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SOCIOLOGY IN SWITZERLAND

Toward Cybersociety and vireal social Relations

„Yours Virtually Forever"

Death memorials and Remembrance Sites in the WWW

Hans Geser

(January 1998)

http://www.geser.net

Contents

1. Death memorials as significant objects of societal and macrocultural studies..... 1

2. The basic significance of the Internet for increasing the permeability between private and public spheres..... 6

3. The phenomenology of Web Remembrance Sites 7

4. The socio-cultural antecedents, functions and consequences of Web Memorial Sites: some macro- and microsociologal considerations. 9

4.1 Completing the dissociation of mourning from the physical body and grave.....9

4.2 Encouraging more complex and reflective responses by loosening the pressures of time 13

4.4 Extensive mobilization of psychological support.....17

4.5 „Mourning" as an increasingly partialized and temporalized social role.....20

4.6 Typifying biographies and democratizing canonization.....21

5. Conclusions..... 25

6. References..... 28

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1. Death memorials as significant objects of societal and macrocultural studies

In most cultures, death is considered the biographical event where an individual is most closely linked to a greater collectivity or to society at large. In most preindustrial settings, there have been rites for informing the surrounding community: by ringing church bells, by engaging ambulant death herolds ("Leichenbitter") or by fixing written notices in public places (Fuchs 1969: 138f.). In addition, the nonprivate character of dying is expressed by mourning rituals and funerals accessible to everybody, by the disposition of survivors to accept condolences from all sides, and by obituaries which celebrate the deceased as somebody who has made contributions to public life.
By contrast, birth or wedding celebrations are far more restricted to inner circles of family, kin and personal acquaintances. In our own society, this asymmetry is easily verified by comparing the size of death notices in newspapers with the tiny official birth and wedding announcements.

Almost universally, graves and memorials are public monuments and the focus of highly collectivized ritual actions. Their erection as well as their later attendance are events in which traditional ceremonies (mostly organized by religious and/or political institutions) play a significant role.
In combination with funerals and other collective actions following death, memorials express how society (or specific collectivities) relates to death in general and to deceased members in particular, and such relationships are themselves highly symptomatic for the most central metaphysical premises concerning human existence and social life, as well as the core dimensions of the social and political order.
„In a way analogous to the experimental method of subatomic physicists bombarding and shattering the nuclei of atoms in order to reveal their constituent parts and processes, death similarly reveals the most central social processes and cultural values. Death is a catalyst that, when put into contact with any cultural order, precipitates out the central beliefs and concerns of a people." (Kearl 1997).[1]

Given their solid material structure, gravesites and tomb memorials belong to the most enduring – and often most visible – remains of past human societies. In some significant cases, (e. g. Egypt or Celtic Peoples), our contemporary image and understanding of whole civilizations is predominantly shaped by such archaeological remains.
Thus, from a methodological point of view, studying death memorials and remembrances, seems to be a fruitful way to learn more about the central value and belief systems of human societies as well as about crucial elements of social structure (e.g. kinship patterns, political authority systems or social stratification).

„No content analysis of a cemetery would be complete without consideration of the tombstones and their inscriptions. The relative sizes of the stones have been taken as indicators of the rela-

[1] Kearl, Michael, Kearl's Guide to Sociological Thantology http://WWW.Trinity.Edu/~mkearl/death.html (found 7. Nov. 1997)

tive power of males over females, adults over children, and rich over poor. In immigrant graveyards, the appearance of inscriptions in English signifies the pace of a nationality's enculturation into American society. The messages and art reflect such things as the emotional bonds between family members and the degree of religious immanence in everyday life." (Kearl 1997).[2]

It may well be argued that such simple concepts may only be applied to rather simple societies where all collective activities are straightforward manifestations of one coherent cultural system.
For two reasons, the same may not be true for contemporary western societies:
First, modern societies are highly differentiated into several institutions with very different value systems and cultural traditions, so that death-related behaviors and monuments may represent only the patterns of a minor subsocietal sphere (e.g. church-related religion or regime-related political symbols). And *secondly,* modern societies are evolving so rapidly that death rituals may not keep pace with the ongoing socio-cultural change (e.g. the development of public ideologies or fashions, the modal philosophies of personal life or the common patterns of friendship or family relations; Kearl 1997).

Arguing in more empirical terms, a mixed picture emerges in the sense that death in modern settings is highly public on an institutional level, but much less so on the level of social interaction or intraindividual attitudes and emotions.
As a correlate of bureaucratic organization permeating society increasingly since the time of absolutism, death is extremely de-privatized on a legal and institutional level: e. g. by the governmental regulations concerning the duties of public notification, the time periods for burial, the location and maintenance of graves etc. In addition, the 20th century has developed some extremely depersonalized forms of remembrance: like the extensive war cemeteries for honoring the dead of the World Wars.
On the other hand, it is highly evident that typical activities related to death, burial and bereavement are highly dissociated from the subjective needs and preferences of the participant individuals as well as from the realities of contemporary social relationships and collective life.
In fact, it has been argued that these activities have been least affected by the general processes of societal modernization. (Fuchs 1969: 136). Even more: they are an excellent field for studying extremely archaic forms of thinking and behavior which have been wiped out long ago in all other spheres of society:
„Im Verhältnis von moderner Gesellschaft und Tod hat sich, wenn nicht alles täuscht, ein Höchstmass an Unmodernität erhalten, ist ein Bereich sozialen Lebens zu identifizieren, der als primitivster Sektor industrieller Gesellschaft beschrieben werden kann.„ (Fuchs 1969: 136).[3]

This also implies that religious institutions have still retained much of their earlier authority and influence: much more than in other spheres of individual life (e.g. birth, wedding etc.). The rituals of Christian churches themselves have been derived from older epochs of animistic paganism. (Fuchs 1969 137).

[2] Kearl, Michael, Kearl's Guide to Sociological Thantology http://WWW.Trinity.Edu/~mkearl/death.html (found 7. Nov. 1997)
[3] Fuchs, Werner, Todesbilder in der modernen Gesellschaft. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt 1969.

Paradoxically, the reliance on tradition may even be enhanced in modern society, because death has become extremely marginalized in daily life, so that survivors are not prepared to react in reflective, individualized ways.
Under such stressing conditions, only two options seem to be available: to delegate most processes to more experienced professionals, or to choose extremely ritualized traditionalized responses, so that individualized, idiosyncratic expressions are avoided.
While the first option is highly used in the United States (giving rise to a huge funeral-related industry), the second is still highly prevalent in European countries.

„Most people give little thought to type, cost, and transactions in a funeral until they are thrust into a crisis context of resolving critical questions. People tend to go with tradition, most do not shop around, and few seek alternatives to a standard funeral".[4]

In particular, ritualization helps to avoid „queer" idiosyncratic responses not likely to be appreciated by other mourners (Fuchs 1969: 139).
Of course, the use of professionals does not mean that tradition is neglected; instead, paid undertakers may even be more pressured to rely on highly standardized routines to avoid any kind of dissatisfaction. In addition, the reliance on „good tradition" is furthered by the fact that under conditions of modern life, the feelings, tastes and belief patterns of different kin and friends are so heterogeneous that every deviance from routinized patterns may engender serious risks of violating somebody's expectations.

„The reflexive deconstruction of communal frameworks for the containment of death has been so extensive that even when persons find themselves at funerals they are often unsure how to act or speak, because prescribed rites of mourning are often no longer available to them"[5].

Such diverse (and unpredictable) sensibilities may further reduce the opportunities for expression by creating a climate of insecurity and anxiousness and a trend to limit activities to the barest minimum of necessary essentials:

„Excessive manifestation of grief is regarded as a bid for sympathy and therefore in poor taste. Monuments are now marked by simplicity or even avoided altogether. In contrast to the sentimental epitaphs inscribed on tombstones from an earlier era, modern epitaphs contain only the barest essentials. The mourning period has been shortened and sometimes eliminated altogether except for observances by very close relatives, who in any event may define the mourning period by their own preferences."[6]

[4] Schvaneveldt, Jay D. Remembering at Death: Funeral and Related Rituals http://www.union.edu/PUBLIC/ANTDEPT/funerals.htm (found on Nov. 7. 1997).

[5] Turner, B.S. 1991 Religion and Social Theory, Sage Publications, London.

[6] Lessa, William A. Death customs and rites Collier's Encyclopedia, Edition 1996 p759(5)

Thus, we typically observe that despite the very wide (and growing) diversity of subjective ideas, cognitions and emotions related to dying and death, the burial rituals are typically standardized to the extreme (Feldmann 1990: 55).[7]

As a consequence, we see that cultural change in death-related behavior is highly inhibited and that mourning patterns are not influenced by the processes of differentiation and innovation constantly transforming most secularized spheres of human life.[8]

Conventional media like the press, radio and TV have not contributed much to loosening the grip of preindustrial traditions and to rejuvenating the social discourse about death. Disregarding the rather stereotyped death notices and obituaries in the local newspapers, they provide no outlet for private mourning and bereavement. Radio and TV in particular have found no way of informing about the passing of ordinary people - and even less of giving survivors an opportunity for eulogies, memories or simply expressing grief.
Thus, conventional media may have contributed to a marginalization of dying and death as an aspect of every-day culture, forcing almost all death-related activities into a sphere of privacy where they are unable to develop into collectively anchored new cultural patterns.

Due to their very short-term perspective, mass media have reinforced the tendency of public mourning and grief to be concentrated on the few days following physical death – leaving survivors alone afterwards with their enduring grief and their longer-term endeavors to find a new psychological equilibrium and to reorganize their daily social life. [9]
This lack of media support may well be at variance with rising individual and social needs of finding new forms of mourning and remembrance, which can be better related to modern everyday life and more consistently integrated with subjective psychological processes and interactive coping strategies on the level of lose social networks and small informal groups. As a correlate of postmaterialist value culture which revitalizes concerns about general aspects of human existence, we may well see a rise in such needs and growing dissatisfaction with the inadequate means currently available for public expression. At least one American survey has shown that college students in 1997 attribute far more significance to mourning and grief rituals than older cohorts did in 1985.[10]

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[7] Feldmann's own interpretation that the cause of homogeneity lies in the commercial routines of undertakers is surely not satisfactory because competition makes these private firms eager to fulfill the expectations of their clients. It is more realistic to assume that the clients prefer highly standardized rituals in order to avoid any risk that anybody may feel disappointed or offended.

[8] As Anthony Giddens has noted, that social life of individuals is anchored in an „ontological security„ based on the premise that life is meaningful and that no menacing events disturb the courses of normal action. The construction of such „meaningful worlds„ implies the „bracketing out„ of events and questions which challenge this security by suggesting that human life is threatened and that disorder, chaos and meaninglessness may lure behind the façade of well-ordered everyday life(Giddens. 1991: 36ff.) see also: Mellor, 1993

[9] Whenever death occurs, the order based on this „bracketing out„ is basically threatened, and intensive processes of reequilibration have to set in. These processes include the search for meaning and value in the life-course by reactivating the past life of the deceased, in his or her works and productions, in the effects his or her actions had on survivors.

[10] See: "Examining the death orientations of trinity students 1985-97"
http:www.trinity.edu/~mkearl|deathsur.html (found Nov 10 1997)

We may predict that neither churches and religious groupings nor any conventional secular institutions will be able to channel these new demands, because they are unlikely to be fully responsive to the highly heterogeneous (and mostly secularized) patterns of individualized coping strategies, values and beliefs.[11]

2. The basic significance of the Internet for increasing the permeability between private and public spheres

As the most universal of all technical devices, the computer operates as a working tool for each individual as well as a communication tool for contacting friends or co-workers and a publishing instrument for making any kind of document accessible to the most extensive world public ever known.
Digitizing data means putting them into a universal format which allows them to be transferred easily between any types and levels of mediated social communication.
With a mouse click, I can send my private notices or family pictures to my friends, feed them into a global newsgroup or publish them on the WWW. On the other hand, it is similarly easy to copy public texts, pictures or videos into my private files on my hard disks and combine them with my personal documents or with the internal documentation system of my firm.
In other words, digitalization provides the foundation for a multimedia universe where all forms of private, semi-private and public expression become components of a unified sphere by being transferable and reproducible without relevant efforts or costs.

These last years have seen giant steps toward a digitalization of texts, spoken words, music, pictures and videos. While scanners and modems have become more widespread to provide an interface between the old analog and the new digital world, they may soon become obsolete when photos, films or telephone conversations are already generated by digital means: so that no later transformation is necessary. Of course, all these objective capacities cannot be exploited fully as long as every computer stands alone. Connecting computers to networks is a necessity for harvesting the fruits of digitalization - as well as for stimulating additional digitalization because its potential is then much more visible than before.

Thus, the most significant function of computer nets may be to facilitate and catalyze cultural production and cultural change: by providing highly accessible means for externalizing subjective thoughts and emotions as well as informal social communications into highly objectified patterns like texts, colors, pictures, videos or sounds which can easily be stored, replicated and communicated to any specific individuals or collectivities as well to an unspecified public on a global scale.
Consequently, the Internet may enlarge the scope of cultural expression to new spheres of thoughts and emotions hitherto hidden in the privacy of individual minds or informal interpersonal relations - as writing has enriched culture with many subjective expressions (like personal diaries or highly reflexive autobiographical accounts) unknown to illiterate cultures.

[11] dito.

If - according to Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schütz - it is acknowledged that human life-worlds, societies and cultures as are constituted by collectively shared patterns of meaning, we may conceptualize the Internet as an arena where such intersubjective productions can be observed in statu nascendi.[12]
From a methodological point of view, the Internet then would be an excellent field for studying developments of imminent cultural change, as it provides insight into those basic trial and error creations and communicative processes out of which future „social constructions of reality" and far-reaching socio-cultural innovations will arise.
Because of its accessibility for all users and the total absence of social control, the Internet is very prone to compensate the deficits of all other media: e.g. by allowing communication about marginalized topics not adequately covered in face-to-face interaction or any other technical channels of expression.
Death is likely to profit from the freedom of Net communication even more than sex, because it is more marginalized in the conventional media as well as in the noninstitutional sectors of social life.

3. The phenomenology of Web Remembrance Sites

In their minimal version, web memorials are short entries in collective obituary sites like „The Virtual Memorial Garden" where anybody (even animals) can be remembered.[13]
As there is less pressure to conform than in the case of guestbook entries and authors have no ambitions to attract a very wide public, at least some obituary messages of these aggregate sites are inspired by a shocking directness and sincerity: providing insight into the wide range of „authentic" human reactions to various cases of death:

Aubrey Lynn Blevins (17 Feb 1954 - 3 Jul 1976)
„For a person, I couldn't stand you. You were stubborn, strong headed and refused to budge, all in all, you were a typical Blevins. I remember taking your GED test so that you could get in the Navy, and I was doing it to get you out of the house. I have never told anybody that I miss you”.[14]
John Bracken (15 May 1974 - 14 Jan 1997)
“John died a lonely man in a motel 6 hotel room. I got the call last Christmas Eve and when they told me the news. I laughed all night till the tears rolled down my face. I wished he didn't die in a roach infested place.”[15]
Leighanne Martindale (Died 1990)
“I never spoke to her. I even cursed her name when she went out with my x-boyfriend in high school. What I didn't feel was her pain and loneliness. I do know she lived with her grandmother, who tried her best to love her. I don't know if her parents are living. She was found in a hotel

[12] See: Berger Peter A. /Luckmann, T. The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise for the Sociology of Knowledge, Penguin, London 1967: passim
[13] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/ (found on Nov. 10 1997)
[14] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/B/Bl.html (found 7. Nov. 1997)
[15] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/B/Br.html (found 7. Nov. 1997)

room in Memphis, Tn, a body of broken bones and bullets. She had become a prostitute. Why!! I wish now I could hug her and tell her she matters. I'm sorry, Leighanne. I hope I spelled your name correctly.”[16]

In their most developed forms, web memorial sites are highly elaborated structures aggregating a manifold of different components and making full use of the sophisticated multimedia capacities of the actual WWW.
Most often, their creators conceive them as open documents inviting an unspecified range of visitors (in fact: anybody) to add something of their own. Consequentially, they tend to become more complex over time while their internal coherence (in style as well as in content) is usually quite low.

Looking at a larger series of memorial sites, there is overwhelming evidence that their creators try to do their best to attract large web audiences and a maximum number of guestbook responses. For reaching this aim, they often tend to present very exuberant pages overflowing with sentimental pictures and sounds, with animated GIF-pictures emulating flickering candles or smoking fires, and with all kinds of ornaments usually not adding up to a satisfying (aesthetical) whole.
As the preferences of potential visitors cannot be known, it may be rational to provide so many components that almost anybody will at least find one attractive item or some edifying words.
But the consequences are that coherence is lost and the content of the message become blurred. Specifically, it is found in many cases that religious interpretations are mixed up syncretistically with purely secular statements, and that „beautiful" pictures or sounds are selected even when they have no intrinsic relationship to death and remembrance.[17]
A second goal is evidently to provide highly personalistic and vivid memories related to the deceased by displaying snapshots from the family album, voice tapes or videos, by enumerating character traits and behavioral habits or by conveying anecdotal memories of outstanding biographical events. In some cases, the „Cyberlife" of the deceased is revitalized by including received or sent email messages or some „preferred links"(evidently copied from the bookmark file in his/her personalized browser).
„Mike and I did quite a bit of web-surfing, so I have compiled a list of his favorite links, and maybe some links that I am sure he would've liked." [18]
In the future, we may well expect that these latter items will gain more importance: both because life in cyberspace expands and because it is technically very easy to insert such digitized remains into a memorial page.
Finally, many memorial sites are inspired by the narcissistic desire of their designers to demonstrate their personal skills in page construction and to propagate their own subjective values and preferences: e.g. by inserting poems, pictures or musical tunes of their own liking, conveying their personal „Weltanschauung" in philosophical or religious terms, or by providing links to groups or organizations they want to support.

[16] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/M/Ma.html (found 7. Nov. 1997)
[17] For illustration look at the site dedicated to Christina Jannelle Wolfe http://www.shreve.net/ismo/ (found 7. Nov. 1997)
[18] http://homepage.interaccess.com/~bradb/michael.html (found 7. Nov. 1997)

Contrasting with the high level of professionalism dominating in the American funeral business, memorial websites are mostly created and maintained on an amateur basis; that is, by self-selected near kin or friends. While there are a growing number of firms offering their services, most of them don't seem to attract many customers, and most of their – often highly standardized - productions lack the idiosyncratic innovative flavor found in the pages of Christine or other frequently visited sites.
Compared to the significant sums Americans spend on coffins, newspaper death notices, funeral services, tombstones and many other death-related objects or services, the financial and organizational overheads involved in establishing a website are certainly very low – and likely to diminish further when it is considered that provider fees and storage costs, that webpage editing programs are becoming more user-friendly and the skills for using them will certainly expand.[19]

4. The socio-cultural antecedents, functions and consequences of Web Memorial Sites: some macro- and microsociologal considerations.

Given that the contemporary Internet is a huge laboratory where all kinds of small-scale cultural inventions are made and tested out on a trial-and-error basis, we may assume that web memorial pages may well remain what they are presently: marginal curiosities without widespread acceptance and without a significant impact on culture and society as a whole.

In the following, it is argued that this may not be exactly the case because some facilitating factors make it likely that virtual remembrance sites will develop and expand:

1) because they are apt to amplify and catalyze certain well-known trends, deeply anchored in the development of modern societies; e.g. the trend toward more individualized life styles or toward the substitution of professional services by informal „self-help" circles;
2) because they offer some functional capacities no other media or social institutions are presently able to provide: e.g. a responsiveness for heterogeneous and unpredictable forms of grief and mourning and generalized low-threshold accessibility irrespective of space and time.

4.1 Completing the dissociation of mourning from the physical body and grave

In all traditional societies, individual and social activities related to death and mourning have consistently crystallized around the dead body, and consequent remembrance behavior focuses mainly on the gravesite where the body lies. Historically, this focus on the dead body and its territorial location may be anchored in archaic belief that body and soul are still not dissociated completely.[20]

[19] Even when pages are designed by specialized firms the costs are usually quite low: ranging from below $ 10 an year at the „Garden of Remembrance" to $ 1000 for three multimedia pages (for three years) at the „Perpetual memorials (Swedlow 1997).
[20] Fuchs 1969

According to Lewis Mumford, it may even be speculated that death rituals were the very origin of continuous settlement in very early times, when economic rationality would have necessitated constant migration:

„Early man's respect for the dead ... perhaps had an even greater role than more practical needs in causing him to seek a fixed meeting place and eventually a continuous settlement. Though food-gathering and hunting do not encourage the permanent occupation of a single site, the dead at least claim that privilege. Long ago the Jews claimed as their patrimony the land where the graves of their forefathers were situated; and that well-attested claim seems a primordial one. The city of the dead antedates the city of the living. In one sense, indeed, the city of the dead is the forerunner of the city of the living."[21]

Of course, such endeavors may be intentionally sought by surviving kin and friends in order to limit the access to the place of remembrance:
„Ein geliebtes Abgeschiedenes umarme ich weit eher und inniger im Grabhügel als im Denkmal, denn dieses ist für sich eigentlich nur wenig; aber um dasselbe her sollen sich wie um einen Markstein Gatten, Verwandte, Freunde selbst nach ihrem Hinscheiden noch versammeln, und der Lebende soll das Recht behalten, Fremde und Mißwollende auch von der Seite seiner geliebten Ruhenden abzuweisen und zu entfernen.“[22]

In modern societies, tendencies exist to dissociate the location of mourning from the location of the physical body.
This separation is facilitated by the ever expanding practice of cremation. Cremation means several things:

1) there is no longer an integral dead body which could be the object of reverence or ritual manipulation, but only amorphous remains without any resemblance to the living person;
2) there is more freedom concerning the point of time when the funeral takes place (because the remains are not affected by decay).
3) there is far more freedom concerning the disposition of physical remains: they can be placed conventionally in a graveyard, but they can also be kept at home in an urn, or they can be dispersed over mountains or over the sea.[23]

Particularly in these latter cases, there is no longer a stable physical substrate which could function as a gathering place and for engaging in death-related communication.
When there is no longer a physical body, many rites grounded in deep emotions loose their anchoring and evaporate (e.g. „natural" fears and irritations when looking at a decaying corpse.).
In particular, many traditional religious practices related to corpses (e.g. washing and beautifying the body) can no longer be maintained (Fuchs 1969: 142).

[21] Mumford 1961: 7.
[22] J. W. von Goethe: Die Wahlverwandtschaften.
[23] In the Los Angeles area, it has been observed that only about half of the cremations are taken home, while the rest are scattered at sea, buried or sprinkled in cemeteries or put into columbarium niches. (Smith, 1996).

On the one hand, this means that survivors are free to relate to the deceased person in completely new ways and to engage in grief and bereavement behavior and emotions without any restrictions in time, space or membership in social collectivities.[24]
Consequently, there is a need to create virtual focus of attention of an artificial kind: e.g. by erecting a memorial stone or plate at some other place. Such memorials may be adequate for very famous persons being honored by statues on most frequented public sites (e.g. city squares); but they are rather inefficient for common people, because nobody ever acquainted to them will ever pass (or notice) such artificial memorial sites.
Evidently, memorial sites on the Internet can substitute physical graves by providing an artificial focus for remembrances and grief.
Given the richness of artifacts (letters, photos, videotapes, audiotapes etc.) most passing individuals leave to the surviving kin, there is much raw material for creating multifaceted and constantly evolving web pages to which more attention may be paid than to any eroding, half-forgotten grave.
It is remarkable to notice how many of the deceased honored in the WWW are not buried in specific locations, so that they attract the attention of survivors who hitherto didn't find sufficient opportunities to express their emotions. In these cases, it is almost evident that the virtual memorial has to function as a substitute for the lacking physical tomb by providing an artificial focus for death-related communication:

“Brian Glowczynski Born: Sept 1955 Died: June 1988 Calumet City Il
It's been seven years since you've been gone.
For seven years I've dealt quite poorly I might add,
with the fact there was no funeral, no wake, no grave to visit
you at. Your parents whisked you away. Your body cremated,
and I didn't even get to say "good bye".[25]

Thus, Web Memorials are specifically adapted to persons unwilling to commit survivors to maintain and attend a grave.

“Lennart Ekstrand
My father's ashes were scattered in the "Minneslund" (a park- like memorial site) of Kungsholms kyrka (church) near the all the sites he loved and where he grew up, played and went to school. He never wanted a grave, because he didn't want family members to have to feel bound to visit and to maintain it. He used to say "If you want to remember me, just look at a picture. You can take that with you anywhere."[26]

[24] Likewise,highly individualistic persons may prefer being cremated because„The scattering of cremated remains is the ultimate symbol of freedom and independence, both from kin, kind and locality.
[25] http://www.rights.org/deathnet/obituaries2.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[26] http://www.interlog.com/~cemetery/Europe/Sweden/ekstrand_l.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)

Having no location in time and space, Memorial sites are particularly useful for the remembrance of highly mobile individuals who have left highly dispersed and incoherent networks of kin, friends and other personal acquaintances.

Conventional death announcements (posted by mail) are based on the premise that the surviving family members have extensive knowledge of the people acquainted or related to the deceased near enough to be informed and to be invited to the funeral. Of course, this is ideally the case only when these near acquaintances happen to be kin or inhabitants of the same community where the survivors are located.
It is evident that as a correlate of highly individualistic modern lifestyles and biographies that our different friends and acquaintances are less and less likely to be related to each other in any way – and even less likely to be members of an overarching communistic group.
Consequently, it is difficult to organize ceremonies in which all these individuals can participate, particularly when they are geographically highly dispersed (e. g. in the case of immigrants).
The range of mourners is even more unpredictable for individuals who were visible to a larger public during their lives or who experienced a „public death„ (e.g. for victims of flight accidents or bombing events). In such cases, there may be many potential mourners who have no opportunity to demonstrate their involvement and express their grief, because they are not invited to ceremonies of any kind.

A funeral director writes on his homepage:
„As I read our local morning paper, I see more and more funeral homes from outside of our local geographical area, submitting death notices about people that once lived in our community or has family presently living in our area. Our society is becoming more and more transient and if funeral service is going to continue effectively, we in funeral service, must find ways to meet the emotional and spiritual needs of people in different ways.
I believe that I can be more fulfilled in my vocation as a funeral director in the Internet environment because it eliminates the geographical boundaries. Although it would be impractical to consider embalming the body of a person who dies in California, it is not impractical for me to offer direction through the Internet to places on the Internet where a healthy expression of emotion can be accomplished by a person who is suffering from bereavement in California."[27]

Consequently, we often find web pages explicitly designed for aggregating dispersed remembrances which cannot be recollected by any other means:

Annette E. Kolbe Memorial Home Page
„My mother died recently and I have decided to erect this page in order to share some of my experiences with anyone that is interested.”[28]

“Clyde L. Sanborn Jr.

[27] Armstrong Funeral Home.http://www.cemetery.on.ca/default2.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[28] http://isx.com/~rkolbe/memorial/ (found 7. Nov. 1996)

To all of Clyde's dear friends, we would love to hear from any and all of you who may have other memories to share, would like copies of photos of him from us, or anything else that comes to mind." Love and Peace, Clyde's family”.[29]

In the future, web memorials may well increase in significance because many people will die who have built extensive networks of virtual on-line friendships and acquaintances all over the globe: so that most significant survivors are absolutely unable to attend the funeral service or visit a localized grave.
For geographically dispersed families and kinship networks, Web memorials can function as focal points where relatives from all over the globe can meet, identify other members and even insert themselves into a genealogical tree.

4.2 Encouraging more complex and reflective responses by loosening the pressures of time

The reliance on highly standardized, traditional formats of mourning behavior (instead of individualized, idiosyncratic responses) is highly conditioned by the extreme pressures of time.
Mostly, there are only a few hours available to reflect on the text and format of death notices, the choice of flowers and coffins and the conception of funeral rites - and everything has to be done in a way that expectations of important kin and friends are respected, so that nobody feels offended or disgusted (e.g. by displays of vulgar taste).

„Amid the juggling of funeral logistics, family responsibilities and grief, it's hard to an adequate memorial in the first few days after a loved one dies. The best that most people can manage is to scribble down a few facts about the life of the deceased for a brief death notice in the local newspaper . Almost immediately after burial, memories of the dead and the lives they lived begin to fade"[30]

In order to allow more elaborate and reflective expressions of remembrance and grief, a growing tendency exists in the US to replace (or supplement) the funeral by a more delayed „memorial service" which can be planned more carefully to take such personalized considerations into account.
„A memorial service after cremation or quick burial is seen by many as a very attractive alternative to the standard funeral. Dealing with disposition of the body at death is the most pressing issue for almost all families. If the decision is cremation, then all energies can go into dealing with friends, family and other loved ones. One does not have to ‘get ready for the funeral’. Later - many times a week or more later - one can invite friends and family to a memorial service that serves many of the same functions of a funeral, but is relatively free of the time pressures of the funeral".[31]

[29] http://www.jps.net/cougre/fromfam.htm (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[30] Swedlow 1997
[31] Schvaneveldt op. cit.

Web memorials profit in several ways from the complete lack of time pressure associated with their establishment, maintenance and use.

First, they are often used to lend more continuity to short-term events and statements which took place at the time of death or shortly after. Thus, many memorial pages contain a description of the funeral: who was there, who spoke or made music and who gave special emotional support.
Secondly, they provide an opportunity for retarded mourning and expression of condolences for survivors who were not able to attend the funeral:

"Aubrey Lynn Blevins (17 Feb 1954 - 3 Jul 1976)
I couldn't go to your funeral, I was there in town, just couldn't see you like that, quiet, non-moving and final. I miss you. Jon."[32]

"Christine Brown (Died 14 Jun 1995)
It is so hard that my fiancée's mother had to die. She died quickly and it was so sudden that none of us knew what to think. My fiancée's family didn't have a funeral for her so I thought that this would be the best way to mourn her death."[33]

Thirdly, they provide ample opportunities for expressing later thoughts of remembrance associated with ongoing psychological processes of coping with feelings of loss and grief. At least in Western culture, there are no cultural forms and very few social arrangements designed to absorb, channel and express processes and outcomes of long-term mourning.[34]
When the funeral and all activities related to it are over, survivors are generally left alone with their feelings of loss and bereavement and their evoked thoughts about God, the World and Human Existence. This may be considered a serious deficiency because death is an experience which sensitizes many individuals to such deeper considerations.
Seen from this perspective, the „virtual memorial" could be a significant cultural innovation because it has the potential of providing a focus for longer-term mourning: an ever-accessible publishing channel for adding emotional expressions and for reworking the remembrances related to the deceased. Thus memorial sites can reflect the fact that surviving marital partners or children have not ended their emotional relationship to the deceased even many years after dying (Fuchs 1969: 154ff.).[38)]
In other words, the WWW can provide means for expressing emotional processes which have always existed on the psychological level, but which have found no means of expression in the conventional institutions and media - except perhaps in retrospective memoirs of a few highly talented writers. From the psychological perspective, these outlets for expression may well have therapeutic significance (like committing oneself to a psychotherapeutic process), shortening the time needed for overcoming subjective states of depression.

[32] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/B/Bl.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[33] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/B/Br.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[34] A major exception are various self-help groups flourishing particularly among the urban and suburban middle strata since the 70ies.

Fourthly, web memorials may even encourage the revival of old grief related to friends or relatives who passed away many years ago. Such sites are particularly apt to illustrate that the WWW expands the range of human psychological expression by providing the means for explicating thoughts never spelled out under conventional conditions of daily life.

“Anita Joan Fox (née Anderson) (13 Jan 1942 - Mar 1983)
In memory of my mother, Anita, who passed away still girlish and very brave. Mom, I see your face echoed in mine as I grow up and look in mirrors. I still cry when I think of you and how unfair it all is. You are not forgotten. We remember with love."[35]
"

“Daniel Chartrand Born: October 1962 Died: November 1985 Mirabel, Quebec
Ten years ago you decided to leave us of your own will.
Today I finally respect your decision
even if I will still grieve for you
and I don't understand it."[36]

"In Memory of My Brother, Ken" (died 1980)
I try to live my life in a way that would make you proud of
me, your big sister. I try to help our sister, Janice, and
her girls too. I've tried to raise my boys to be good men.
I do these things in memory of you.
I love you as much as I always did, no number of years apart will ever change that. I am crying now as I type this memorium, another small way I can keep you alive." [37]

"Bill E. King (24 Apr 1931 - 8 Mar 1985)
Grandpa,
Even though I was only seven years old when you died I would never thought that I would be still grieving over you. You were the kindest and the most loving grandpa, that I could never forget. I hope that you have been watching over us for the last eleven years and will continue to do so for the rest of our lives. I know that you are very proud of me, in everything that I have accomplished. I will see you again someday, and always remember that I love you
Love, your granddaughter Jennifer Marie"[38]

The rather high number of such delayed memorials indicates that long-term mourning may be more frequent than hitherto suspected. In the most extreme cases, we find memorials dedicated to relatives who died when its author was a small child or not yet born:

“Gustave Paul De Vries (16 Oct 1932 - 18 Jan 1935)

[35] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/F/Fo.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[36] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/C/Ch.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[37] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/F.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[38] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/K/Ki.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)

Gustav Paul died prematurely, while being administered chloroform for a stitched finger. He died in his father's arms. Although he was dead long before I was born, I will always remember him, and he will have a special place in my heart forever."[39]

“Elmer DeGase (Died 1948)
You were my Grandfather, although you died before I was ever born, My father had told me many stories about you, He said you were a gentle and caring man with a Great sense of family value. I know that one day we will meet in Heaven, until then rest in peace....I LOVE YOU!! The Granddaughter."[40]

Such remembrances testify to the existence of highly traditional family bonds constituted by the mere fact of objective blood kinship rather than by interpersonal relationships and subjective affections.

4.3 Aggregating heterogeneous and dissensual remembrances and evaluations

As death announcements, funeral rites and tombstones have a very low expressive potential, it is al the more important to use them in a highly disciplined, responsible way. For instance, there is only one opportunity to formulate a death notice in the local newspaper: so that it is highly consequential what kinds of attributes are used to characterize the deceased person or what bible texts are added for expressing religious belief.
And writing the obituary usually means spelling out a final assessment of a deceased person's characters and merits, and deciding on a tombstone's inscriptions may well be one of the most irreversible acts in human life.

In times of growing individualization and pluralization, it may be hypothesized that it gets ever more difficult to accomplish such tasks, because there are rising risks that divergent or contradictory preferences have to be combined.
In addition, modern individuals are likely to leave survivors with extremely divergent remembrances, because they have been engaged in highly heterogeneous and changing role relationships, and because their personal identity and character traits has evolved over time.
Web memorials eliminate such restrictions because sites can become extremely complex as well as highly variable over time, thus losing their coherence in favor of a multifaceted aggregation of remembrances related to different life periods and stemming from highly divergent personal perspectives.
While some website authors are surely convinced that they are providing the final ("objectively true") appraisal, others admit that their personal view is partial and biased, so that others are invited to add something or to correct the overall picture:

“A tribute to Michael Cannon

[39] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/D/De.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[40] http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/D/De.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)

„So you may be saying, who was Michael Cannon. Some others may know parts of his story. Although I was only a part of Mikes life for 4 years, here is my story as I can best tell it."[41]

"A Collection of Oral Histories
Grammy Mirk died when I was eight years old. Growing up, I have come to know her through the recollections of older family members. Because she was extremely judgmental, she showed different parts of herself to different people. In turn, they became polarized in how they viewed her. Since a grain of truth exists in everybody's perspective, I have attempted to create a composite sketch of her as seen from many different perspectives. This website is a collection of oral histories of those who have survived her."[42]

Consistent with this relativistic view, Grammy Mirk's site is conceived as an interactive forum where the personality and biography of the remembered individual can be openly discussed:

"A Living History
The site is interactive. Not only can you read about Grammy Mirk, you can e-mail questions about her life. Maybe you want to direct questions to a family member about a specific story. Maybe there are aspects of her life you want to know more about. Your questions and their answers will be posted and become part of this dynamic and evolving history."[43]

Flexibility is also increased by the fact that things which are not placed within the page can still be included in linked „neighbor pages„ - or by linking such neighbor pages to even more remote sites.
As the "Virtual Memorial Garden" does not suffer from scarcity of territory; websites can grow to biggest proportions without infringing into the space reserved for others; and no periodic exhumations are needed to free the place for newcomers. As a consequence, deceased individuals may be remembered as multifaceted personalities who have occupied highly diversified role sets and led volatile biographical trajectories, and who have been perceived and evaluated in quite discrepant ways by different (equally individualized) survivors,

4.4 Extensive mobilization of psychological support

Conventional funeral rites are not very effective in catalyzing the expression of individual emotions, so that their psycho-therapeutic effect is rather weak.
The reason is that funerals are highly formalized, ritualized events which provide no room for spontaneous, unpredictable behavior (like sudden outbursts of tears, fainting etc etc.).[44]
The most important function of traditional funerals is not related to individual mourners with their inner emotional problems, but to the reequilibration of the social role system in which the deceased has left a vacant hole. The funeral rites are conceived as transition rituals which shall

[41] http://homepage.interaccess.com/~bradb/michael.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[42] http://www.ipl.org/exhibit/grammy/Mirk/facepage/jacket.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[43] dito
[44] Hockey, 1993

reinforce the common assumption that the deceased person has now finally gone away, so survivors can feel legitimated to fill the vacant roles or to make use of their various legal prerogatives (e.g. accept inherited goods).

Today, exactly this social function has often lost significance for various reasons. For instance, many individuals die at a high age when they have already been fully replaced at their work place and children are old enough to be independent from parental care.
As a consequence, the core functions of memorial activities shift to the psychological level: they are meant to provide emotional support in moments of immediate distress as well as in the more long term processes of psychic re-equilibration.

Evidently, many creators of Web Memorials reach out to the world in order to evoke psychologically helpful responses. On the most basic level, psychological satisfaction may be drawn from the mere quantity of evoked responses: like in the case of Jewish or Gaelic graves where growing heaps of stones testify to the number of visitors who have brought along their individual pieces.

This motive is most evident in the page of a Scottish widower, emigrated to Canada, who commemorates his Gaelic wife:

„It is our custom in the Highlands to build a small rock pile called a cairn to memorialize someone special, always beside a path, so that passing strangers can add a rock, and indeed all Highlanders add a rock to any cairn they pass, so the memorial becomes permanent. Because I am far from home and the custom of building a cairn and passers-by adding to it is unknown here, I saw no point in building one. Instead, my wife's page is her cairn and the numbers added to the counter are the rocks placed by the people who pass by. When I go home to Scotland I will build a cairn for her. If I cannot, my children will."[45]

Given the proliferation of highly unexciting „personal web pages" as well as the well-known composition of the present surfing community (mostly young males around college age), we may well doubt whether memorial sites evoke any significant attention.
Of course, nobody expects them to be preferred sites with a very high number of visitors. Evidently, most people surf on the internet for enjoying entertainment or gathering information, not for meditating about death - at least not the death of completely unknown, unrelated individuals.
Nevertheless, we see successful sites reaching astonishingly high numbers of visitors within rather short periods of time. [46]

[45] http://www.geocities.com/Paris/2350/index.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)

[46] For instance, the memorial Christine Chanelle Wolfe (an girl from Louisiana murdered at the age of 13) received almost 1000 hits per month in the first periods of their installment. In the latter case, we may suspect that this interest was fuelled by the publicity the murder case has received in newspapers and TV (but also by the highly sophisticated nature of the site which has resulted in several „awards" and a large number of other pages pointing to it by a link. Similarly, the high attention paid to the site of Ana-Duarte Corner is certainly conditioned by the fact that she died in the crashdown of the TWA flight 800. http://www.capital.net/users/mfree/ (found 7. Nov. 1996)

On a more qualitative level, we may wonder in what way email messages and guestbook entries posted by unknown are functional in providing genuine emotional support - or even help to mourners in their self-therapeutic endeavors to cope with their inner feelings and their changed patterns of daily life.
Unquestionably, a large number of posted messages indicate that web memorials can evoke rather strong emotions and genuine feelings of compassion, even in those most frequent cases where people literally „stumble„ over them accidentally without looking for something of this kind while surfing.
In many cases, the empathic resonance is caused by the fact that visitors can relate the case to similar experiences in their own life:

*”***Apr. 28 1997, 1:29:04 - Melissa Arnold mailman@citcom.net**
What a beautiful page. I cried when I went through it. I accidentily found it and I am glad I did! The pictures, the music they are all beautiful!! Just like your little girl. I lost my baby boy very recently, the day after he was born. I know how it hurts but I also know how much of a blessing she was to you.”

Seen from this perspective, the consummation of virtual memorial sites may sometimes have the function of releasing emotions which cannot be released in any social encounter, of finding relief in the fact that one’s own grieving is equaled or even surpassed by that of other suffering people, or of sensitizing oneself for dying as a fate everybody will have to endure sometime in the future.
By increasing the chances of finding congenial responses anytime from anywhere and in any situation, Web memorials can be instrumental for people with even very rare and highly individualized experiences to share their thoughts and emotions.
Evidently, this may be crucial for families experiencing the death of a child in an accident or from a lethal disease, because the rareness of such events makes it unlikely that people with similar experience will be found in the neighborhood or among personal friends.
Whoever has to live through such a hard experience may find that net communication provides two kinds of satisfaction:

1) the satisfaction associated with other individuals who can offer psychological support and empathic understanding because they have lived through similar experiences in the past;
2) the reciprocal satisfaction of providing support to others experiencing similar sufferings now or in the future.

In addition, opening up to worldwide responses is highly functional in a society where individuals are getting ever more different in their personal reactions, preferences and beliefs.
In other words: the more pluralistic and individualized the views of death and the strategies of coping with grief, the less likely it is that near relative, friends or neighbors are optimally disposed to find the right word for effective consolation. When I succeed in generating a virtual guestbook with 200 entries from all over the world, I will have far better chances of finding at least a few congenial responses (e.g. individuals with a short-term "window" for empathic participation due to their actual mood or circumstances)

Finally, it has to be acknowledged that the mere act of creating web pages (by writing texts, collecting photographs, composing pictures and ornaments etc. may have a therapeutic impact, because it helps to overcome feelings of helpless passivity and guiltful regrets.
Thus, the motivation to publish web memorials may even be „overdetermined" by cumulating social rewards with purely intrapersonal satisfactions:

“My story of Michael. The gift of unconditional love.
I have wrote this as a tribute to my best friend and partner, and for myself as a method of healing."[47]

“In Memory of Christina Janelle Wolfe
Hi Randy, you already know my feelings on this tragedy so I wont go into it. I am so glad to finally see the new bright page. We know what it symbolizes and now I know Christie can rest in peace and you can go on with your life"[48]

Thus, the proliferation of web memorials may be symptomatic of a much larger „self-help-movement" arising from the growing dissatisfaction with professionalized or institutionalized provisions of help.

4.5 „Mourning“ as an increasingly partialized and temporalized social role

Another aspect where the Internet is pushing forward previous developments is the growing partialization (or „trivialization„) of the mourner’s role.
In traditional society, mourning after death is a *„full-time activity„ encompassing all aspects of private and public life. Mourners are recognizable by their black clothes, by their refusal to visit festivities, by the general air of seriousness pervading all their life, by their abstinence and the relative social isolation.” (Fuchs 1969: 150).*
Industrial society has brought an erosion of such encompassing roles, substituting them by roles far more restricted in time and space.
More than in the past, modern mourning behavior concentrates on very special occasions: particularly on the funeral and very few later occasions (e.g. visits to the grave, commemoration rites in certain (e.g. catholic) settings etc.
In the case of virtual memorials, the mourning role shrinks even further to a behavior extremely short in time and extremely unrelated to any other social involvements. It becomes a small „intermezzo„ during surfing activities which are dedicated to other more salient purposes: e.g. gather information, gaming etc etc. Nothing is less imaginable than a family or even a larger kinship group assembling around a computer display to mediate collectively on a memorial site.
Contrary to graves and other physical memorials where sometimes only collective worship takes place, web memorials induce completely individualized behavior.

[47] http://homepage.interaccess.com/~bradb/mystory.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[48] http://www.shreve.net/ismo/angel1.htm (found 7. Nov. 1996)

This has certainly the effect that virtual mourning behavior will never become the object of cultural ritualization and traditionalized habitualization, but remains perpetually dependent on momentaneous subjective motivations.
Of course, visitors to web memorials may be motivated by various intentions other than grief and compassion (e.g. curiosity), but it is hard to imagine that they may be moved by pressures of social conformity or by the goal of strengthening collective bonds. In particular, different visitors have very little chance of getting acquainted with each other and to communicate what they feel and how they react to the formats and contents of the memorial page.
Because visiting a memorial website is extremely individualized behavior not observable by anybody else, it may be important to leave a textual notice in the guestbook or to throw some kind of „virtual flowers„. The guestbook takes its importance from the fact that it alone provides an aspect of collectivization to an aggregation of completely individualized behaviors unrelated to each other.

4.6 Typifying biographies and democratizing canonization

Almost all websites are conceived to fulfill very different communication functions at the same time. First of all, they are directed to a rather well-defined audience like a cluster of friends or relatives, the members of a formal institution or the inhabitants or visitors of a city.
Very often, it is this narrower focus which is salient in the consciousness of the website-producers, so that they are likely to use parochial language or include pictures and songs tailored to the preferences and needs of such in-groups which have an offline origin.[49]
But secondly, all web publishers also face the fact that their products will be accessible by any Internet-surfers anywhere in the world at any point of time.
Given the fact that Net-users expand in number every day and that their surfing habits are not well known (and may in fact be very fluctuating), no web publisher may be sure that nobody else except „explicitly addressed” receivers will log into his site.
Or the other way round: millions of very modest web publishers may see certain chances to gain an audience, to receive feed-backs from unexpected corners of the world - or to be even honored by one of these - also multiplying - evaluation agencies and prize-giving institutions.
As the average public visibility may remain almost nil, the high insecurity about its scope (and the determinants of its allocation) may stimulate efforts and may motivate many publishers to „keep an eye” on an unspecified world-wide public even when addressing mainly his friends, his firm employees or the students of his seminar.
As the contents transported by memorial websites are highly private and highly public at the same time, there is pressure to send messages that are supposed to be compatible with the decoding capacities, the cognitions and personal views of a very large number of possible recipients (irrespective of divergences in educational background or ethnic culture).

[49] When it is asked why so many interesting contents are offered on the internet for free, one answer is that the motivation of most web creators is to do something useful for themselves or for quite restricted audiences they know, while the enjoyment provided to any others is an unintentional „windfall gain" caused by the intrinsic public character of the World Wide Web.

In the realm of Memorial Sites, such conformist endeavors are particularly evident in the rather low profile attributed to religion. While allusions to God's Love and Mercy (or to a hidden metaphysic sense in everything happening) are quite frequent, more specific beliefs based on particular theological doctrines and denominational identifications are rather rare. In fact, religious views seem to be restrained to the same universalized „civil religion" evoked by US-presidents in their speeches of inauguration.[50]
Secondly, it is found that many sites focus on remembrances which are likely to evoke empathic compassion because they refer to events and experiences widely shared by many individuals in modern society.
One of these quite universal traits of contemporary life is that human suffering and dying takes place mostly within a setting of intensive medical intervention (Fuchs 1969: 161). This has the consequence that biographical histories of most people end in phases highly shaped by formal institutions and professions, by the obtrusive presence of high technology and full-blown bureaucratic administration.

In other words: stories of modern dying are stories which contain many facts and events familiar to everybody because they relate to the world of public institutions and socio-technological structures.
Narrating medical stories means communicating about a highly established societal institution and about highly consensual values and practices in our modern society, sharing experiences to which everybody can develop some empathy irrespective of any divergences in culture, religion and social class.
Thus, many highly successful memorials belong to those which provide highly dramatic stories of suffering and dying. As an illustration, let's look at the webpage dedicated to Michael Cannon, a 19 year-old youngster who died from muscular dystrophy.[51] The story told by his „best friend" draws attention by its detailed account of the cruel long-term decaying process associated with this incurable disease. It explicitly tries to sensitize visitors to the suffering related to this disease, and to the unhappy fate of highly disabled people in general, by providing a large number links to webpages dedicated to various forms of neural and muscular disorders. Thus, the personal story has only the function of a bridge leading visitors to more depersonalized considerations related to imminent medical problems on the one hand and to the inevitability of human suffering on the other.
The new heroic tragedies of our age are about fighting a deadly disease by engaging in dangerous treatments, by making use of most up-to-date medical technology or by profiting from the care of very humanitarian nurses etc.
After death, these events are consolidated into a coherent history of impressive human endeavors to prolong life and diminish suffering, and of the deceased individual as an inspiring model in keeping up his/her spirits even in moments of uttermost hopelessness and pain.

We may well assume that the media thus provide templates which are then used to structure private death stories: such as those narrated on the internet. Films and TV series with stories about dying abound, particularly about exceptional forms of death.

[50] See Bellah 1991.
[51] http://homepage.interaccess.com/~bradb/michael.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)

„It can be argued that if medicine has replaced the church as the manager of death, then the mass media have replaced the church as the interpreter of death, not only in fictional movies but also in news handling of death - for example, in the lengthy attempts after a disaster to find a cause and to establish guilt.“[52]

The symbiotic relationship with conventional mass media is also evident in the many memorial pages which refer to persons who have died under circumstances evoking public interest: e. g. because they are victims of murder or spectacular accidents.
Thus, the crash of the TWA Flight 800 (on July 17th 1996) has provoked a large amount of web-sites; some of them referring to all the victims, some of them to specific passengers. The core homepage „TWA flight 800 Memorial @ NYSTATE.COM" providing a gateway to more specific sites has been accessed more than 60 000 within the first 12 months of its existence. This traffic was heavy enough to establish a life discussion forum encompassing several „chat rooms" (e.g. for discussing more technical or more psychological problems).
In addition, the page has attracted many hundred messages discussing the more objective circumstances of the accident on the one hand and expressing the subjective reactions of mourning survivors on the other.

This example again illustrates how the conventional mass media generate the basic information and focuses of collective attention which Net users need to approach specific netsites (instead of millions of others). While public in character to the outmost extreme, the page serves for many mourners as a platform for very intimate exchanges of condolences, emotional supports and idiosyncratic personal remembrances.

In their ambition to bridge private and public spheres, many webpages try to make use of evoked emotions by stimulating donations or other instrumental actions:

“Madelynn Courtney Salzman Oct.27, 1994 to November 25, 1994
I would like to let anyone know who enters this page, how vital donating blood is for many sick children, if it were not for volunteers donating blood, the ECMO circuit that kept Madelynn alive would not be possible. For more info on donating blood, click here America's Blood Centers.“[53]
Others try to exploit inconspicuous cases of death in order to encourage more public, depersonalized memorials dedicated to historic events or tragic incurable diseases; thus contributing to the processes of collective concern associated with these specific causes of widespread dying in contemporary society.[54]
Oscillating on the ambiguous interface between very private and very public spheres, memorial web pages may well set in motion various processes affecting cultural production as well as personal identities and patterns of subjective thought and emotion.
For example: when an individual is remembered as a „shining role model", we understand that such a semi-scientific term is used mainly because it is commonly understood, not because it

[52] Walter 1993: 181.
[53] http://members.aol.com/MadelynnS/index8.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[54] WORLDWIDE CEMETERY http://www.interlog.com/~cemetery/ (found 7. Nov. 1996)

expresses adequately the innermost subjective emotions of the messaging survivors. But we may well argue that the usage of such terms may feed back on the way their users interpret their own private thoughts and emotions: by giving them a definite form and relating them to the way other people feel and think

Thus, „public privacy" implies two things at the same time: the overflowing of public spheres with very subjective expressions on the one hand, and the (homogenizing) colonizing of human minds by public conceptual patterns on the other.
This ambiguity inherent in all net communications is highly congenial to death itself, because death is an event which - more than births, weddings or other biographical transitions - typically takes place at the interface between private and public realms. Of course, this is most vividly seen in the death of highly reputable persons (like Mother Teresa or Princess Diana) which provoke encompassing processes of public „canonization". Purged from its more specific meaning within the Catholic Church, the term „canonization" refers to the much more universal endeavor of explicating how a deceased individual has enriched the human collectivity as an overall summary of his/her passed life.
In a sense, we may say that survivors generally "exploit" deceased persons for enriching general culture: like the church when it beatifies individuals with outstanding religious and humanitarian merits, or like ruling regimes which are eager to enhance their own public reputation by celebrating the deeds of a passed on political leader.
While simple remembering is caused by particularistic family relationship and/or particularistic emotional bondings, there is a more universalistic dimension of mourning which relates the personality and/or the actions, productions or achievements of the deceased to consensual norms, values or goals.[55]

“A tribute to Michael Cannon:
I know that for most people, Michael would be of no interest, but to those he came in contact with, he LITERALLY changed lives. That is what this page is for, to pay tribute to Mikes accomplishments, and to never forget the change that Mike brought to many lives and the world." [56] [67)]

“Eulogy for Annette E. Kolbe
„Her thoughtful advice and loving kindness will remind us of our own human potential. Her example will give us strength in our lives."[57] [68)]

[55] This collective appropriation of individual biographies and productions is spelled out very explicitly by Fuchs: *„Der Beitrag des Einzelnen zum allgemeinen Wohl und zum Fortschritt des Gemeinwesens garantiert ihm, dass er mit dem Tode nicht ganz verloren ist. Die Hinterlassenschaft an materiellen oder geistigen Werken wird Bestandteil der Kultur und erzeugt darin auf ewig vom Urheber. Die Unsterblichkeit ist zwar nicht direkt erreichbar, wohl aber durch indirekte, über Arbeit und Innovation vermittelte teilhabe am Fortschritt des Gesamtsystems. Das Gesamtsystem aber muss, sollen die Werke Fortleben garantieren, selbst nicht als sterblich vorgestellt sein- Der Einzelne fällt heraus, übergibt in seinen letzten Momenten die Erträge seines Lebens der Gesamtheit, die sie in unendlichem Prozess mit sich fortträgt." (Fuchs 1969: 98).*

[56] http://homepage.interaccess.com/~bradb/michael.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[57] http://isx.com/~rkolbe/memorial/AEKEulogy.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)

In such cases, Web Memorials are designed to „democratize" the chances of getting public attention by also paying tribute to completely inconspicuous individuals who have led a very modest, widely unnoticed life limited to their family and a small circle of friends.
Given the low costs of web memorial sites on the one hand and the innumerable evaluating criteria on the other, potentially everybody can be celebrated as a person outstanding and inspiring in particular specific ways, by having displayed amiable character traits, followed an exemplary way of life, kept up his spirits in suffering, spent money for humanitarian goals, participated in some endeavors which have changed the world (maybe in extremely tiny proportions).[58] [69)]
Andy Warhol's prophecy that „anybody may be famous for 15 minutes in the future" is overruled by the fact that there are no time limits for virtual memorials, so that any memorial site may function as a nucleus attracting ever increasing and diversifying remembrances from all stages of biography and encompassing all perspectives held by different kin and friends.

5. Conclusions

Among the innumerable unintended effects of global computer networks on society and culture, some will certainly be related to our activities and cultural patterns related to dying, death and remembrance.
More than that: the impact of the internet on death may even be more significant than on most other aspects of human existence (like birth, marriage, divorce etc.).
Theoretically spoken, the reason for this is that in all societies, death is an event taking place at the interface between public and private spheres, so that it profits highly from any technologies which –like the internet – increase the permeability between private and public worlds.
In more concrete terms, we may see actual web memorials and remembrance sites as embryonic manifestations of a new „post-modern" discourse about human death - „Post-modern" because it may overcome the tendency of „modern" societies to marginalize the topic from everyday life by constraining it into institutional (mostly religious) enclaves still dominated by ossified premodern ritualizations.

Seen from this perspective, virtual memorial sites may become more developed and widespread not because they overturn deeply anchored beloved customs and traditions, but because they simply support, amplify and catalyze several developments already under way for decades: these trends bring death-related thoughts, emotions and activities more in line with the general tendencies of contemporary socio-cultural change:

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[58] This aim is made very explicit in the mission statement of "Yours virtually Forever Inc." (a new firm located in San Diego, Ca.):
"*Our Mission: We believe that there are lessons to be learned from the living experience of every person. Too often these lessons or messages are loss due to the lack of the facility to capture and share them. Our goal is to create a graphical Hypertext record of our clients lives and accomplishments and to serve these up on the World Wide Web and its predecessors forever*." *(http://www.foundation.sdsu.edu/~john/Memory/)* (found 7. Nov. 1996)

1) Personalization:
There is a growing need to remain remembered as a particular person with specific qualities and merits, not simply as a member of a clan or a religious community. Consequently, new forms of funeral rites have become common: e.g. ceremonies including music or poems loved by the deceased, or dominated by speeches held by near friends.[59]

2) Participation
Ceremonies have become more participative in many respects: family members and friends take roles by singing a song, reciting poems, telling a story about the deceased. Consequently, the role of priests or other officiators is reduced to coordinating the logistics of everyone's participation rather than being the center of the ceremony.[60]

3) Informalization
Ceremonies are less accentuated as formal activities highly dissociated from everyday life. This is demonstrated in the tendency to wear everyday clothing, as well as in ad hoc ceremonies unconnected with any religious organization (e.g. spreading ashes in a mountainous area in the presence of selected family members and friends).

4) Secularization
Informalization often implies that ceremonies are disconnected from religious organizations, or that religious rites become at least mixed with elements of secular culture (e.g. by secular songs in worship or by secular objects deposited on the grave (e.g. toys in the case of deceased children).

5) Inclusiveness
Traditionally, participation in mourning was usually restricted according to ascriptive criteria (e.g. close kinship, neighbors, inhabitants of the same local community etc.). Such restrictions were adapted to rather uniform and predictable kinds of biographies where kin and neighbors also happened to be the individuals best known and emotionally most involved with the deceased person. Today, individuals live more variable and unpredictable lives resulting in a more dynamic and dispersed network of kin, friends and acquaintances.[61]
All these tendencies have given rise to rather informal „memorial services„ disconnected from the event of physical death in terms of time and space. Sometimes, different memorial ceremonies are held for survivors with different relationships to the deceased.[62]
Inclusiveness is in turn reinforcing processes of secularization, because there is no basis for assuming that all the mourners share any specific type of religious belief. The only things they share are common memories referring to the deceased and common correlative feelings of loss.

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[59] Chris Tina Leimer: Rites and Memorials in a New Era http://www.uh.edu/~cleimer/new.html (found 7. Nov. 1996)
[60] For example, it has become a widespread custom in the US that burial participants put written notes in the casket (Leimer op. cit.).

[61] *"Today, those who are grieving may be first wives, third husbands, stepbrothers, half-sisters, friends not generally known to the family."* (*Leimer op. cit.).*
[62] Leimer op. cit.

Internet memorial sites are consistently enhancing all these trends by providing focal points for absolutely personalized, participative, informalized, secularized and inclusive forms of grief.
Like in many other aspects of human life, the internet is used for compensating functional deficits of „offline society". In this case, these shortcomings consist of a lack of institutionalized procedures for dealing with grief, particularly during the long periods after funerals (or other memorial services) have taken place. The growing distance from churches leaves most individual alone in cases of intensive suffering, because no institutions or professionals exist (or are accepted) for giving advice or for shortening or alleviating these very difficult phases of life.

One of the most fascinating functions of the Internet is to provide a highly flexible, adaptive medium capable of keeping pace with subtle specificities and changes of subjective thoughts and emotions.
While tombstone inscriptions may express emotions which were only salient a short time after death, memorial death sites can ever be adjusted to express changing feelings over time as well as the heterogeneity of reactions within a very heterogeneous flock of relatives and friends.
The very fact that sites are perpetually modifiable may exert pressure on the survivors to „update„ the memorial page regularly so that it conforms with their inner psychological states.
While traditional culture is determined by a rather neat separation between the sphere of processual- interactional culture (=soci-facts) and the level of fixed material culture (arti-facts), websites may be fruitfully conceptualized as entities falling in between.
Thus, typical websites are „solid" in the sense that at every given moment in time, they contain given texts, pictures, videos etc, which are the same for all given recipients; but on the other hand, they remain fundamentally „fluid" because all these fixations can be eliminated or modified at any given time without leaving traces of the status quo ante.

Seen from the processual, fluid perspective, virtual memorials can be seen as ongoing memorial services ever open for new inputs from anybody around the whole globe. Seen from the structural, „solid" side, they represent „organic tombstones" capable of growth and evolution.
On a more theoretical level, the Internet may be conceptualized as a powerful tool for bringing subjective mental states and objectified cultural expressions into higher accordance with each other, instead of producing irreversible artifacts ever more alienated from the mental states responsible for their initial generation.
Thus, it provides the necessary infrastructure for a post-modern society which has to exist without irreversibly frozen and universally consensualized traditions, so that the discourse about death (and any other existential topics) has to continue perpetually as a public endeavor without institutional, professional (or any other social) constraints.

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