

DEATH ON FACEBOOK

Learning to Grieve Online

by

Chisom Giovanna Onuoha

Thesis submitted to
the Department of Anthropology, Princeton University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

April 1, 2011

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis.

Chisom Giovanna Onuoha

*For Nina,
and all those whose time
has come too soon.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Isabel Clark-Deces for her advice, critique, and guidance in this project. Without her commitment, it is certain that this thesis would have taken a much different (and far less memorable) form. I also extend a heartfelt thank you to the many classmates and colleagues who contributed personal stories and anecdotes about their Facebook experiences. Finally, countless thanks go to my family (Mom, Dad, Sochi, and Chioma) as well as my close friends—S.C. and C.K. especially—who never cease to amaze me with their steadfast and unrelenting support.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iv
Introduction	6
1 A History of Facebook and Its Place in the Web	11
2 An Insider Examination of Facebook	29
3 Identity on the Web	45
4 Grief on Facebook	58
Conclusion	74
Bibliography	76

INTRODUCTION

How do American youth grieve the deaths of their friends and loved ones? And in our increasingly digital-oriented world, how does technology mediate that expression of grief?

This work sprung from my near obsession with such questions following the untimely death of a friend. Nina¹, who I met during our shared time working as camp counselors, died at the too-young age of twenty-one after being hit by a truck. In the aftermath of her death, and out of a need to feel somehow connected to her, I decided to visit her personal page on Facebook. What I found occurring on that page was a congregation of mourners engaging in the formation of grief and mourning rites. But within that creation I also found confusion, disagreement, and discord about the nature of the website and what types of meaning it could hold. It was at that moment that an anthropological interest joined my personal attachment: what did it mean for rites around grief to be crafted within the shifting medium of the Internet, and on Facebook specifically? Furthermore, what did it mean that those crafted rites were viewed as troublesome by

¹ Nina is a pseudonym for my friend.

members of the very population by and for whom they were created? In the unique virtual sphere of wall posts, comments, and “likes”, I found myself mesmerized by the visible social change that was unfolding literally before my eyes.

The concept of social change is nothing new to anthropology. The essay “Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example” from Clifford Geertz’s defining text *The Interpretation of Cultures* deals entirely with this topic, and conveniently within the context of a funeral. In the essay, Geertz writes about the way that broader social change, in the form of growing tensions and shifting attitudes about the region’s different religions, impacted the observance of one funeral rite for the Javanese. In the specific instance upon which Geertz focuses, the man whose job it had traditionally been to conduct funeral rites refused to perform because the deceased individual was of a different religion and political affiliation. Within the changing political context of the time, the result of the situation was that the Javanese were left searching for an appropriate course of action. Geertz (1973:165) explains that the subsequent “disorganization of the ritual resulted from a basic ambiguity in the meaning of the rite for those who participated in it”. For the Javanese, the central problem was that they could not determine what was appropriate: was the context that of a sacred religious moment or a secular political power struggle? The inability to determine which context the moment fell into directly affected observance of the rite.

In the Facebook situation that I explored there was a similar confusion. The Facebook users whose behavior I observed found it difficult to determine whether Facebook represented a space of mundane commonality or if it could become an area that could foster ritualization. In their debate, the users were forced to directly confront taken-for-granted Western cultural attitudes towards grief and death. What was especially

noteworthy was where these realizations took place, for it was the technological medium of Facebook itself that represented a troubled context for the website's users.

John Postill, an anthropologist whose work concerns new media, suggests on his blog that when technology is added to a situation, a new joint social and technological impact must be considered: not only does the technology influence social attitudes, habits, and thoughts, but social change can influence the way the technology is also considered (Postill 2011). In the case of the moment I witnessed on Facebook, the connotations of Postill's claim meant that the users were forced to deal not only with rituals within Facebook, but also of Facebook being a habit or ritual that itself was appropriating and making possible other rituals. Consideration of the medium played a critical role in considerations of what it meant to express grief *within* the medium. This point became a recurring theme of my research.

There is admittedly not much ethnography within my work. My course of research forced me to question not only the definition of ethnography, but also its relationship with the field of anthropology. Sociologist Paul Willis (2011), who is well-known for his use of ethnography and multi-disciplinary appeal across the social sciences, recently gave a commemorative lecture on Clifford Geertz in which he argued that "ethnography can still help us to know what's going on." He insisted that ethnography produces face to face contact that results in an ethical relationship between informant and ethnographer. When done right, the ethnographer sees neither himself nor himself among others, but rather sees himself in *the way that others view him*. In the line of Geertz's thinking, seeing ourselves as others see us can be far more difficult than merely seeing ourselves among others.

Ethnography has held and still holds an important place within anthropology. However, I believe that an effort of inquiry is necessary to see exactly how ethnography fits in relation to the Internet. Internet anthropologist Keith Hart has argued that an auto-ethnographical approach is necessary when it comes to conducting research on the Internet: fieldwork must become a personal experience, for the web does not exist “independently of our own individual experience of it” (2004). I speak more upon this topic in the second chapter, but I wish to point out that the approach I have taken in this paper is one that is necessarily personally-informed. It is informed by the experience that precipitated this work and by my own experience using the medium of Facebook. At its core, such an approach was not strictly ethnographical. Even still, in the course of my research I was able to, as Geertz would say, see myself as others saw me. As I will make clear in the second chapter, the mechanics of Facebook make possible a visual understanding of one’s relationships and one’s social ties. Thus, the very medium of Facebook enabled me to receive a sense of that which Geertz and Willis argue ethnography must give. As such, in the case of anthropological efforts towards certain areas of the Internet, perhaps a new sensibility towards ethnography and research must be cultivated, one that draws from the conventions of ethnography but does not strictly adhere to it. Such an approach would make it possible to glean valuable data and learn important truths from the world of the web. My work today is a result of that unique sensibility.

In my first chapter of this paper, I offer a history of Facebook and its place within the Internet. In doing so, I also address the issues of privacy and personal data that have followed Facebook from its development and explore what the site means to its users. My second chapter is a methodological approach to Facebook, entered through a personal

perspective. I outline the different aspects of the site and what the practical uses of each function are and provide an in-depth explanation of any Facebook user's typical experience of the site. My third chapter gives an overview and contextualization of what identity on the Internet and on Facebook represent. I also explore American understandings of death and especially of death on the Internet so as to provide a framework for understanding the situation that I present in the fourth chapter. The fourth and final chapter ties the other chapters together by advancing an academic argument about how certain commemorative acts on Facebook are indicative of a broader change in cultural thought.

In his introduction to *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage*, Ronald Grimes insists that "it matters not only *that* we birth and die but *how* we birth and die." I echo his sentiment, but with some important addendums: in our digital age, it matters not only that we die and grieve, but how our deaths and grief are treated in online contexts. What we learn about these distinctly human processes carries unparalleled significance for our cultural, personal, and offline responses.

A HISTORY OF FACEBOOK AND ITS PLACE IN THE WEB

Chapter One

It has become commonplace to find in popular discourses of the Internet comparisons against other telecommunication mediums. The juxtapositions are usually presented as an illuminating list of facts, meant to highlight those characteristics about the Internet that make it fundamentally different from that which has preceded it. Such lists typically take the following form: *“Radio took 38 years to reach 50 million users. TV took 13 years. Internet 4 years....Facebook added 200 million users in less than a year”* (Qualman 2010).

The continued promulgation of these facts is unsurprising—indeed, they are astonishing in their own right, proof of a striking era of technological adaptation and innovation. However, it is noteworthy that these facts point to a realization grounded solely in the tool of comparison. The Internet, more than any other medium and despite its short lifetime, has constantly been understood through comparisons—if not to other mediums than to something labeled “reality”, a word often used to describe the offline world.

Facebook, as a social networking site (or perhaps as *the* social networking site, given its prominence in terms of user count and Internet influence), often finds itself in a similar position as the Internet. Conversation around Facebook has become a minefield of assessments, confusions, and projections, all attempts to understand the site and render intelligible that which is already classified as different.

It is for this reason that much has been written about Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's twenty-six year old founder, and for this same reason that the site's origin story has often been elevated to the status of myth. It has been recorded, contested, and even, in the 2010 aptly titled film *The Social Network*, imagined and captured as a type of mass media visual truth. Books have been written about the site's formation and then dismissed as biased or one-sided; facts have emerged to be denied by the Zuckerberg camp, and lawsuits have been sprung and settled, only to be re-opened again. There is no purely objective and uncontested account of the site's formational years.

The questions are many: What is the true connection between Zuckerberg and the Facebook website? What is Facebook's purpose? How did it become popular? Will it continue to maintain its popularity? At the core, the questions are all human attempts to grasp the answer to one defining query: What does Facebook mean, and what will it continue to mean?

Daniel Miller, anthropologist and author of *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, has made the critical point that Facebook's significance is not about or best understood by investigating its beginnings (Miller 2000). I agree with him completely. But in order to see from where Facebook has come, and in order to provide a contextual foundation for the later parts of my research, it is necessary to employ a historical glance at the site and the

subcategory in which it resides. This exploration is what will ultimately provide the groundwork for a discussion of the site's significance.

By the time that Facebook emerged in 2004, the Internet was not a new phenomenon. It had already been enjoying widespread use and had existed in a public form for nearly ten years. The generation that Facebook's founding members would belong to was one that had grown up with the Internet around them, exerting increasingly larger impacts on their lives.

Social Networking Sites (the group of websites, commonly abbreviated as SNSs, to which Facebook belongs) were especially not new things at the time of Facebook's invention. In "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship", Internet sociologists danah boyd² and Nicole Ellison (2007) describe social network (or networking) sites as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system". Put in more colloquial terms, SNSs are sites in which all users have profile sites that they can easily access and use to interact with the profiles of other users that they accept as Friends³. While previous sites offered these functions in segments, one reason for the SNS rise in popularity was due to their combining all of these functions into one site. The functions outlined by boyd and Ellison have now become the foundation for determining whether or not a site fits into the SNS category, though as time has progressed, the majority of these sites have developed other features, such as video

² danah boyd's name is intentionally left uncapitalized.

³ Keeping in line with the trend of boyd and Ellison, I capitalize "Friend" when referring to the online, SNS definition of a user who is given access to interact with another user's pages.

and photo sharing capabilities. However, according to boyd and Ellison, , the primary importance of SNSs lies neither in these features nor in their capacity to bring new users together, but rather in their ability to articulate and make visible users' Friends and social networks.

The site that is commonly recognized as the first SNS was a 1997-launched website called SixDegrees. SixDegrees gave users the ability to create profiles, list Friends, and surf Friend lists, but the website shut down in 2000 because of complaints that "there was little to do after accepting Friend requests" (boyd & Ellison 2007). SNSs remained under the radar until about 2003, the year of the rise of Friendster, a dating website designed specifically for connecting friends-of-friends rather than strangers. The site gained popularity to the point of spurring technical and social difficulties, and it opened the doors for the widespread acceptance of SNSs as attractive ventures (boyd & Heer 2006). By 2003, the social networking site MySpace had been formed, and had found its niche by picking up frustrated and alienated Friendster departees and opening up space for indie-rock bands to promote themselves. By 2006, it had become the most popular social networking site in the United States (Cashmore 2006).

These sites, especially Friendster and MySpace, were already capitalizing on the potential inherent in enabling users to connect virtually and form networks. MySpace especially had contributed the central discovery that social networking could fulfill users' needs by offering room to do more than just chat: the sites could also function as places to find dates and to promote events and music. As SNS researchers and sociologists Acquisto and Gross (2006) have noted, no users were ever forced to sign up to a social networking

site; there was simply already an obvious demand for the combination of functions that the sites were providing.

What the short history detailed above shows is that Facebook did not enter the world in a vacuum; whether site creator Mark Zuckerberg aimed to create an SNS on purpose or stumbled upon it through anger and/or curiosity (the myth varies according to source), it is clear that he had a wealth of resources in SNSs from which to learn and build upon. In the early 2000's, at the time that SNSs were growing in popularity, Zuckerberg was a Harvard student who already had experience with creating sites that aimed to explore, in his own words, "how people were connected through mutual references" (Kirkpatrick 2010:26). At Harvard he had fallen into minor disciplinary trouble with the University for creating a site that involved hacking into dorm systems to access photos of students. But that website, called Facemash and based upon comparing the attractiveness of Harvard students, had been nearly completely personally motivated. Though Facebook (or "Thefacebook", as it was originally known), was also partially personally motivated, it was in addition formed as a response to Harvard's sluggishness at creating an online personal directory where students could look up information about each other. Its other driving motivation was Zuckerberg's personal attempt to give students a fun and entertaining way to share more about themselves and goings-on at school. The site went live as Thefacebook on February 4, 2004 (Facebook 2011). A month later, it had 10,000 users (over half of Harvard's undergraduate population). Four months later, it had been extended to include other Boston and Ivy League universities and had created a wave that resulted in Zuckerberg being offered \$10 million for the company (Kirkpatrick 2010: 121).

As the site's popularity grew, so did its reach. In September 2005, the site opened up to high school students, and soon after to employees of several companies, including Apple Inc. and Microsoft. A year later, in an attempt to continue with its stated mission of "help[ing] people understand the world around them", it was opened up to anyone aged thirteen and older in possession of a valid email address (Abram 2006). As a brief aside, I will note that according to my twelve-year-old sister, Facebook's reach actually extends to those who are younger than the thirteen year limit, as some younger students have taken to forming accounts by simply lying about their ages.

Apart from its large mainstream adoption and its generally-acknowledged success (according to the site's pressroom (2011), it has overtaken MySpace to currently hold the position of the most popular social networking site in the world and has, as of 2010, over 500 million active users), what makes Facebook different from other social networking sites is the fact that, as Acquisti and Gross (2006) point out, the information presented is "uniquely and personally identified." Unlike other sites, where users are required to develop personas (often shown by particular usernames or avatars), Facebook's strength is based upon on its ties to the offline world. For the site to function, users must present themselves using their true identities.

But the site has had a problematic lifespan, and its troubles are most clearly seen in the form of user dissatisfaction over privacy concerns and in its public court cases. On Facebook's court cases I will not dwell, except to mention that they are part of what gives the Facebook origin story its disputed and unverified status. The most high profile and long-running of these cases has been *Facebook, Inc. v. ConnectU*, in which Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg was accused of stealing the source code for Facebook from the other

students with whom he was initially working together to form a site called ConnectU (Kincaid 2009). ConnectU had many of the same features that Facebook would have, and the trio of students behind the site approached Zuckerberg for help around the same time that thefacebook.com domain name was registered. The case was settled in 2009 when Facebook paid ConnectU about \$65 million in settlement but a new case was filed when the stakes with which ConnectU had been paid for were claimed fraudulent. The significance that I find in this case is in how it has served to add to the mythic quality of Facebook's founding and founder, helping to make the beginnings of the site murky and unclear.

While the ConnectU case has lasted for a long time, user dissatisfaction with changes made on the Facebook site is an issue that the website first faced with its 2005 expansion and has been forced to deal with for nearly each step of its history. I remember, as a high school student, hearing from my relatives in college about their discontent with Facebook choosing to allow high school students onto the site. For them, one of the most important aspects of the site that made it both trustworthy and valuable was its focus upon college students, so they were sure that in letting go of that exclusivity, the site would also lose some aspect of its integrity. These same feelings about the site losing what sets it apart have resurfaced with each major change that the site has instituted. Indeed, when I spoke to a friend about her Facebook profile and the information that she displayed on it, she reminded me that when she first joined the site in its students-only days, she had been far more open with the information she shared. As the site became more open, she felt pushed to become more private with her information. Today, she displays no personal information about herself other than her month and day of birth.

Not only has widespread dissatisfaction with changes that Facebook makes become a trend in the short history of website, but much of this displeasure has been made public in Internet spaces . In 2006, when Facebook first adopted the Newsfeed, a feature that offered a constantly-updating broadcast of Friends' activity, there was a tangible outcry from users in the form of angry blogposts, articles, indignant petitions released by the ACLU, and even a group formed in 2006 on Facebook called "Students against Facebook News Feed (Official Petition to Facebook)" that, as of January 2011, has 158,904 members (2006). In 2009, the site faced another backlash from users when it updated its status feature to mirror that of Twitter, a then-new competing SNS through which users could provide brief updates of their lives in 140 characters (Obasanjo 2011). Though these are only two instances where Facebook has made important changes and suffered from an almost immediate backlash, the examples abound. Part of the controversy around the changes that the site makes can, of course, be attributed to the sheer number of users the site has—with 500 million users, any change is bound to upset some, and, those feelings of unhappiness are likely to be expressed on the web and in some cases, on the Facebook website. The virtual nature of expressing criticism can also make it difficult to tell whether an uproar is truly as widespread as it seems, as traditional media sources may begin to publish stories on issues that only elevate the perceived outcry. And in retrospect, it is easy to see that the Newsfeed feature, which in 2006 was viewed as a disruptive invasion of privacy, has now become one of the central and defining features of the website, reflecting the fact that changes made to Facebook do have a history of gradually winning the acceptance of users.

However, much of the rebellion concerning Facebook's privacy policy and the company's approach towards instating those policies has not waned as months and even years have passed. Part of the reasoning for this is because of how much the website's privacy policy has changed since its inception in 2004. As the metaphorical doors of the site have been opened to allow more users, so too have more users voiced their disagreement with the site's privacy policy. The tech website Gizmodo was one of several sites to publish an article entitled "Top Ten Reasons You Should Quit Facebook" (Yoder 2010), bloggers have posted dissatisfied entries with titles like "Good Bye Facebook. Your Privacy Sucks!" (Reynolds 2010), and commenters on articles posted about Facebook have routinely picked at the site's perceived failings (O'Neill 2009). These examples, pulled from a sea of many dissenting journalists, bloggers, designers, and Facebook users, provide a useful counternarrative against the official blog posts that Facebook uses as a platform for explaining its policy changes.

The narrative that these sources push against is the Facebook company's insistence that the world is becoming more open, and information shared on Facebook is merely following this supposed trend. This very point was made by Zuckerberg in a January 2010 interview with the technology-focused website TechCrunch where he stated that "People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people. That social norm is just something that has evolved over time" (Kirkpatrick 2010). Facebook's actions are then framed by the company as a response to what the organization claims are changing norms of American society resulting in people—Internet users in particular—becoming more open. "Openness", in this context, means that more of the information that Facebook users volunteer about themselves (or

are encouraged to give as they join the site) should become “public” data, or information available for anyone with internet access, including advertisers who could profit by learning the exact interests of millions of Facebook users. Whether or not the world is becoming as open as Facebook officials insist is a point that is itself debatable, especially in light of current data. Research published by Associate Professor of Law James Grimmelman shows that Facebook users actually tend to care a great deal about privacy, though they also tend to misunderstand the privacy policies of the website. However, Grimmelman demonstrates that the fact that Facebook users may not consistently behave rationally in regards to their privacy does not mean that privacy is not an important concern; rather, it illustrates that privacy is important to and only effective when determined by individuals (Grimmelman 2010). Though one of Grimmelman’s points is that Facebook’s privacy policy is difficult to understand, infographics created by Matt McKeon (and shown on the following page as Figures 1 and 2) have shown to great effect what the policy changes have done. In 2005, a Facebook user’s name, profile picture, demographic information, friends, and networks were visible only to that user, that user’s friends, and the network to which the user belonged; a user’s wall posts, photos, and extended profile data were even more limited, and visible only to that user’s friends. By April 2010, wall posts were still limited to friends and user photos were visible only to friends and those in the network. All of the other features—a user’s name, profile picture, demographic information, extended profile data, friends, and networks were visible to anyone on the Internet, and in addition, it is now possible for users’ “likes” and Facebook preferences to show up all over the web, from online shopping sites to newspaper articles. (McKeon 2010)

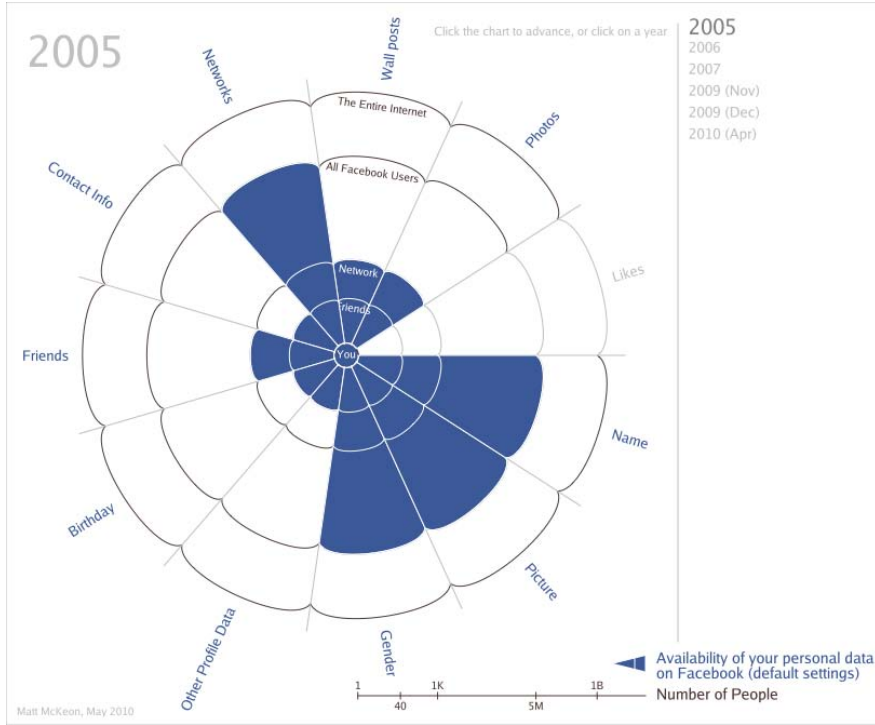


Figure 1: Facebook privacy settings in 2005

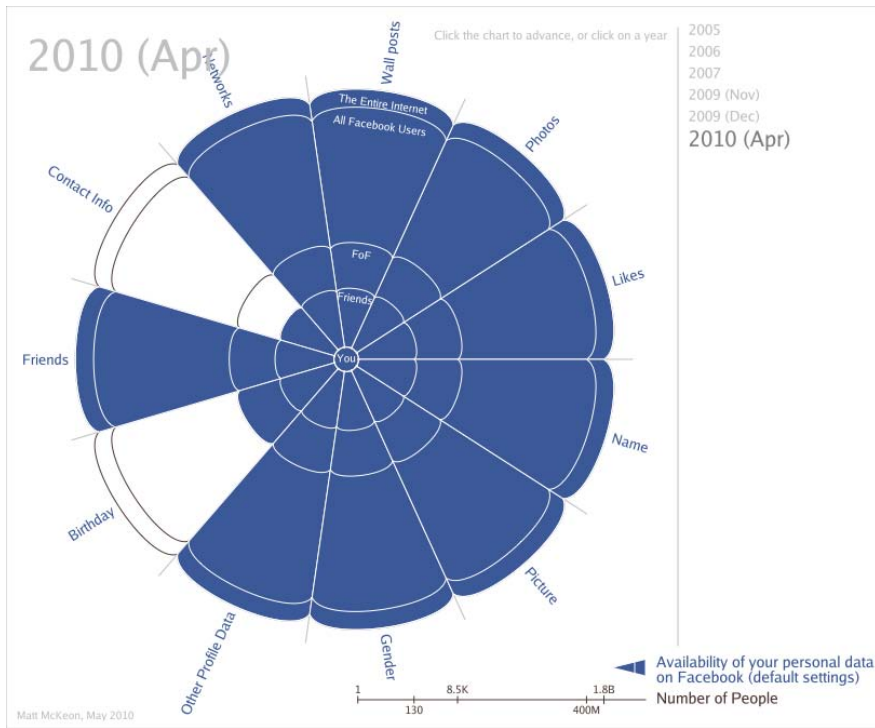


Figure 2: Facebook privacy settings in 2010

Another way to state these changes is in the words of Facebook's representatives. In 2005, the privacy policy of Facebook stated that "No personal information that you submit to Thefacebook will be available to any user of the Web Site who does not belong to at least one of the groups specified by you in your privacy settings." By 2010, the privacy policy had changed to claim that:

*Information set to "everyone" is publicly available information, just like your name, profile picture, and connections. Such information may, for example, be accessed by everyone on the Internet (including people not logged into Facebook), be indexed by third party search engines, and be imported, exported, distributed, and redistributed by us and others without privacy limitations. Such information may also be associated with you, including your name and profile picture, even outside of Facebook, such as on public search engines and when you visit other sites on the internet. **The default privacy setting for certain types of information you post on Facebook is set to "everyone."** (Facebook's Privacy Policy 2010, emphasis added)*

What these policy changes represent is a shift in Facebook's privacy values that can essentially be summed up as a systematic progression to a more public form of displaying information on the website. The juxtaposition of the privacy policy from 2005 and 2010 especially makes this clear by indicating that Facebook's original settings for its users (established when the site was still for students only) were such that any information stored, shared, and received on or through the site were kept private—that is, not accessible by anyone other than the users and the site itself. But as the site has matured and made itself more accessible to more people, it has also made that information shared by people more accessible.

Despite this reality, what many point to as the central problem with Facebook's privacy settings actually comes down to a lack of information and a disregard for user

opinions. A synthesis of the online material⁴ about Facebook suggests that there are two aspects with which users and critics have overwhelmingly expressed dissatisfaction: first, the supposedly poor job that Facebook has done of informing its users of changes to its policy, and second, the fact that those people who signed up before the privacy changes took place were forced to adopt them (even as they may not have been aware that information that they thought of as private one day was made public the next).

The first of these issues is tied to a general criticism of Facebook, well-articulated by Marshall Kirkpatrick of Read Write Web, which is that it does not listen to its user's concerns and opinions, preferring instead to adopt new policies and features and wait for users to adapt to the instituted changes. As Kirkpatrick explained, "Facebook's privacy changes were bad for two reasons: because they violated the trust of hundreds of millions of users, putting many of them at risk where they had felt safe before, and because by burning that trust in the first major social network online, the next generation of online innovation built on top of social network user data is put at risk" (Kirkpatrick 2010). Though Facebook's status as the "first major social network" may deserve closer analysis based on the aforementioned history of SNSs, the concern about trust that Kirkpatrick voices reflects an expectation on the part of Facebook users that the opinions of consumers are just as important as those of the company. Facebook's changes thus force consumers to consider questions about what trust and privacy mean in the Internet Age: is it reflective of a certain brand of entitled thinking, or even plain naïveté, to assume information expressed

⁴ The online materials to which I refer are the numerous online articles (from blogs as well as online newspapers) that express some sort of discontent with the issue of privacy on Facebook. Because of the extraordinary number of articles on this topic, it is impossible to list every article. However, a cursory online search of "privacy on Facebook" should provide a taste of responses from Facebook users.

in an online setting should, as a default, be protected and withheld from third parties? Facebook's view, when pushed to the extreme, suggests that anything published online should be understood as also intended for public distribution, a concept that is being debated in online and academic spaces. Some, like University of Massachusetts-Amherst Legal Studies student Chris Peterson, argue that the very idea of privacy when applied to virtual spaces demands a more nuanced explanation revolving around the integrity of context. His central thesis is that privacy has everything to do with relegating information (and communication) to the contexts for which it is intended. For example, it seems intuitive to suppose that a college student might play drinking games with friends in a dorm room and yet would protect this information from his Grandmother so as to project to her a different type of persona (Peterson 2010). However, with its changing privacy settings, increasing openness, and ability to broadcast photos uploaded by anyone, the features of Facebook make the possibility of keeping distance between these two personas much more difficult. Peterson uses this conflict to make the point that privacy is inextricable from one's environment, and that "the physical world and Facebook have extremely different information architectures and so are necessarily different when it comes to practicing privacy" (2010:3). In other words, in the offline world it might be considered rude or inappropriate for one to bring up at church the activities a friend was partaking in at a club the night before. But with the Facebook policy of all information being public information, this distinction becomes lost. Facebook thus has, as Miller argued, "all the contradictions found in a community" (Miller 2010). Context still matters, but the Facebook privacy policy conflates these contexts and in doing so amplifies user's concerns about the wrong people finding out the wrong sort of information via Facebook. Recently, I

attended a forum sponsored by the Hotchkiss School entitled “The New World of Media” and where similar issues were being discussed. Shelby Bourne, co-founder of CNET Networks, explained that he found the central privacy issue of Facebook to be what he dubbed the “Wedding Party Syndrome”: At a wedding, the convergence of people from different contexts into one setting has the potential for the sort of information sharing that a bride and groom may prefer not to see (Bourne 2010). For example, a groom may not want his friends from college exchanging stories with his bride’s parents, and so forth. Wedding Party Syndrome refers perfectly to Peterson’s thesis: information out of context can itself represent a breach of privacy.

Facebook’s second fault in the eyes of the public, namely its seeming disregard for its users’ opinion, is one that has been addressed by the company in some form. The latest instance of this was May 2010 when, in response to another storm of criticism about privacy settings and in an attempt to regain the trust of its users, Facebook simplified its privacy policy into three main components, summed up by Brennon Slattery of PCWorld (2010) as “aggregating all privacy settings into one simple control; blocking unwanted visitors to your profile and others; and stopping third-party applications from sneaking into your personal information”. While these changes did not change the core fact that the default setting for user information is public, they did demonstrate that the Facebook Company and staff do have an awareness of its users’ feelings and a desire to keep those feelings positive.

At the same time, though newspapers have reported on the so-called phenomenon, there is no substantial and reliable data on how many people have left Facebook and cited privacy concerns as the sole or defining reason for departure, as the site does not publish

such information.⁵ Using personal anecdotal information, I can confirm that while I have had many conversations with friends about their dissatisfaction with the Facebook privacy concerns, few of these people have actually left the site permanently. Those that *did* leave the site did so only temporarily and for reasons related to procrastination rather than privacy concerns, suggesting that if anything they were spending too *much* time on the website.

So what is it that Facebook provides for its users that makes it difficult for them to stay and keeps them invested enough to criticize even as they remain attached to their own Facebook profiles? What this appears to indicate is that Facebook provides functions and uses that users cannot find in other website and SNSs. Dan Yoder, in his article titled “Top Ten Reasons to Quit Facebook”, may have touched upon the answer when he jokingly admitted that part of his reason for trying to convince people to leave the site was that after deactivating his account, he would “like my own social network to migrate away from Facebook so that I’m not missing anything” (Yoder 2010). In fact, there is truth to Yoder’s statement. Facebook has grown so that it not only gives its users the ability to connect and interact with its friends, but also provides the functions of letting users upload videos and pictures, organize and plan events, support and invite others to join causes, and even play games. Furthermore, Facebook is the most prominent SNS; it has the greatest number of users of all other SNSs. As Yoder said, leaving Facebook can actually mean missing out on a great deal of socially spread information. For example, I deactivated my Facebook a year ago and was asked by an engaged friend to please reactivate because she found the Private

⁵ Though they do not publish the information, I am confident that the website does have it. As someone who has deactivated her Facebook account several times, I am intimately aware of how throughout the deactivation process, the site not only asks why users are attempting to leave but also offers counterarguments and “solutions” for any reason the user gives.

Message function to be more ideal for sending out information to her bridesmaids than email. Another friend of mine confessed that once she left Facebook, she realized that she was left disconnected from her classmates: she was no longer in the loop about parties, could not see pictures from events that she had attended, and so on. Her surprise at this realization was an indication that the extent to which Facebook was a part of her social life was previously unknown to her; it was only after she attempted to leave the site that she saw how ingrained its presence was.

What these anecdotes show is that not only has Facebook become culturally rooted as an information-sharing and interaction-enabling tool within its users, but that it is also so popular that there is simply no current viable SNS alternative that can compete with the huge advantage that Facebook has: Friends. Facebook is the online location where most Friends are. And since Facebook has always represented a means to connect with friends, it appears that the corollary is true: if all of your friends are on Facebook and you decide to leave, you are, in some respect, cut off from certain aspects of your social life. It may still be possible to stay in the loop after leaving Facebook when a majority of your friends utilize the SNS, but it is certainly more inconvenient.

I have attempted in this chapter to provide a brief history of the important aspects of Facebook's short but dense history. My account has not been comprehensive, but my goal has been for it to provide an illuminating glance at the site and introduction to the conversation around some of the issues that the website finds itself facing. In the process, one fact that I believe has also been made apparent is that the intimate relationship Facebook users appear to have with the site is one that is highly personal and extremely important to them. In the next chapter I will attempt, using a personal, explicit, and

methodic manner, to explain how users interact with the Facebook website, and how the site influences and encourages certain types of communication and information-sharing while making others less possible.⁶

⁶ For more scholarly treatment of issues surrounding privacy on Facebook, see Aleksandra Korolova's "Privacy Violations Using Microtargeted Ads: A Case Study" and Harvey Jones and Jose Hiram Soltren's "Facebook: Threats to Privacy".

AN INSIDER EXAMINATION OF FACEBOOK

Chapter Two

An effective explanation of Facebook demands an overview of the social networking site's astonishing statistics. Launched in 2004, the site boasts over 500 million active users and 200 million active users who access Facebook through mobile devices. Half of Facebook's users log onto the site at least once a day, resulting in over 700 billion minutes being spent on Facebook per month. These numbers are impressive on their own rights, but are really only half of a story that is completed by looking at the site's rapid growth: in 2008, Facebook had only 80 million active users as opposed to its current 500 million.

In this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of the mechanics of the site and its faculties in order to give an understanding of how the site is used. My explanation is one that will appear redundant and tedious to a regular Facebook user, for whom each aspect of what I explain comes as second nature. For the purpose of this methodical overview, I use my own Facebook page as the starting place for discussion. All of the photos and screenshots are taken from my page (which explains why certain names and images are

blacked out or made blurry); as a twenty-one year old college student, I fall directly into the demographic for which Facebook was initially intended as well as the demographic that continues to use the site most prolifically today. Furthermore, my use of Facebook preceded my own interest in the site as a topic of research, which has resulted in my close relationship with the material that I now attempt to explain.

Keith Hart (2004) has observed that, “an anthropology of the Internet relies on auto-ethnography, on fieldwork as personal experience. We each enter it through a unique trajectory. The world constituted by this ‘network of networks’ does not exist out there, independently of our own individual experience of it”. For the purposes of this chapter I use his understanding of the Internet as a starting place for my own research and explanation. Facebook is by nature an intensely communal and yet personal space. It is communal because the website is driven and powered by one’s “Friends”; participation on the site is impossible and disengaging without the presence of a network of Friends with whom to establish and build connections. However, entry into the site requires the creation of a personal page where one must define oneself, thereby turning the site into a personal experience as well. To do an ethnography of the site thus requires becoming a part of it. For though exclusionary practices are certainly possible within Facebook, when it comes to ethnographical research there can be no “insider” and “outsider”; there can be no fears over the ethical implications of “going native” or being a participant-observer. One simply is on Facebook or one isn’t. Facebook, in this case, makes matters of acceptance extremely clear-cut.

Even still, to label my approach to this subject and material as ethnographical or even auto-ethnographic rings as presumptuous and ill-fitting. As I mentioned before,

though I have spent a great deal of time on the site, my experience with Facebook preceded my experience with conducting research on Facebook. Therefore, this chapter represents neither an ethnographic nor an auto-ethnographic leap into the material. Rather, this is an insider account that purports to reach for ethnographic standards. Furthermore, because Facebook is about both the social and the personal, in addition to describing the mechanics of the site as entered through my own page, I have provided comments and short anecdotes from the Facebook pages and stories of other friends who use the site.

Facebook is included in the growing category of social networking sites, or, to repeat the boyd and Ellison (2007) definition that I introduced earlier, “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. In its aim to further explore these three functions, Facebook has grown in countless ways since its original launch (it has also suffered several backlashes from its users concerning certain conditions of this growth, as I attempted to convey in the previous chapter). It would be impossible for me to cover all of the functions that are available on Facebook; my intent is to cover the primary ones that are used most frequently by users. Additionally, the features that Facebook offers and the layout in which it offers these features also continue to change; in fact, after I wrote this chapter Facebook introduced a new design to its profile pages that compiled user information more succinctly. Though I will include images of the new and older designs, I have sought to capture the essence of the site and its utility rather than to explain specific details of its continuously changing features.

Explaining Facebook requires using a base definition of terms that are common to most users. Rather than define all of these terms at the beginning, I will explain them as I go so as to replicate the manner in which most users also learn how to navigate the site.

I now begin and focus my research upon the two pages that users see most frequently: the profile page and the home page. Of the two, I begin with the profile page, which most clearly exemplifies the dual personal and communal natures of the site.

The Profile Page

Every Facebook user has a profile page, and each user's page is different. The profile page operates as a personal website of sorts; if one searches or looks up the name of an individual on Facebook, it is the first page that appears. It is a space that "belongs" to each user, and it is through this page that users on Facebook craft and express identities for themselves as well as how they respond and react to those identities created by other users. The Profile page is divided into three primary sections: "Info", "Wall", and "Photos". For the purposes of space and relevance, I will go into a much more in-depth description of the first two and only briefly touch upon the final section.

Info Page

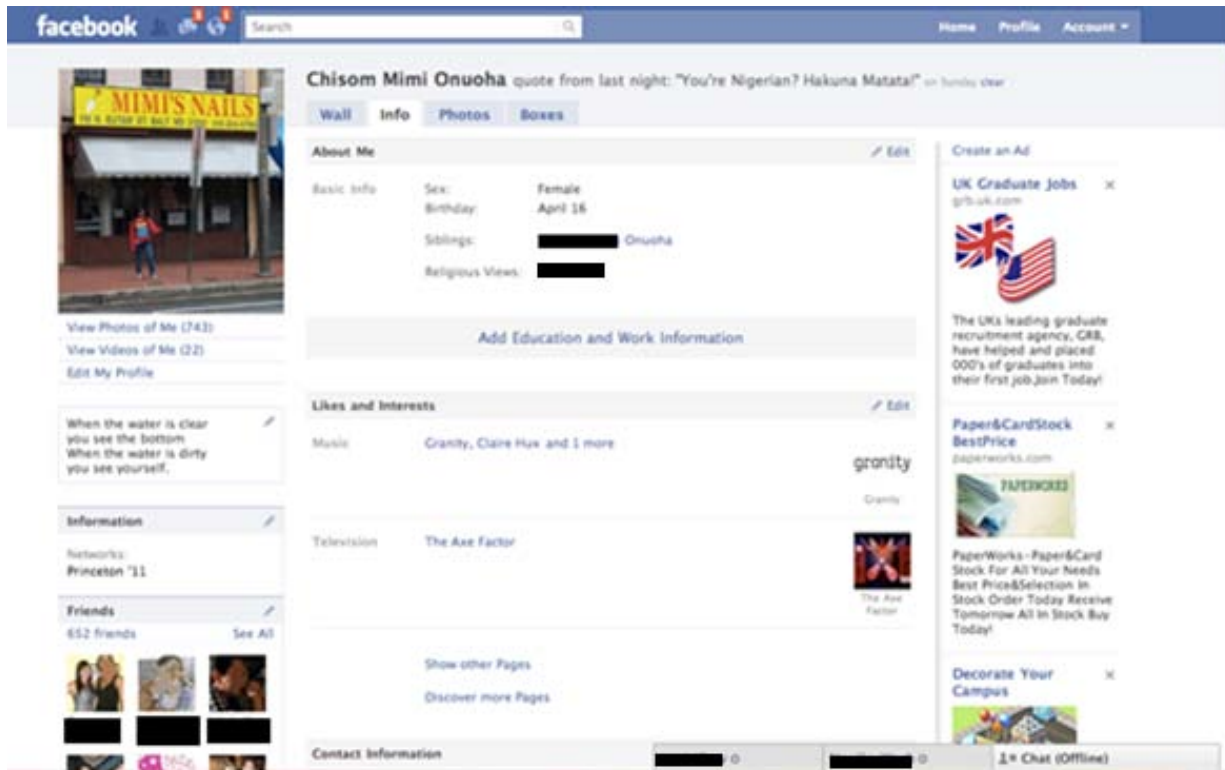


Figure 3: Info page on Facebook, November 2010

The information page is one space over which users have the ability—though limited by the restraints of the Facebook platform—to define themselves. Through it, the unique and messy borders of one’s personality and character are condensed into a neat, orderly, space. It is on this page that users are able to provide various types of personal information. I have listed here the different sections that are in the Info page, as well as what types of information they ask for.

- **About Me:** Users are asked to provide Basic Info, i.e. Sex, Birthday, Siblings, Parents, Relationship Status, Looking For (a category in which one indicates what one is searching for from Facebook, choosing from the options of “friendship,” “dating”, “networking” or “a relationship”), Current

City, Hometown, Religious Views, and Political Views. The remainder of the “About Me” section consists of Bio and Favorite Quotations, in which users may fill in a brief autobiography and their favorite quotations.

- **Education and Work:** Users are able to list the names of their current and previous employers, and their high school, college, and postgraduate institution names and dates of attendance.
- **Likes and Interests:** This section is composed of different categories that users are encouraged to fill in with personal information. The categories are Activities, Interests, Music, Books, Movies, and Television, and information within the categories are presented in the format of a list.
- **Contact Information:** This is the final section of the Info page. Users can list the ways that they can be reached: Phone, Residence, School Mailbox, AIM, Skype, Google Talk, Email, and Website.

It is vital to point out that users are not obligated to fill in all of these categories, and that users can also change their privacy settings so that only certain people are able to see particular pieces of information in their profiles. In many cases, the decision to include or remove certain pieces of information is as revealing of one’s personality and/or character as the decision to provide all of one’s personal information (for example, one of my friends decided to write for her religious views the words “Food = Love,” the motto of the student club to which she has the strongest affiliation). Given the fact that the Info page is the clearest way that users are able to conceptualize and craft their particular perceptions of themselves and then project these self-perceptions onto the Facebook world, it is understandable that this is the page upon which many privacy issues are centered.

Acquisto and Gross (2006) have determined that many students on Facebook misdetermine the visibility of their Facebook profiles, and that concerns about privacy are not enough to stop people from joining Facebook and sharing information. However, though the Info page is the piece of the identity-crafting Profile that the user has the most control over, it is only one piece. The Wall portion of the Facebook Profile also serves this purpose, though it is different in that other Facebook users are able to affect the Facebook perception of a user.

Wall Page



Figure 4: Wall page, November 2010

Facebook is, of course, a social networking site, and thus one of its aims is to connect people to others. In Facebook, the manner in which this is done is by “Friending” others—

that is, allowing other people access to view certain pieces of a user's information and to communicate in certain ways with that user via Facebook profile pages. The most relevant of these is through Wall Pages, or as they are typically known, Walls.

The Wall allows for conversation between individual users and their Friends. Each user has the ability to post information, in the form of status updates, to their walls. These statuses are simply short messages in which the Facebook user can literally type anything, provided that it fits within the limited number of characters. Statuses can range from a user's thoughts of the moment, to brief advertisements of events, to random questions, to anything the user feels like writing. Statuses can also be links, photos, or videos.

Friends—who are alerted to status updates—are able to “like” or “comment” on these statuses. “Liking” consists of little more than it implies: simply clicking a button, demarcated with a thumbs-up picture, to express approval. By “commenting” users leave any sort of remark or response to the status. “Liking” and “commenting” are not limited to status updates; photos, videos, and events can be commented on, while all of those as well as comments can be “liked.”

Friends are also not simply restricted to responding to the user; they also have the ability to share and/or write on other user's walls. These wall posts, like status updates, can be text, links, photos, or videos. Perhaps the most noteworthy element of wall posts is that they are inherently public. And because Facebook already has a utility by which friends can send each other messages that no one else can read—these are called “Private Messages”, and are delivered to a special Inbox that only the user can access—all Facebook users knows that their wall posts could potentially be read by any Facebook Friend. This creates an interesting pretense of closed conversation between two Facebook users. Two

users may have a wall post thread on one another's sides, but the idea that this conversation is only restricted to the two of them is a facade. It is, in reality, a conversation that is between two people but on *display* for a portion of the larger Facebook community. Posting on someone's wall is akin to having a conversation with another person in a crowded elevator: the speaker is directing his words to one individual, but is fully aware that everyone else could be (and most likely is) listening. This point about the duality of conversations via wall posts on Facebook will become especially salient in later chapters. The very visibility of these posts speaks to one of the core organizing principles of Facebook, which appears to be the idea that people do not only want to communicate with their friends, but they also want to witness communication amongst their friends.⁷

Having said this, many of the people I spoke with had personal anecdotes of times when, in face-to-face conversation, they referenced the content of two other people's wall-to-wall posts and then felt extremely awkward. This suggests that there is a level of decorum that seems to accompany Facebook wall conversations, much like the social norm that one is supposed to pretend not to listen in on the cell phone call of someone sitting beside them, even though it is obvious that the conversation is clearly audible. There is apparently some form of politeness by which some feel that they should not mention those personal conversations between people on each other's walls, despite the fact that anyone with proper access can view them.

⁷ This is especially typified by one of the newer Facebook additions, "View Friendship." Clicking this button allows one to view the interactions between any two Facebook friends, including (but not limited to) their wall posts, events they both attended, and photos that they are tagged in together.

Photo Page

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, because this particular function of Facebook is less relevant to the aims of this thesis, I will restrict my discussion of the Photo page to just the basics. Facebook, like most other sites and especially social networking sites, has a very strong visual element to it. Each Facebook user has a photo that appears on their profile page (typically called a “Profile Picture”) but these pictures are not simply limited to the pages. They also are featured, along with the user’s name, on each comment and wall post that the user leaves. The photos, thus, provide a visual representation—chosen by the user as self-representation—to accompany each piece of Facebook data that the user leaves.

The Photo page operates (in most cases, and in general) separately from the profile photo. It essentially showcases photos that the Facebook user has either uploaded him/herself or has been tagged in (tagging refers to the process of officially identifying someone in a photo so that, when one clicks on their profile page, it is listed there as a photo that they are in and thus can be looked up in).

Though I will not speak more about the Facebook Photo page, this in no way is a reflection of unimportance. I believe that an analysis could be done solely on the use of photos and how they are used to further perpetuate particular self-images of what kind of person one is, much in the vein of Don Miller’s (2000) argument about the hypervisibility that Facebook encourages. Grimmelman (2010) too has made a point about the public nature of Facebook photos, and how the fact that a user does not need another user’s permission to tag that second user in any photo is indicative of a lax approach towards privacy concerns. However, neither of these points is within the scope of this particular

endeavor, though I do provide resources at the conclusion of this chapter for those interested in such topics.

Earlier, I hinted at the communal and individual nature of the Facebook page, and it is important to highlight the inherent tension between these things. In the previous chapter, I gestured at Daniel Miller's (2010:14) claim that "Facebook has all the contradictions found in a community. You simply can't have both closeness and privacy....if you really do want to have more community and less isolated individualism, it means trading privacy. But popular discourse wants it both ways, they want a community that is private and anthropologists should be pointing out this kind of contradiction." In my discussions with classmates and colleagues about their use of the site, the point of a simultaneous privacy and community was brought up often. One friend remarked that the very reason why she had been so forthcoming with her personal information had everything to do with the extended privacy that Facebook offered in its earlier days. I have already discussed how Facebook's constant struggles over privacy represent a tension between the values of a tight-knit community and the desire to allow others to experience this same community. Elaboration on this point conveys that for most, the decision to allow more people access to personal information is directly related to the user's perception of who the consumers of that information are. A member of my university summed this idea up succinctly when she informed me that, "I leave my profile information blank because I know that anyone could be reading it!" This lighthearted comment implied that things would be different if she could control and know with certainty the identities and motives of all her readers. However, when I asked if having more control would prompt her to release more information, she was unrelenting in her insistence that because advertisers

on Facebook could access all of her information and activity, it was actually better to leave it off the page from the start.

On a more personal level, I understood her trepidation. My Facebook profile page, like hers, is almost completely blank, reflecting a twofold desire on my part: The first is a refusal to provide future friends a shortcut for getting to know me; if my Friends can only find out information about me if they are close to me, then it becomes easy to tell who my close friends are. (As a brief aside, I should note that many have expressed similar sentiments, though in regards to the automatic birthday reminder that Facebook has. These people have claimed that it becomes more difficult to judge how well their friends know them because all friends are saved the hassle of needing to remember birthdays.) My second personal identification with my friend's feelings is tied to the oft-exchanged horror stories of young people losing jobs because of Facebook statuses, information, picture, and activity that is somehow leaked to the wrong person. Such stories prompt a self-policing of Facebook behavior that occurs in other venues as well, such as on the wall page, where if someone posts a comment that a user finds undesirable, the user has the power to delete that comment. Users can also remove their name from a photo, a process known by users as "untagging". One of my friends explained to me that in order to maintain a certain level of cleanliness and "appropriateness" on her page, she often untags photos and deletes comments when she finds them unsatisfactory.

Thus concludes my discussion of the Facebook profile page. I will now move on to the one page that users interact with more than their profiles, simply because it is where one is immediately taken upon logging into Facebook: the home page.

The Home Page

Stylistically, the layout of the Home Page is similar to that of the Profile Page; both contain three columns, whereby the most important information is in the center, supporting features are on the left side, and the right column contains information that is (arguably) less vital than any of the rest.

However, as I discussed above, the Profile page is meant for public viewing; all of the interactions that take place on it can, for the most part, be viewed by all of a user's Friends. The Profile page that users see upon logging in is the same as what their Friends see (except, occasionally, for minor differences that are affected by the different privacy levels).

The same cannot be said for the Home Page. The Home Page is the page that each individual Facebook user sees upon logging into the site, and it is different for each user. The most important and useful feature of the Home Page is the News Feed; it is also the function of Facebook that most makes the site what it is in terms of its claim to be a social connector.

The News Feed

Facebook is a site about social interactions, and it is on the News Feed that social interactions are tracked. The primary purpose of the News Feed is simply to keep each Facebook user informed of the activities of their Facebook Friends in the form of a constantly-updating stream. The types of things that appear on Facebook News Feeds are illustrated in Figure 5 below.



Figure 5: Home page (with News Feed)

As Figure 5 shows, status updates, posted videos, links, comments, and likes appear on the news feed. The one thing that does *not* appear on one's news feed is information about one's own Facebook activity. This can serve to help one think of Facebook as a machine that helps deliver information about others without remembering that, in fact, information about oneself and one's own Facebook activity is also being decimated. Therefore, through Facebook, users gain more information about those around them, but also lose a bit of self-reflexivity.

I will further explain this point by using an example. I could log onto Facebook, immediately go to a Friend's profile page, and write a message on her wall, asking if she would like to meet for lunch later in the week. I could then click back to the home page and view all of the information and updates of my Facebook Friends on the News Feed. I would

witness status updates and comments, relationship updates, video postings, and the like.

The one thing I would *not* witness would be my earlier post on my Friend's wall. In my role as the witness, I would lose the ability to see my own activity alongside my Friends.

Though the News Feed is the largest and most important part of the Facebook Home page, as the figure shows, there are other features that the site has to offer. On the right and left sides, the Home page lists such things as events that one has been invited to, and Friends' upcoming birthdays. These and other features of Facebook—such as Facebook chat, where friends who are online can chat in real time—are all tools that aim to further expand Facebook's goal of helping people to “stay connected”, though the explicit definition of this term is unclear. It appears to imply engaging in some sort of conversation with other people through the features Facebook offers.

At the very least, it is true that through Facebook, users have the ability to communicate, express approval, respond, and acknowledge their Friends as well as themselves. What this acknowledgement and communication means in terms of their online and offline selves will be addressed in the next chapter.



Figure 6: Updated version of Facebook wall (March 2011)

IDENTITY ON THE WEB

Chapter Three

The previous chapters should have made it clear that once we move aside from historical and methodological descriptions, it becomes highly difficult to provide an easy definition of exactly what the Internet is and is not to its many users. Fortunately, various anthropologists and sociologists have conducted research on the Internet, and in the process have provided a number of clarifying sociological insights.

For the purpose of this chapter I start with the assumption, posited by Miller and Slater (2000), that the Internet is not a single thing; rather, it is composed of and intended for several different contexts. To regular Internet users, this claim seems intuitive. After all, most are familiar with the reality that the Internet can be used in a variety of ways, ranging from as a means to learn about possible jobs and careers to a place where one can enjoy Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. However, Postill's theory begs two further extensions.

First, what is true for one place on the Internet is not necessarily true for another. The conclusions drawn about Facebook cannot be summarily expected of World of Warcraft or even the comparable social networking site MySpace. Similarly, the conclusions reached about one website on the Internet cannot be used to explain the entire Internet. To make assumptions about Internet places without first analyzing the features that set these places apart is to risk oversimplification. Of course, it is possible for websites to share similarities; for example, many blogs have comparable formats and purposes. But just because they share these elements does not mean that we should assume that all blogs contain the same meaning for their readers and authors. The Internet is not a monolithic entity—each part of it demands its own analysis and study.

The second point I highlight is that though they are different places, *all* websites share in common that they are true and real places. There is a tendency in public discourse to think of online sites as nebulous places where fluid identities operate apart from the “real” world. The question of what “real” means is one to which I will return, but it is first important to establish that online domains are *not* divorced from physical, offline places. Online places are a *part* of everyday, offline contexts. The actions that occur within them not only can have the potential to affect both the online and offline world, but they also very often do.

Goffman’s seminal sociology text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) gave one of the first academic considerations about the performances inherent in each aspect of human life, and in the process provided a metaphor that has captured the terms of discussion on the topic: every individual as actor or actress. Each person is both actor and audience to his or her own and other’s plays, and all of these plays span settings and

contexts. To bring Miller and Slater into conversation with Goffman, it is accurate to say that Facebook, like home, work, or school, is merely another context (1959:13). Like all other contexts, it represents a place of performance for each actor, but it is the same actor who performs in each place. Though in the case of Facebook, where one's online identity is directly connected to one's offline identity, the link between and amongst contexts appears as much more visible, it is still necessary to emphasize. This is because the link between offline and online is absolutely crucial to the functionality of the site. In other words, Facebook functions in the way it does *because* it is tied to the interactions and meanings that are already crafted in the context of offline places and *because* the interactions that happen on the site are highly likely to affect offline interactions. I was personally presented with a frivolous yet illustrative example of this as I worked on this very paper. A friend and I attended a writing workshop wherein all participants held the shared understanding that we were required to work diligently on our independent papers. At one point in the session, I logged onto Facebook to let a classmate know that I had ended up using as a source a text that he knew very well. Five minutes later, my friend sitting beside me commented on the Facebook wall post that I had just written to inform me that I was supposed to be working instead of checking Facebook; I then turned in my chair and verbally pointed out the irony of her comment, prompting us to share a laugh before returning to work. Our interactions were seamlessly interwoven between Facebook and the offline world, and we did not find anything unusual about how we had oscillated so rapidly and fluidly between the two.

As the example shows, it is the intricacy of the ties between the interactions in the offline and online world that serve as support for the idea that the selves that are seen on

Facebook are just as “real” as the selves we encounter in the offline world. In fact, I posit that in light of Facebook and matters of Internet identity, this is indeed what “real” means: the ability for online interactions to have some sort of impact on our offline senses. With Facebook, there are a multitude of examples that prove this point, some with stakes that are higher than the casual interaction between my friend and me at our writing workshop. One notable example that received some media attention was a November 2010 story about a woman fired from her job after her supervisor saw disparaging comments that she had made about him on Facebook. This incident launched a discussion across the web about the divide between private and public, and whether the posting of such comments was ground for a dismissal. Eventually, a Federal court decided the act of firing was illegal under free speech labor laws, but regardless, the fact that more companies are adopting—or at the very least discussing the possibility of adopting—social media policies for their employees reflects an understanding of how some Internet involvement can have negative repercussions for those in the corporate world (Hananel 2011, Dishman 2010). As Karen Glickstein (2011) warned in the *Springfield Business Journal*, “The rules will continue to change, and information will continue to be broadly disseminated. Only companies that proactively consider the possibilities will be prepared to address the social aspect of this new media”.

These examples represent external instances of when Facebook’s reality was made obvious by repercussions for actions taken on the site. But even within the site, there is evidence of users asserting the reality of Facebook themselves. This internal element of Facebook’s reality as an online domain can be seen through the self-creation that occurs within the site: as I explained earlier, users have and take advantage of the ability to

construct their profiles and personal information so as to advance a certain image, conception, or message about themselves. Some social scientists have argued that because of this self-creation, Facebook selves may be more “real” than offline selves. Internet anthropologist Daniel Miller makes the argument in his paper “An Extreme Reading of Facebook” that making a self visible helps to create that self (Miller 2010). Miller’s argument comes from his research in Trinidad and is founded on a Trinidadian belief about masks: rather than working as a disguise, the mask—or even merely the outward appearance—serves as the best indication of who someone is because it has been crafted or chosen by that person. The Facebook profile page, with its boxes and lists that ask the user to define him or herself and then present that self to the Facebook world, is analogous to the Trinidadian mask, as both are completely self-constructed.

Miller sums up his argument with the adage, taken from one of his informants, that “the true person is the one you meet on Facebook, not the person you meet face-to face” (2010: 14). For it is on Facebook that the person has had the chance to shape him or herself in such a way that is pleasing to him or her, and the very act of shaping reveals character. To discover who someone is, look at what they post on Facebook. Similarly, to discover who *you* are, look at the compendium of all of the things that you have posted on Facebook—this is the most realistic self that you have. If, as Miller argues, making a self visible helps to create it, then the set-up of Facebook lends itself to the visible construction of selves and relationships.

But this construction is a process, fleshed out in the myriad of interactions—wall posts, comments, “likes”—that take place on the site. Crucial to the Facebook experience are the elements of time and change; no user can gain a complete experience of the site by

logging on merely once or twice (in fact, those people who only log onto Facebook every once in a while receive a very different and arguably less total experience of the website as a result of not spending enough time on it). The Facebook experience of constant change becomes noteworthy when placed in conversation with 20th century French philosopher Henri Bergson's crucial claim in *Creative Evolution* (1944) that *everything changes*, and as such, identity and the self evolve continuously and constantly. States of being undergo change each moment; the self, whether on Facebook or some other offline context, is never composed of separate wholes. The self is in a permanent construction process.

In a sense, Facebook helps to illuminate this Bergson-esque view of the self, for as I explained in the previous chapter, a user's profile page on Facebook is constantly changed and updated, in two specific ways: first, the actions that user takes on his or her own, such as writing on people's walls, uploading photos or videos, adding or deleting information, commenting or answering questions, and the like. The second manner through which change happens is through the actions taken by other users upon a user's one's Facebook profile and presence—when *they* comment on photos, tag people in your videos, write on your wall, tag you in a post or note, and other forms of online contact (Abbas and Dervin 2009). A user may log on to the site in the morning, log off, and log back on again in the evening and discover a completely changed page, with new information, updates, and notifications.⁸ Regardless of whether a user is there to witness it or not, on Facebook “individuals are continuously reconstituting themselves into new selves in response to internal and external stimuli”, creating new parts of their selves rather than one long extended self (Ewing 1990). On Facebook—just like in Western societies, as the work of

⁸ Say something about how this change is actually dependent also on how much yo friends use it, compare the example of my dad who doesn't touch his facebook so it is the same.

social scientist Katherine Ewing attests— this contradiction and consistent transition is a natural state of being.

The entire discussion of self and identity on the Internet is one that is preempted and in many ways informed by Foucault's *Technologies of the Self*, which claimed that certain technologies "permit individuals to effect by their own means with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls" (1980: 18). As early as 1980, Foucault was able to find a connection between the formulation of self and the potential that technology had to enhance that process. While Foucault laid the groundwork for detecting a connection between technology and construction of the self, it was Turkle (1995) who was one of the first social scientists to look at *digital* technologies in particular as being especially linked with identity formation. The work of Foucault and Turkle informs my own work in this paper, but when considering Facebook, their theses demand a necessary amount of extension.

The crucial addition to both of their arguments has to do with the *way* in which Facebook manages to aid in online and offline identity formation. For by virtue of demanding that an individual represent his own true identity on the site, Facebook accomplishes the aforementioned process in a manner that is at once specific, fluid, and as contradictory as any other process of identity construction. But because every action is recorded on the site, it creates a more coherent visualization of the acts. In other words, the actions, thoughts, beliefs and work that go into any person who is creating and defining his self are always messy and contradictory, but as they change, the remnants of how one once used to be tend to survive only in the tenuous and imperfect medium of memory. But on

Facebook, a clear record is kept of each user's actions. The process of change is systematically documented, and as a result institutionalized within the site.

Death on the Internet and Facebook

There is one thing that can soundly interrupt the process of change: death. Death brings with it an abrupt end to our bodies and our selves; it is a process that none can escape. If the large amount of literature on the subject is any indication, fascination with death abounds in academia. It has been approached from a variety of angles and disciplines, ranging from investigations on the biological and psychiatric aspects of dying to work in the social science on the implications, reactions, and importance of several different aspects of death.

In the anthropological tradition, many examinations of the topic revolve around death rituals, especially those that take place in cultures that are notably not of the Western European and American tradition. Among the examples of this trend are Conklin's study of compassionate attitudes towards cannibalism in grief in Amazonian society (2001), Harris's study of the treatment of devils and the spirits of the dead among the Laymi (1982), and Paerregaard's examination of death rituals within the Andes (1987). More recent studies, such as Dernbach's research from Chuuk, Micronesia (2005) continues the trend of looking outwards rather than inwards when it comes to death.

Of the anthropologists who have taken the West as their field of study, most of the published work that I have focused on has been theoretical rather than ethnographical and practical in nature. The epochal work of anthropologist Ernest Becker typified the former: most emblematic of all was his argument that humanity's inherent fear of death was and is

an evolutionary necessity—a claim that would go on to provide a considerable impact into the terms with which death would be understood within the social sciences. In terms of current anthropological treatments, James W. Green's *Beyond the Good Death: The Anthropology of Modern Dying* (2008) and Ronald Grime's *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (2000) offer some of the most thorough examinations of Western trends, rituals, and attitudes surrounding the subject of death. One of the topics that Green highlights in his anecdotal and anthropological examination of how dying has been treated in literature, academia, and popular culture is the idea of a “good death”. The popular public notion of the “good death”, which Green (2008:8) traces back to French historian Philip Ariès but acknowledges came into popularity “partly as a reaction to the twentieth century’s medicalization and commercialization of life’s end”, is centered around the idea that there are some positive and personalized ways of dying that are inherently better than the alternatives. These types of deaths are “comfortable and meaningful”, and include the well-known public approval of an experience of dying that is a peaceful passing away in one’s bed from old age, surrounded by friends and family (2008: 192). Conversely, within this model, deaths by AIDS, cancer, and other chronic diseases are framed as bad and less desirable, deaths that are “messy, painful, full of contradictions, and fearful” (though Green points out that most deaths tend to be this way) (2008: 192). In North America today, lifespans have increased to points that far exceed earlier eras, and thus Green points out that notions about “bad deaths” can be tied directly to age: deaths of young people, or losses of children, easily make the list of less-preferred deaths.

Grimes further fleshes out the good death/bad death public discourse by exploring the contradictions within Western approaches towards death. The typical Western

approach towards death begins with careful avoidance. As Grimes explains, “In North America, we place little emphasis on anticipating our own deaths. In fact, we avoid doing so with notable consistency” (Grimes 2000: 220). Grimes goes on to point out that the Western cultural fear of death contributes to a sense of discomfort about it. This fear and discomfort can even be shown to spill over into our offline rituals for death, which come primarily in the form of an uneasy relationship with emotional display at funerals. “Distaste for funerals arises for two contradictory reasons: on the one hand, suspicion that ceremonial formalities stifle genuine feeling and, on the other, fear that funerals will not succeed in stifling emotional display” (2000: 245). In a society where death is viewed as a morbid inevitability best treated with a studied avoidance, it seems logical that the eventual confrontation with the subject can provoke a myriad of conflicting emotions and feelings. The very expression of these emotions can itself be a tricky process, often viewed as appropriate only for some and only to a certain extent.

Within the context of Green and Grimes’s work emerges a framework for understanding the range of issues and emotions that the death of a Facebook user can conjure. With a user population that initially was—and still to some extent is, despite demographics of the site changing to include older users—skewed disproportionately towards the young, it is understandable that Zuckerberg and the other founders of the site initially did not make provisions for what would happen should the death of a Facebook user occur. And yet ironically, consideration of the potential (or inevitability) of user deaths rings as far more vital precisely because of the young average user age. Any death of a young Facebook user falls immediately into the category of “bad deaths”—deaths that are

undesirable, tragic, and present even more confusion and difficulty for those who must cope.

But there is another aspect to the death of a Facebook user that has everything to do with the medium of the site and of the Internet. There is ample evidence on the web that shows that certain aspects of Facebook can promote a situation by which friends and families of deceased users find it difficult to move on because they continue to receive Facebook updates from their deceased relatives. In a space like Facebook, where everything is constantly changing—both in the Bergstromian and literal sense of the word—it can become trying to confront the cognitive dissonance inherent in *knowing* that someone is no longer physically present but constantly *seeing* virtual updates from them on Facebook. The buzz surrounding this issue resulted in the creation of Memorial pages, or pages that made sure friends wouldn't receive updates from deceased users while simultaneously commemorating those users in the form of giving them their own (static) pages⁹ (Moore 2009). Even still, adoption of the page was not made mandatory, and it almost certainly has not been used for all Facebook profiles of deceased users. In fact, the page can bring up even more tangled issues that friends of the deceased may be loath to confront, such as who gets to determine what should happen to someone's Facebook presence? Who gets the ultimate authority in deciding whether that person's life should be commemorated as a Facebook memorial page, left the same way it was, or even simply removed from the site? All of these options can reiterate fresh hurts for already-grieving people, and the decision of how to handle them is not one that can be taken lightly.

⁹ Facebook has a feature where it encourages users to get in touch with Friends who they may not have interacted with on the site in quite some time; the algorithm informing this feature does not filter out deceased users unless their pages have been changed to Memorial Pages.

Moving away from Facebook and into a more generalized virtual setting, in some sense, the Internet can be said to both resolve and amplify many of the complications that Westerners already feel towards death. On the one hand, the personal physical space that the virtual world provides can give more room for composure: on the Internet, no one can see an emotional break-down unless that process is self-documented and uploaded or posted. The act of mourning has the capability to become neatly composed in a way that is impossible to achieve in the offline world, where body cues, watery eyes, and vocal tremors can be difficult to hide. Furthermore, the Internet provides its own spaces to commemorate the dead. In fact, there currently exist websites, like gonetoosoon.com and 1000memories.com, where Internet users can create digital scrapbooks of deceased loved ones. Other websites, like TheDigitalBeyond.com, have even created ways of profiting from the real-life implications of what gets digitally left behind when active Internet users pass away.

But at the same time, some aspects of the Internet make the process of closure much harder to sense. Much in the same way that Facebook continues the process of updates even after a user has died, one's offline death does not erase one's online presence. The process of forgetting, which has been understood to be a necessary part of the Western approach to death, can become complicated and difficult online. A consideration of Facebook is crucial in this regard because it expertly exemplifies the majority of these concerns. The very creation of the aforementioned websites and of the Facebook memorial sites are indications that something must be done with the online presence that lingers after a person has died. This in itself is an acknowledgement of the significance that our online selves both can and do have.

But cyber-deaths are interesting not just because of their occurrence, but also because of the response that has developed (and is being developed) as a means to cope with the issues they present. As Grimes says, “The question is not *whether* cyber ritual is real, but *how* it is real” (2000: 273). In examining deaths on Facebook, perhaps we should not be surprised by formations of responses. Instead, we should focus our attention upon discovering what exactly those responses signify.

GRIEF ON FACEBOOK

Chapter Four

On July 20th, 2010, a local news station released an online story about the death of a university student. The death was untimely and tragic: the victim was a twenty-one year-old college senior who was hit by a truck while completing a cross-country ride for charity. By the time the truck driver saw the victim, it was too late; though he tried to swerve out of the way, his oversized trailer struck and killed her.

I found out about the death of Nina Jackson on July 21st by email notification. In the summer of 2008, I had worked as a camp counselor with a group of other university students. At the conclusion of the summer, we established an email thread through which we would occasionally keep in touch with one another. Over the course of the next year, as we moved on with our lives the thread died down until we had all but forgotten about its existence. But on July 21st, 2010, the thread was revived when one person sent out a somber email alerting the rest of the group to the passing of one of our cohort.

It was the first time in my life that someone had passed away who was both close to my age and someone that I considered a friend. I found myself in a state of shock, confused as to what my next move should be. I hadn't spoken to the group in several months, and thus the prospect of calling any of them felt strange. Even still, I wanted to feel connected to Nina and the people who had known her. It was this combination of emotions—surprise, confusion, loneliness, disbelief—that drew me to her Facebook page.

On Nina's Facebook page, I witnessed something that, even in my muddled emotional state, struck me as extraordinary. In the hours following the accident, her Facebook page had become a place of congregation for all of her grieving friends. Though it was clear that she had passed away, people were writing messages on her wall that were addressed to her; they described memories, expressed their feelings of loss at her death, and wrote about how different life would be without her. I spent a long time scrolling through the posts, reading messages written to Nina by people who, for the most part, I had never met or even heard of. After reading all of the posts, I felt as though I were a part of a community of mourners. I felt this way, though I also felt no desire or need to post anything on her wall myself.

In the days following July 21st, I spoke with many other people about what I had seen on Nina's Facebook page. The image of scores of wall posts, all addressed to a deceased individual who—maybe, probably—would never see them was one that lingered in my mind, and as a result I found myself often discussing the moment. My friends had many reactions to the story, but one of the most prevalent was disapproval, bordering on repulsion. They contended that there was something wrong about the act of writing on someone's Facebook wall to express grief and insisted that the public context of the wall

was simply an inappropriate place for such actions. My friends, people who were my age and had been using Facebook for just as long (if not longer) than I, thought it was more than simply misguided to use Facebook as a replacement memorial of sorts; they actually found it deeply disrespectful. In that moment where some sort of Facebook formality—what I would later look upon as a rite or a ritual—was being created, my friends expressed deep dissent to that creation. The fact that these two reactions were felt nearly simultaneously by groups of people that shared a culture and demographic struck me as significant.

To say that rites and rituals are central tools used by anthropologists to gather cultural data is too obvious to rank as argument. Rituals, when boiled down to their simplest definition, are habitual and/or formalized actions that carry symbolic meaning. Because they are culturally constructed, they also hold a considerable societal impact and importance. Condensed within them are depths of information about a wealth of cultural systems, including but not in the least limited to that society's values, beliefs, hierarchical standards, and social bonds. It is through rites and rituals that humans are able to make sense of life's events, and are able to further distinguish the special from the everyday; the very establishment of rituals gives humans a sense of control over defining life events such as birth and death. Rothenbuhler and Coman, in their work on media anthropology, explain that rituals are necessary and open to individual appropriation and reflection, and they cite Maurice Bloch in their claim that it is this very ambiguity of rituals that allows us to gift them with some sense of overriding truth (2005:14). Because rituals fluctuate between the past traditions they represent and the current people who adapt them, they

occupy a unique space that only serves to further set them apart from that which is pedestrian.

But death rites represent a unique field within contemporary ritual studies, in part due to their confrontation of ambiguity and in part because of their relative stability as compared with other rituals. For example, according to Grimes, marriage rites, though they may follow a general and prescribed script in most societies, are often subject to invention and re-creation by participants. Customs and traditions may be upheld, but a great deal of experimentation can also be expected (Grimes 2006:269).

But rites around death—including “memorials, exhumations, re-burials, and even pre-death ceremonies” (Grimes 2000:222)—hold a greater sense of uncertainty and can appear to raise problems. No one knows with absolute certainty what happens after death. Projections may be made and beliefs can be had, but there is no way to verify either with complete confidence. Therefore, as Grimes says, “Death rites never provide answers. Ritual is a good way of performing, thereby becoming identified with, our most troubling questions” (2000:19). If anything, death rituals raise more questions than answers, though as the last chapter explained, Westerners are likely to ignore those questions with a studied concentration.

Furthermore, in North America, most other rites—such as birth, marriage, and coming-of-age rites—tend to be for the individuals who are most directly affected by the event. Birth rites are for the person who has been born (and in some cases, the mother and occasionally father who are birthing the child), marriage rites are centered upon the couple to be wedded, and coming-of-age rites focus upon the person who is passing through to the next stage of life. But death rites are different in function, for we have no way of

guaranteeing that the person they commemorate is aware of the ceremony or events. In some cultures, death rituals take place primarily to ensure that the soul of the deceased person is well treated, but in the West, we are as a rule less likely to acknowledge or believe in the need of the soul to be spiritually or metaphysically released and guided to its next destination (2000:243-250).

What Westerners do tend to have is a minimalistic approach to funeral and death rites. The late anthropologist David G. Mandelbaum, who studied death rites in several cultures, argued that American culture has a deritualized approach to death (ed. Herman 1959: 58) that often results in a widespread discomfort with public emotional displays at funerals and memorials (though some leniency is offered to direct relatives of the deceased in the name of expression). However, Westerners also tend to display an individualized approach to death rites so as to insist that rites are intended to comfort the living—even though these same funerals can suppress grief and result in a decidedly *not* cathartic experience. As a result, Mandelbaum argued that our contradictory and minimalistic approach to memorials and funerals may lead mourners to search for their own individual ways of addressing their grief; when these solutions are searched out repeatedly, “they may tend to coalesce and to become institutionalized” (1959:214). In other words, Mandelbaum suggested that through this process, there is the potential for creation of new rituals around death.

This notable suggestion returns us to the curious dissension to the acts occurring on Nina’s Facebook page. What was actually taking place on Nina’s Facebook page was predicated by a collapse of the two layers that the site is organized upon—what Miller calls the “active layer” and the “inactive layer” (Miller 2010:14). The active layer refers to the

people that a Facebook user interacts with consistently on Facebook; typically this group is directed correlated with the people that a user interacts with on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis in the offline world as well. They are the Friends who comment on a user's statuses, who are tagged in a user's photo albums, and who a user will reciprocate to along the same lines. These are the people with whom one's online and offline interactions are often seamlessly connected. They also make up a relatively small portion of a user's Facebook Friends.

The majority of Facebook Friends fall into Miller's inactive layer, which is what I prefer to call the passive layer, as all of these people are active to certain users on some level. These are the hundreds of people who a user has as Friends but typically does not interact with. According to Miller, they come to represent "a generic other consisting of anyone or everyone." What is crucial about this group is that though the user may not actively engage with them, he or she is still aware of their general presence, and they become important in Miller's eyes because of "what their role is in relation to our personal postings" (2010:14). This is a role that the majority of the time is perpetual witness.

In the wake of my friend's death, there suddenly occurred on her wall a collapse of both layers of her friends into one temporarily active group. Users who generally would not and had not interacted with Paige (a fact that was clear because of the manner in which Facebook makes it easy to trace one's history of contact with any other user) suddenly appeared and, as a mass, began to write on her wall. The comments they wrote mentioned her by name and were ostensibly addressed to her. And yet, they also were not. As I addressed in an earlier chapter, Facebook has many tools by which users can communicate with one another. Wall posts are by far one of the more public methods of interacting, as

they are generally visible by all of one's Facebook friends on both the active and passive layers. Had any of those users wanted to write a message explicitly to my friend, they could have opted for a Private Message; this would have ensured that the only person who could have accessed the message would be the user to whom it was addressed. But instead, they chose the public forum of the wall post, implicitly showing that if the message was not intended to reach a wider audience, it was at least acceptable if widely viewed.

Implied in their actions was the undertaking of a performance that was in its nature different from what a wall post typically implies: one person communicating with another active layer user, knowing that any member of the general inactive layer could view it. Rather, in the performance taking place on my friend's wall, members of my friend's inactive layer were writing comments that were addressed *de facto* to people they did not even know. All of the users were brought together by their shared experiences with my friend, but even still, they only *indirectly* acknowledged one another. The witnesses continued to be just that, even when they finally stepped out of invisibility.

There were also aspects of ritualizing behavior embedded in the actions of those who posted on my deceased friend's wall. In line with Grimes's list of ritualistic gestures presented in *Deeply Into the Bone* (2000:221), the people who posted on Nina's wall (and to some extent those of us who lurked, preferring to only read the posts), were engaging in an act of congregation by coming together to write on her wall. The sentiments could also be said to be an act of commemoration. Taken together, the writers and conscious readers of the wall posts were all partaking in a type of ritual: a virtual, cyber-ritual.

But what interrupted conceptualization of the ritualistic aspects of the wall posts was the sizable number of people who wholeheartedly disagreed with the behavior. Those

acts that in one light could be viewed as a form of rite were in another viewed as disrespectful. And dissent did not spring from *what* was being said about my friend; there was no opposition to the specific words or sentiments. Rather, it was the very existence and *placement* of the sentiments. They took issue with *how* my friend was being commemorated; their opposition was on the level of context rather than content.

What did this dissent mean? Was it itself a ritual, an attempt to maintain a social order after the death by ensuring that grief was expressed by the proper people and in the proper places, keeping in line with a decidedly North American treatment of emotion? Or was it an outright denial of what they saw?

What is clear is that implicit in the conflict of opinions was the construction of ritual-like behavior in a new context. Despite Mandelbaum's claim that new rituals can be developed when older ones are simply not sufficient, there is still an element of tradition to rituals and rites that rests upon their being actions with a written history of familiarity, actions that may have been passed down generationally or through widespread cultural knowledge. While pieces may change slightly so as to adjust to the demands of the times, the essence of the rite—that inexplicable quality which is impossible to pin down but defines it as what it is—remains the same.

But on Facebook (*specifically* Facebook, as spaces for death are being and have already been crafted on the Internet in the forms of website like the aforementioned 1000memories.com and gonetoosoon.com), a sizable group of people found something to be different. When a Facebook user who also knew my deceased friend confessed that he was “uncomfortable with people posting stuff like that on her wall”, he was implicitly tapping into the Douglas-ian idea that such expressions were fit for other spaces; in that

moment, on her wall, matter was simply out of place (Douglas: 1966). If rites are like handed-down quilts that people continue to patch, it was as though some people felt that the Facebook wall posts were assaults to the very nature of the quilt, as if they had been handed a T-shirt instead (Grimes 2000). In the preface to *Rite Out of Place: Ritual, Media, and the Arts*, Grimes says that if one is to ask any common layperson where rituals reside or should be found, the general answer that they will give is, “someplace special” (Grimes 2006: X). It appears that despite its work in establishing and interactions and connections between individuals, for some people Facebook just was not a special enough place.

In *Media Anthropology*, Rothenbuhler and Conan raise an epochal question: “Why ignore the possibility...that new forms of ritual may be being generated right now, perhaps especially through the media’s operations?” (2005: 61). Though their focus is obviously upon the media, they refer to the ability of a new medium to provide the impetus and foundation for the formation of new types of rituals. Technology also is a tool that can impact the most essential nature of a ritual. The Durkheimian approach to death rites always advanced the idea that one function of death rites was to reaffirm social bonds and social structure; even when moving past the very fundamentalist aspects of his arguments, it is clear that death rites, with or without technology, always affect relationships within a people. Ritual adds an essentially human aspect to technology, just as technology has the capability to change the nature of rites as they were previously conducted and experienced.

For further analysis, I engage in conversation with Grimes, and more specifically with the discussion he begins about reinvention of death rites. Grimes argues that the reinvention of death rites requires “not only experimenting with less conventional ritual attitudes but also a wrestling match with the institutions that control them” (2000:281) He

goes on to insist that the fundamental change that must occur in the North American approach is a more hands-on attitude towards our dead. In the absence of such an approach, death itself has the potential to become “ethereal and abstract”. Grimes insists that there is a stark and dire need for “graphic myths rooted in tactile rites and passionate engagement without the requirement of literal belief” (2000: 282); Death must be imagined far more seriously than it currently is.

Whether Grimes is correct in his advocacy for a change in the Western approach towards death is far less significant than whether or not the actions taken on Facebook and subsequent responses to those actions are indicative of a change in that approach. Even in virtual rituals, there is a decidedly tactile and present aspect to actions. Though many people may sit in offline solitude with bright computer screens in front of them, we should not forget that they are, in that moment, choosing to sit behind those screens and be engaged in the virtual procedures. These individuals could have chosen to be on a different website, or to be in front of a television set, or outside at a parade, but they have made a choice to participate in *that* moment of virtual companionship. The bodily and mental presence and choice that is inherent in the act cannot be ignored (Miller 2010: 22).

I have already made it clear that to some people, the memories and expressions of sadness inscribed on my deceased friend’s wall were effective ceremonial acts in the sense that they helped those Friends find and center their grief. Even I, though I did not write anything myself, was able to derive some sense of comfort from reading the things written by people who I did not know. But at the same time, there were some who believed that there was an aspect of Facebook that set it into the realm of the everyday, of places that are not special enough for the conduction of rites.

Included in our American approach to death is the idea of limitation. We limit death and we limit grief. Death is restricted to the extent that we have a tendency to refuse confrontation with it until absolutely forced; along the same lines, we push the work of death onto professionals—doctors, funeral homes—so that our contact with it is decreased. Grief is treated in a similar fashion: we assure ourselves that its expression is necessary as a means that helps us “move on”. But even still, we constrict its manifestation to minimal visible amounts. Our sense of decorum prevents us from wanting to allow grief to be expressed in a public manner, even as we have events whose purposes are supposedly to allow us to express that same grief.

The reaction to the expression of grief on Facebook has many similarities with the typical Western approach to coping with death and grief. The dissension with the act thus can be viewed as a twofold process: a discomfort with the general decidedly public showing of grief, and a discomfort with the act of mourning leaking over into the medium of Facebook. It is certain that the Private Message function on Facebook would have been viewed as decidedly more appropriate than the wall posts that users offered up instead. The wall posts were not only more public in a functional manner, but also at the level that everyone was permitted to express grief in a similar fashion. Regardless of how close they were to the deceased, regardless of whether they were members of the inactive or passive layers, each individual’s expression was self-regulated, without the sense of social pressure that could have only permitted those who were closest to the deceased to express themselves. In the process, social grief hierarchies were broken down and the expression of grief was left unchecked.

Discomfort with grief spreading to Facebook must be examined in light of the Western attempt to limit death to certain spheres as a means of exercising greater control over it. Death is often left to spaces like hospitals and funeral home; it is not spoken about in front of children and is considered taboo and morbid to mention in joyful moments. We reluctantly give death its spaces and push them far away: offline, we put our funerals on the edges of town, and online, we create websites to deal specifically with the problem of death. Death is coped with not only through regulation and a staunch refusal to let it bleed into the majority of our lives, but also through the insistence that to let such a thing happen is wildly inappropriate.

Facebook acts as an extension of our offline lives, but it is a notably mundane one. It is used for neither the special moments nor the important times that beg documentation and symbolism. It is an everyday tool. Most who utilize the website check it more than once a day, and students often speak of checking Facebook as a means of procrastination. The site is a tool through which people interact with each other, but it also has the characteristic of constant availability as a source of amusement. It is this characteristic of Facebook that leads Miller to call it a “meta-best-friend.” It is why “even at 3 a.m., when not even our best best-friend wants to be disturbed, we can turn to Facebook and feel connected with all those other lives, and come out of it less lonely and bored” (Miller 2010:10). In this sense, Facebook is normal and regular. It is the friend we interact with all the time. It is not a holy place, where we regularly recognize that sacred goings-on are supposed to happen. It is the opposite: the virtual café-of-sorts that we stop by constantly. In this sense, the dissenters are correct, and their disapproval is understandable if not justified: Facebook just is not an inherently special place.

And it is precisely because of this that the wall posts immediately made on any deceased Facebook user's wall carry so much importance. They represent a startling connection made between the mundane and the distinct. In the Western context, this is a connection that runs contrary to socially learned and taught ways of grieving and expressing grief. The communal participation in an experience of mourning through the medium of Facebook is unique precisely because of how the capabilities and understandings of the medium force that understanding of grief to be expanded. Simply put, the public expression of grief on Facebook through groups of people who do not know each other is a reinsertion of death into a context—the mundane, everyday context—where death is typically not allowed to be. In the context of Greek mourning rituals, this would ring as a simple online continuation of an online ritual. In the Western context, it is an online reintegration, mediated through ritual, of an offline prohibition.

Grimes advocates for a reinvented sensibility that enables us to imagine death in a much more serious fashion; what he fails to acknowledge is that one way that this very process can take place is through the reverse: an insertion of ritualized grief actions into the less serious aspects of our lives. In doing so, we de-compartmentalize and free up our imaginings of death and confront it in a manner that we would typically be tempted to avoid. What I am arguing is that a change to the manner and places in which death rituals are allowed to be conducted can serve to open up discussion about the very ways that we insert meaning into those rites. If the example of what occurred on Facebook is any indication, this process is enacted in cyber spaces in a way not similarly seen in the offline world. Within the newness and difference of the online world, it is possible that some changes may be easier to enact.

Of course, ease of enactment does not guarantee universal acceptance. A central part of my argument has been to analyze the dissent towards the public expression of grief on Facebook walls. As a microcosmic example of my argument, I turn now to an example of a similar realm of conversation that took place earlier this year on PrincetonFML.com, a website through which Princeton students can anonymously voice complaints about events in their daily lives and other students can express their agreement or dislike of the posting by writing a comment or giving the posting a thumbs up or a thumbs down (also known as a +1 or -1). Though the site, which continues to be currently active, was intended to display the often humorous grumblings of the student body, it has evolved to also include the sharing of other occasions as well, such as excitements and moments of gratitude and appreciation, and even more serious disappointments.

In the spring semester of the 2010-2011 school year, freshman Khristin Kyлло died in her dorm room due to natural causes (Rome 2011). The reaction from the University was widespread, somber, and respectful; the death was reported in the student newspaper, a memorial was set up for friends and family to attend, an official announcement was released, and a memorial fund was established in Kyлло's name. In the online world, responses to Kyлло's death leaked onto the PrincetonFML site in the form of a posting that read, "Love and prayers to the family and friends of Khristin Kyлло '14. We hope [Her Life] WillRestInPeace". Though the posting received over 478 thumbs up, ranking it amongst the most popular, conversation sparked in the comment section about the placement of the sentiment. One commenter, who chose to identify him or herself as "a pfml fan but..." wrote, "I wonder if this is the appropriate forum. At best this post gets a lot of +1s, which is

pretty crude, at worst it brings unwanted attention to her death and rumors and speculation. Just out of curiosity I wonder what drives someone to submit a post like this.”

A quick response came from another commenter, who chose to use “PFML fan #2” as a moniker: “The PFML community would seem heartless if we just ignored this tragedy. It’s way better that we acknowledge it and remember her, even if it is just an FML site” (PrincetonFML 2011).

PrincetonFML is a different site from Facebook in the sense that it is *not* an SNS and all postings and comments are anonymous. However, because the vast majority of the small student body (about 5,000 students) all live on the same campus, they share a certain amount of cultural knowledge with each other that allows them to be similarly informed and aware of certain events and phenomena (About Princeton University 2010). Therefore, like the case of Nina’s Facebook wall, though the users of PrincetonFML are heterogeneous, they share a crucial connection. In the Facebook example that I have been tracing, the connection was Nina; in the case of PrincetonFML, the connection was happenings within the University.

The point raised by the commenter *A pfml fan but....* concerned the fitness of PrincetonFML as a space to commemorate the death of Kylo. The reasoning of *A pfml fan but...* was that any response to the posting would be rendered “crude” by the mediating mechanisms of the PrincetonFML site. Consequently, the commenter felt that any attention the site would draw to Kylo’s death could only result in disrespectful activity, making the preferable option one where responses to her death were left for other contexts.

Ultimately, the user *PFML fan #2* insisted that an acknowledgment of Kylo’s death was necessary and in fact respectful, but the entire PrincetonFML example shows that

though discussions about death may be making their way into Internet places that share with Facebook a sense of routineness about them, similar questions of context play a large role in determining appropriation. Though technology may seem to ease the way for the insertion of ritualized grieving behaviors, it does not ease discomfort with the topic.

Even still, we should not forget the masses of passive layer users who emerged out of the woodwork in the wake of Nina's death. I have already mentioned that passive layer users are those who tend not to have a strong relationship with a given user; though they are Friends, they could be said to be the equivalent of offline acquaintances. In the case of Nina, a college student who attended school out of her home state, perhaps it could be argued that some of those who wrote on her wall would not have had the opportunity otherwise to engage in an offline communal gathering of grief. For people like me, who knew Nina through somewhat unique circumstances, this was almost certainly the case. For some Facebook friends, expressing their mournful sentiments online could have been a way to pay respects to Nina through a medium with which they were intimately acquainted. But it also could be argued that for some of those who wrote on her wall, an online expression of grief was the only way to tap into a community of other mourners.

Whether this was the case for a large number of Friends remains unclear. In any case, the discussion evident on Facebook (and on PrincetonFML as well) showed a willingness to flesh out and detangle the twisted understandings of allowed and prohibited behavior. As a result, engaging in such a discussion may have shown an unintentional attempt to push the limits and reaches of ritual and technology, and in the process determine what sort of impact could be had by both.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to give an analysis of the creation of and opposition to ritualized displays of grief on the social networking site Facebook.

In order to do so, I have provided historical, personal, insider, and scholarly explorations of the Internet, Facebook, and the broader American cultural approach towards death and grief. My entrance into this topic came from the need to discover the answer to a pressing question, which I posed in my introduction: how does technology mediate our current expressions of grief?

The answer, as I have discovered in the course of researching and writing this paper, is simply: *significantly*. College-aged Facebook users were able to exhibit on the website a response to death that ran against their lived experiences and cultural assumptions. By inserting death into their everyday online lives, they demonstrated a notable commitment to acknowledging its presence. And in their dissent there lay a remarkable attempt at discussion as well as a desire to flesh out what could and would be accepted as appropriate in the mundane virtual spaces that held meaning for them.

For me, charting an example of the incorporation of ritual-like behavior on the Internet as a means to make sense of a defining event—particularly death—was especially enlightening because of the relative newness of these technologies. My research seemed to be a way to freeze a unique moment in time. It appears that we are still making sense of the Internet and still finding ways to fully utilize all that it has to offer and to completely insert it into each part of our lives. We can measure our usage of the Internet by charting its incorporation into our culture and daily lives. One day, the stories of deaths of SNS users may cease to be out of the ordinary. One day, the ritual-like actions that accompany the reality of deaths on Facebook may become set in stone rituals that are passed down through generations. If that day does indeed come, than this research represents a vivid snapshot, a long stare into one specific formation of a ritual within a specific medium and at a specific moment in time.

In that case, this work will matter as an anthropological but also historical treatment of a fleeting time. But even if it is not true, and the rites once crafted on Facebook appear only in the form of contested debate, or if Facebook itself loses its importance and ubiquity among users, grief rites and responses to death in the online world will continue to hold meaning as decidedly social productions. For we will always die and grieve, and we will always construct our responses to death and grief into forms that fit our ever-changing contexts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbas, Yasmine and Fred Dervin (eds) 2009 *Digital Technologies of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Abram, Carolyn

2006 Welcome to Facebook, Everyone. The Facebook Blog, September 26.

<http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=2210227130>, accessed December 21, 2010.

Acquisti, Alessandro, and Ralph Gross

2006 Imagined Communities: Awareness, Information Sharing, and Privacy on the Facebook. In Golle, P. and Danezis, G. (Eds.), *Proceedings of 6th Workshop on Privacy Enhancing Technologies*. (pp. 36--58). Cambridge, U.K. Robinson College. June 28-30 (conference paper).

American Civil Liberties Union

Facebook's Privacy Policy: Gain Control of Your Information.

https://secure.aclu.org/site/SPageNavigator/100513_Petition_Facebook_Policy, accessed January 18, 2011.

Ariès, Philippe

1974 *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Becker, Ernest

1973 *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press.

Bergson, Henri

2007 (1944) *Creative Evolution*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bourne, Shelby

2010 The New World of Media. Hotchkiss Forum, November 9.

boyd, danah

2006 "Friendster lost steam. Is MySpace just a fad?" Apophenia Blog.

<http://www.danah.org/papers/FriendsterMySpaceEssay.html>, accessed January 10, 2011.

boyd, danah and Nicole Ellison

2007 Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13,1: article 11.

boyd, danah & Jeffrey Heer

2006 Profiles as conversation: Networked identity performance on Friendster. *Proceedings of Thirty-Ninth Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences*. Los Alamitos: IEEE Press.

Cashmore, Pete

2006 MySpace, America's Number One. Mashable, July 11 2006.
<http://mashable.com/2006/07/11/myspace-americas-number-one/>, accessed December 20, 2010.

Chapman, Cameron

2009 The History of the Internet in a Nutshell. Six Revisions.
<http://sixrevisions.com/resources/the-history-of-the-internet-in-a-nutshell/> accessed January 5, 2011.

Christ, Nicolas and Marco Gonzalez, Jason Kaufman, Kevin Lewis and Andreas Wimmer
Taste, ties, and time: a new Social network dataset using Facebook. *Social Networks* 30, 4: 330-342.

Coman, Mihai and Eric W. Rothenbuhler

2005 Media Anthropology. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Conklin, Beth

2001 Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Dernbach, Katherine Boris

2005 Spirits of the Hereafter: Death, Funerary Possession, and the Afterlife in Chuuk, Micronesia. *Ethnology*, 44 (2), 99-123.

DiMocco, Joan Morris and David R. Millen

2007 Identity Management: Multiple Presentations of Self in Facebook. Cambridge: T Watson Research.

Dishman, Lydia

2010 Corporate Social Media Policies: The Good, the Mediocre, and the Ugly. Fast Company, <http://www.fastcompany.com/1668368/social-media-policies-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly>, accessed February 20, 2011.

Douglas, Mary

2005 (1966) Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo
London: Routledge.

Dwyer, Catherine

2007 Digital Relationships in the 'MySpace' Generation: Results From a Qualitative Study. *40th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)*. Waikoloa, HI (conference paper) <http://csis.pace.edu/~dwyer/research/DwyerHICSS2007.pdf>.

Ewing, Katherine

1990 The Illusion of Wholeness: "Culture," "Self," and the Experience of Inconsistency. *Ethos*18,3: 251-278.

Facebook

2006 Students against Facebook News Feed (Official Petition to Facebook). <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2208288769>, accessed January 10, 2011.

Facebook

2010 Facebook's Privacy Policy. <http://www.facebook.com/policy.php>, accessed January 3, 2011.

Facebook

2011 Company Timeline. Press Room. <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?timeline>, accessed March 14, 2011.

Facebook

2011 Statistics. Press Room. <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>, accessed March 14, 2011.

Foucault, Michel

1988 *Technologies of the Self*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Geertz, Clifford.

1973 Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example. In *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*. Pp. 142-169. New York: Basic Books, Publishers.

Gergen, Kenneth

1991 *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic Books.

Glickstein, Karen R.

2011 Opinion: Social media rise merits updated staff policies. *Springfield Business Journal Online*. <http://sbj.net/main.asp?SectionID=48&SubSectionID=108&ArticleID=88844>, accessed February 20, 2011.

Goffman, Erving

1973 (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Woodstock: Overlook Press.

Green, James W.

2008 *Beyond The Good Death: An Anthropology of Modern Dying*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Grimes, Ronald

2000 *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Grimes, Ronald

2006 *Rite Out Of Place: Media, Ritual and the Arts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grimmelman, James

2010 Privacy as Product Safety. *Widener Law Journal*: 795-800.

Hananel, Sam

2011 Feds settle case of woman fired over Facebook comments. *MSNBC*, February 7 2011. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/41465076/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/, accessed March 1, 2011.

Hananel, Sam

2010 Woman fired over Facebook rant; suit follows. *MSNBC*, November 10, 2010. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/40097443/ns/business-careers/>, accessed February 10, 2010.

Harris, Olivia

1982 The dead and the devils among the Bolivian Laymi. In *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, eds M. Bloch & J. Parry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hart, Keith

2004 Notes Towards an Anthropology of the Internet. *Horizontes Antropologicos* 10, 2: 15-40.

Heidegger, Martin

2001 (1930) *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Bloomington: Indiana U.P.

Kincaid, Jason

2009 The AP Reveals Details of Facebook/ConnectU Settlement With Greatest Hack Ever. *TechCrunch*. <http://techcrunch.com/2009/02/11/the-ap-reveals-details-of-facebookconnectu-settlement-with-best-hack-ever/>, accessed February 10, 2011.

Kirkpatrick, David

2010 *The Facebook Effect*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Kirkpatrick, Marshall

2010 Facebook's Zuckerberg Says The Age of Privacy is Over. Read Write Web January 9.
http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/facebooks_zuckerberg_says_the_age_of_privacy_is_ov.php, accessed January, 10 2011.

Kirkpatrick, Marshall

2010 Privacy, Facebook, and the Future of the Internet. Read Write Web, January 28.
http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/privacy_facebook_and_the_future_of_the_internet.php, accessed January 10, 2011.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth

1969 On Death and Dying. New York: Macmillan.

Mandelbaum, David

1959 Social Uses of Funeral Rites. In *The Meaning of Death*. Fiebel Herman (Ed). New York: McGraw-Hill.

McKeon, Matt

2010 The Evolution of Privacy on Facebook Over Time May 2010.
<http://mattmckeeon.com/facebook-privacy/> accessed January 10, 2011.

Mezrich, Ben

2009 *The Accidental Billionaires: The Founding of Facebook*. New York: Doubleday.

Miller, Daniel

2010 An Extreme Reading of Facebook. Open Anthropology Cooperative Press (Working Paper Series # 5).

Miller, Daniel & Don Slater

2000 *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.

Moore, Matthew

2009 Facebook introduces 'memorial' pages to prevent alerts about dead members. *The Telegraph*, October 27 2009.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/6445152/Facebook-introduces-memorial-pages-to-prevent-alerts-about-dead-members.html> accessed January 2, 2011.

Obasanjo, Dare

2009 Facebook "stream" redesign: Disruptive companies don't listen to their customers – Mark Zuckerberg. Dare Obasanjo aka Carnage4Life.
<http://www.25hoursaday.com/weblog/2009/03/21/FacebookStreamRedesignDisruptiveCompaniesDontListenToTheirCustomersMarkZuckerburk.aspx>, accessed January 10, 2011.

O'Neill, Nick

2009 Facebook's New Privacy Settings Begin Rolling Out Today. All Facebook, <http://www.allfacebook.com/facebooks-new-privacy-settings-begin-rolling-out-today-2009-12> (comments) accessed February 11, 2011.

Opsahl, Kurt

2010 Facebook's Eroding Privacy Policy: A Timeline. Electronic Frontier Foundation. <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2010/04/facebook-timeline/> accessed January 11, 2011.

Paerregaard, Karsten

1987 "Death Rituals and Symbols in the Andes." *Folk* 29: 23-42.

Postill, John

2010 New media and social change. *Media/anthropology* June 4 2011. <http://johnpostill.wordpress.com/2010/06/04/new-media-and-social-change/>, accessed March 11, 2011.

Postill, John

2010 Researching the Internet. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16(3): 646-650.

Peterson, Chris

2010 Losing Face: An Environmental Analysis of Privacy on Facebook (Unpublished draft on file with author using Facebook as case study).

Princeton

2010 About Princeton University. Princeton Profile. <http://www.princeton.edu/profile/about/> accessed March 22, 2011.

PrincetonFML

2011 Love and prayers to the family and friends of Khristin Kylo '14. <http://princetonfml.com/?s=khristin> accessed January 13, 2011.

Qualman, Eric

2010 Social Media Revolution Video (Refreshed). *Socialnomics* 2010 <http://www.socialnomics.net/2010/05/05/social-media-revolution-2-refresh/> accessed December 23, 2010

Reynolds, Dave

2010 Good Bye Facebook. Your Privacy Sucks! Business is Please. <http://bip.softwarejewel.com/technology/good-bye-facebook-your-privacy-sucks-3775/>, accessed March 14, 2011.

Robben, Antonius

2004 *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Rome, Henry

2011 Kylo '14 dies in dorm room. *Daily Princetonian*, January 14, 2011.

<http://www.dailyprincetonian.com/2011/01/14/27346/>, accessed January 14, 2011.

Sanghvi, Ruchi

2006 Facebook Gets a Facelift. *The Facebook Blog*, September 5

http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=2207967130_ accessed December 20, 2010.

Slattery, Brennon

2010 Facebook's Privacy Changes Get Mixed Reviews. *PCWorld* May 27 2010.

http://www.pcworld.com/article/197359/facebooks_privacy_changes_get_mixed_reviews.html, accessed February 2, 2011.

Sutter, John D.

2010 Some Quitting Facebook As Concerns About Privacy Escalate. *CNN*, May 13, 2010.

http://articles.cnn.com/2010-05-13/tech/facebook.delete.privacy_1_facebook-users-privacy-settings-facebook-friends?s=PM:TECH, accessed January 10, 2011.

Turkle, Sherry

1995 *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Vander Veer, Emily

2008 *Facebook, the Missing Manual*. Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media.

Willis, Paul

2011 *Renewing Ethnography: A Resource for Hope*. Glifford Geertz Commemorative Lecture Presented By Paul Willis, March 9.

Yoder, Dan

2010 Top Ten Reasons Why You Should Quit Facebook. *Gizmodo*,

<http://gizmodo.com/#!5530178/top-ten-reasons-you-should-quit-facebook>, accessed March 14, 2011.

HONOR CODE

I pledge my honor that this thesis represents my own work in accordance with Princeton University regulations.