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In beloved memory of

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Publication date:
2011

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal

Citation for published version (APA):
Varis, P., & Spotti, M. (2011). *In beloved memory of: Facebook, death and subjectivity*. (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies; No. 5).

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TILBURG UNIVERSITY
Understanding Society

Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper 5

In beloved memory of: Facebook, death and subjectivity

by

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September 2011

1 Introduction

With the emergence of social media, our life projects and the ways in which they are written into being have become increasingly complex.[1] Different socio-technological advances have permeated our everyday existence, and in one way or another we are 'always on' (Baron 2008) – always within the reach of others, always able to reach others, always updating and checking one or the other medium. It is undeniable that, with these new developments, we have been introduced with new practices that can certainly make our everyday lives easier – on a very practical level, we are able to (re)connect and communicate with other people, find information and be mobile more efficiently and easily than ever before. The implications of these new advances are, however, much more fundamental and far-reaching than that: not only do we have the opportunities for new forms of organization (of our social lives, everyday practices, etc.), but also new forms of *subjectivity*. This is what Elliott and Urry (2010: 3) call *portable personhood* – subjects who are increasingly mobile, and have life trajectories influenced by and saturated with different technologies. That is, the very way in which we *are* in the world has been influenced by the new developments: "(…) the rise of an intensively mobile society *reshapes the self* – its everyday activities, interpersonal relations with others, as well connections with the wider world." (Elliott and Urry ibid.; our emphasis).

Social network sites (SNSs)[2] such as Facebook are of course one specific instantiation of all this – they enable and encourage particular forms of communication, self-presentation and community formation. What is more, SNSs are specifically about these reshaped *selves* Elliott and Urry refer to: a medium in which one's self is the center of attention. As Boyd and Ellison (2008: 219) suggest, "While websites dedicated to communities of interest still exist and prosper, SNSs are primarily organized around people, not interests. Early public online communities such as Usenet and public discussion forums were structured by topics or according to topical hierarchies, but social network sites are structured as personal (or "egocentric") networks, with the individual at the center of their own community." The emergence of these new technologies of the self (Foucault 1988) has also meant the emergence of a new discourse of self-presentation, often with criticisms of 'egocentricity' and 'narcissism' that social network sites encourage (see e.g., Mendelson and Papacharissi 2010). As Rosen (2008: 16, emphasis in original) puts it, "The Delphic oracle's guidance was *know thyself*. Today, in the world of online social networks, the oracle's advice might be *show thyself*."

Indeed, Facebook and other social network sites are about *me* – technologies of subjectivity and subjectification, of being and becoming a certain kind of subject. They offer new opportunities for self-presentation, for writing oneself into being (Sundén 2003), and making oneself and one's network visible. We might even

[1] This paper has been written in the context of the research projects *Transformations of the Public Sphere* (Tilburg University, the Netherlands) and *The Finland Distinguished Professor Project in Multilingualism* (University of Jyväskylä, Finland).

[2] We adopt Boyd and Ellison's (2008: 211) preference to talk about social *network* sites rather than social *networking* sites, as the latter "emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers. While networking is possible on these sites, it is not the primary practice on many of them, nor is it what differentiates them from other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC)." (ibid.)

describe the phenomena and practices enabled and encouraged by these sites as "self-absorbed publishing" (Shirky 2008: 85). These are, consequently, also technologies of *agency* – they provide us with new opportunities for being social agents, and of being and becoming certain kinds of subjects.

From all this it is clear that these new socio-technological tools do have an empowering dimension. However, they also shape our subjectivities by regulating them and limiting our agency – by imposing certain forms of communicating, sharing, publishing and being on us. Here, we discuss these new developments through the case of Facebook – arguably one of the most significant social phenomena at the moment. In our discussion, we focus on the implications social media such as Facebook have for subjectivity – our life projects – and the new practices that we consequently have to develop now that our lives have become saturated and, at least to some extent, controlled by the media we engage in. With the emergence of new forms of self-presentation and subjectivity, social interaction and community formation, we now have to negotiate new dynamics (see e.g., Boyd 2010) and are faced with the (re)creation of new social practices. These new practices are not only shaping and actively used to shape our *lives*, but also our *deaths*, and, consequently, the affects and practices associated with mourning.

2 Life on Facebook

Facebook has truly become one of the central – if not *the* central – social media shaping our selves and contributing to our mobility[3]. We can think of Facebook as being *mimetic* of 'real' life: it imitates 'real life' in the sense that it is in many ways modelled on 'real life' understandings of social life and interaction and draws on a 'real life' lexicon to organise our Facebook existence – the people we connect, share and interact with, for instance, are called our 'Friends'[4]. Having this new dimension to our life projects (whether an additional or substitutive one, depending on one's engagement in these media) means having a new technology of subjectivity at our disposal. The kind of agency Facebook and other similar media suggest can seem intoxicating: being able to construct and experiment with identities, interact with others defying limitations in time and space, build networks, etc. With all these possibilities, Facebook, among other media, changes our way of thinking about ourselves as subjects and the limits of our subjectivity.

What is interesting about these new online forms of subjectivity is that they involve new forms of presenting, sharing and also *preserving* one's self by means of colossal (even if largely invisible) archives. As Richardson and Hessey (2009: 36) suggest, "Facebook acts as an archive of social relationships and provides a means of recording ongoing interactions.", and "(…) is a way of archiving the self, storing

[3] According to Facebook statistics (Facebook 2010a), it has more than 500 million users, more than 200 million of whom access Facebook through different mobile devices. That is, Facebook is very much a medium 'on the move'.

[4] It is perhaps indicative of our difficulties with grasping what exactly having an 'online life' means that we struggle with this lexicon; for instance the notion of 'friendship' on Facebook and other similar media is of course a matter of intense debate (see e.g., Emerson 2008 for an interesting report).

biography and enhancing social memory." Thus, apart from being a 'me technology' here and now – something that is only about creating certain selves and publishing oneself for an immediate audience – social media such as Facebook allow for the recording and storing of selves and social interactions. And all this is possible because of the *archive function* of SNSs and the internet as a whole. As a result of this archive function, we become subjects to *archontic power* (Derrida 1996): what we present of ourselves and others lives on, archived, even after we cease to exist physically – even after we die – and archontic power and agency become complex issues in relation to each other. This is where the limitations to our agency and subjectivity enter the picture, and Facebook becomes also a technology of death.

3 Death on Facebook

In discussing death and Facebook, we of course have to take into account not only one, but two kinds of death. Firstly, there is the matter of dying 'in the real world' – the end of someone's physical and subjective existence. In less technologically saturated times and societies, this was the only kind of death and end of existence people had to understand and cope with, and the established practices and norms that we have surrounding death have been developed for this purpose. Now, and secondly, however, there is the issue of *dying online*: we live in an era in which the online extensions of our lives implicate certain changes in our social worlds. The emergence of virtual subjectivities and new kinds of life projects has led to the birth of other novel phenomena; thus, for instance, as life online is mimetic of life 'offline', there of course will have to be death online, too. Websites such as Seppukoo.com and Web 2.0 Suicide Machine have emerged to assist us in ending our virtual existence, but in reality killing 'the virtual me' is quite a complicated matter, at least as far as Facebook is concerned.

To take Facebook as an example of how our practices and understandings of death and subjectivity will have to change, we see that when someone with a Facebook profile dies, his or her virtual existence starts to live a life of its own. When Facebook and other such virtual phenomena did not exist, those who passed away of course still 'lived on' as well in memories and memorabilia – photos, objects that belonged to or were shared by the deceased person and those close to him or her, and so on. On social network sites, however, the concept of 'living on' takes on quite different meanings. Until fairly recently, in the suggestions Facebook gives to users as people they might know and want to add as their Friends, or reconnect with, dead people could appear[5]. Obviously and understandably, such incidents were very upsetting for many people. Deceased people are not supposed to appear in these suggestions anymore, and Facebook has introduced some additional measures to manage death and regulate mourning among its users – some of the changes having been inspired by

[5] Interestingly, another popular social media, i.e. Twitter, only very recently (August 2010) introduced its own policy for dealing with deceased users – deleting the account, or helping family members to create a backup of the user's public tweets. In the Facebook Help Center (Facebook 2010b), there are still users asking related, difficult questions for instance concerning the 'Tag a Friend' feature, which may suggest tagging a deceased user in a photo. Facebook has no answer to this, other than that they "do not have the technical ability to determine whether the person shown in the photo is deceased", and their apologies for any discomfort caused by this.

the tragic Virginia Tech shootings in 2007, after which many felt the need and had the desire to mourn for those who lost their lives there, and wanted to do that online.

The ways in which Facebook manages its users' profiles and their deaths of course has a very practical dimension. There are certain procedures involved in managing the account of someone who dies and has a Facebook profile, and Facebook has created regulations for the deletion of a user's virtual existence. Someone will have to 'report a deceased user' to Facebook, and here is where 'the deceased' and 'the user' become two different things – two separate entities. The virtual becomes separated from the 'real'[6], and although the person does not physically exist anymore, his or her virtual subjectivity will live on. This is what Facebook (2010b) states concerning the removal of a deceased person's account[7]:

> Immediate family members may request the removal of a loved one's account. This will completely remove the account from Facebook so that no one can view it. We will not restore the account or provide information on its content unless required by law. If you are requesting a removal and are not an immediate family member of the deceased, your request will not be processed, but the account will be memorialized.

This means, first of all, that once one passes away, it is *Facebook* that creates the rules for managing one's existence there. Secondly, there are certain others that form a second layer of regulators: one's immediate family can have a say on what happens to the profile. With 'immediate family', Facebook refers to spouses, parents, siblings and children of the deceased user, as defined in the drop down menu for 'Relationship to this person' in the form one has to fill out to make the request for the removal of a profile (see Figure 1; under 'Requested action' one can choose either 'Memorialize profile' or 'Remove profile').

The attempt to delete an account – to erase a virtual subjectivity – is therefore a very practical matter couched in very 'real' legal and administrative frames: it involves the filling out of a form, the informing of a regulating institution as which Facebook in the case of death appears. However, as is apparent, the attempt to delete an account and its possible future uses are *not* only practical matters, but are both surrounded by all kinds of legal, social and cultural issues concerning for instance the rights of those mourning for the deceased person and the rights of Facebook to regulate their mourning and the virtual life of the deceased.

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[6] The separation of 'virtual' and 'real' is admittedly awkward and, in many senses pointless as what is 'virtual' can indeed be very 'real' (see, for instance, Varis et al. forthcoming), but in this case the separation seems very much needed.

[7] At the time of writing, November 2010.

Report a deceased person's profile

IMPORTANT: Under penalty of perjury, this form is solely for the reporting of a deceased person to memorialise or remove the person's account.

Memorialising the account removes certain sensitive information and sets privacy so that only confirmed friends can see the profile or locate it in search. The Wall remains so that friends and family can leave posts in remembrance.

Please note that unrelated enquiries through this form may not receive a response.

Full name: on the account

Date of birth: Day: Month: Year:

Account email addresses: which may have been used to create the account

Networks: which the person may have been in (e.g. the Stanford University educational network)

Web address (URL) of the profile you would like to report: Please copy and paste the web address (URL) of his/her profile.

Relationship to this person: Please select:

Requested action: Please select:

Proof of death: An obituary or news article

Submit Cancel

Figure 1. Facebook form for 'reporting a deceased user's profile'

Apart from removing the account, Facebook offers the possibility of memorializing the account. For those who pass away without any immediate family left, this in fact looks like the only option: if there are no family members to request the removal of the account, Facebook will memorialize it. To see what the memorialization means in practice, let us have a look at the information Facebook (2010b) provides on memorializing accounts[8]:

> When a user passes away, we memorialize their account to protect their privacy. Memorializing an account removes certain sensitive information (e.g., status updates and contact information) and sets privacy so that only confirmed friends can see the profile or locate it in search. The Wall remains so that friends and family can leave posts in remembrance. Memorializing an account also prevents all login access to it.

The memorialization of accounts in the Facebook sense of the word is primarily not at all about virtual memorialization, remembrance or commemoration, but about real-world legal and administrative notions of *privacy*. Interestingly, the Facebook self created by the one whose account is memorialized does not remain intact, but is

[8] At the time of writing, November 2010.

reshaped by Facebook – and this is done according to the Facebook understanding of what is 'sensitive information'. Hence, with memorialization a Facebook profile becomes an edited form of biography, as the (extension of) subjectivity archived is taken over by Facebook and modified to meet certain understandings of what is appropriate.[9]

Thus, what may have seemed to the now deceased person during his or her Facebook life to be a technology of agency and subjectivity becomes after his or her death subject to the regulating power of Facebook, and is also to some extent at the mercy of those close to the deceased one. There are also potential further complications to all of this. Hackers may be able to access a memorialized account (see e.g., Paull 2010 for such a case), and cause additional grief to those already having to cope with the physical absence and loss of someone. How we deal with death itself in online environments is yet another dimension here, and a significant one concerning those who stay behind and mourn: interaction and self-presentation online is often affected by the fact that we often have to manage communication with few (emerging) contextual cues (see e.g., Boyd 2009 for a discussion), with often implicit norms both being imposed on us by the media we use and also created by us ourselves as users. *www.lamebook.com*, which according to its slogan presents "the funniest and lamest of Facebook", is a clear illustration of this. On that site, Facebook users can submit either their own or others' Facebook blunders (e.g. posts and/or comments to posts that are seen as funny, awkward, etc.), and death is by no means an infrequent topic in these submissions. Thus, 'leaving posts in remembrance' on a memorialized account may not be a simple matter, and controlling these postings an intricate process regulated not by the person who originally created the account, but by someone else.

As is already apparent from this snapshot into Facebook and death, it is clear that this is a very complex matter, and we are faced with all sorts of questions previously foreign to the management of our life projects and death. Do we know, or how do we get to know, that those close to us have a Facebook profile? Who, in the eyes of Facebook, is 'close enough' to someone having a profile in order to be able to ask for deletion or memorialization? What is considered by Facebook to be 'sensitive information'? What happens to all that 'information' we have posted (of) ourselves, and the posts by others? Will having to deal with the virtual existence(s) of our loved ones after their death simply add to our grief? It is clear that these are not only technical questions to be solved by those planning and regulating the storage of information in online environments, but questions with social and ethical dimensions. All this adds another layer to our subjectivities – our ways of being in the world – and the ways in which we manage the 'ceasing to be' in the world.

4 Afterlife

[9] It is also possible to make a 'special request' concerning a deceased user's profile that has already been memorialized. This can be done using a special form (Facebook 2010c), similar to the one used for reporting a deceased user's account. It remains unclear for which purposes Facebook encourages the use of this form.

We should naturally not undermine the potential significance of tools such as Facebook for people as they cope with the loss of their loved ones; social media may provide people with a space in which they can reminisce, share memories and find comfort in other mourners. However, we should also take into account the fact that the emergence of such media involves certain repercussions for our subjectivities and our practices of grieving and mourning.

Dealing with death has always involved certain mourning and memorial practices, of course differing from one culture, locality and era to another. With the introduction of a virtual dimension to our lives, we now have virtual mimetic projections of real-life rituals, also of mourning and memorialization. In this age of new subjectivities, mobilities and life trajectories, our practices are also changing, and in many ways we are compelled to change them. The accustomed way of Western societies of dealing with grief – psychologizing it and seeing it as an inner state of individuals – also has a socio-cultural (and, we might now add, a technological) dimension. This also means that grieving is *normative* – it is controlled and regulated in implicit and explicit ways. (Neimeyer et al. 2002; Walter 1999; Durkheim 1965) The socio-technological developments we have witnessed have added another layer of practices to all of this, and now we also have the opportunity – and, it seems, the responsibility – to "technologize" grief and mourning (see also e.g., Bos 1995; van den Hoven et al. 2008; Hall et al. 2006). And here Facebook is a case in point. Facebook in itself has become an actor in all of this, and is now one of the institutions regulating our practices and processes of coming to terms with and coping with death and loss.

This new technologization of grief is not the only aspect worthy of discussion in relation to SNSs, and we should not forget the person whose death is being mourned by others. What is of course grieved is the loss of a physical body – the loss of someone who is no longer physically among us. As before, this person will live on in and through the objects that she or he has left behind, and in the memories of others. If he or she happened to have a Facebook profile, he or she will 'live on' on Facebook, and here the issue becomes that of subjectivity and agency. Here is also where the issue becomes controversial.

A Facebook profile – as any social media profile – can be viewed as a technology of the self, a site for the production and enactment of new subjectivities. Millions and millions of people engage with and enjoy these new technologies for several different purposes, such as interacting and (re)connecting with people, and constructing and experimenting with expanded repertoires of identities (e.g. Varis et al. forthcoming). These new phenomena change our ways of being in the world, introduce new forms of subjectivity, of being and becoming someone. The huge social investments people make in these new media suggest that people are getting something out of them. However, our subjectivities are now also beyond our control, and in the end the agency these media offer seems to be limited.

It has become clear that social network sites have not always been, nor they still are, prepared to deal with the intricacies of (offline) human life. It remains to be seen how these new technologies of the self will evolve, and how life-publishing – and death-publishing – will develop. Will Facebook, in fact, with time become more like an online cemetery, as the average age of the users becomes higher and higher, and

younger generations perhaps choosing to rather engage with some other social media? Will we see, instead of the vibrant social network environment that Facebook is now, a virtual collection of epitaphs and a site for commemoration? Whatever the fate of Facebook itself, all this gives a considerable amount of food for further thought. As Ilana Gershon (2010: 201) suggests, "New media spark ethical dilemmas because the media alter the range of information communicated as well as the publics involved." Hence, it will not only be of immense interest to record the evolution of Facebook as a social medium, but also the wider ethical, social and cultural repercussions of having such new forms of practices and subjectivities, and the new interfaces between public and private that all this entails. We now have 'passworded selves' – selves we create in online environments, working on them protected by the use of usernames and passwords. Or at least we think this is protected work. However, as we have seen, our ways of being in the world are changing, and not all of it is under our own control. Seen from this perspective, ticking the 'keep me logged in' box on the Facebook login page gets a whole new different meaning.

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