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## **Personal blogs and mourning: the writing of Self on the Net as a support network in situations of help**

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**Abstract.** The paper propose the results of a wider research about the use of the Net in the Process of mourning, with a specific focus on personal weblogs. The conceptual frame is the narrative one. I starts my research considering the Net a meta-narrative medium, made up of the contributions of all the surfers. I analysed 10 virtual journal where the main content is the bereavement and the memory of the beloved. Through the narrative content analysis and the interviews conducted with the authors, It was possible to show the characteristics of the management, the practices of use and the functions of these virtual interactive environments.

**Keywords** on-line ethnography, mourning, Internet, weblogs, self-narrative

### **1. Interwoven stories for a single Net-plot**

In the following pages I present some results of a broader study aimed at investigating the forms of sharing experiences of loss through the Net. In this paper, I focus my attention on practices of use and functions that the act of writing about Self and about personal experience of mourning<sup>2</sup> has when it is done on personal blogs<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> More specifications on the argument of loss and its psychological implications are proposed by Cazzaniga E., Marchesi G.C. (a cura di), 2004, *Isole di differenza: le dimensioni del lutto*, Edizioni AMA Lombardia, Milano. About the anthropological aspects i suggest Gorer G., 1965, The pornography of death, in Gorer G., Death,

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But before presenting the results I would argue on two themes that are the conceptual frame of the research: the blog<sup>2</sup> as personal narrative space and as well as a public one; the importance of writing of Self in situations of suffering .

The definition of Internet that I support is proposed by De Carli (1996) that defines the Web as a meta-narrative context that hosts and makes stories – posts - interconnected. Therefore, my starting position is that the Net is a relational space focused on the exchange of narrative fragments, more or less personal, that can give information and identity's tracks of the author.

The case of blogs makes it more obvious thanks to the analogy, emphasized since the early studies on them, with personal journals.

In fact, like in personal Journals you can write down thoughts and events, day by day, instants by instants, track them down and browse the posts following a backward order than the publication. Unlike them, however, the weblogs define a private space within a public dimension and, in this way, with the necessary implications and possible restrictions, they imply more clearly the “presence” of the potential reader.

All typologies of autobiographical writing, in fact, "search for others" (Demetrio, 2000, p. 25), in the sense that there is always, implicitly, in the text an hypothetical referent, even when he/she coincides with the author - in the role of reader. This aspect is more evident in personal blogs, where the act of pressing the editing button establishes the "publicity" of the content, just wrote down.

So, starting from these points, the weblog is, on one hand, more private and author-centric than other *user generated spaces*; but, on

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grief and mourning, Doubleday, New York, 1965 and Vovelle M.(2000), *La morte e l'Occidente : dal 1300 ai giorni nostri* , GLF Editori Laterza, Bari.

<sup>1</sup> The definition of “personal blog” I used for my research is that proposed by Di Fraia (2007) “blogs that are above introspective and close to the personal journal” (p.34)

<sup>2</sup> In order to deepen this argument, I suggest the paper of Schmidt J. (2007), *Blogging practices: an analytical framework*, Journal of Computer and Mediated Communication, vol 12 del 2007, pp. 1409-1427.

So, starting from these points, the weblog is, on one hand, more private and author-centric than other *user generated spaces*; but, on the other hand, like many other contexts inhabited the Net (Meistrello, 2007), blogs have a public dimension which even the smallest and most scattered of bloggers must deal with. This aspect leads me to highlight two important elements: the writing of Self and identity implications of that; and the act of sharing this content with the rest of the Net.

I agree with those who define blogs as personal “psycho-technologic environments (De Kerkhove, 1999) with a high value of identity contents, digitized protrusions of the psychological processes through which each human being constantly produces and reproduces his own identity” (Di Fraia, 2007, p.36).

The phenomenon of personal blogs, in this way, would work against the process of *nothing*-fication of individual biographies, underlined by Demetrio (2003). At the same time, it would contribute to the discovery of a new relationship between the author and the writing of Self, that is the process of reorganization and analysis of personal experiences that is part of autobiographical writing (among other Olagnero, xxxx).

There isn't the space to deepen each of these issues. Here I would emphasize that the mechanism of writing about the Self becomes essential in coping traumatic experiences or painful ones, such as the bereavement. The moment of facing the grief and the suffering feelings is essential, or rather “existential” – in order to save the existence of the survivor - and writing down about personal emotions is certainly one of the possible routes to follow in this situation.

In the case of personal blogs, the publication of contents “exposes” (Di Fraia, 2007) the personal story to the gaze of the readers, that can be known, unknown, coincident with author or in any other “shape”.

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Unlike the witness<sup>1</sup>(Jedlowski, 2000) of the classic autobiographies, the reader can participate in the story by writing down comments or by leaving a track of his/her passage.

By this interweaving of personal stories – the author's one with other bloggers or with the commentators -, it is possible to discover the mesh of the Net. In the next few pages I try to focus on the practice of story-telling about Self and on the act of sharing them in the specific circumstances of mourning.

## **2. Personal journals and experiences of loss: uses, practices and functions**

The research provided qualitative analysis of 10 personal blogs about the theme of mourning and the conduction of email interviews with the authors of the narratives<sup>2</sup>.

By the words of the interviewees and contents published on the Net, it was possible to reconstruct the practices of use of these spaces and, starting from them, the functions performed by the writing of Self in public, interactive virtual places like blogs.

About the practices of use of the blogs, the interviewees didn't underline any specific activities, that could be different from the normal actions of "taking care" of their digital space. Participation is often "focused" or concentrated in specific moments of day, when they can have time for themselves and for writing. In my opinion, this element seems to be specific of blog than other interactive environments – such as forums - where there is often a distributed participation throughout the day, by little incursions followed by the exit from the space without a real disconnection.

The time spent in reading of his/her own posts and the others' ones is an other discriminating element of the active "life in" a

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<sup>1</sup> The author uses the figure of witness proposed by Benjamin in Benjamin, W. (1962), *Il narratore. Considerazioni sull'opera di Nicola Leskov*, in Angelus Novus, Einaudi, Milano, pp.347-367.

<sup>2</sup> Nota metodologica

personal blog. The author of this specific virtual journals tends to spend few time in reading posts and he/she focus his/her attention on writing, especially in the first step. This behavior emphasizes the focus on the Self of the posts on personal blogs about mourning.

The description of the practices of uses is strictly connected with the management of the time dedicated to the digital journal. By the description of our respondents and by the content analysis, I identified a "parabolic" trend in the usage of this virtual environment. The opening of space and a first setting step are followed by a frenetic sequence of publications until when, after a sudden increase in activity, the author proceeds towards a reduction of its digital presence on the blog.

Not all journals were created in coincide with the experience of loss<sup>1</sup>.

As the "birth of the blog" can have different "origins", also the end of its story can follow different directions. In the case of blogs analysed, in fact, there were various forms of "conclusions" of the personal blog:

1. the closure of the space: there can be different reasons for this action. I suppose that the deletion could be a form of overcoming or simply a permanent removal: a symbolic gesture of coping and "storing" a painful past. In this sense, this act can be considered also as a sign of a rediscovery of desires and projects for the future. But sometimes, the cancellation - such as for one respondent of mine - may be due to excessive "invasion" of the space by the undesired guests. I interpret this behavior as an act of repudiation of a place that was, before, an extension of the author, as some of the interviewees said. It is like a sign of misappropriation that can be followed by the "moving" in an other place, not yet chosen;

2. the occasional visit / abandonment: the blog becomes a space of memory, the eternal memory of the beloved, but paid

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in some blogs analyzed the author at first tells about her everyday life and about the pregnancy, and only after the abort, the blog becomes the instrument to pour out the suffer for the loss of her baby.

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its educational and caring functions, it merely fulfills the role of crystallized memory in bits (Demetrio, 2003), "the blog was naturally inspired, writing rarely post nearer to press communication than life story fragments." (FP);

3. The change of topic of the blog: It seems the normal evolution of those journals that existed before the experience of mourning. The author converted normally the main theme in other contents, following the developments and implications of "unique" narratives of his/her life.

Regarding the second aspect of the analysis, I have identified four functions that a blog has for its author and which are located along a hypothetical continuum that ranges from private to public use of the Net and above all of the virtual journals: the containing, the therapeutic, the sharing and the memory functions.

The blog is primarily the space of writing about Self: it is an intimate and private context that it is opened in order to accept his/her story and nothing else.

In this way, if the blog, at the first instance, is a container of thoughts, by the act of writing and consequently of reading, it offers the possibility of a path of self-analysis with therapeutic effects, above all in the peculiar circumstances of mourning.

However, publishing means that the contents will be shared or simply shareable with other net-users, that give a sign of their presence through the comments or simply leaving a track readable by widespread programs of tracking<sup>1</sup>.

In my opinion, the concept of "presence" even if on the Net – virtually - has a dual anthropological value. On one hand, writing and publishing are a surrogate for the digital presence (La Cecla, 2007) of the author who, more aware of the finitude of life, meets the need to assert his/her existence: he/she rediscovers to be alive and it is fundamental to come back to the daily routine life. On the other hand, the personal narratives, hosted on the blogs, are focusing on life stories

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to specify that the presence of the readers is considered by the interviewees as secondary element, especially at a first step. The reader is defined as "an unexpected presence" only in a second step also "welcome".

that intercept also the experiences and, in general, the life of the beloved: in this way, the blog becomes a way to attest his/her existence, even if in the past time.

This leads us to define the role of witness, proposed in the previous paragraph, and in this case performed by the reader; at the same time it is going to introduce the fourth function - the most public one – that is the memory function.

In fact, in the posts is evident the need of making eternal the memory of the beloved as well as the desire of making present the relation with the deceased, make it “actual” in order to bridge with the lost temporality:

«Firstly, the blog had been for him a way to continue to talk with others; then it became a way for me and him to start a" new "dialog and thus a way to open our communication to the Universe: in other words, it is relation that is renewed every day, in order to transform the past time, identified with the death, in a project oriented toward the present and the future, in an *unicum*, to give me the opportunity to live a vertical life that may be experienced in the miracle of being, in order to continue to be » (Mom Gio) .

It is very common finding posts where the use of the second person is a way to talk to the beloved. I defined this form of communication “dialogic monologue” because the formal structure of the post is similar to a dialogue, but it is inevitably a conversation without the referent.

I would return to the role of the readers. I suggest that the signs of their presence, hoped but not expected at all, further remark the sense of the gratuity of the writing act. The lure, the stroke, the sign of attention by leaving a comment are the expression of the spontaneous gift offered by a digital *flaneur* (Aime, Cosetta, 2009; Dei, 2008).

The balance between personal outpourings and the presence of the others leads the authors to perceive the blog as intimate, protected and trusted space where disclosing the Self. This is more significant if we consider that the respondents don't talk about the blog to known people – often only at first, sometimes during all the time spent in writing on the blog . It is clearly a way to protect the intimacy and the



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privacy of their own pain by the glance of those who seemed not to understand.

The author doesn't talk to a specific referent because primary aim is not to be listened but to «spit out what you have inside». But "the idea of the other" is also crucial. It is important that there is someone, today, tomorrow, in the distant future, that is able to receive the story of pain and love of the blogger. I suggest that this is an important element that drives the choice of the blog as a tool for processing the bereavement, than other interactive channels present on the Net. In fact, «in the psycho-technologic and relational space of the blog, the presence of the other represents a constitutive and structural factor inscribed in the genetic source of what, even if used as a journal, remains, however, a communicative and sharing medium». (Di Fraia, 2007, p. 96).

So, the research seems to confirm that the blog is a semi-intimate space where to express themselves and to expose themselves, more or less consciously, toward the glance of the others.

### 3. The virtual journal as a real support?

Through this short dissertation about some results of a wider research, I have tried to highlight some characteristics of a process little studied: the process of mourning through and in personal blogs. Although there are already researches about the Self-help online groups<sup>1</sup> and other studies focused on practice of structured therapeutic uses of the web in situations of suffer<sup>2</sup>, there aren't contributions focused on the attempt to describe and to interpret the "spontaneous"

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<sup>1</sup> An exaple is the study of Pitt V. (2004), *Illness and Internet empowerment: writing and reading breast cancer in cyberspace*, Healt, Londono, vol 8 n. 33, 2004, pp. 33-59.

<sup>2</sup> It is the case of the study of Wagner B. (2005), *Internet-based tratment for complicated grief: concepts and case study*, Journal of loss and Trauma, vol 10 del 2005, pp. 409-432. In this paper is presented the method called "interapy".

practice - outside of an organized and structured context- about the mourning through the Internet.

I would conclude the article with a focus on the powerful aspects and the critical ones, of these interactive contexts.

Internet «certainly offers the opportunity to write and to comment at any time, but this aspect alone it is not enough, it isn't like a personal journal. It is important that someone can listen you and can answer: it express a deep need of being listened» (Marida).

We have often marked the role of writing, in itself, as a therapeutic moment. The secondary orality (Ong, 1982), that characterizes the Net, is an important resource because it puts together the "power" of verbal outpourings and the "sedimentation" of thoughts, typical of the writing action. Writing on the blogs is not simply a way to report thoughts on paper. The web allows the authors to share, delete, edit, re-edit, correct, work on them more than you can do on a sheet by the pen: «writing on paper is uncomfortable, is good for notes; pressing the keys on the computer boards allows you to "spit" out thoughts quickly, from the stomach to the paper; then to give time to your brain to review, rethink and possibly delete exaggeration, or things that you don't really think, but, that are thrown out; all of this stuff without necessarily having to use rubber or whitebait» (FP).

Writing inevitably defines a broader level of reflection than that is created by a conversation face to face. The opportunity to type, go back, work on the text, delete, rewrite are aspects that in my opinion contribute to the metabolism of the experience of pain, "the facility of access is an advantage; the anonymity is another possible plus, if you do not like face to face; for those who talk. *slowly, with reflection and consideration, is the perfect tool (...)*; it is good for those who want a place where "throw" thoughts and reflections during the day" (Lorenza).

I was surprised - and perhaps it was the aspect that touch me more - to discover that the protection of the screen constitutes a valuable opportunity especially when people need to express a big suffer. Becoming invisible, protected by the monitor of a PC, and able to communicate by writing may be crucial factors in the ability to

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disclose the Self to others and freely vent, "another great advantage for me is the opportunity to" talk "even if I'm crying. I can't talk yet about Alice and my long suffering without crying, and since I cannot talk while I cry, if it happens in a conversation with some friends, I have to conclude the dialogue, even when I need to continue it. On the Net it is not a problem, I can cry and at the same time I can say what I think. For me, it is really important "(Lucia).

These words indicate that "mediation" is not always a limit and the opportunity to use this channel can contribute to create an appropriate and more comfortable *setting* in the specific context of situation of help.

The e-mail interview with the respondents, however, was also focused on identification of critic aspects of this medium. In fact, they deals with constitutive elements that are typical of any virtual environment. But in this case, It is necessary to consider the sensitivity of the argument and the characteristics of the communication and the context that each author need to create in his/her own virtual space.

The main critique towards the medium is obviously concerning specular aspects to those just mentioned. There isn't a direct contact with his/her visitors, which sometimes it is a need for the author especially when he/she has extreme outpourings. But it is important to highlight that in the case of blog – that is, as I specified, above all a private experience – the first contact searched is with themselves.

Another negative aspect concerns the "depth of links" with the visitors or other bloggers. Blogs sometimes become the platform where to create personal relations beyond the Net. In other cases, however, the links get the impression to be strong on digital level but more delicate on the "real "one and, in this way, more exposed to the risk of rupture. The absence of non verbal and para linguistics signals may reduce the effectiveness of communication and augment the risk of misinterpretation; furthermore, it is obviously much easier to "liquidate" a virtual contact than a real one.

Finally, last point concerns the digital invasion. It can happen, as I mentioned before, that the blogger receives undesired visits from both known or unknown persons. In the first case, there is the risk of censure, confessed by some bloggers who had shared the link with

people known outside of the Net. The idea of being read by "certain" persons reduces the authenticity of the contents, which are filtered re-adapted, according to their "public".

The second case is when some unwelcome people leave the sign of their presence. This type of situation usually ends in two ways: or with the introduction of special restrictions or, in extreme cases, with the abandonment of its digital space. And this final conclusion can still be considered as further loss.

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### **Extended Abstract**

The article is about some results of an empirical wider research about the Net as new anthropological and social context where elaborate the bereavement. Specifically, this paper focuses on the use of personal blogs as narrative spaces where to outpour emotions and feelings about the mourning.

The theoretical frame of my study is that the Net can be considered as a narrative meta-medium because it is made up of above all by stories. And it is more evident in virtual journal where the focus is often the life of the author.

By this perspective, I consider also the mourning as a biographical moment of disruption. At the same time, referring to the wide literature about the power of the writing about self, the self narration could be a source of empowerment.

Starting from this frame, the part of the research described on this paper aims at investigating the practices of uses, the interpersonal dynamics and the function of the writing of self on the blogs in case of bereavement. I conducted the narrative content analysis of ten personal weblogs that have the mourning as the main theme and, at the same time, I realised the narrative interviews with the bloggers.

I also opened a blog in order to promote the research and to participate to the bloggers community, as a part of them.

In order to synthesize the results, I underline the role of the self writing in a virtual space that is personal and private as well as public.

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Like a traditional personal journal, the blog is based on the collection of thoughts and the act of writing helps the author to give an order to the experience.

At the same time, unlike a traditional autobiographical texts, it exposes the blogger, potentially, to the glance of the others surfers. This is an important element if we consider the specific circumstance of the mourning because, at a first step, the bereaved needs to outpours his/her feelings, but at a second step, it's very important the presence of a witness. In the case of blogs, the witness is the reader that leaves a sign of his/her presence, publishing a comments, quoting a passage etc.

In the article I proposes also a model of participation, distinguishing a parabolic trend of the self writing on the posts. The author writes a lot in the first moment, and the posts are focused above all on his/her suffer. Then he/she starts to read also the comments and to write answering to the readers, interacting with them. This is a period of high participation to the "life" of the blog. Then, the activity is progressively reduced, until the "end of the story" of the virtual journal.

I end my contribution focusing on the pro and cons of the practice of self writing on the Net in the case of mourning, distinguishing technical aspects from the elements related with the virtuality of the environment.