

Posting Grief on the Wall Using Facebook to Grieve and Offer Support After a Tragedy

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Abstract

This research explores how people use Facebook as an emotional outlet after a tragedy. Facebook has become a form of communication in the digital age; it is used to send messages, share photos and as a public forum. Facebook can be used as a gathering place for grievers following a death and can be used to send messages of support after an accident. Through the use of auto-ethnography, content analysis and interviews, this research examines the trends behind and the benefits of logging in to grieve and find support.

I. Introduction

“Stay strong Laura” “Thinking about you Laura!!” “Good luck girl!!! Praying for you from London!” These are just three of the almost 300 posts on a Facebook page titled “Pray for Laura Levitt.”

In a time of tragedy, people search for ways to reach out for catharsis, information, and solace. Social media site Facebook has added a new platform that is changing how people seek support and grieve after an accident or death. In the case of an accident, people use Facebook to receive updates about the victim’s condition, stay in touch with the family, and send supportive messages to the victim. This new platform allows the family to give updates about the condition to thousands of people at once. The victim can also receive supportive messages from friends and strangers.

This forum also gives users a place to mourn and memorialize a deceased friend. People set up groups where friends and strangers can share memories and photos about a deceased friend. People also use the deceased friend’s Facebook as a platform for mourning. There is a connection with the lost friend. Facebook also provides a community for mourning. People can share stories about their mutual friend and offer support.

In April of 2010, the Facebook site “Pray for Laura Levitt” was created after an accident left me hospitalized for two week. This study will rely on auto-ethnography, textual analysis and interviews to determine why people turn to social media in the aftermath of an accident or tragedy and will look into the ramifications of doing so.

This research is important because social media has drastically changed how people relate to each other. Studying how social media aids in times of tragedy or grief adds to what is known about these computer-mediated relationships. This specific study is important because it will provide a first-hand account of a support page. Previous researchers have studied Facebook pages objectively because they were not apart of the group. This study will look at the new trend from inside the grieving experience.

* **Keywords:** personal reflection, support, tragedy, family, Facebook, community

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II. Literature Review

Grief

Grief has been described as a “natural reaction or ‘passion’ [that] produces mental suffering and afflicts physical health” (Archer, 1). Another way of describing grief is as “both an emotional reaction to loss and an active process for dealing with loss” (Merten & Williams, 2009). However it’s defined, grief is an unavoidable aspect of human nature that has both physical and mental side effects. While everyone handles grief in different ways, there are similarities between how everyone grieves. People share the four steps of grief: 1. numbness and disbelief, 2. yearning and searching, 3. disorganization and 4. despair and reorganization (Archer, 24). While the number of steps and the steps themselves vary between studies, there is an understanding that there are steps that bridge from disbelief to acceptance.

The first step, numbness and disbelief, “are common initial reactions to bereavement” (68). The focus of this step is denial. However, this is only a temporary removal from the truth. Once people move beyond the denial stage, they become angry, which “can be regarded as a basic emotional response to loss” (70). Another response is distress, which is “anxiety verging on panic, a desperate feeling of not knowing what to do next, or of wanting to run away” (74). This emotion can be experienced after a death or a near-death experience. These feelings are caused by an inability to control the situation. Running away is seen as an option because people feel like they are in control.

The next step is yearning and disbelief, which includes “feelings of sorrow, mental pain, anxiety and anger” (76). These four characteristics are also included in the first step of numbness and disbelief. Yearning occurs as a result of separation distress, in which there are “feelings of pining surges up inside the person, producing pangs of grief, often resulting in an outburst of sobbing” (76). This goes a step further into preoccupation, when a person relives moments they spend with their lost friend and the moment they lost that friend. The recovery process is often hindered on the anniversary of the death or a significant day, such as a birthday. Because of the pain associated with these dates, “some bereaved people avoid them” (81).

After yearning and disbelief, people who are grieving go through a disorganization period followed by a period of reorganization where they are able to accept their loss and move forward with their lives.

Although people grieve differently, grief is a natural human reaction that is “in the province of biology and psychology” (249). Some recognize grief in stages, but “recent research suggests that grief is best understood within a flexible content, recognizing the tendency to move between phases during the mourning period” (Fearon, 11).

Social Networking

Because this study looks at the grieving process as told through social media, it is necessary to understand how social media creates connections between users. The current model of social networking, which in this case is a website that facilitates online relationships, was started in 1997 with the creation of sixdegrees.com. This social networking site opened a door for many other social networking sites, including Friendster in 2002 and LinkedIn and MySpace in 2003 (Social Networking Timeline, 2007). Facebook, which quickly dominated the social networking field, was founded in 2004. Facebook allows people to create personal profile pages, “friend” people, send messages to their friends, upload pictures and videos and “like” fan pages. Facebook has more than 400 million active users and “the average user spends more than 55 minutes per day on Facebook” (Fearon, 2011).

The way people communicate and interact is changing because of social media. Ninety-three percent of teenagers use the internet with “more than half of those users participating in online social networking via websites such as www.Myspace.com and www.Facebook.com” (Merten & Williams, 2009). Social networking allows people to “share common interests, connect with friends, participate in discussion forums and express themselves through a personalized blog” (Kim & Ahn, 2011). People often form connections with others who are like them; they work together, live near each other and/or have a hobby in common. However, Facebook is changing that. Social networking is “utilized within a variety of social arenas connecting work and home, without geographic or generational barriers” (Fearon, 2011).

As technology evolves social networking changes with it. Initially someone had to be at a computer to use her social networks but now she can check her Facebook from almost anywhere using a smartphone.

Because of this changing technology and the increasing popularity of social networking, it “continues to gain momentum as numerous users experience a new level of interaction with other users” (Kim & Ahn, 2011).

This increased social networking use comes with a price. Although people are creating “relationships” with others on sites like Facebook, “research on excessive forms of Internet usage has shown that uncontrolled or compulsive Internet use has been known to have negative effects on psychological well-being, such as depression and loneliness” (Junghyun, LaRose, & Peng, 2009). Depression can push people online in search of companionship, but as they spend more and more time online they have a hard time regulating their Internet use.

Overuse of social networking can lead to “negative life outcomes such as lower academic grades, missing class or work, and missing a social engagement” (Junghyun, LaRose, & Peng, 2009). People turn to the Internet when they seek companionship, but they often find the opposite. A study of 176 secondary students that analyzed the ramifications of social networking found a correlation between excessive Internet use and loneliness (Deniz, 2010).

Sharing Grief

It is not possible to change grief because there is no specific formula for grief and everyone handles their own grief differently. However, it is possible that “how people share grief” has changed (Dickinson, 2011). The presence of the media surrounding traumatic events has encouraged people to become more open about grieving. There are “solidarity-producing effects of crime, natural disasters and mass tragedies” (Hawdon & Ryan, 2011).

This change in how people share grief was seen “on Facebook, whose ‘Never Forget 9/11’ site the social networking company calls the ‘largest and most interactive 9/11 memorial page on the internet’” (Dickinson, 2011). Facebook facilitates relationships between griever which allows them to support each other. These relationships are between family, friends and strangers, and “a sharing of grief, even by strangers, seems to console; it helps to know that others care” (Dickinson, 2011).

The openness of grief has made people more comfortable with expressing their grief in public. There are “changing practices of public visibilities of death and grief—practices that render visible in a semiotic way what would otherwise be invisible or relatively unknown occurrences of death” (Gibson, 2011). Public grief can be seen, for example, in roadside memorials. These public memorials suggest that “the ordinary citizen feels entitled to public recognition beyond officially sanctioned categories of death events such as war, natural disaster, or mass murder” (Gibson, 2011).

The media coverage of tragic events has encouraged people to be more open with their grief. This has led to people sharing their grief with one another and expressing their grief in very public ways. Furthermore, social structure also affects how people grieve because of the “important function, both for the individual and the group, of funeral rites, mourning customs, and general social structural features in moderating and managing the course of grief” (Fowlkes, 1990).

Grieving Online

People shared grief before social networking sites were popular, but the sites offered a new and very different platform on which to share grief. Facebook is a popular site to connect with people, but “it has also become a site to express grief and bereavement through the creation of Memorial Groups” (Fearon, 2011). The creation of the groups represents “a new mourning ritual with the bereavement process.”

The stages of grief suggest that at the end of the grieving process there is acceptance and moving on. However, social networking allows a long-lasting connection with a deceased friend. If someone has a Facebook page, it stays online after his or her death. The page allows friends to look through their photos and send them messages, meaning they can “maintain the bonds established in a new and reorganized manner” (Fearon, 2011). Reorganization means that rather than moving on from a death a person changes their bond with that person.

The Memorial Page allows someone to communicate with a deceased friend, tell the friend stories and experience the connection they had when the friend was still alive. The friend will not respond, but it gives the griever an outlet. Someone in mourning no longer has to sever all ties immediately at death; they can maintain a relationship with that person.

Social networking also allows people to support other griever after an accident or death. Facebook

provides an “emotional outlet for individuals unable to express emotion in public” (Fearon, 2011). Furthermore, “talking about the death with others has been suggested as a positive coping skill, allowing individuals to process grief.” News is easily and quickly spread through Facebook, meaning the news of an accident or death is made public, it is potentially in front of hundreds of eyes in a matter of minutes. Facebook allows random strangers to connect, which is helpful if those strangers are grieving over a mutual friend. They can offer each other support and share stories about their friend.

Facebook gives people an outlet for grief, which is especially helpful when people have trouble expressing their grief in public. Facebook also allows people to choose how they grieve. They can write what they want and chose where to write it. They can post a photo, change their profile picture or post a song that expresses how they feel.

Facebook facilitates a new kind of grieving that is very public and yet more personal. People can connect with a friend who passed away and maintain a relationship with that friend. People, whether they know each other or not, can also connect with each other when mourning the loss of a friend or showing support for a friend.

III. Method

For my research I conducted auto-ethnography, which means I studied an experience in my own life. In April of 2010 I was in a severe car crash. The night of my accident my friend Kristi Ferguson created a Facebook page titled “Pray for Laura Levitt.” My brother, sister and Kristi posted updates about my recovery. Family, friends and strangers used this page to receive those updates and to show their support and encouragement for my family and me.

I looked at the page’s posts between April 5, 2010 and April 5, 2011 to determine the frequency and content of the posts. Research suggests that people address posts to the victim and use the page as an outlet, and I studied my Facebook support page to see how it compares to previous research. Additionally, I interviewed my friend who created the group and my mom and sister to ascertain how the people closest to me were impacted by this use of social media. I sent out a survey to the members of the Facebook group that asked closed- and open-ended questions about how and why they used the page. Finally, I used my own recollections and experiences of reading the posts to determine how the page affected my recovery.

Background on the Event

On Monday, April 5, 2010 I was in a severe car accident when a man fleeing police rammed into my Toyota truck on highway 85 in Durham during afternoon rush hour. The truck I was driving flipped approximately 10 times. I was Medevac’d to Duke Medical Center immediately after the crash where I spent four days sedated and on a ventilator due to a badly bruised lung. I came off the ventilator on Friday but it wasn’t until Monday that I was really aware of what was going on. I have very few personal memories from that first week I was in the hospitalized. I was released after twelve days and spent the next month in a wheel chair doing physical therapy for my leg, which was broken and had many deep cuts, and spent a year in physical therapy for my shoulder, which was broken and dislocated.

IV. Findings

Facebook Page Details

Although I was sedated, the rest of the world was actively making efforts to connect with me. My family and I received phone calls, emails, texts and letters from friends and strangers who were interested in my recovery. However, the primary and most expansive source of support was from a Facebook page created by a friend from high school, Kristi Ferguson. The page “Pray for Laura Levitt” was activated early in the morning on April 6. In the description of the group, Ferguson wrote:

“Laura Levitt was involved in a serious car accident on Monday, April 5th. She has several broken

bones and will spend many days in the hospital but I thought it would be nice if we had a group to tell her and her family how much we love them and that we are here for them.”

In an interview with K. Ferguson, she explained that she made the group because she “figured [she’d] get as many people to rally in support of [Laura]” (personal communication, Nov. 11, 2011).. Her initial intention behind the group was a place for people to post photos and stories about me and for my family to post updates. However, “it became a support network” and “ended up being such a big thing where people who barely even knew [me] or people who saw the accident joined the group.” Ferguson said she was surprised by what the group turned into and was “shocked... that it spread so far.” After one of my roommates posted something on the page Ferguson messaged her so that they could support each other, even though they had never met in person. The page gave members “some kind of way to find support in each other.” Summing everything up, Ferguson said that “it was cool to see that something as small as a Facebook page can bring everyone together.”

By the end of April 6, there were 104 posts to the page not including comments to these posts. By the second week there were 254 posts. A couple weeks after the accident there were more than 1000 members. People posted daily until the end of April and then the posts became more sporadic. The last post was on July 24, 2010. In total, there were 272 posts to the page, not including comments on posts. During the second week of my hospital stay I started being able to do more on my own. I was aware of what was going on and understood what happened to me. My parents started bringing my laptop to the hospital. During that week I was able to read the entire Facebook page.

My family didn’t use Facebook a whole lot and was skeptical about Facebook. My parents had a joint Facebook that they never used and my brother and sister had Facebook profiles that they used scarcely. My sister said she mainly used Facebook to send messages about dance performances and to wish people happy birthday. My sister, S. Levitt, even said that she “generally spends a lot of time thinking Facebook is the worst thing ever and has no value and drives community and people apart” (personal communication, Nov. 5, 2011). However, my sister and mom were both surprised and impressed by the Facebook page. My mom, V. Levitt, thought the page was “a stroke of genius [and that] it was inspired.” Both found the page extremely beneficial and used it almost exclusively to contact people. It was helpful in many different ways. My mom said the page “put a lot of information in a simple manner that everyone could access.” There were a lot of my friends from high school and college in the group that my parents wouldn’t have known to contact. The Facebook page allowed my family to contact a large number of people, many of whom they wouldn’t have contacted, at once. This allowed a lot of people to receive first hand information that was coming from the source. This helped minimize false information.

The ability to contact a lot of people at once also made my parents life easier because they “didn’t have the time or the energy to field those phone calls or emails” from people wanting to show support or receive updates.

The page also had a huge impact on my family. My mom said “the humanity of mankind was remarkable” and that “the kind of emotional sustainment that that much encouragement came from was huge.” Through the support of more than 1000 members, my family realized that they weren’t fighting the battle by themselves. My sister, who previously saw Facebook as superfluous, realized that “having something like [Facebook] is really valuable” in that kind of situation.

My family found the Facebook page very beneficial because it gave them a huge support network. People who were members also found the page beneficial. A survey was sent to members of the group and their responses paralleled my family’s responses about why they liked the page, specifically that it was a place to receive updates and gathering place for support. Many of the respondents said they used the page to receive updates, and one added that it was “nice to get information without having to bother a lot of people by phone.”

The page was also used for support and encouragement. People used the page to support the family and to find support themselves. One survey respondent said he/she used the page to show “support for someone I knew who was hurt. I know Laura (distantly) but wanted to acknowledge that I was thinking of her.” Another said that the page was an “excellent meeting house and sense of community supporting Laura in recovery.” One respondent had a slightly different view about the page but was still benefited by it. That respondent said, “it was disheartening to look at, at first because it is how I found out about the accident. But as I started reading the updates and the positive messages I really like looking at it and it reheartened me. [sic]”

Ferguson’s initial intention of creating the page was not how the page was ultimately used. However,

family, total strangers and I found support and encouragement in the page.

Analysis of Posts

There was a mix between posts from family, high school friends, college friends, friends of friends and complete strangers. After examining these posts, two patterns emerged in the messages. First, my family posted updates about my condition. Second, people posted messages of support for my family and me.

There were fifteen posts about my condition that were posted by my brother, my sister and myself. Initially, my parents and siblings had family conferences about what to post on the page. My mom had a small group of family and friends who she updated through email, but this page allowed them to, according to my mom, “put [out] a lot of information in a simple manner that everyone could access” (Levitt & Levitt, 2011).

My family would let people know about my condition, what surgeries I had, what the doctors were saying and what I was doing or how I was responding to them. My sister also posted information about how to send me cards. They would both also use the page to thank everyone for their support. There was about a post every day for the first week.

The first one was on April 6, 2010 just before noon. My brother updated people about what was wrong and what the doctors were doing and saying about my condition. He also wrote:

“...she started waving her hand around a bit in front of my mom. We assumed she was just delirious, but the nurse figured out that she really wanted to communicate. They gave her a pen, and while most of what she wrote was illegible, it’s really a great sign.”

He ended the post by thanking everyone for his or her support. The first couple of updates about my condition were straightforward and serious. The second update was on April 7 and was similar to the first one. However, as it became clear that I would make a full recovery the posts became more celebratory. On April 8, my sister posted:

“UPDATE: Just left Laura at the hospital--she is OFF the ventilator and breathing on her own! She had a lot of questions about the accident and now she is resting. We are so thankful. Please keep the prayers coming!”

The last post by a family member was the most jubilant and thankful of any one before it. On April 13 my sister gave one last update about my condition and thanked everyone for his or her support. At this point I was healthy enough to be giving updates. I gave three updates about my recovery, including an update that I would be leaving the hospital and an update when I first walked during physical therapy. Furthermore, I updated my personal Facebook status and thanked everyone for his or her support.

In response to these posts about my condition, people posted words of support and encouragement to my family and me. On April 7 a friend from high school posted:

“Laura you and your family are in my prayers!!! You are so strong, you will be amazing in your recovery.”

A majority of the posts were very similar to this one. I knew many of the people in the page and while the posts were personalized they all contained similar messages. There were deviations from that pattern, and those posts were from people who I knew really well and from people who I didn’t know at all.

The people who I knew really well included family and friends who I have known for a long time. Posts from these people were more personalized in the sense that they included personal jokes and references to things we had in common. A family friend who I took karate with years ago said:

“...not many know how tough you are, but those of us who sparred against you can tell stories!!!”

Another friend wrote:

“... if Jack Bauer really existed I know he’d lock up the jerk that hit you.”

She was referencing one of our favorite television shows *24*. Although many of my close personal friends were also contacting me through other forms of communication, they chose to be a part of the online support group.

Although I knew a majority of the people who posted, there were a handful of posts from complete strangers. Complete strangers are people whose names I don’t recognize and who don’t work with my parents. There were 20 posts from complete strangers. Many of the complete strangers addressed the fact that they didn’t know me and explained how they became aware of my situation. Many of them learned about it

through the media, including news broadcasts and newspapers. However, their posts still included the same messages of support that were discussed earlier.

One complete stranger posted: "I have no [idea] who Laura is all I know is what I read in the paper my thoughts are with her and her family..."

Another said: "Live and work here in the Durham area. I left work a few minutes early that day and just missed this incident. Glad to hear that Laura is improving."

A third complete stranger posted: "Laura, I had similar injuries from an automobile accident in 1995 and was treated at Duke just like you. You are in my prayers."

These are just three of the posts from complete strangers but they all included a personal message and explained why they felt connected with me.

There were two people who connected with me via Facebook that were unexpected and would not have happened without Facebook. The first person that surprised me was Mark Carder. On April 11 he posted:

"i dont know you,whoever my wife and myself were the first on scene at accident.we were at a friends house and saw the wreck.we are so glad to see that you pulled through.seeing it happen i said "whoever is in that truck wont be alive when we were running to it to assist.again, good luck in your recovery laura. [sic]"

Although I don't remember this, Carder told me in a Facebook message that he called 911 while his wife stood with me and talked with me until the emergency crews showed up. Without Facebook I would have never been able to connect with him and never would have known that he and his wife were the first ones on the scene.

The second one was an anchor from WTVD in Durham, North Carolina. WTVD covered my accident and had footage from the scene. My family was contacted by reporters from the station asking for an interview. I Facebook messaged the anchor about doing an interview. When she responded, she said "I remember seeing you from our helicopter's liveshot... and i was praying you would be OK. [sic]" The anchor was one of the few people who saw the immediate aftermath live. She was watching the moments after the accident as they happened. She was able to follow my recovery and we were able to get in touch, two things that would have been very difficult without Facebook.

V. Discussion

Facebook allows strangers to support each other in tough times. Many people sent me messages on Facebook even though they didn't know who I was. Facebook provided an outlet for people to find out updates about me and show me their support. It was an outlet for me, too. I was able to connect with more than a thousand people on one forum. They could write individual messages to me and I could address everyone with one wall post.

Facebook served as a catharsis, an outlet for my emotions. I was able to log on to Facebook and find support that stretched far beyond the walls of my hospital room. Once I was well enough to sit up and was aware of what was going on around me my parents would bring my laptop to my hospital room. About a week after my accident I was alone in my hospital room with my computer. I opened up the Facebook page for the first time and read through every post. It was overwhelming to see how many people, from close family to strangers, posted a message of support on the wall. I could not believe that so many people had reached out to support me. It was comforting to know that there were more than a thousand people connected through Facebook to support me. For about a month I went on the Facebook page on a daily basis to read what people were posting and to post my own updates. I updated people about my recovery and thanked everyone for their support. Almost two years after the accident I still occasionally read the page and am still amazed at the power that a Facebook page had during a challenging time.

The Facebook page provided an outlet for anyone's emotions, not just my own. An aspect of grief is the "active process for dealing with loss" (Merten and Williams, 2009). Even though the authors are addressing grieving over a death, there was an active process for dealing with the grief of the accident. During the first week of my hospital stay the posts by my family were relatively serious and there were messages of

support. As it became clear that I would make a full recovery the posts became more celebratory. There was a process of transitioning from worry to support to celebration.

Social networking sites such as Facebook allow strangers to share common interests, participate in discussion forums and express themselves (Kim & Ahn, 2011). The *Pray for Laura Levitt* Facebook page demonstrates how that happens. More than 1,000 people united over a common interest and participated in discussions and expressions about that common interest. Many of the people in the group didn't know each other, but there was a connection between the members. This bond was strengthened by the "solidarity-producing effects of crime" (Hawdon & Ryan, 2011). The members of the group united on a virtual platform to support me.

Research suggests that when people are writing on the Facebook wall of someone who died or who went through a tragedy they address the victim. For the most part this is true in my situation too. Most people addressed me directly, sharing words of support or a personal joke. However, there are a couple exceptions. When my family would post updates they would address the whole group. Besides the updates, there were only a couple of posts that were not addressed to me. One of the posts was from an Elon professor and was addressed to the group explaining how she knew me and saying she hoped I could return to campus soon. Facebook was the easiest way for people to reach out to me, which explains why most people addressed me directly. Furthermore, Facebook is becoming a form of communication for many, which explains why people turned to Facebook to send me a message more than any other method.

While Facebook is often used for superfluous status updates about watching television or complaining about homework, it offered an unbelievable platform for people to reach out and support me in an easy and quick fashion.

VI. Conclusion

Social media has changed how people communicate with one another and how people mourn and grieve. Grieving was once looked at as a very rigid process that was kept private, but grieving has become a public matter fairly recently. As the Internet became common and pervasive, grieving moved online. Online grieving provides a personal connection to the victim. In my situation, Facebook offered a platform where people could support me, my family and each other through the healing process.

This study adds to the current field of research because it gives a look at using Facebook for grieving and support from the perspective of the victim. Furthermore, previous studies look at how people use Facebook for grieving and this study looks at how Facebook can be used as a means for communal support. This research is important because the Internet is changing how people are grieving.

There are negative ramifications of turning to Facebook to find companionship in times of loneliness. This study is primarily about using Facebook for support rather than grief, which means it doesn't address the ramifications of going online for grieving. Future research should examine if turning to social media helps or hurts the grieving individual, both in terms of the immediate grieving process and the long-term mental health.

Secondly, there are many more social networking sites such as Twitter and Tumblr that are extremely popular and yet offer different ways of interacting with other users. There needs to be research about how people use those social networking sites and how the sites are being used as a platform for grieving to fully understand how people grieve online.

Facebook has become a form of communication for many and a major part of the societal structure. As a part of the social structure, Facebook has also become a natural place to reach out for grief and support during times of tragedy and celebration.

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