Actual(ly) mourning - Using autoethnography in virtual mourning research

Internet provides a space for different rituals, which previously have based on communal and face-to-face experience, such as birth, marriage and death. These rituals have benefited from new forms of online communities and their social expressions. At the time of sorrow and death the communal aspect of virtual socialisation becomes crucial. Death is dealt within the Internet in various ways, whether it is seeking advice from discussion forums, sharing thoughts through private blogging, or creating memorial videos and photo albums. In social media, such as in Facebook, it is possible to memorialise the profile page of the deceased and leave it open for people to share feelings, memories and talk to the dead. In online gaming communities people can have memorial services and build virtual shrines and tombs in the game environment itself.

In this presentation I will discuss how I have used autoethnography to understand the experience of mourning and honoring online. In my PhD thesis I have explored the various ways people use online environments to mourn honor, from social media applications to virtual worlds, from YouTube videos to memorial websites. During my fieldwork in 2007-2012 I have visited several international memorial websites, studied how Facebook is being used to remember and memorialize, how online gaming environments such as World of Warcraft and Second Life are being used as alternative (virtual) spaces to remember a deceased game community member. During my fieldwork I have also participated in these environments with a classic anthropological method: participant observation. I have asked, inter alia, how the internet mediates co-presence, identity, community, memory and sense of space and place?

In the beginning of this research in 2007 mourning online was entirely unfamiliar practice for myself, which is why I was able wonder every specific detail I learned from this phenomenon. I pursued especially to understand the motivation to mourn online, since it seemed an alien way to remember the memory of a loved one. In order to step in the shoes of my interviewees and understand all of the features of virtual memorial websites I used the memory of my father to reflect the choices and feelings in the process of creating a memorial. Intentionality was not yet the scope
of my research. However, in June 2008 I lost a friend, who was my Facebook friend as well, and I was forced to actually live through the experience of using Facebook to seek solace to my own grief and to be connected with people who knew her.

I was living in Kotka city, some 133 km from Helsinki, working as a guide at the Maritime Museum of Finland, when I learned about her death. I remember having my breakfast in front of the computer (as usual), checking Facebook messages and listening to the radio. Suddenly our mutual friend sent a message through the chat “Katie has died, she killed herself!!”. I knew they were really close and I felt blood escaping my face out of shock and disbelief. This cannot be happening. We were hundreds of kilometers apart and I felt useless trying to help her via Facebook chat. Everything I wrote sounded wrong, flat and banal. I remembered trying to contact Katie earlier that spring and could not help myself thinking, if I could have done something. Maybe I should have called her, maybe I should have visited her when I heard she was in a hospital because of her depression. Maybe’s kept running through my mind and I couldn’t stop crying. When I went to see Katie’s profile, I could see others posting her Wall solemn wishes, such as “safe travels dear friend”, but their personal status updates were of disbelief, anger and pain, “can’t believ she did it!!” and “this is the worst day of my life!”. I read all of the messages on Katie’s Wall and could see a message from Katie’s mother a few days earlier, where she asked if anyone had heard about Katie and should contact her (the mother) immediately if they knew something. I could feel the terror in her words, not knowing what has happened to her daughter. Few hours later she had posted: “Katie has been found. Thank you all for helping, she is in a better place now.” I kept crying the whole day.

The word spread fast with the help of Facebook and mobile phones, which I learned from the messages on Katies Wall. The following month it became a routine for myself of reading what others wrote and there were dozens of messages each day. People liked each others posts, posted song lyrics, YouTube video links and memories they had of Katie. I did not knew her family, but I felt better seeing the messages from her mother and sister, since it kept me up to date about their wellbeing. I did not knew Katie well and I could only imagine the terror and pain her family and close friends were going through, which is why I wanted to show how much I had liked her by liking their posts on Katie’s Wall. Walter describes this action as an act of solidarity (Walter 1994, 174).
After a couple of months the only people posting anymore were Katies sister and mother, who also contacted Facebook officials in order to memorialize Katies profile. Memorializing is a form of deactivation of the profile creating “a passive profile”, without removing it from the service. It allows the friends interact with each others through the profile, but it is no longer itself part of the social interaction. The deactivation should allow the friends of the deceased to view the profile in their own personal Search hits, but at the time of writing this chapter I was not able find Katie’s profile, when using the Search box in the upper corner of the page. I found her from my Friends list after some clicking. The memorializing also hided all the status updates of the deceased, which upset me, since I would have wanted to read her posts.

It is our policy to memorialize all deceased users' accounts on the site. When an account is memorialized, only confirmed friends can see the timeline or locate it in Search. The timeline will also no longer appear in the Suggestions section of the Home page. Friends and family can leave posts in remembrance. (Facebook Help Center, accessed 20.9.2012.)

People leave surprising things in their online profiles. At the time of an accident the last messages do not gain the same meaning as in the case of a suicide. Katies last status update was a thank you for all her loved ones and at the time it seemed like a thank you for her birthday a week before (people posted congratulations on her wall). But no, years later, when the update became visible again it struck me how she had deliberately planned the suicide and also the message on her Wall. She knew, that her status update would be there for others to see after her death. She left another message - deliberately or by accident - in her Microsoft Messenger program profile, which was popular among my friends before Facebook. You could write a “status” on your messenger profile as well. Katie’s last status said “to infinity and beyond!”, as it was a quotation from her favorite animation movie Toy Story. The message is still visible if I log in the service and will stay visible as long as the service or feature exists.

During spring 2013, at the time of writing a chapter of my thesis, the memorializing feature has restored the status updates of the deceased, possibly because of the pleas of the users in Facebook. Reading Katie’s updates all over again seemed not a good idea after all, since they revealed the struggle she had with her deep depression. Realizing this made it difficult to even write about Katie in this chapter, because of the difficulty to keep myself at an analytical distance. The situation felt
more than participant observation or emphatic observation, since in previous researches I did not analyse painful emotions such as grief and loss. It felt real and very painful.

Today I went to check some details about the profile I am writing about – just had written a sentence, where I felt bad of not having the opportunity to read the status updates anymore – and to my surprise, and shock, they were visible again. But I didn’t expect how I suddenly lived the emotions from 2008 all over again. The shock, the pain and the sadness. I searched some of my private messages with the name of the person and found old chat logs with that person from 2007, six months before the death. And again I understood the amount of online material we leave behind. The messages and words, sentences and voices, that keep echoing in the pixel space. (Anna Haverinen, research blog post bittiavaruuteen.wordpress.com, 28.3.2013)

As a researcher I can understand the useful meaning of this situation, when I am forced to live the very same experience(s) as my interviewees, but as a person I would have wanted to keep these emotions to myself, private and unpublished. I have the permission of Katies mother to use this material (as anonymized) and she herself answered to my survey and we had an email interview as well. But they do not teach in ethnography classes to cope with emotions caused by a painful research material. We read about anthropologists “lost in the field”, when they married to the tribe they were studying, but reading is not as experiencing. Experiencing the actual research topic provides the important *emic* insight.

Last words have significance to the people mourning and especially if the death has been tragic somehow. During this digital age we leave much more words behind us, than before digital technology. Text messages, emails, status updates, comments, likes, shares, chat logs, and even phone numbers in our mobile phones become meaningful, when the person behind them is suddenly gone. The above explained autoethnography revealed the emotional importance of having the material online and accessible at all times, which my interviewees discussed often, when explaining why they use the internet to mourn and honor.

Another occasion of difficult research situation was the disappearance of my field. In Second Life virtual world I conducted fieldwork in two memorial park areas, where Remembering Our Friends was a privately funded memorial chapel area, where anyone could request a memorial or a
I felt terrible. I felt like someone slapped my face or burnt down the village where I did my fieldwork. The place is gone, the familiar place, where I have walked the past four years, reading the memorials, listening the birds sing and wind in the trees. Reading and watching and reading all the stories in the hundreds of the memorials in the three chapels of the area. Now all I have is the videos, screenshots and notes. And memories. (Anna Haverinen, research blog post bittiavaruuteen.wordpress.com, 16.3.2013)

I did not expect to feel that sad, since I did not feel I was part of any community, but the area became surprisingly meaningful for me during my fieldwork. I had read all the memorials, clicked their links and watched the material on external websites. It was familiar and mine, albeit a fieldwork location. The experience in the memorial park area had changed me as a person and a researcher, and the area will remain with me in my memories and stories of the place.

Conclusion

With these above explained examples I have wanted to display the usefulness of autoethnography in online research. Participant observation is not possible in online environments, where I sit alone infront of my computer and imagine participating something. It is not possible to participate in mourning, although the Finnish proverb “I’m sorry for your loss” translates as “I take participation in your loss”. By experiencing myself the actual mourning and actually mourning I gained a deeper level of empathical understanding of my interviews, survey answers and other ethnographical data. Understanding is always different from actual experience.

In this short presentation I have also wanted to answer how virtual memorials 1) build & maintain communities and social relationships, 2) turn online spaces into meaningful places, 3) represent and (re)build identities. All these three aspects provide autonomy for the bereaved to dictate their own way to express bereavement and honor the memory of a loved one. It is no longer dictated by the society or religion as in the previous years, not even the deceased themselves, but is now in the hands of the bereaver who is always left behind to gather the pieces and carry on with their lives.