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## DIGITIZED MOURNING VIRTUAL MEMORIALS AND SERVICES IN THE INTERNET

• ANNA HAVERINEN •

Perceptions of the afterlife, and ways of treating the dead and honouring the memory of the deceased, are unique in every culture, but all cultures have ways of expressing such concepts and experiences, with funeral services and mourning periods with specific their dress and social codes only a few aspects of this. In Western society, death rituals changed dramatically over the twentieth century. It has even been argued that this has led to a 'utopia' where sorrow and mourning are considered almost weaknesses and where it is possible to reach adulthood without having to face death and loss. Some researchers claim that this is a result of industrialization and urbanization, lack of communality, and the rise of individualism and an ideal of efficiency (Ariés 1974, 1991; Pentikäinen 1990). Meanwhile modern technology, specifically virtual technology, has made possible new variations on old mourning rituals and created new ways to express honour, give condolences and share experiences. Here I want to look at some of these changes, examining in particular their likely impact on mourning in Finland, known for its enthusiastic adoption of technological innovation in everyday life.

In the twenty-first century the Internet has taken a permanent place in social and cultural interactions, commerce, and in accessing and distributing information (e.g. Boellstorff 2008). Faster and cheaper broadband services and comprehensive virtual technology (mobile phones, wireless networks and portable computers) have also helped the virtual world to take its place in (global) communication cultures, including practices

of mourning. Virtual memorials have developed immensely with Web 2.0, which means more user-centred, collective intelligence utilization, and faster and lighter information transfer (O'Reilly 2005).

Mortuary rituals, like rites of passage, allow the persona of the deceased to be transferred to another social status and conceptual place: the afterworld. In different ritual traditions, the afterworld can be seen as actively affecting the affairs of the living, or may deal more with memory and loss. Imaginations of the afterworld are also relative and personal, but they do seem to be analogical with the virtual world. Blogs, profile pages in social media, avatars and other virtual expressions seem to preserve the identity of a person, leading to phenomena such as virtual candles (e.g. [www.sytytakynttila.fi](http://www.sytytakynttila.fi)) that resemble older conventions like bringing flowers and candles to the deceased's home or place of death.

Conventional forms of mourning like scrap-booking or photo albums, and a generalized need to reminisce, appear to have led to the first memorial websites in the USA, created around 1996 (e.g. [www.virtualmemorials.com](http://www.virtualmemorials.com)). Such websites allow anyone to create a virtual memorial for anybody. Since the emergence of the first virtual cemeteries and memorial sites, they have increased tremendously in popularity and size. My own research indicates that a virtual memorial site has significance similar to an actual memorial such as a gravesite (Haverinen 2009a, 2009b). The creators of these websites are either family or friends, and reasons for keeping the sites open to the public can be practical (no passwords needed) or simply 'to announce to the world how great a man my husband was (to friends and strangers)' (Haverinen 2009a: 54). Using websites to cope with loss and sorrow seems to help the mourning process, especially if the deceased has no physical 'resting place' or it is too far away: 'I would love to create a physical memorial for my sister, since she was cremated, per her wishes. I feel kind of lost because there is no place I can go to grieve for her. (...) I think that is why the website has been so healing for me.' (Haverinen 2009a: 55)

During the past three years (2007–2010) memorial groups and pages in the Finnish *Facebook* network have also increased in number. To date no official virtual memorial websites exist in Finland, and the use of foreign memorial websites seems to be marginal. This raises questions of anthropological interest. Does, for example, the Finnish cultural convention of keeping sorrow and loss as private or, at best, a 'family matter', have something to do with the slow uptake of memorial websites? Finland used to be at the forefront of adopting new technology but compared to Americans Finns do not utilize social media and virtual communications as comprehensively as they could given the available technological infrastructure. So it seems worth asking whether a slowness in adopting this particular branch of technology has to do with anthropologically interesting rules of social interaction in a country where the culture provides strict guidelines on personal space.

Privacy does suggest itself as a key factor when dealing with (virtual) personal material after death, for example e-mails or social website accounts. Legislation is outdated both globally and in Finland, and it is hard to determine who has the right to see electronic correspondence, whereas physical letters almost always belong to the heirs. In the future, there might be a policy of adding passwords and usernames to wills, so that digital material and physical possessions could be managed side by side. This might sound like a nightmare for lawyers, but it also suggests that we need to look at digital material with a more creative

vision in order to invent satisfying solutions for organizing virtual possessions. After all, online personalities and interactions have become socially significant in important new ways. Blogs, forums, photo albums and social websites are rich in personal material yet few people think about what happens to that material upon death. The general policy of companies has been to delete inactive accounts, but *Facebook* has decided to provide a memorialized profile for those who actively mourn online (Facebook 2009a, 2009b).

In Finland general attitudes towards virtual mourning vary immensely, especially between different age groups. Familiarity with virtual technology seems to influence whether virtual mourning is accepted or not. Negative attitudes are usually explained and justified by virtual memorials being perceived as disrespectful and/or harmful. Positive attitudes build on the argument that parts of our lives are already in the Web, and so death should be included as well. Issues such as accessibility, speed and convenience are also reasons to mourn virtually. Service providers are relying on this idea, which is why virtual testament websites are already providing services to handle virtual accounts and passwords (e.g. [www.doyourownwill.com](http://www.doyourownwill.com), [www.legacylocker.com](http://www.legacylocker.com)). However, it remains to be seen, and for anthropologists to examine, how this phenomenon will develop. Merely making a technology available will not determine its future, rather, the new possibilities offered by the Web will build on cultural and social aspects.

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