

Research examines the implications of mourning on Facebook

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With increasing regularity, relatives, friends and colleagues find out someone they know or love has died via social media.

A University of Toronto research paper, "Virtual Mourning and Memory Construction on Facebook: Here Are the Terms of Use," was recently published in the *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*. The researchers investigated the online information practices of people grieving, commemorating, and mourning a loved one through the popular [social media](#) channel, Facebook.

Professor Rhonda McEwen and Librarian Kathleen Scheaffer, at the Faculty of Information (iSchool), University of Toronto, teamed up to examine how, or whether, mourning practices and Facebook's terms of use policies have implications for the bereaved and/or the memory of the deceased.

McEwen and Scheaffer compared traditional methods of grieving (e.g., print obituaries, radio announcements) with Facebook's features (e.g., pages, messages, profiles), analyzed documents, carried out one-on-one interviews, and conducted surveys with nearly 20 Facebook users who have had a loved one die after 2008.

Facebook has had a "memorializing procedure" in place since 2007, leaving the deceased's estate options in the hands of friend and [relatives](#).

When coping with the loss of another, Facebook is a familiar tool that

gives instant access for users to share their emotions, and a large user base, making it a natural place for mourners to gather virtually for group support (via comment, "likes", photos, etc). "Loved ones can continue an online relationship with the deceased for personal and collective expression," the authors report.

However, users could also inadvertently erode or negatively affect the deceased's memory, alter the established image of who and what the deceased intentionally represented. Additionally, the research found that contributions of the bereaved on the deceased's profile can, in some cases, foster an environment of competition among mourners (e.g., who loved her the most).

"The immediacy of being able to publish grieving and memorializing comments, messages, wall posts, photos, and so on has direct consequences for the deceased's curation of self – the intentional online content creation and content editing to represent an intentional persona," the researchers say.

Through several examples, McEwen and Scheaffer show how the profile of a deceased may no longer reflect their image, but rather the remembered life of the user's Facebook friends. "The individual's memory archive becomes a social archive. The online self-curation of the deceased is overridden."

To avoid this practice, the researchers give three recommendations in their article:

Facebook should offer "digital estate options" to users at sign up, and allow current users this option now. Everyone should have the ability to amend their decision.

Shut off the ability to modify a deceased's Facebook account and leave

the work as it is. Facebook should delete everything after 50 years.

The Facebook profile of deceased members should be frozen, but remain accessible to Facebook [friends](#) with the same privacy filters enabled, but the direct message function disabled. The profile would not be searchable online. Instead, loved ones can create memorial pages, thereby owning the digital content and curation.

More information: "Virtual Mourning and Memory Construction on Facebook: Here Are the Terms of Use." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 0270467613516753, first published on December 19, 2013. [DOI: 10.1177/0270467613516753](https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467613516753)

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