000 within 6 days, outmatching the original \$16,000 goal. In a note, the Lomas family refers to “#Berniebaby” (Lomas, 2016). This hashtag, along with the popularity of Bernie Sanders as a political figure, may have helped the campaign spread over social media. Images and discourses associated with the dead may, indeed, take on emotionally tinged, political meanings, constituting an “active mode of communication and ritual communion” (Gyori, 2013, p. 487).

David Joseph, an African-American high school student in Austin, Texas, was shot and killed by the police. Through the national discourse afforded by movements like Black Lives Matter, Joseph’s death is connected to the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, as well as to a string of similar incidents. A GoFundMe page intended to raise money for his burial features images of Joseph in his football uniform and other photographs of him relaxing with friends. The family friend who started the campaign states that “for [David Joseph] to be shot down unarmed & unclothed was unnecessary so at this time we are all just asking for help in any way to help fund with all funeral & medical costs” (Morales, 2016). While some donors evidently know the family, others more broadly link Joseph to the deaths of other young African-American men while offering emotional support. One woman says, “David could have been my son. I’m so sad and angry that this keeps happening (hugs)” (Morales, 2016). The campaign has not reached its \$20,000 goal.

Despite the fact that the media covered Joseph’s story, his death did not receive the same amount of attention as others. This might have contributed to his funeral fund being less successful.

Whitney lives in Austin and heard about Joseph’s death through Black Lives Matter, which she follows on Tumblr. Whitney decided to share the link on her Facebook page in order to attract additional support and funds and to spread information about the death of yet another young African-American man at the hands of the police. When interviewed about her crowdfunding activity, Whitney said that she posted whatever she could find about David Joseph with the intention of making her friends more aware of what was happening in “their own backyard,” even if they were more familiar with the stories of Eric Garner and Michael Brown. Whitney stated that if people purportedly back a cause, then they should “materially support it.” Whitney’s engagement with Joseph’s funeral fund was precipitated by her political engagement as well as her use of social media platforms. Similarly, another informant described the crowdfunding campaign initiated on behalf of Jamar Clarke, another young African-American killed by the police, in order to raise money for his tombstone in Minneapolis. Julia reasoned that many people wanted to share this campaign over social media as a “political act” because, as she asserted, “we don’t have justice and we also don’t have a tombstone.” Like Whitney, Julia viewed sharing the page, or circulating affect, as a political act. To donors, proper burial and memorialization are, thus, seen as a means of providing dignity in death.

Donors and Black Lives Matters supporters like Julia and Whitney, however, were uncertain if their money was being sent to family members of the deceased or if it was being used for other purposes. Whitney was skeptical of the campaign, which is not directly controlled by the Joseph family, and therefore did not donate. Rather than giving money, Whitney contributed by sharing the page on her personal Facebook page. Similarly, Julia also expressed skepticism about what was being done with Clarke’s memorial funds. Some donors were aggrieved that Black Lives Matter was using money to support ongoing protests, but that the tombstone was not yet erected in memory of Clarke. The stance of interviewed participants seems to suggest that unverified campaigns, or those that are not clearly tied to the kin members of the deceased, are less likely to raise money. Even so, just the act of sharing the pages on social media can make individuals feel more emotionally connected to a political cause. Circulating itself constitutes a display of solidarity.

Because of the importance of social media sharing or the possibility of going viral, a combination of emotionally evocative images and text helps campaigns meet or exceed their financial goals. Often, several color photographs of the deceased individual are included, featuring military members in uniform, families spending time together, and wedding or graduation celebrations. Various websites instruct potential users on how to start a crowdfunded funeral

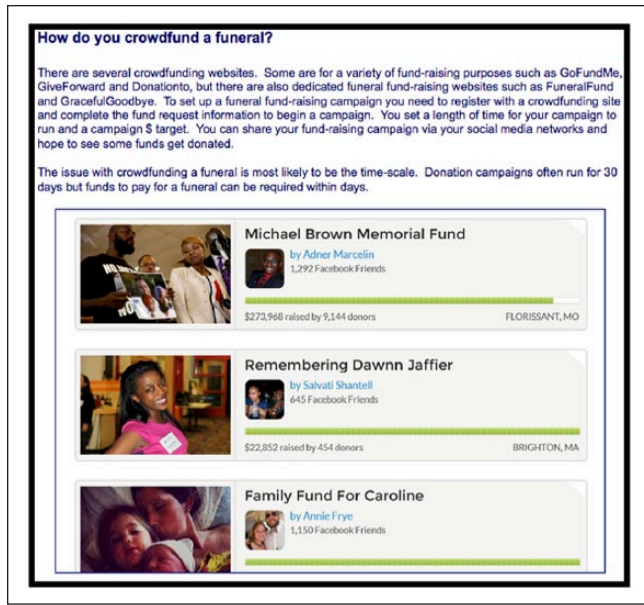


Figure 2. Sample crowdfunding funeral campaigns, including Michael Brown's, on US Funerals.com.

campaign, outlining the ways of making it successful while emphasizing its utilitarian, even ethical role. DonationTo is a general crowdfunding platform, but offers advice about how to raise money for funerals. It points to Matt Montgomery's memorial fund on its website. Montgomery died young and unexpectedly, so his family was unprepared to pay for his burial (DonationTo, 2014). DonationTo emphasizes how modest the family's campaign was, claiming that while funerals can cost over \$10,000, the Montgomery family only wanted to raise \$5,500. The focus on frugality and the absence of greed point to the importance of crowdfunded funerals' moral economy. Circulating emotionally evocative narratives is a critical part of attracting donors, but crowdfunding platforms downplay the role of money itself.

Still, there is a strong link between popularity metrics and donations. US Funerals have a crowdfunding information webpage, featuring Michael Brown's campaign as an example of a successful campaign (Marsden, 2014). Note that the image accompanying the crowdfunded funeral how-to features flourishing campaigns that raised tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars (see Figure 2). Another aspect of these featured campaigns is the notably high numbers of Facebook friends listed for each of the campaign initiators. The viability of a crowdfunded funeral campaign is reliant not only on the narrative about the recently deceased person but also on the recognizability, popularity, and verifiability of the campaign initiator. Having a lot of friends or being connected to a social or political movement correlates to a campaign's monetary success.

Crowdfunding websites emphasize the affective potential of crowdfunded funeral campaigns. DonationTo notes the geographic dispersal of families, stating that disparately

located family members may not be able to even attend a funeral. Instead, far-flung relatives can feel that they are offering support by donating money via DonationTo's online platform (DonationTo, 2014). Social networks can also bolster support through financial donations. One informant, Megan, reinforced this point while describing the fund raised on behalf of a young man who died of cancer, leaving behind three young daughters and a wife. Megan donated to the campaign on Facebook and also shared it because, as she stated during our interview, "if you can't go to the funeral, it feels like it's important to do something."

Aside from the financial necessity of using crowdfunding platforms to pay for funerals, DonationTo also highlights the community-bolstering affective bonds facilitated by the comments section. Not only do grieving family members raise money to pay for their loved one's funeral but they also receive supportive comments from donors. DonationTo has a section called "The Importance of Kind Comments," telling users that the kind words help lessen the emotional toll of losing a loved one. They serve another purpose as well: "Comments can also be used to help rally support from other potential donors" (DonationTo, 2014). Receiving comments from donors has both emotional and monetary value, in that attracting attention leads to more potential donations. Circulating compassion is, in this way, just as important to a campaign's success as the giving of actual money.

Crowdfunding a funeral is contingent upon the circulation of links, images, and narratives; the sharing of resources; as well as the production of affective bonds. Looking and reading are, indeed, forms of affective labor, directly contributing to the flow of capital. Jodi Dean (2010) claims that blogs are inherently tied to both affective and economic flows, constituting a form of "communicative capitalism" (p. 53). Those donors who contribute to a campaign's success therefore engage in a type of crowdwork. Jonathan Beller (2006) depicts the attention economy as an environment where spectators are drawn into the machinations of global capitalism so that "to look is to labor" (p. 2). Even those who merely click on and view campaigns, and those who take the time to read the narratives or associated comments, are performing acts of labor. Campaign creators perform a similar labor in their choice of the right image that will ensure a campaign's broad appeal. In order to attract attention and garner donations, crowdfunding campaigns circulate both appealing visuals and compelling narratives. In one highly successful campaign that raised far more money than originally requested, two young sisters highlight their mother's beauty and strength as a fighter against cancer, including an artful YouTube music video of themselves with their mother. Rhetorical as well as technological skill is required in order to create a successful crowdfunding campaign, especially for a cause as intensely personal as burial rites.

Crowdfunded funerals are, thus, connected to a mode of capitalism based not just on attention but also on the production of "intimate publics" (Berlant, 2008, p. viii) and "ordinary

affects” (Stewart, 2007, p. 1). Crafting a successful crowdfunding campaign, particularly a campaign for something as possibly loaded as a funeral, requires finesse and, no doubt, a kind of calculated sincerity. The campaign usually displays images that are attractive or intriguing, but not too jarring or graphic. For instance, none of the campaigns examined in this study displayed photographs of injuries or death. Many campaigns for elderly individuals showed them as young people. The text accompanying the images should provoke an emotional response without giving way to melodrama or overt anger. Some campaigns obliquely refer to suicide or overdoses. One campaign referred to a motorcycle accident in passing, but did not provide explicit details. In another campaign, a man drowned while attempting to rescue children in a river, so this act of self-sacrifice was part of the narrative. To crowdfund a funeral is a balancing act, requiring individuals to garner enough interest while avoiding negative feelings inspired by violent or otherwise “bad” deaths. Initiators attempt to create affective connections between their personal stories and a broad Internet audience, circulating familiar elements of the ordinary or everyday to forge intimate bonds and new publics.

Crowdfunding Compassion

Affective or community-enhancing ties associated with crowdfunded funerals are intimately connected to crowd-based responsibility. In addition to the supposed entrepreneurialism offered by crowdwork, neoliberal logics emphasize the importance of volunteerism and charity. Paul England (2005) notes that care work has moved from the domain of women’s unpaid domestic and reproductive labor to a form of marginalized wage-based labor, subject to the whims of the market. Relational labor, however, can be paid or unpaid, mandatory or apparently voluntary, as it is defined by “ongoing communicative practices and skills of building and maintaining interpersonal and group relationships” (Baym, 2015). A culture of volunteerism compels strangers to assume these responsibilities without pay (Muehlebach, 2011). Other feminist affect and media theorists have noted how unpaid, often feminized reproductive labor persists in digital spaces (Duffy, 2016; Jarrett, 2014). Collaboration, love, and self-sacrifice are used as positive qualifiers for this kind of labor. However, crowdfunding campaign recipients often temper their requests for money. In one financially successful campaign, the initiator emphasized the voluntary nature of donating, not wishing to burden those without extra resources. In the post, the initiator asks, “Is it fair for us to ask other people on the internet to bear the burden of our problems?” and later says “Nobody owes us anything” (Emmanuel, 2013). She also emphatically thanks donors. Strangers on the Internet are not obligated to donate money or even their attention, but those who do show compassion through donating or even sharing receive an emotional outpouring of appreciation.

In the context of crowdfunding websites, sociality is employed to fill in the gaps created by vast economic inequalities and the depletion of social services. The community theoretically takes care of individuals who cannot fend for themselves, but this responsibility actually falls on the charitable individuals who perform this altruistic work or on the less fortunate individual who must perform relational labor in order to attract attention, sympathy, and money.

A similar sense of volunteerism and intimately public compassion is evident in the American context of crowdfunding campaigns for those who died controversial or violent deaths. In the spring of 2014, 15-year-old Jared Padgett shot and killed fellow Reynolds High School student Emilio Hoffman before killing himself. Katie, a 2009 graduate of Reynolds High School, started a crowdfunded funeral campaign for Padgett. After her friend started a GoFundMe campaign to help the Hoffman family cover Hoffman’s funeral expenses, Katie started a similar fund for the Padgett family. She set the original desired sum to \$4,000, but eventually received \$7,000 in donations (Hurst, 2014). The campaign’s website reads, “[w]e acknowledge that huge amounts of terror, anger, and even hatred can come from a tragedy like yesterday’s. But given the choice, we would rather respond with compassion than with more hatred” (Evans, 2014). Instead of a picture of Jared Padgett, a Henry Beecher Ward quote in large font sits in the center of the page: “Compassion will cure more sins than condemnation” (see Figure 3). Padgett himself is more or less absent from the narrative, but Katie focuses on the importance of compassion for Padgett’s family members, who are in no position to start such a fund themselves.

In the context of this crowdfunding campaign, Katie performed relational labor. Not only did she put effort into creating the page but she also fielded comments from the public. Katie pledged that she “would police the forums and delete the nasty comments.” She deleted disparaging messages from community members who were upset that she was supporting a murderer’s funeral and from random Internet trolls. Even with less contentious online memorials, removing comments from trolls or other interlopers is an important task (Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Phillips, 2011). This case was especially public because journalists linked to the crowdfunding page when writing stories about the shooting, meaning that negative comments were common. But Katie had to address public comments, in general, as her name was directly associated with the campaign. The positive comments posted to the page, however, far outnumbered the negative ones, many of them directly praising Katie for her act of kindness. She also directly interacted with Troutdale community members and with the Padgett family. Katie spoke to Jared’s brother on the phone, and he was very appreciative because, as Katie told me during our interview, “he hadn’t expected anything other than hate.”

During our interview, Katie expressed ambivalence about her experience with crowdfunding Jared’s funeral. She stated

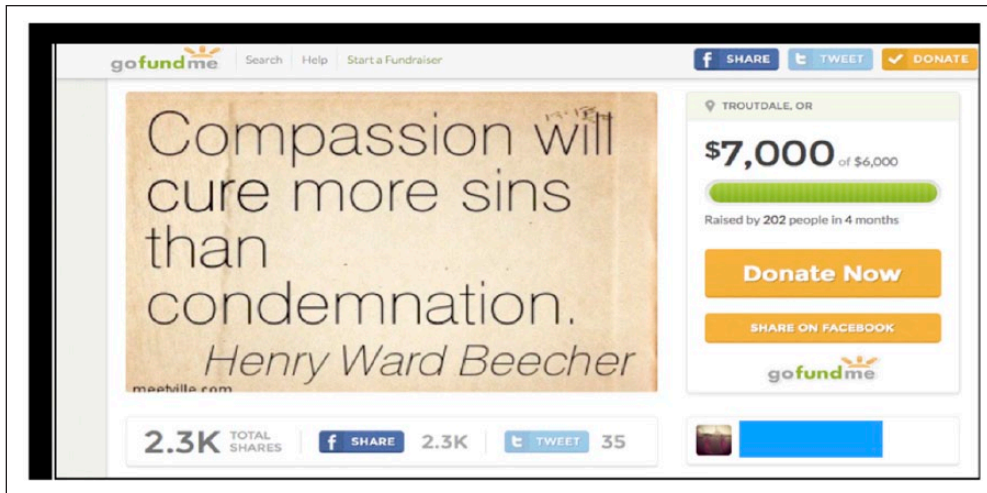


Figure 3. The GoFundMe page created on the behalf of the Padgett family.

that most donations came from members of the community, but that many of the donors did not personally know the Hoffman or Padgett families and some donations came from complete strangers. She said, “it was beautiful to see this community come together” in the face of tragedy. On the other hand, Katie questioned GoFundMe’s model, as they received a sizable percentage of the donations. While the individuals who donated to Jared’s family in order to fund his funeral did so for altruistic reasons, companies like GoFundMe obviously rely on this circulation of emotion and affect in order to profit.

Even in a volunteer-based system theoretically based on compassion, capitalist entities are present. The gift economy in non-capitalist, non-digital contexts also contains this relationship to power and hierarchy. Authority, difference, and social inequality are, thus, all entangled in gift-based systems of exchange (Munn, 1986; Weiner, 1992). Who is obligated or able to give, and who is deemed worthy of receiving, is dependent on power differentials intrinsic to the gift economy.

Although the very idea of the gift economy is based on structural inequalities and power relations, this does not mean that the affective outcomes of crowdfunded funerals are strictly dystopian in nature. Crowdfunding is based on the notion of networked responsibility, although it is inflected by neoliberal logics of volunteerism and used as a way of extracting profit from third-party platforms. Social relations and solidarity may result from these exchanges. Within the neoliberal appropriation of collectivity, where communities come together to fund what should be basic human dignities, such as medical procedures, cancer treatments, or meaningful burial, there remains a more utopian potentiality. As Katie’s story reveals, crowdfunding campaigns can bring people together through the circulation of positive affect, even as they superficially bridge the gaps created by vast economic and social inequalities.

The more pressing issue is that individuals who perceive themselves as disembedded, charitable citizens may ignore the broader systemic problems inherent to late capitalism. For example, one participant, Tina, noted that “people want to feel altruistic and donate money for poor people to be buried.” But she said that sometimes this backfires:

One couple was on social security and the wife couldn’t pay the funeral expenses. People saw the story on the news and suddenly the wife has 10,000 dollars in assets and she lost her Medicaid and disability because she has this money.

What was donated in good faith as a gift became a liability, calling into question this model of altruistic crowdfunding. It also sets a precedent for crowdfunding taking the place for a formal social safety net, where individuals ask the Internet to compassionately donate attention and money to their chemo treatments or loved one’s burial, but unsuccessful campaigns slip through the cracks. Tina also related the story of a large funeral home company, which started a crowdfunding campaign for those who died in a local landslide. She lamented the fact that donors had no way of knowing where the money went or how it was used. As shown by this and previous examples, it is possible that people’s emotional connection to stories, their compassion, and their desire to be charitable will be exploited unless adequate monitoring and accountability controls are embedded in digital platforms for crowdfunding.

Precarity in the Digital Commons

The notion of the commons is related to equal access and distributed control. Historically, the commons referred to things necessary for survival, such as air, soil, or water, and can be expanded to include social relations and cultural phenomena (Hardt & Negri, 2009). Some scholars have argued that the dynamic, interactive Web, or Web 2.0, has democratic

potential, allowing for a kind of digital commons (Kelty, 2008; Shirky, 2008). Digital forms of collaboration, however, do not necessarily guarantee universal access or equality; Airbnb and other profit-driven companies are not in the same category as actually collaborative, anti-capitalist endeavors like (Scholz, 2014; Federici & De Moore, 2014). Even in collaborative spaces, unequal access to the digital commons is exemplified by the gender bias and harassment reported by female Wikipedia editors (Paling, 2015).

In the world of crowdfunding as in the general sharing economy, some people are more equal than others. Elizabeth Heideman (2014) notes how companies like Uber and Airbnb are not designed with disabled individuals in mind. Cars for Lyft and Uber may not be wheelchair accessible, while Airbnb has made it extremely difficult to locate wheelchair accessible apartments. Airbnb's website is also incompatible with Internet-reading software for the blind. In practice, the sharing economy is not part of the digital commons because it is not equally open to all.

Likewise, crowdfunded funerals are not possibilities for everyone. Whose campaigns are successful and whose go unfunded? Researchers have found that crowdfunding campaigns are most lucrative when the subjects are young, white, and attractive (Jenq, Pan, & Theseira, 2015). For those who are not in this category, it may be harder to raise sufficient funds. In one example, Nick Davis, a 23-year-old mentally ill homeless man, was shot and killed by the Portland, Oregon police in June 2014. Davis' friends attempted to raise money for his funeral on GoFundMe (Mental Health Association of Portland, 2014). This story was complicated, however, because Davis' death was allegedly the result of an altercation with police. According to Davis' friend who initiated the GoFundMe campaign on his behalf, Davis had recently purchased a bicycle without realizing it was stolen. When the bike's original owner approached him, they got into a fight. The GoFundMe page for Nick Davis still exists, but it never reached its funding goal (see Figure 4). Despite local news coverage of the story and information spread on blogs and Twitter, merely 10 people donated to the campaign in 4 months. It ultimately raised only \$195 out of the desired \$1,500. Davis was stigmatized in the local mainstream media as violent and mentally unstable, as well as by his characterization as homeless. As a result of this confluence of factors, Davis' memorial fund was unsuccessful.

Those who are most marginal in society are the least likely to attract sufficient compassion and are therefore likely to have failed crowdfunding campaigns. According to US Funerals.com, the "most effective campaigns are those where a sudden or unexpected death has occurred, however, the death of an elderly person does not prompt such an outpouring of empathy and financial support" (Marsden, 2014). Not only is it considered less tragic if an older person dies but also the elderly are expected to have made their own funeral arrangements or to have their burials covered by life insurance policies. This is reflected in the author's perusal

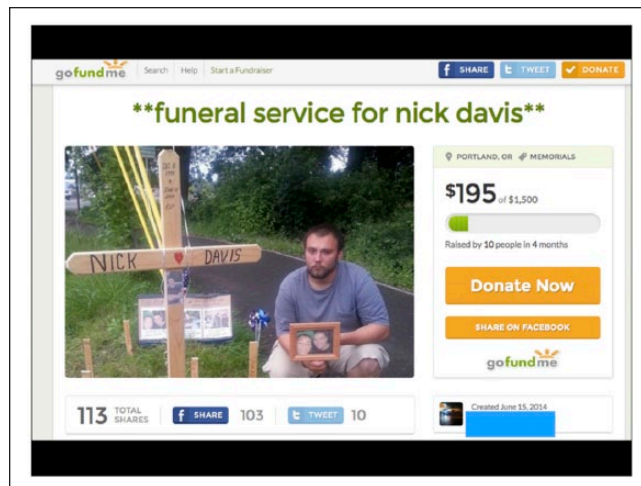


Figure 4. Screenshot of GoFundMe campaign for Nick Davis's funeral service.

of currently open crowdfunded funeral campaigns, particularly those about to end. Of 20 FuneralFund campaigns that are close to ending without reaching their funding goals, 13 of them are for senior citizens. For instance, one man is described as a beloved grandfather, but his campaign was only 1% funded with two donors, despite having been viewed 242 times. While some individuals' stories attract hundreds of donors and inspire thousands of shares over social media, many more people's stories go unnoticed and are eventually forgotten.

Judith Butler's (2004) assessment of precarity's relationship to grief is salient: "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life?*" (p. 20). While general precarity necessitates the existence of social obligations and structures, some lives will always be more precarious than others. In the context of crowdfunded funerals, those who are the most marginalized are the least likely to receive the support their families need. Scarcity and precarity may continue even after death. As this study found, crowdfunded funeral campaigns highlighted by the media often meet their goals, but there are many unsuccessful campaigns, especially for those who are elderly, disabled, or who die violently.

Conclusion

Crowdfunded funerals show how structural inequalities can be reproduced by sharing economy platforms and their related cultural practices. While crowdfunded funerals provide grieving kin members with a means of paying for mortuary rites without incurring debt, popularity metrics on social media determine whether a campaign meets its financial goals or whether it fails. Emotionally tinged narratives and images compel charitable individuals to donate money and attention to campaigns. Media coverage and political

movements can bolster the profile of individual campaigns and yield more donations through the circulation of affect, but unverified campaigns or those belonging to marginal populations are often unsuccessful. While the sharing economy is supposedly open to everyone and constitutes a kind of digital commons, crowdfunded funeral practices indicate that this is not universally true.

On one hand, stories on crowdfunded funeral websites are telling examples of the failures of late capitalism, as those who are without economic and social resources face scarcity in life as well as in death. On the other hand, crowdfunding may foster community bonding or political solidarity, as proper burial is a way of showing respect for the dead. In a time of general austerity, crowdfunded funerals expose the centrality of social networks, including those enhanced by social media platforms, mourning practices, and affective labor, to contemporary North American life.

Numerous studies have examined online mourning and memorialization practices, but scholars have not spent as much time looking at mortuary rituals and burial rites. Crowdfunded funerals are part of digital mourning and memorialization practices, and they also directly impact the treatment of the dead body itself. Funerary crowdfunding campaigns raise money for memorial services, burials, and tombstones. In assessing the perpetuation of structural inequalities in crowdfunded funeral campaigns, this study shows how precarity in life often translates into precarity after death.

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Notes

1. When I started this research project as a dissertation side venture in the summer of 2014, Black Lives Matter (BLM) had not yet become part of the national discourse in the United States. In the course of writing and editing this article, BLM took on an increasingly central role as interview subjects repeatedly referred to the movement.
2. In her 2014 *Fast Company* article on the digital sharing economy, Sarah Kessler quotes Brian Chesky, the CEO and co-founder of Airbnb, who claims that he wants to “live in a world where people can become entrepreneurs or micro-entrepreneurs.”

3. The most recent statistics from the NFDA show the median price of a funeral at \$8,508 with the price of a vault included. More information can be found on their website: <http://www.nfda.org/news/statistics>.
4. Berliner and Kenworthy organized a 2016 University of Washington symposium called “Crowdsourcing Care: Health, Debility, and Dying in a Digital Age,” which addressed the ways that affective labor, inequalities, and neoliberal values are embedded in crowdfunding and other forms of crowdsourcing used to manage individuals’ health and wellbeing.

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