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Mourning network: new social practices in online communities

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Abstract

In this paper we present some results from broader research, undertaken using an ethnographic approach, about the role of the web as a (socio-cultural) relational context in which to share and overcome the experience of mourning. From a narrative perspective, we describe the peculiar reality in online communities regarding loss and mourning and, above all, we focus on the social dynamics, the motivations – that push people to enter these specific e-places – and the functions of the web in terms of mourning.

Keywords

internet, mourning, on-line communities, social practices

Xarxa de dol: noves pràctiques socials en comunitats en línia

Resum

En aquest article proposem resultats d'una recerca més àmplia, duta a terme amb un enfocament etnogràfic, sobre el paper d'internet com a context relacional (sociocultural) en el qual es pot compartir i superar l'experiència del dol. Amb una mirada narrativa, descriurem la realitat peculiar de la comunitat en línia sobre la pèrdua i el dol i, sobretot, ens centrarem en les dinàmiques socials, les motivacions que porten les persones a entrar en aquests espais virtuals específics i les funcions d'internet en la situació del dol.

Paraules clau

internet, dol, comunitats en línia, pràctiques socials

Self-narration and the power of the net in loss experiences

This brief paper describes the results of broader research on the role of internet in loss and bereavement experiences. Before presenting our research, we have to emphasize some aspects of the net that, in our opinion, are very important elements for

understanding the power of the net in the peculiar circumstance of sharing the experience of loss.

We dwell upon three aspects connected to internet as a meta-social medium.

According to our perspective,¹ the net is a *narrative technology* (Walzer, 2001; Walzer *et al.*, 2002). Even if the number of multimedia languages is increasing, internet is composed above all

1. Our research is based on the narrative approach. For more details we suggest J. Bruner (2006).



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by texts: the simplicity of opening a personal space leads everyone to add personal contents that are mostly autobiographical fragments, connected with each other, and collected in intimate spaces (blogs, forums, and personal homepages).

As a narrative support, the net is similar to traditional diaries or personal notes where people can write down and then read the contents. This process, based on the action of writing and reading about self, is very useful for allowing the author to reflect upon his/her self (Bruner, 2006).

Speaking about personal emotions or about the story of loss is very useful in the case of mourning: it is a way to retrace the story and in this way reflect on the present (Pitt, 2004; Orgad, 2006). This mechanism, called by Bruner (1996, p. 65) *reflexivity*, is a natural psychological process that can be defined as "the perpetual readjustment of past and present to create and sustain a good story".

The net is also an *interactive technology* (Howard, 2002). By the action of publishing, personal contents are exposed to the glance of net users (Di Fraia, 2007) who have the opportunity of answering, commenting or posting something new. Looking at this process – writing, commenting, writing again – from a broader perspective, we can say that the macro story produced in a specific digital place is the result of the plot of a single fragment, written by different authors and that gives the sense of one big story (Grohol, 2002).

In the case of mourning stories, the bereaved person can exchange their experience in these spaces or recognise themselves in another narration.

The last interesting aspect for our dissertation is that the net can also be considered a *technology of the memory*. From this perspective, internet is a 'digital archive', a vast storage of stories, thoughts, notions, contents and information of any kind (De Carli, 1996). A web is a virtual space for putting and delegating personal memory and in which contents are consulted. Crossing this aspect with the second one – the interactive dimension – the net is a place where you can exchange memories with other persons: sharing, co-constructing, or simply knowing feeling, emotions connected with past experiences. Thus the net could become the 'place of memory' where the memory of the beloved is celebrated and shared (Hess, 2007), and it could be also the place to discover the personal trace of the deceased – if they were a net user. Starting from these considerations, we set out to verify if all of these aspects were investigable through an empirical study.

The research: goals, methodology and sample

Through our empirical study, we would know if internet, as technological artefact (Flishy, 1995), could be considered a new social context where people can socialise the experience of mourning, receiving the appropriate emotional support.

In this paper we propose only a part of the results of more extensive research. Particularly, we focus on the case of weblogs and web communities dedicated to loss.² From the macro-objective, we identified more operative questions in order to:

- understand the motivations that push people to enter and use the net as an intimate space where they speak about their personal experience of mourning;
- analyse the practices of use of digital spaces and the interactions among participants (roles, elective relations, timing, modality of access, etc);
- reconstruct the functions recognised on the net in the specific case of mourning experiences.

The empirical work was divided into two steps. The first one was based on the identification – through the most important Italian search engine³ – and on the qualitative content analysis of websites where the theme of death (mourning and memory) was central.

The second step was based on web overt observations⁴ inside communities dedicated to the theme of mourning and loss and on blogs with the same argument and on e-mail narrative interviews with members of the forums and authors of the blogs. We participated in four communities and ten blogs and we conducted 32 interviews with net users of forums and 15 with bloggers.⁵

Mourning online: the results

In the next pages we present the results of our research distinguishing three aspects: the motivations that push people to enter and to use virtual space to share their personal experience of loss; the characteristics of the interactions inside the communities; the peculiar elements of the use of blogs as 'intimate environments' where personal mourning is written about. We try to provide an answer to our first question: could the net define new social, anthropological spaces where experiences of mourning are shared?

2. For the complete presentation of the research we invite you to consult the acts of the international conference *Mending the Gap 2008*.
3. We analysed only Italian webs because we believe that cultural and religious beliefs have a great influence on how we live through and perceive the way of living and perceiving death experience as well as in the way of showing how grief is shown. We used: <www.google.it>.
4. For more details about the use of ethnographic perspective we suggest to read also: D. Carter (2005), C. Hine (2000), Miller *et al.* (2001).
5. Almost all the interviewees are female (a part two case), which can lead to a consideration of the natural female attitude of using autobiographical writing as a self-therapy.



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We identified three groups of motivations connected with the first access on the web, looking for a solution to their personal grief. The first group of motivation was related with the isolation perceived by the bereaved in their social real context. In fact, this isolation is a part of the process of mourning (Kübler-Ross, 1975) and is a consequence of a particular emotive distance between the bereaved and their relatives and friends. As one of our interviewees said:

I entered into a completely different dimension, out of reality, shocked by emotions and feelings. It seemed to stay upon a roundabout. The following ten days I stayed in total silence, refusing to see and meet whoever. (T.)

In this case the net helped the bereaved person to find a personal dimension, an intimate space for pouring out suffering and loneliness, for crying out their desperation.

The net is also chosen as a space in which relations with other persons began again because our interviewees felt protected on the web: "the forum became a protective shell". The sense of protection on the net is connected with three aspects:

- the protection of the screen (Gamba, 2004): the monitor represents a virtual space that the net user can modify and control, reducing fear toward the new;
- the protection from the external environment: the bereaved person carried out their first access from home, in a familiar context, without any contact with external situations;
- the protection of self (Suler, 1993): interaction with other net users is based on digital messages, which are filtered and less spontaneous than face-to-face conversation. It is simpler for the bereaved 'dosing' the exposition of self to other net users (Howard, 2002; Grohol, 2002).

The last group of motivations relies on the need of sharing personal experience. The bereaved enters the web because they want to speak about their story of grief, to compare their feelings with the emotions of other bereaved and, above all, they don't want to feel that they are 'the only one': "You need to know not to be alone in this world! I had to know that I could survive, that I could return to live like a normal person".

The participation in a web community or blog has a specific trend. The observations and the content analysis showed that there is a cyclical process that goes from access to exit from the group that follows different stages. First, we describe the characteristics of the online groups, very similar in terms of sharing and therapeutic effects to face-to-face self-help groups. Secondly, we synthesize the peculiar aspects of writing on the blogs, and of having a virtual diary.

The first phase of the participation in the forum consists of a moment of exploration of the community's life through reading previously posted contents. We have defined this phase as *setting*

because the new member increases their trust and confidence in the environment.

The action of reading is often driven by the need/desire to reflect one's own personal experience into the stories of others: for this reason, people tend to read and follow threads and posts that they perceive as close to their personal story. In this way, a process begins of projection/identification between the new member and other net users:

I immediately started to read and it seemed that I felt the same hurt in that specific moment, but I immediately felt less alone and I realized that my experience is not the only one and that the reactions and the feelings were common to other mothers. (L.)

The mechanism of identification is very common in three specific cases: when the protagonist of the story lives through the same phase of mourning as the new affiliate, when the reader and the author are joined by the same typology of loss, or when the loss described is 'complementary' with respect to the loss experienced by the reader. We can call this last circumstance *substitution effect* and it is confirmed by the words of a moderator:

There are different relations inside the group: for instance, mothers that have lost their sons that create a special contact with sons that have lost their mothers. [...] A sort of substitution. [...] In this way, an affective maternal or filial situation has been recreated. (P.)

The second step was the introduction of the new member to the group and the sharing of their own story of mourning. All the presentations start with the description of the personal link with the disappeared person. The publication of the first post causes a "chain reaction" among other participants who, as in a ritual, give welcome to the new member. We defined this process as *reception*: the tones are very warm and personal and the new member immediately perceives to be in the right place.

The third phase deals with the real participation: reading, commenting, answering messages.

The new member, by now, belongs to the group and contributes, with personal posts, to enrich the contents of the space. This is also the phase during which the member constructs strong relations with a few of the participants. They start to write in private chats with some contacts, exchange telephone numbers, and in the case of geographic proximity, may decide to meet each other. This relational mechanism starts only with those with whom the net user feels an affective or psychological affinity. This is the phase of elective relations. This mechanism is controversial because, on one hand, it increases participation in the forum, and, on the other hand, it weakens the identity of the group. However, we have to consider that in a virtual community is very hard to



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create a high sense of cohesion inside the group because of the great number of members.

We called the fourth phase *empowerment*, since the member offers assistance to new participants or toward those people who need greater attention.

The last phase is the exit from the community that can be a mature exit, sporadic participation or simply a sudden abandonment. In our observations, we noticed only one case of mature exit from the group. In this case the member announced their leaving the community with an official post of greeting and motivations. This praxis is useful both for the author and for other members of the forum because it is a way to demonstrate that it is possible to complete the elaboration. Sporadic participation is the most common modality of exit. It consists of lurking – as in the first period – and publishing a reduced number of posts. It is a way to still feel a part of the community. The last case is that of sudden abandonment. It is very frequent that after a period of access and participation, some members 'disappear'. On the web, where you can decide what personal information to give and share, where you can access with a nickname, it is less difficult to leave a group without explanations.

The case of blogging shows some differences dealing with the interaction both with the technology and with the commentators. In the specific situation of grief, "blogging combines two recommended techniques for people to work through problems: writing in a journal and using a computer to type out thoughts. Some bloggers say that the extra dimension of posting thoughts on the web enables them to broach difficult subjects with loved one, as well as to reap support from a virtual community of people they don't know" (Noguchi, 2005, p. 43).

If in the virtual communities the members are peers – because of the symmetry of situation (an affective loss) – on the blog there is a different distribution of roles: there are the author, that is the 'owner' of the virtual space, and their public of readers, that is the variable number of net users that participate in the 'life' of their diary.

According to our observations of 10 blogs, the life of the virtual diary is characterized by a parabolic trend. In the initial phase the author acquires familiarity with the new environment. This moment of adaptation is followed by an intense activity of publishing posts about personal feelings, emotions and description of the story of their loss. The narrations are completely dedicated to the deceased person and there is not space for commentators: external interventions are almost always ignored by the author. The blogger writes to the beloved person, giving the structure of a monologic to the narration, that is, a conversation that has the structure of an exchange among two people but that obviously misses the answers of the other involved subject:

My sweet prince, I'm here... I have read and re-read what I wrote, I am not correcting, I want to remember each word. Almost one month has passed from when I saw you for the

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last time. Despite the disease, you were beautiful as the sun, [...] I don't know if something can arrive to you from here. The strongest and truest thing I can think is a love's drop.

After the period of intensive publications, the number of posts tends to be reduced and the narration acquires new contents and forms. Even if the pain remains in the centre of the narration and the author continues to write to their beloved, some posts appear about episodes of everyday life – the present – and also about future projects. This is the moment when the author interacts with their readers or commentators, recognising their presence.

Also in the case of blogs there is a conclusive phase, the exit, which can assume different forms: the shutting down of the space, deleting all the traces of the blog; the changing of the argument, focusing more and more on the present; the sporadic visit, in order to verify the access of readers or to answer to some comments. The first circumstance – the shutting down of the blog – represents a gesture of extreme 'breakup' with the virtual space, which means a taking of distance from an experience ended or a manifestation of protest – disownment – toward the blog because of some undesired visitors.

Not all the blogs we analysed were 'born' in coincidence of loss. In two cases, for instance, they were similar to a personal diary, previously opened, that became the ideal space for describing and pouring out the personal experience of mourning – after an important loss.

Above all, on this type of blogs – but not only – it is frequent that the author changes the argument of the virtual diary. In the course of time the narrations are directed toward other themes and other experiences. Finally, the last case of exit from a blog is the sporadic visit and participation. This is confirmed by the words of one blogger who attends the space only sporadically:

My blog had solved the function of saving me; many times I went out on my balcony and looked down, asking myself if there was a way to go to my son quickly. Fortunately, my pragmatism stopped me and my blog was my safety valve, like a pressure pot, that cries out and seems to explode but then starts to reduce the pressure.

The sustaining net: the web and its functions

This paper tried to show the potentialities of the web as complementary environment - not necessarily the only one - in the situation of mourning. There are some structural limits. The emotional interactions are more complex in digital contexts. For instance, the lack of physical contact reduces the sharing of emotions, and the readers must interpret the real status only from the explicit contents written by the author. Also, the protection of the screen can be a limit if it is a way of reducing exposition of self



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or masking the reality (Suler, 1993). However, we believe that the therapeutic benefits of writing and exchanging narrations about mourning in protected virtual environments are so great that we can hope for a legitimacy of this space as 'effective' context where self-help supporting relations can take place (Walther *et al.*, 2002).

Nowadays, the boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the net is very transitory and unstable. As we showed by the results, it is evident how the benefits constructed inside the net have effects in the everyday life of our interviewees, beyond the Internet environment.

For this reason, we believe that the answer to our question – if the net could be a new social context for socialising the experience of mourning – is affirmative and we hope for the future development of these networks and virtual spaces for supporting bereaved persons.

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