Topic Proposal (Intro below)

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**Tentative paper title:**  Leaving Digital Flowers on Digital Graves: The Communicative Practices of Online Remembrance in Virtual Cemeteries  
**Research question(s):** In this study, the primary research question that will be explored is how grief and memorialization are transformed by the online world. With the rise of online memorials, how are afterlife memorials being digitally facilitated? How do people grieve online? What are the implications of posts or pages dedicated to the deceased? How do digital spaces and places devoted to grieving alter the communicative practices of grieving the dead?

**Area of COM:** Interpersonal/Mass Communication  
**Theory:** Grounded theory, and the theory of hyperlinked society (Turow and Tsui) put forward that the mediated character of digital technology makes it easier for certain groups and organizations to network and find better representation in social dialogue. Marginalized narratives can exert more influence in shared social spaces.

**Data/How it will be obtained:** Public memorials and legacy pages on sites like FindAGrave, MyDeathSpace, Facebook, Instagram, and others. It will be accessed online, as it is publicly available. Qualitative analysis techniques and rhetorical criticism will be used.

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*“Neon gravestones try to call; Neon gravestones try to call for my bones”*

*– twenty one pilots*

The digital age has changed the process of mourning through the form of virtual cemeteries, which create and communicate the online legacies of the dead. Researchers at Oxford University predict that deceased Facebook members will outnumber the living users on the platform within 50 years (Öhman & Watson, 2019). Will this rise in “dead” accounts change how people interact with the dead? How has it changed already? Do the dead live among us, or live on through memory?

*“Have a great birthday* 🎂*”*

*– a message left on the Facebook wall of my late great-aunt one year after her passing.*

As noted in “Logging On and Letting Out” by Brian Carroll and Katie Landry, traditional mourning rituals evolve. Prior to recent trends of virtual cemeteries, “an individual’s death rarely extended beyond the immediate physical area where the person was born and lived his or her entire life” (Carroll & Landry, 2010). Death notices are traditionally spread by word-of-mouth, newspaper obituaries, or in the case of a prominent death, special TV/radio newscasts. However, with the rise of digital memorials, how are afterlife memorials being digitally facilitated? How do people grieve online? What are the implications of posts or pages dedicated to the deceased? How do digital spaces devoted to grief and mourning alter the communicative practices of grieving the dead?

To clarify, in this study, a virtual cemetery will reference any online platform that hosts makeshift or more formal memorials for the deceased, typically through user-generated content collections (e.g., MyDeathSpace, Facebook), or through more genealogical databases, such as FindAGrave.com or Ancestry. These sites, including celebrity or public memorials, will serve as the primary artifacts and texts of further analysis.

In this study, the primary research question that will be explored is how grief and memorialization are transformed by the online world. Through the comprehensive qualitative and quantitative analysis of the above phenomena, a better understanding will be sought inside the lenses of interpersonal and mass communication. One main hypothesis towards the results of the study is that lives are being publicly immortalized, as in the future, users will be able to access not only virtual memorials, but also witness the grief that death wrought.

*“Every man has two deaths, when he is buried in the ground and the last time someone says his name. In some ways men can be immortal”*

*-Ernest Hemingway*

**References**

Baig, E. C. (2019). 'I See Dead People' on Facebook: What is to become of our digital remains? TIME (Online), (apr 26, 2019). <https://time.com/5579737/facebook-dead-living/>

Carroll, B., & Landry, K. (2010). Logging On and Letting Out: Using Online Social Networks to Grieve and to Mourn. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, *30*(5), 341–349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610380006>

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Öhman, C., & Watson, D. (2019). Are the dead taking over Facebook? A Big Data approach to the future of death online. *Big Data & Society*, *6*(1), 205395171984254. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951719842540>