

Mourning and Memorial culture on the Internet: The Israeli case

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Abstract:

The present research focuses on the Israeli culture of mourning and memorialization on the Internet. The research question is two-fold: Is the Internet rejuvenating memorial culture in Israel, and what characterizes the expression of such painful emotions such as grief and bereavement in a virtual environment in the Israeli context? The study is primarily based on an ethnographic study taking place through and on the Internet, examining the Israeli sites and the virtual support community for the mourning and bereaved. We shall be using three complementary qualitative research methodologies of data-gathering: on-line observations, interviews and content analysis of supplementary materials. The study's importance lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of cyberspace as a research field. In addition, we are seeking to understand how emotions are expressed in on-line communication, as well as obtain a better understanding of the culture of mourning and memorials in Israeli society.

Introduction

"Ya'ara was born on February 9, 1980... For 18 years she hovered among us like a good fairy, sprinkling her magic dust all over us. But on October 31, 1998, she was attacked by a vicious microbe, cutting short her dreams, her beauty and silencing the melody. We hope that now, all of the good fairies are flying above her and sprinkling their magic dust for her" (www.yaaronet.com).

The above excerpt is from the opening page of Ya'ara's virtual memorial site. It is not alone; there are many such memorials on Israeli Internet sites. Along with the sites, there is an active Israeli support community for the bereaved and those in mourning. The site administrator's greetings details the community's goals: "People often want to share, release feelings, let it all out, tell stories, be comforted, embrace and be embraced in return. This is the place. You already know me, I am one of you, member of the huge clan of all those who have lost someone near and dear to our hearts...I am here for you exactly as you are here for me, to listen, to respond, and often just to be silent."

The goal of the present research is an examination of the following questions: Has the Internet rejuvenated the culture of mourning and memorialization, and if so, to what degree? Is it expanding the sphere of mourning, reorganizing the field, or changing it from the bottom up while restructuring new patterns? What characterizes the way in which painful and difficult emotions of loss are expressed on the Internet, which is a system constructed on impersonal communication without physical visual interaction? How does the Internet contribute to the Israeli culture of loss and memorialization, especially given the processes of change, leading to increased sectorialization and privatization of the past few years.

Since the Internet is a new medium, with many implications for Israeli society that I will examine in my research, I feel it is best to begin with a brief description of the Internet and its affects on society:

The Internet and its social implications

In contrast to other media, the Internet integrates personal and mass media. It has, in fact, created a new mode of human communication, enabling participants to take part in two-way communication. Users of the World Wide Web are no longer passive audiences of data consumers as in media such as television and radio, but are active participants controlling the contents of the desired information. They shape the quality of the data and respond to them.

The Internet opens up a simple virtual topography of sites and “addresses” to users, allowing travel from site to site by moving from link to link. Cyberspace, or cybernetic space, through which users move, does not imitate the real world, but rather creates a rapid, new, immediate, multi-layered world, thanks to the 24/7 accessibility to the Internet and site structure. Vast amounts of data and links to additional, related sites provides a huge storehouse of available information; thus, the Internet is a technological innovation tightly linked to social change. These social changes have clear implications for the patterns of mourning and memory to be detailed in the research and described below.

In order to distinguish the characteristics of expression of painful emotions of grief and loss on the Internet, we shall move to the next issue:

Identity, emotions and communities: Does the Internet make a difference?

On-line communication on the Internet facilitates the expression of emotions (output) and the input of emotional messages, thus developing and reinforcing important social ties between users, forming a system of relationships similar to ties

of family and friendship, all taking place without participants being physically present. Thus, the Internet may be said to aid in preserving personal and intimate ties in cases where face-to-face contact is impossible due to physical distance between parties. On-line interaction through the Internet functions mostly as a writing medium, operating within a communications framework that takes place in “real time,” i.e., the Internet transforms the act of writing into “speech.”

On one hand, communication through the Internet provides immediacy, accessibility and continuousness to the expression of emotion; on the other hand, it differs from face to face communication. When both parties are present, physical and visual interaction provides details on the identity of users and about the situation eliciting the emotion. This phenomenon questions the essence of emotions, the degree to which they are concrete, and their mode of expression in virtual space. Can emotions really be expressed through an “impersonal” or “alienated” computer technology? Can we express emotions of love, pain or sorrow through a communication medium based on reading and writing, but lacking any visual physical expressions?

The social space from which we can learn about the expression of emotions through the Internet is formed by virtual communities, such as e-groups. Studies that have investigated interpersonal communications in these communities, primarily studying virtual support groups, have found that on-line communication enables users to freely express emotions and reach a high level of self-disclosure. This exposure is accomplished through expressive codes developed among users as a sign language and vocabulary of abbreviations, and through written descriptive emotions (in short or expanded form) in “real time” in a genuine, spontaneous manner.

As a new medium, the Internet facilitates the expression of emotions through on-site memorialization through participation in grief work support groups. A closer examination of these phenomena brings us to focus on the next issue:

The culture of mourning and memorialization on the Internet

Communities define their identity in the present through the design and restructuring of the collective memory that they have in common. This factor forms the group and unifies the community, but can also become the battleground between various agents of memory as to which memories should be conserved and which forgotten. Communities fix and conserve their collective memory through different practices, such as museums, contracts, cemeteries, special memorial days, history

books and more. Nora (1989) has defined these manifestations of collective memory as “places of memory” (*Lieux de Memoire*): He does not relate to the limited definition of the word in space, but emphasizes its broadest interpretation. He characterizes these “places of memory” as the visual expression on the public sphere, as events found on the real-time calendar, and as mental spaces existing within the consciousness of people who remember, expressed in dialogue, dress and behavior. The Internet technology influences the memorial culture since it transforms the concepts “place of memory” and “community of memory,” placing them in a space cut off from specific time and place, with direct and unmediated access 24 hours a day. In addition, it expands the virtual memorial sites into meta-places of memory. Each site can simultaneously use several practical memorial methods, and exhibit several places of memory at one time: photo gallery, monument, poem, condolence book and linking users to other memory sites. All this is made possible thanks to the multi-layered presentation and hypertext resources of virtual sites.

Internet technology can transform the virtual social space into a place where those who are grieving can receive group support, participate in discussions and chats, and memorialize the departed in virtual memorial sites on differing levels of the personal, communal, national and global. Memorial sites may include many elements of traditional mourning ceremonies, such as biographical details of the departed, dates of birth and death and selected photographs. There may also be formal or religious items enabling mourners and visitors to participate in a wide range of meaningful activities or ceremonies, such as building a monument, lighting a virtual memorial candle, and writing in the memorial book of condolences.

Sofka (1997) described several goals for memorial sites; the sites can bring together a memorial community of support from among the mourners, and primarily from among others who are dealing with daily mourning. With the help of the site, those experiencing loss can receive affirmation of their emotions during difficult times. Visiting memorial sites assists the mourners in overcoming their feeling of isolation and loneliness, and helps them identify with other bereaved. Such sites allow the users to express their condolences to public figures and to private citizens, while allowing the bereaved to receive support from a wide sector of people through the virtual “condolence book” or through a link to e-mail.

The site can host discussions on emotions and conflicts that arose following the death. Development of memorial sites can help fulfill the obligations and needs of

the mourners, primarily in cases in which the body was not found, or for people who were buried at a place very distant from those mourning the departed (Andsager, 1997; Sofka, 1997).

Examples of major Internet memorial sites include the patchwork quilt commemorating AIDS-related deaths; the virtual wall for US servicemen who lost their life in Vietnam; the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC; public figures such as Princess Diana and Frank Sinatra (Andsager, 1997).

Virtual memorial sites and the grief support community exist in Israeli society. The rise in the number of these sites is linked to processes of change taking place in Israeli society over the past two decades, as I shall proceed to describe:

Israel's mourning culture: What do Israelis remember?

Israeli society has shaped its civilian social culture in accordance with the Zionist narrative through the “founding myth” that described the establishment of the State of Israel as part of the continuum of Jewish historical heritage. The founding myth was structured and maintained, among others, by state-established to remember Independence Day and memorial all of the fallen who contributed to the struggle. Independence Day was made part of the fabric of the Jewish religious holidays, such as Passover and Hannukah, symbolizing the heroism of the Jewish people. Alongside of Independence Day ritual, there developed within Israeli society a culture of mourning for the fallen Israel's wars, expressed in the concept “the family of bereavement.” In contrast to the ritual of Independence Day and the ritual of memorial Israel's fallen soldiers, the Israeli society found it difficult to cope with the trauma of the Holocaust. The Israelis succeeded in doing so only by embracing it within the Zionist ethos through heightening the link between the Holocaust of the Jewish people and their rebirth as the State of Israel.

The chipping away at the status of the hegemony of Zionist memory over the past 25 years within Israeli society has led to the privatization of collective memory and changes in the culture of memorial. The first example of this process may be seen in the transition in the memorial processes for the Holocaust and for the fallen in Israel's wars. The emphasis is passing from collective national memorial to memorials that express a more personal meaning of bereavement, plus the integration of personal and communal mourning in official government memorial sites.

Another example of this trend may be observed in the struggles by bereaved families against the Israel Defense Forces and government agencies as they press for

full disclosure of circumstances surrounding the death of their fallen son or daughter. Yet another example is seen in families' appeals for personal grave inscriptions in military cemeteries, instead of the standard IDF formula.

The second type of sectorialization processes which memorial culture is undergoing in Israel, including the increase in the number of agents of memory, is observed in the many memorial activities celebrating the memory of the prime minister, the late Yitzhak Rabin. The many memorial activities for Rabin that were intended to unify Israelis actually express precisely these deep rifts in Israeli society. The changes in the culture of memory in Israel are linked to the rise of virtual Israeli memorial sites on the Internet that I shall examine in my research.

In two surveys that I conducted using search engines, I found about 130 current sites, a figure that is consistently increasing. On the basis of an initial survey, we may distinguish two major categories: official sites and private and community sites.

The official sites are most inclusive and give less expression to personal bereavement. For example, the <http://www.izkor.gov.il> site presents a fixed formal for all: a single photo of the soldier, date of birth, date of death, short CV from the Ministry of Defense's *Yizkor* memorial booklet, and where the soldier is buried. In contrast, private memorial sites provide much more detail, with more freedom to those designing the sites. Options include integrating several memorial practices simultaneously: a "cover photo," detailed CV, eulogies and condolences, letters, poems, visitor's book and contact link directly to the family or to the site manager. Examples of this type are: private sites to memorialize fallen soldiers, such as <http://www.yadnahum.cjb.net> ; for famous people <http://www.mota.co.il> ; for Jewish communities wiped out in the Holocaust, <http://www.korets.org.il> ; sites in memory of terror attack victims, <http://www.racheli.org> ; or victims of accidents or illness, <http://www.yaaronet.com> . Other more complex sites include audio-video clips, background music, and additional options such as social action opportunities in memory of the departed, <http://www.shira.org.il> ; or an appeal for the existing memorial statue erected by a bereaved father, <http://www.inter.net.il/~eizen/mitzpor.html>.

On Internet research: Methodology

Clarification of the problems of qualitative research on the Internet in my work will form a major part of the study. In order to produce rich ethnographic data not limited

to the Internet, I shall be gathering data through three complementary research methods: on-line observation, interviews and content analysis of press material and media databases on the Internet. Data gathered from the field work will be analyzed using grounded theory. Grounded theory is an approach espousing inductive research based on forming the overall hypotheses following data gathering, while constantly comparing all of the research variables. I selected this approach since it allows for a flexible and open analysis that does not coerce theory onto the research field, but rather suits itself to research that contains a variety of source material, including interviews, observations and additional documents. This method of analysis will enable me to examine the various facts produced as a result of the field-work and to deduce from those data the definition of the research topic. This makes it more focused, with specific research areas and broad theoretical principles. My goal is to formulate theoretical principles parallel to the research work so as to include the data gathered, thus creating additional criteria forming the basis for examination of further new data from the field.

My three methods of data gathering were on-line observation, interviews and content analysis. Let us look at each one in turn:

ON-LINE OBSERVATIONS were made on virtual memorial sites and what is commonly called in Israel “the family bereavement.” I chose this method instead of using the traditional, classical concept of the “participant observer,” since the latter does not suit the circumstances of the virtual culture. Instead, my research method literally “domesticates” anthropological research methods by taking the researcher away from the field “out there” in society, whether at home or a distant country, while placing the researcher in cyberspace, in a virtual field, through the home or office computer. Communicating through this research framework, I have contacted other sites, their webmasters, visitors, and site directors providing on-line memorial services. I am maintaining the contact that I initiated with the director of the virtual support community for the bereaved who are mourning their loss. I shall be visiting virtual on-site memorials and the support community’s sites, performing content analysis on their components and correspondence, their visual elements and “guest books.” At the same time as I am interacting on the Internet, I shall be visiting concrete memorial sites over Israel that have their “virtual twins,” such as the Museum of Yad Vashem, Heroes’ and Martyr’s Holocaust Memorial Authority.

As for the *INTERVIEWS*, I shall be holding about 30 semi-structured interviews by running a representative model on the research population in its various strata. The subjects are those who established virtual Israeli memorial sites, on various levels - personal, group and national – visitors to the sites, directors providing services, and administrators and participants in the grief support community.

CONTENT ANALYSIS will be applied to documents, press articles and items from Internet databases and research collections, notices from the virtual bereavement community, articles on the subject from the print and electronic media, including virtual magazines such as “Captain Internet” and “TheNet” (and all other relevant informational groups during the data-gathering stage).

Using all three qualitative research data-gathering methods, complementing each other, will facilitate gathering of factual information from the field, i.e., from the sites themselves: How many virtual Israeli memorial sites are there? Does the number vary? What types of sites exist, such as private, governmental, and more? What is the structure, contents and components of the sites? How many hits are there on these sites? Such facts will constitute the basis for data-gathering and analysis in several categories:

Information on the sites: Who is behind the sites and what characterizes them? How is a virtual site similar to and different from the usual social memorial means? What characterizes the people or groups being remembered? What are the characteristics of the ongoing sites and those that are renewed or abandoned? And what is the nature of the connection formed between actual memorials and their virtual twins?

Information about the initiators of the sites: Who are the people behind the memorial sites? Why do people choose to build their sites in the virtual world?

Information about the emotions arising from the sites: How do people broadcast emotional messages on an Internet page? What are the characteristics of emotion on the Internet? How do people overcome the problems involved in transmitting and emotional message through a non-visual, non-physical interactive medium based on writing? And what happens to people after they express their feelings on the Internet?

Information on users: Who are the visitors to the virtual memorial sites? What is written in the “guest books” of these sites? What sort of contact is created between the sites’ creators and Internet visitors?

WHAT INFORMATION DO WE HAVE ABOUT THE VIRTUAL BEREAVEMENT AND LOSS SUPPORT COMMUNITY and what sort of interpersonal and emotional interaction is generated by it? What processes take place in the active participants, and what is their connection to other virtual memorial sites?

Based on the above questions, we will be able to find answers to broader questions about Israeli society: What is reflected through these sites regarding the memorial “economy” in Israel? Who memorializes and who is memorialized? Who is not? How do the virtual memorial sites reflect changes in stratification of Israeli society (ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, gender)? What characterizes the expression of emotions on the virtual memorials and within the Internet-based community of bereavement and loss within the Israeli Net?

This research contributes to scientific literature on four levels:

First, the Internet as a medium with social influence is a new anthropological field of inquiry. I hope that the way that I have coped with qualitative research problems using the Internet in my work will help with improved methodological understanding for carrying out such an anthropological study.

Second, the Internet is a new tool for the direct expression of emotions, and is accessible in real time. However, it differs from face to face communication in society. On-line interaction functions primarily as a written medium, fulfilling the function of speech, an interaction that negates most means of identification. Thus, the user may conceal one’s identity, facilitating greater freedom and openness. My primary interest is in the study of how emotions are expressed on memorial sites and in Internet grief support groups: I intend to contribute to the body of scientific research on the characteristics of emotion in the age of the Internet.

Third, the Internet acts as an instrument through which one can receive emotional support through e-mail, conversation with a therapist, discussion or support group, or through sites whose declared purpose is to provide such assistance. I hope that my specific study on inter-personal communication taking place within the Israeli virtual community of support for the bereaved will lead to deeper understanding of the phenomenon of the Internet as a means of obtaining emotional support and in the social and cultural coping with bereavement.

Fourth, the Internet has implications for Israeli society in several areas. I would like my study to contribute to the issue as to whether and how the Internet has rejuvenated

the culture of mourning and memorial. This analysis takes place while examining the processes of change in Israeli society, of sectorialization and privatization, and which are affecting the nature of how society memorializes the departed. One of the most outstanding changes is the transition from collective national memorialization to an expression of the personal meaning of bereavement, and the integration of private and the public grief in the governmental memorial sites.

My research goal is to show how the Internet is involved with the changes that Israeli society is currently undergoing.

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