This talk outlines the changing history of mourning in terms of mourners’ social relationships - with the living and the dead. The latest chapter comprises new online communities of mourning. The first (1990s) generation of specialised online groups and virtual cemeteries changed little, but interactive Web 2.0 social network sites (SNSs) have enabled mourning once again to become a community rather than a private experience – for both better and worse.

Demographic, social and technological changes have changed mourners’ social relationships & hence the experience of grief:

1. **Family/community grief (pre-industrial).** People live in small, stable, rural communities. The typical death is of a child, leaving behind a house in mourning; chief mourners are co-resident; grief is a shared experience (nb ‘shared’ leads to group norms as to the right way to mourn, with the potential for censure and conflict); others living in the community know the deceased.

2. **Private grief (20c).** With longevity, geographical mobility, and work/home separation, the typical death is of an old person, leaving behind an elderly spouse and adult children living in different towns (or even continents) who go out to work where their colleagues never knew the deceased. The more dispersed the chief mourners and the more fragmented their networks, the more grief becomes a private experience; those met every day can ‘support’ the griever, but they do not share their grief, because they did not know the deceased. With the decline of mourning dress, others may not even know I am grieving. The more hidden grief becomes, the more the mourner is left to mourn in their own way without censure from others – though where others do observe my grief, as within the family, censure may well occur.

Some private grievers feel the isolation more than the freedom and turn for help to:

a) Counselling/therapy, where a stranger helps them explore their feelings, or when there has been censure, helps to validate their feelings

b) Mutual help groups (MHGs), where the mourner meets those who have suffered the same kind of loss. By the late 1990s, MHGs were increasingly online, but this did not change the basic MHG dynamics of fusion with those who have experienced a similar kind of loss.

3. **Public grief (late 20c / early 21c).** Mass media, celebrity culture, and the internet allow public mourning (offline: flowers, condolence book signings, roadside shrines, etc; online: virtual cemeteries, online condolence books, etc). But this does little to change the reality of private grief for those who are personally bereft, though a main mourner can sometimes:
   - Feel their grief validated by the grief of unknown others
   - Feel their grief marginalised as unknown others take over the public memorialising (not entirely new!)

In the view of private grievers, public grief is inauthentic.

4. **Online grief (Web 2.0).**

a) **Facebook.** In death as in life, SNSs such as FB enable previously separated members of a person’s network to be aware of and communicate with each other. Memories, stories and feelings can be shared on FB with a range of people who knew the deceased.

b) **Continuing the temporary community.** SNSs can continue the temporary community created by the funeral (Roberts).
c) Virtual grief. Grief may be felt for one known only online, eg a fellow gamer, or support group member (who may likely die, as in cancer or anorexia online support groups). How, if at all, does shared grief between virtual mourners connect to the deceased’s offline friends & family (who may not even know they exist)?

d) Relaxing/shifting norms for grief (Jakoby & Reiser 2013):
- Talking to the dead. Feels real, validates a hitherto private practice.
- Spiritualisation and afterlife. The dead are, online, more likely to become angels than souls!
- More than family can mourn.
- No time limit to grief.
- Enfranchising grief. Depends on the site.
- Emerging norms…..

e) Replicability of digital inheritance.
Unlike physical stuff that can be inherited by only one person (usually within the family), digital photos, music, etc can be shared by many friends, thus helping the deceased to become an ancestor for groups beyond the family.

Online grief increases the potential for conflict:
- different individuals’ grieving styles become more apparent
- public posts (eg FB Wall) also allow disrespectful posts, esp if anonymous (eg MyDeathSpace).
- chief mourners may lose control: usurped by younger online mourners (Hutchings), upset by superficial & unrelentingly upbeat posts, unable to control pacing of memorialisation
- invasion of online funeral by gaming competitors

Online grief resembles 1), and is potentially the most radical change to mourners’ social connections since 19c urbanisation:-
- Sharing of grief among the whole range of the deceased’s mourners.
- Grief ceases to be private, thus opening up the possibility of one criticising how another grieves or expresses their grief or challenging their status as chief mourner.
- Posts or tags can indicate status as a mourner to those who are not mourners – the digital equivalent of the black armband.

NB Every site is different! RD4U, FaceBook, MyDeathSpace, and online games have very different norms.

Does cyberspace isolate or connect people? In mourning, it clearly connects them, or more accurately re-connects them – both for better and for worse.

Walter, T. et al. (2011) "Does the internet change how we die and mourn?" Omega 64(4): 275-302.

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