

Grief.com: How the Internet has changed the landscape for grieving

Lindsey Schwarze

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University of California, Santa Barbara

## **Introduction**

The Internet has undoubtedly changed the shape of human interaction by transcending the limitations of space and time, which has disarmed the barriers of geography on communication. The Internet is a vast space in which there are various outlets for communication, ranging from social networking sites to online forums and everything in between. A social networking site, such as Facebook, is defined as an Internet page that allows users to create a unique profile with pictures and personal data and that simultaneously acts as a forum for others to post comments on the profile's author (Williams & Merten, 2009, p. 71). Similarly, an online memorial, such as Legacy or 1000Memories, is an Internet site that acts as a platform for grieving families and friends, allowing them to connect through sharing pictures, messages, and memories regarding the deceased (Falconer, Gibson, Norman, & Sachsenweger, 2011, p. 83). Both social networking sites and online memorials are forums through which the bereaved can communicate with others and express their grief.

According to Falconer et al. (2011), the Internet has become a part of our everyday communication, adding a new dimension to human interactions (p. 82). In the mix of ubiquitous human experiences, both death and its corresponding grief have not been left out of this new frontier for communication. The increased use of online communication for various aspects of life has prompted interesting questions regarding the impact of this online forum on expressions and experiences of grief. According to J. Good, three million Facebook users died in 2011 (as cited in Falconer et al., 2011, p. 82), the numbers alone thus indicating a potential for serious implications. Further, Falconer et al. contend that people use any available media as a way to fulfill their needs associated with grief. Because the Internet is accessible 24 hours a day and seven days a week, it is a media source constantly available for people to use to address their grief.

Not only is the Internet widely available for expressing grief, but it is also effective in helping the bereaved work through their grief. In their 2010 study, Massimi and Baecker found that 65% of their bereaved subjects reported the Internet as sufficiently assisting them through the grieving process (p. 1823). Further, the students who endured the massacres at Virginia Tech. and North Illinois University reported that Facebook groups provided temporary relief from their grief (Vicary & Fraley, 2010, p. 1561). Thus, the Internet seems to be accessible for expressing grief and also seems to simultaneously facilitate a positive impact on the grieving process—but, how?

This paper seeks to understand how the Internet positively affects the grieving process and to also further identify the effects of the Internet on the bereaved. In order to answer these questions, this paper will provide an overview of scholarship regarding the Internet and grief. In light of the literature, the following sections of this paper will discuss two categories of benefits provided by the Internet: continued bonds with the deceased (part one) and fostered community support (part two). To provide an example of current scientific discussions on the topic, part three will offer an argument from a clinician's perspective regarding tasks for successful mourning and the advantages and disadvantages provided by the Internet. In an attempt to identify the significance of these effects, part four will consider the possible cultural implications of the Internet on the grieving process, specifically for Western Culture.

#### Part 1: Continued Bonds

No matter if it is a social networking site, an online memorial, or an online obituary, the Internet has the capacity to create a virtual memorial for the deceased. According to Davies (2004), Roberts (2004), and Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996), "...virtual memorials blur the boundaries between the living and the dead, enabling relationships to continue after death" (as cited by Mitchell, Stephenson, Cadell, & MacDonald, 2012, p. 416). The foundation of *any*

relationship is communication, as communication is a ubiquitous aspect of human life—and death. According to DeGroot (2012), even death does not end communication, because people continue to communicate with the deceased; further, communication with the dead is key in that it reassures the bereaved that, while a person isn't physically present, it does not mean that the relationship has disappeared with them (p. 209).

Reflecting this premise, DeVries and Ruthorford (2004) contend that, "...while 'death ends a life—it does not necessarily end a relationship'" (p. 6). Relatedly, communicating with the deceased is important to the grieving process, and the Internet provides a forum where this communication can take place. Specifically, according to Williams and Merten (2009), social networking sites offer a history of the interactions between the author of a deceased profile and her friends, which provides a frame of reference through which the bereaved can continue their relationship with the deceased (p. 72). Thus, the Internet creates a holistic opportunity for relational continuity between the deceased and their family and friends.

Through a content analysis of comments and posts made by the bereaved to a deceased member's page, DeGroot (2012) looks at how the bereaved use Facebook memorial pages to make sense of a death by reconnecting with the deceased. DeGroot terms this communication with the dead "Transcorporeal Communication" (p. 198), which is defined as communication with someone who no longer has a physical presence. Notably, DeGroot finds that the bereaved make promises to and requests of the dead, which carries significant relational meaning because it indicates the continuous and *reciprocal* nature of a friendship, further signifying a continued relational bond (p. 207).

The Internet clearly fosters continued relational bonds, which research suggests is paramount to successful grieving—especially for particularly tragic losses. In fact, Klass et al.

(1996) argue that continued connections with the deceased are important for parents grieving the loss of a child and for adolescents grieving the loss of a peer:

Remaining connected seemed to facilitate both adults' and children's ability to cope with the loss and the accompanying changes in their lives. These 'connections' provided solace, comfort and support, and eased the transition from the past to the future. (p.xviii)

According to Williams and Merten (2009) and Mitchell et al. (2012), the Internet allows for these relationships to continue, providing unique benefits for parents and adolescents experiencing grief.

For adolescents, Oltenjenbruns (1996) argues that effectively grieving the loss of a peer has the capacity to not only ensure successful coping with the loss, but it can also result in amazing benefits, including: "...A deeper appreciation for life, emotional strength and bonding, enhanced problem-solving skills, empathy, better communication skills, and resilience" (as cited by Williams & Merten, 2009, p. 69). Successfully grieving the loss of a peer during adolescence has the capacity to remind the grieving adolescent of his or her own mortality; thus, effectively coping with the grief can foster a growth in maturity.

Corresponding to this existential reminder, the adolescents' thought processes become more abstract as they cope with the loss of a peer (Williams & Merten, 2009, p. 69). This abstraction can be difficult to understand and therefore inhibit successful grieving. However, using online mediums such as social networking sites, these adolescents are comforted by tangible communication with the deceased (Williams & Merten, p. 82). Thus, the Internet promotes effective grieving, which benefits the adolescents on a larger scale of personal growth in addition to coping with the loss.

Similarly, parents grieving the loss of a child also benefit from using the Internet to grieve. In their 2012 study, Mitchell et al. research how parents use the Internet to cope with the

loss of a child, which is unquestionably one of the most traumatic experiences any human can endure. Adding to the severity of the situation, Riches and Dawson (1996) argue that within an affluent society, deaths of children are rare; thus, it is difficult to find other people who are experiencing a similar trauma (as cited by Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 414). This rarity isolates the parents in their grief, which could pose a danger to successfully grieving.

A sense of continued bonds with the deceased child helps mitigate this sense of isolation, according to Mitchell et al. (2012): “The ability to continue relationships with the deceased allows parents a sense of relationship with the deceased children in a healthy way, and it helps mitigate feelings of isolation” (p. 165). Like with adolescents continuing the bonds with deceased peers, parents use the Internet as a forum through which they can communicate with their deceased child in a transcorporeal way. Thus, the Internet allows people to *interact* with their grief—not merely attend a funeral or read an obituary.

Mitchell et al. (2012) discuss the significance of this transition from passive to active grieving, attributing the continued relational bonds to this active approach to grief. Losing a child would understandably make a parent feel as though they were robbed of control, but through the perceived continued bond with the deceased, the parents feel as though they have regained control of the situation. In addition to being able to post comments directed toward their children, parents also have the ability to *regulate* posts of pictures and share memories of their children, creating a sense of control over the situation (Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 429). Thus, the Internet not only helps the parents mitigate feelings of isolation, but it also benefits them through reinstating their perception of being a parent through regaining control.

From adolescents experiencing grief over the death of a peer to a parent grieving the loss of a child, the Internet has opened doors for people of all ages and circumstances to better cope with grief. In particular, maintaining relationships with the deceased is achieved through using

various Internet technologies. The research suggests this is largely beneficial to the bereaved. Specifically, the Internet allows for tangible transcorporeal communication, allowing isolated populations, such as adolescents or parents, to both mitigate feelings of isolation and to also find personal growth.

## Part 2: Increased Opportunities for Support

As continued bonds with the deceased resolves feelings of isolation, so does community support; the following section will discuss the benefits associated with increased community support. In her 2007 book, Glanz outlines three key methods for effective support regarding grief: “‘showing up’, showing compassion, and providing meaningful support” (as cited by Swartwood, Veach, Kuhne, Lee, & Kangting, 2011, p. 165). According to Swartwood et al. (2011), the Internet has the ability to meet all three of these supportive methods because of its accessible and interactive nature. The Internet not only enables support, but it also promotes *quality* support. To further this claim, the following section will discuss each of Glanz’s three methods for effective support in light of the research on online support for the bereaved.

According to Swartwood et al. (2011), the Internet provides a platform through which the method of “showing up” is made possible. Recalling Falconer et al. (2011), people use available media to cope with their grief, and the 24/7–accessibility of the Internet makes online forums infinitely available. According to Hess (2007), this constant accessibility is termed deterritorialization (as cited by Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 416), and it ultimately strips the bereaved of boundaries of time and space for grieving, thereby promoting a perception of continued support:

Through asynchronous public access, the online memorials are said to enable new forms of support for bereaved individuals, providing a sense of community, ‘a unique form of

communal discourse' (Carroll & Landry, 2010, p. 342). (as cited by Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 416)

Thus, the Internet truly allows the bereaved to have confidence that others will show up and provide support, which is a key element of effective support, according to Glanz (2007).

As the Internet clearly promotes solace in trusting support, it also welcomes support for certain demographics of the bereaved that are traditionally left out of support networks. Notably, DeVries & Ruthorford (2004) argue that friends and acquaintances of the deceased are typically "disenfranchised from traditional grief" (p. 19, as cited by Hume & Bressers, p. 257). Further, Williams and Merten (2009) discuss this same phenomenon, referring to those who are isolated from traditional grief as "peripheral" friends (p. 89). This is important because while the close family and friends of the bereaved can turn to each other to cope with a loss, these peripheral friends are often neglected. With numerous content analyses of online memorial sites, a majority of commenters and visitors were people who could be considered these peripheral friends (Mitchell et al., 2012; Williams & Merten, 2009; Swartwood et al., 2011). So, the widely accessible nature of the Internet widens the net for support, encompassing a large group of previously neglected people.

Finally, Glanz's last two effective methods for peer support are showing compassion and providing meaningful support. Both of these methods are inherently available through online support communities. The online support communities that evolve on the Internet are typically composed of people who are sharing a similar experience, which automatically promotes compassionate and empathetic messages. Further, Hume and Bressers (2009) argue that people often feel more support from online friends than they do from their real friends and family (p. 268); and similarly, Swartwood et al. (2011) contend that close family and friends often say the wrong thing (p. 174). Thus, it is through these potentially anonymous connections that people



feel the most supported. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is the online disinhibition effect, which is the result of mediated communication such as the Internet, and gives the effect of feeling safer and "...less inhibited" (DeGroot, 2012, p. 198). This lack of inhibition may allow people to express their emotions more comfortably, yielding meaningful support and compassion.

The Internet fosters continued bonds with the deceased while simultaneously enabling the bereaved to find support from a wide network of people. As literary research suggests, the Internet not only promotes community support, but it also fosters *quality* support. Perhaps most significantly, the Internet offers support outlets for nearly every demographic of the bereaved, from close family and friends to acquaintances—a set of the bereaved who often lack resources for support. Further, as continued bonds mitigate feelings of isolation, it is intuitive to assume that community support would, as well. The interactive nature of the Internet promotes connections of all kinds—both continued bonds with the deceased as well as new bonds through online communities—therefore providing the bereaved with a myriad of options for support for their grief.

### Part 3: A Clinician's Perspective

To provide a holistic view of the benefits of the Internet for the bereaved, the following section incorporates a clinician's perspective on how the Internet benefits the grieving process. To do this, Falconer et al. (2011) outline four "tasks" (p. 80) of mourning: "accept the reality of the loss," "work through the pain," "readjust to the environment," and "reinvest in life and forge a new bond" (pp. 80-81). As seen in the table below, Falconer et al. weigh the advantages and disadvantages of grieving online, in consideration of these four tasks:

Tasks of mourning	Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Accept the reality of the loss	Faster communication	Frozen in time
2. Work through the pain	Normalise experience Share emotions more freely	--
3. Readjust to the environment	Broader community More durable community	Pain in online abandonment
4. Reinvest in life and forge a new bond	Rich and vibrant place to remember Safe and accessible Start something positive in a loved one's memory	Risk of family members disabling sites

Figure 1. Traditional customs and the tasks of mourning. Reprinted from *Grieving in the Internet age*.

This table provides a visual representation of the greater number and significance of advantages over disadvantages for grieving online. Taking each task individually, Falconer et al. (2011) discuss these pros and cons. Starting with “accepting the reality of the loss,” Falconer et al. contend that the constant accessibility of the Internet, combined with the interconnectedness it fosters, allows the news of a death to spread more quickly and broadly (p. 84). Further, they argue that the quick spread of news is bolstered by the credibility associated with information communicated through an Internet site; for example, seeing a thread of comments on a friend’s Facebook page allows news to be taken at face value without running the risk of being altered through what can be called a “telephone tree” (Falconer et al., p. 84).

While Falconer et al. (2011) point to the Internet facilitating the first task of mourning, they also note a possible danger: specifically, a Facebook page can cause a person’s online persona to be “frozen in time” (p. 84). This is especially relevant to Facebook, because the site now allows for the memorialization of a deceased user’s page, which truly freezes that person’s online persona. So, while they contend that the Internet encourages acceptance of a loss, Falconer et al. also recognize that this frozen persona may negatively contribute to the grieving process—it could inhibit the ability of the bereaved to accept the reality of the loss. However,

while this is a real possibility, other researchers have also studied this effect; Marwick and Ellison (2012) conclude that the continued relational bonds might in fact sidestep this issue altogether: "...Ongoing updates by mourners on the profile pages of the dead create a sense of ongoing bonds, situating the deceased within a community of peers rather than a static moment" (p. 382). Thus, while Falconer et al. acknowledge frozen personas as a possible disadvantage to grieving, the literature largely suggests that the continued relational bonds inherently encourage the bereaved to accept the reality of the loss by placing their relationship with the deceased into the present context.

According to Falconer et al. (2011), the second task of grieving—"working through the pain"—is entirely facilitated through the Internet. Namely, Falconer et al. argue that the 24/7 nature of the Internet combined with the online support communities that arise contribute to helping the bereaved work through their pain (p. 84). This argument fully aligns with other research regarding online support communities—the interactive and accessible nature of the Internet inherently promotes assistance in working through the pain associated with grief. Recalling the discussion of Part 2, the Internet promotes Glanz's (2007) three methods for effective support, thus aiding the bereaved in working through their grief.

The third task, "readjusting to the environment," has both advantages and a disadvantage for experiencing grief (Falconer et al., 2011). In conjunction with task two, this readjustment relies on the support of others, and according to Falconer et al., a sense of community is key in readjusting to the environment post-loss (p. 84). Again, the Internet inherently promotes communities by transcending time and space and by broadening communities, thereby making relationships more durable (Falconer et al., p. 84). The disadvantage is that these online communities also have the potential to cause a perception of a "second death" (Falconer et al., p. 84). According to Falconer et al., this phenomenon arises because the bereaved take comfort in

the support gained through online communities; however, as this support may subside over time, they fear the deterioration of the online persona of the deceased (p. 84). Despite this possible disadvantage, Falconer et al. suggest that the Internet is largely beneficial to this third task.

The fourth task, “reinvesting in life and forging continuing bonds,” involves accepting the loss, coming to terms with the new reality, and finding new bonds with the deceased (Falconer et al., 2011, p. 84). Further supporting other scholarship on the Internet and grieving, Falconer et al. suggest that the Internet allows the bereaved to have a safe space in which they can mourn and commemorate the life of someone lost. In addition to finding new meaning in the loss, as previously established, the Internet provides a space in which those who are grieving can communicate with the deceased in a more tangible way. Thus, the Internet’s ability to provide both continued relational bonds with the deceased and build a sense of online community support inherently enables this fourth task.

Falconer et al.’s (2011) article encapsulates the body of literature on the Internet and grieving. Holistically, the Internet seems to benefit the grieving process through its interconnected and accessible nature. However, future research could draw upon these ideas and explore the long-term affects of the Internet on grieving. For example, it would be important to understand the long-term affects of the relational continuity provided by the Internet, which could be accomplished through a longitudinal study. Regardless, Falconer et al.’s article provides a wonderful example of how the Internet can benefit the grieving process, considering clinical tasks for overcoming grief.

#### Part 4: Cultural Implications

As research suggests, the Internet unquestionably affects the grieving process, adding a new outlet for the bereaved to express their grief, find support, and continue relationships with the dead; it has thereby created a ripple effect of significant cultural implications. Specifically,

Western culture has been greatly affected by the Internet—especially when it comes to grief. Previously, Western cultures valued private expressions of grief, but with the Internet, people are more apt to publically express their mourning online (Carroll & Landry, 2010). According to Carroll and Landry, Western culture does not traditionally welcome public displays of mourning; yet with the advent of social networking sites, public expressions of grief have become more culturally acceptable (p. 342).

Further, the Internet has stripped grief of its traditional territories, allowing the bereaved to mourn, “...whenever and however they wish” (Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 416), which can be related to how the Internet connects and widens the community of grievers, “...Shift[ing] death and bereavement from the private sphere of family and local community into the public largely unregulated spaces of the Internet” (as cited by Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 416).

While Western culture previously segregated grieving to family and friends within limited time and space, it has now transitioned into a culture that values a more inclusive and expressive experience of grief. People who traditionally lacked resources for grieving—such as parents and adolescents or peripheral friends and acquaintances of the deceased—are now able to find support because of the Internet.

Further, the Internet even has the potential to shift gender norms and expectations. The online disinhibition effect, which enables unfiltered expressions of grief, could be extremely beneficial for men, as their gender norms tend to prescribe less emotional expression (Gamble & Gamble, 2014). Through anonymity associated with mediated communication, men may feel more comfortable expressing their emotions and therefore feel able to work through their emotions in a healthy and fulfilling way. Correspondingly, Western culture could readjust gender norms to socially permit men to openly express grief.

These societal changes truly show how the Internet has changed the landscape of grief—a landscape that was once flat and rigid now appears dynamic and expansive, welcoming all mourners to express their grief and providing an effective source for coping with a loss. These cultural implications show how significant the changed landscape is within our society and throughout the world at large. Because communication is an undercurrent of human existence, any changes to the ways in which humans communicate can enormously impact the cultures of our world. Thus, understanding the impacts of a new medium of communication, such as the Internet, is extremely significant—particularly when it affects a ubiquitous and deeply emotional experience like grief.

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