Death, Hope and the Internet

An outline of some of the most important ways in which digital media are handling the way people die and mourn today. Christians need to think seriously about how they can bring their message of hope and love to this emerging network society.

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This article outlines some of the most important ways in which digital media are changing the way people die and mourn today. I'll focus on three aspects of grief – sharing the news, the funeral event and creating a memorial – and I'll discuss the use of the internet to talk to the dead, one of the most intriguing findings of research in this area. Researchers have begun to pay close attention to all of these topics, but so far Christian theologians have shown much less interest. I am an academic sociologist of religion and media, not a preacher or a theologian, but I can try to describe what's happening in society today and encourage you to think about a response that emphasises a Christian understanding of hope and love.

The internet is now a part of everyday life for most of us, a medium of communication we use to find information, conduct business and contact friends. According to sociologists, the internet has played a part in the development of a new kind of 'network society', powered not by stable, place-based communities but by 'networked individualism'.[1] The 'network society' has been developing over the last century or so as more people moved to cities and began using new communication technologies to keep in touch, and the internet has proved to be the perfect medium to support its expansion. Each person now chooses exactly who they want to contact, building up a social network that reflects their personal needs and interests. Through a mobile phone or a social network site, all my friends and colleagues are available to me everywhere I go, and I am available to them. This does not mean that 'community' has disappeared, but the meaning of the word has changed to emphasise the warm friendships we choose to invest in rather than the stable local groups we are born into.

Our experiences of death and grief are, in part, about relationships. We mourn the deaths of people we love and feel close to, people who are important to us, and we mourn in ways that reflect the kinds of relationships we had with them. In recent years a number of academics studying death and dying have argued that the grieving process should be understood not as a passing phase but as a way of continuing those relationships, and that this can be healthy.[2] Keeping photographs, leaving gifts at a grave or talking to the dead can all be ways to keep something of a person alive and preserve a bond with them.

If mourning is about continuing a relationship, and the way we relate to each other is changing, then we shouldn't be surprised to discover that the way people mourn is now changing too. When the structure of society changes, the way we die and remember the dead also changes. This is a phenomenon that Christians should watch with particular interest, because they, of course, have their own particular ideas about what happens after death. They have a distinctive hope for the future, and need to find ways to share that hope in a changing world.

One of the most important changes in grief experienced in recent years has been a shift in how we share the news of a death or disaster. Online, rumours and information can spread to more people more quickly than ever before. Anyone can publish and share information and add their own reactions. When Michael Jackson died in 2009, the news was first broken by a Twitter message posted just 20 minutes after the first

911 phone call. The rumour was quickly picked up by a Hollywood gossip blog and spread from there around the world. Conflicting rumours led to an editing battle on Wikipedia,[3] while major websites, chatrooms and social media sites experienced crashes and slow-downs under the sudden surge in demand for information and comment. Amid the excitement, false rumours about deaths of other celebrities quickly spread online. The internet itself became a part of the story, with journalists discussing the unprecedented levels of online communication and trawling social media to collect 'fan reactions'. Fans used social media to share their love for Jackson and memories of his music, and sales of his songs boomed. This was a new kind of media event, in which unprecedented numbers of mourners worldwide used the internet to express their reactions and connect temporary networks of emotional support.

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The internet has also transformed other, much less public kinds of dying. Elizabeth Drescher has published an account of the death of one of her own university students, Kirstin, who spent her last two years writing online about her life with cancer.[4] According to Drescher, this blog demonstrates the power of the internet to overcome the isolation of the dying, bringing them, or at least their words, out of the sterile hospital and back among the living. Kirstin's friends around the world came to her blog and Facebook page to read her thoughts, updates and prayer requests, and responded with prayers, inspirational photographs and music. When Kirstin announced online that she had decided to stop her chemotherapy and move to a hospice, her friends turned her Facebook page into a vigil site, forming a network of continuous prayer and support to care for her and for each other. At the end of her life, when Kirstin was too sick to read and type, a close friend took over her Facebook page and continued to tell Kirstin about the prayers her friends were sending her. Drescher spoke to this friend, who told her, 'The prayers meant so much to her, Kirstin knew she was not alone ... It was like the whole cloud of witnesses was with us both at the end of her life.' This is a powerful story of Christian hope, but very similar tales have been published by non-Christians who have used online media like Facebook and Skype to gather family and friends around the deathbed of their loved ones.[5]

These tales remind us that online media are not just 'virtual'; they are part of everyday life. These are normal ways to communicate with friends and family, meaningful ways to share time and invest emotionally in our relationships. In a 'network society', in which the connections we choose around the world are more important than where we are born or where we live, an online presence can be the most effective way to share experiences and offer support to those we care about.

The internet has also become part of funerals and memorial services, allowing those who can attend to share something of the experience with those who cannot. When Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston died, thousands of fans attended memorial events and used social media like Twitter to share every detail in real time with global audiences unable to attend in person. A growing number of funeral providers offer webcasts as part of their package, broadcasting the funeral live online for distant mourners to watch.

In some cases, friends who only know each other online have created completely online funeral services. This may seem more surprising, particularly to anyone who hasn't been part of an online community, but it shouldn't be too hard to understand. My own research has included five studies of 'online churches', Christian groups who use the internet to worship together. These worshippers prayed and talked together every day, sometimes for many years, and formed very deep friendships over time. They did meet sometimes, face to face, but these communities included participants all over the world; some could gather in the same place, sometimes, but the internet was the only place for everyone to come together. When church members died, their friends needed to express their grief, and they did so by talking to each other online and creating online memorial services. This is not just an experience shared by Christians: non-religious funerals have also been created inside computer games like World of Warcraft, allowing people who may have played the same game together for many years to express their own grief and loss after the death of a friend.

The internet has also generated new ways of remembering the dead. 'Virtual cemeteries' have been created online since the 1990s, allowing family and friends to build online memorials to their loved ones. Online memorial websites usually offer a similar range of features: a profile page of information about the person remembered, with the chance to upload photos, stories and videos. The creator of the web page can use all these options to build and share their own version of the memory of the person who has died. Visitors are invited to contribute to a memorial book and to light virtual candles. To light a candle, the visitor simply clicks a button on their computer screen, producing an image of a flickering flame that will remain on the webpage for others to see.

These pages offer several advantages over traditional gravesites. They are quick and easy to create, offer lots of options for personalisation and interaction, and can be visited at any time of day or night from anywhere in the world. Creating an online memorial also allows the mourner to connect to new online audiences, encountering strangers who have shared a similar tragedy. Communities of mutual support emerge across memorial pages, blogs and other sites where grief can be expressed. Online memorials can also be created by anyone. Gonetoosoon.org, a popular memorial site with 100,000 tribute pages, reassures visitors that they 'would not be encroaching on other family member's territory' by setting up a memorial. The important thing is to create the site as quickly as possible, to give family

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1. The most complete explanation of this idea can be found in Barry Wellman and Lee Rainie's book *'Networked'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

2. E.g. Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman and Steven Nickman (eds), *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 1996).

3. See, e.g., http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/wikipedia/5652230/Michael-Jacksons-death-sparks-Wikipedia-editing-war.html

4. Elizabeth Drescher wrote about Kirstin in an article called 'Pixels Perpetual Shine', published in *CrossCurrents* 62.2 (2012).

5. See Jane Moore's contribution to *Dying, Death, and Grief in an Online Universe* C Sofka, I Cupit and K Gilbert eds; New York: Springer 2012).

6. Elaine Kasket has shared her findings in an article called 'Continuing bonds in the age of social networking: Facebook as a modern-day medium', in *Bereavement Care* 31.2 (2012).

and friends somewhere to visit online to share their condolences – close family might not want to create a memorial soon after the death, so they will appreciate your efforts to help them as 'a great mark of respect'. This is a rather optimistic promise; in reality, researchers have found, outbreaks of jealous squabbling between the creators of rival memorials are not uncommon.

Memorial spaces have also appeared on Facebook, currently the most popular social networking site. Each Facebook member has a profile page on which they can post messages, updates, photos and links. If a member dies, that page remains online as a kind of self-constructed memorial, a collection of the thoughts they wanted to share with their friends. When a Facebook user dies, their friends may create memorial groups and pages, express grief through their status updates and change their own profile photos to include an image of the dead, but they also visit their dead friend's profile and leave messages there. Facebook initially tried to delete profiles of dead members, but since 2009 they have been 'memorialised' instead, allowing friends to continue writing private and public messages to the dead person. Even after death, your network of relationships is preserved online.

Studies of messages posted on 'memorial' pages show that friends continue visiting them for years. Comments can include tributes, condolences and expressions of grief, but most seem to be speaking directly to the person who has died. This phenomenon has been reported by researchers studying memorial websites, online communities, MySpace and Facebook, and seems to be becoming more common over time. Online conversations with the dead include expressions of grief, birthday and Christmas greetings, and regular updates about the experiences the dead have missed. The idea of communication with the dead isn't unique to the internet, of course – mourners also visit graves with flowers and presents, talk aloud to the dead, feel the dead nearby and send text messages to their mobile phones – but a Facebook post can be seen by a much wider audience. Something that once happened in private has become more public, and perhaps more common.

Researchers have suggested that these online conversations reflect a consistent view of life after death: the dead reside in a heaven that is very similar to our world, and they watch the living, check Facebook and offer supernatural help in moments of crisis. Research so far has focused particularly on college students, people who are particularly likely to use social networking sites regularly, so it's not yet clear how widespread this view of the afterlife might be, but it's possible that it's most common among the young.

Elaine Kasket has recorded some examples of Facebook comments to illustrate these themes.[6] 'Even though it seems silly to talk through Facebook,' one commenter wrote to a dead friend, 'I know u can see and understand every word I type.' Others used Facebook to describe other encounters with the dead: 'Thanks for the dream you gave me, you weirdo.' 'There's been a really bright star in the sky lately and I know that that's you.' 'The car almost skidded over the median. Thank you for keeping me from going across all the way.'

Kasket's interviews with mourners suggested that Facebook is understood as an especially powerful way to talk to the dead, more useful than visiting a grave or writing a letter. A Facebook profile is a reminder of life and relationships, the way we communicate every day with our friends. It does not symbolise death and loss, like a graveyard, and this can make it easier to feel a conversation can continue.

This understanding of life after death seems to be shared by Christian and non-Christian users of Facebook. According to Drescher, the Christian friends of her student, Kirstin, continued to talk to her through Facebook after she died, and wrote messages reassuring each other that Kirstin could read Facebook in heaven. One student believed that Kirstin had intervened in her own life at a crucial moment, just as she would have done while she was alive: 'Thank you for helping me find the right words to say to my grandmother, who is so very scared to die ... Even after passing into the next, you and your life still helps minister to those in need.'

These reports suggest that something is happening online, and Christians need to pay attention. Of course, we can't assume that the way people act or talk online really reflects exactly what they believe. Some could find it comforting to act as if the dead were still listening, even if they don't really think that's true. Despite this, the sheer volume of communication with the dead found online has led some academics to suggest that Facebook is encouraging more people to talk to the dead, to do so more publicly, and to think differently about the afterlife. Even if these claims are exaggerated, the online messages I have described do show a widespread longing for relationships that continue after death. Whether or not mourners really believe that the dead can read Facebook, the fact that so many people wish to act as if they do reveals a hope for comfort and companionship and help that does not end with death. This is not a hope for a future reunion, or a better, future heaven and earth, and there is no suggestion in these messages that anyone might need to be saved from anything. Instead, we see an immediate hope that our loved ones are still with us, right now, to help us through our grief and stay with us, at least for just a little longer.

It isn't my place, I think, to tell you how to respond to these ideas. But I do believe that Christians should be watching with great interest, and thinking hard about how to speak to the new 'network society' that is emerging around us. Certain aspects of digital social networks seem to encourage an interest in non-material, perhaps even spiritual ways of thinking – but the ideas that I have described differ in important ways from the promises described in the Bible and in traditional Christian theologies. Can Christians listen to the kind of hope that is being expressed in these online messages? Is there anything in Christian theology that could be heard as 'good news' by people hoping for something quite different?