

Online obituaries are changing the way we publicly remember the dead and how newspapers cover deaths

June 16 2009

The ways we deal with death are finding a new life online, according to research being published by a Kansas State University journalism professor and her colleague.

"You're accustomed to clipping an obituary from the [newspaper](#) and putting it in the family Bible, but with online obituary services you can e-mail them to anyone you know," said Bonnie Bressers, associate professor of journalism and mass communications at K-State.

She and Janice Hume at the University of Georgia, who is the principal researcher on the project, have studied the phenomenon of newspapers publishing obituaries online and what it means not only for mourners and the public memory of the dead but also the ethical implications for newspapers. They will present their work in August at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications conference in Boston.

Hume was a K-State journalism and mass communications faculty member from 1999-2001.

Hume and Bressers looked at obituaries in the largest circulation newspapers in each of nine geographic regions across the United States. All of these newspapers had a partnership with Legacy.com, an online obituary service. When readers click on a paid obituary from the

newspaper's Web site, they're redirected to the Legacy site, which adds an online guestbook that allows visitors to post comments. The family can later e-mail the entire guestbook to other mourners.

The researchers found that although this capability has positive implications for a community of mourners, it poses a conundrum for newspapers. In part, this is because the Legacy pages recreate the look of the hosting newspaper.

"To the user who isn't savvy, he or she would assume it's still the newspaper's site," Bressers said. "In a hundred years, will readers distinguish the two? The ethical implications need to be considered."

Legacy vets comments for the subjective quality of appropriateness, which Bressers said makes it unlikely to read comments about a person that aren't a glowing -- and perhaps more accurate -- account of their character. At the same time, comments aren't edited for accuracy in the way a newspaper report would be.

"If I were a newspaper, I'd also be concerned that outside companies like this are making money providing the kind of public access people want," Bressers said. "Newspapers have long been the holders of public memory, remembering people and reflecting the values of the time. At one time, for example, an examination of newspaper obituaries would make it look like women and African-Americans didn't die. We see online obituaries opening up the possibility that more people won't be forgotten."

Bressers said that she and Hume also see how online obituaries are bringing mourners together in a way that would have been impossible before. Friends and family who wouldn't have been able to attend a funeral to sign a physical guest book can send their condolences from anywhere they have an Internet connection. The researchers found

comments from friends and family members sharing stories -- often humorous ones -- that painted a clearer picture of what the deceased person was really like.

Bressers said they were struck by the remarkable connections not just between people who have died and their childhood friends and co-workers, but also between complete strangers. If the deceased was a veteran, strangers express gratitude for that person having served the country. Strangers who shared a medical condition with the deceased convey empathy with the family.

The messages that are perhaps more specific to online mourning are those speaking to the dead themselves. Hume and Bressers found such guestbook comments often make a request of the deceased, such as 'Say hi to Mom.'

Although comments can be left anonymously, mourners can leave an e-mail address with the "contact me" button, allowing the grieving to connect outside of the guestbook.

"These obituaries go beyond what a reporter would write and what a family would pay for," Bressers said. "Something may be lost in families not getting cards in the mail, but what is lost is outsized by allowing more people to participate in an online guestbook. The implications for community-building are immense."

Source: Kansas State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Online obituaries are changing the way we publicly remember the dead and how newspapers cover deaths (2009, June 16) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-06-online-obituaries-publicly-dead-newspapers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.