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Life, Death and Everyday Experience of Social Media

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Abstract

This paper explores the online remembrances of people made famous through media-generated fame post-mortem. We explore the observed ritualised practices found on memorial websites (specifically gonetoosoon.org) and present them as examples of contemporary displays of belief practices and what can be described in anthropological terms as contemporary magico-religious communities. The study takes a socio-anthropological approach originally developed by Piddington (1950), in a different context, to discuss the contemporary cultural practices of public grieving and the social practices surrounding online death socialisation. The paper describes contemporary rituals associated with death that are conducted within technologically-mediated public spaces in order to claim that there is an observable continuity of traditional practices of remembrance and grieving that is now mediated through new forms of action.

Key words

death, ritual, technologically-mediated spaces, cultural practice

Life, Death and Everyday Experience of Social Media

Introduction

Much attention has been given to the development of social media and its relationship to 'our' everyday experiences (e.g. Galloway, 2004). The application of the traditional notion of a face-to-face 'friend' is regularly questioned in critical literature discussing social media use and social networking (Eliison *et al* 2007; Tong *et al* 2008) and the recognition that at least younger generations have attenuated transliterate capacities that make social media an increasingly central aspect of their daily experience (Thomas 2007, Ware 2008).

The complexities and intricacies of social networking are exemplified and emphasised by those social networks that have explicitly formed around mourning, the remembrance of life and, perhaps unfortunately, sensational death. However, while these special interest social networks are the most visible and easiest to observe in the context of cultural rituals concerning death all the most popular social networks including, for example, *Facebook* and *Bebo* have been used as the site for the conduct of these rituals (Carroll & Landry 2010, McCrudy 2010, Fearon 2011). This paper is an interpretative and observational examination of *gonetoosoon.org* - a website that encourages family, friends as well as complete strangers to create memorials, befriend others who have created memorials and to leave digital tributes. We have utilised *gonetoosoon.org* as the basis for analysis as a representative harbinger of digital action for contemporary mourning rituals. Reimers (1999, p147) emphasises that an 'aspect of rituals, and especially of *rites de passage*, is that they unite participants [...] with each other.' An observation that is made in the context of death and mourning but that could equally define the pivotal purpose of social networks more generally and is a preliminary rationale for the close association of specific actions (such as social network participation) with cultural practices (including mourning). Reimers (1999) takes this observation further to argue that the unifying aspects of ritual also create an association, 'with situations and collectives beyond themselves, such as relatives at other places, ancestors, and rising generations.' Taken together Reimers' two statements effectively define the *raison d'etre* for *gonetoosoon.org*.

In this paper we introduce the concept of 'thananetworking'. This term is consciously applied in order to dually recognise that these practices being described are a subset of social networking more generally as well as the relation that these practices have with dark tourism or thanatourism (Seaton 1996, Slade 2003, Stone 2005). Both thanatourism and thananetworking practices reveal an ongoing human desire to understand and rationalise death. Thanatourism most commonly cites Jim Morrison's graveyard in Paris and Elvis Presley's Gracelands as two examples of tourist activity that has been built around the early untimely deaths of these performers (Ryan & Kohil 2006, Stone and Sharpley 2008). The human (living) ordering and respect to death provided by graveyards constructs a defined venue for entertainment (Rugg 2000, 264). The activities and actions associated with visiting these venues form the basis for thanatourism – shifting the concept of pilgrimage to a form of entertainment. Thananetworking has evolved from the opposite direction – to a similar observable outcome - taking the ostensibly entertainment focussed medium of social networking to the purpose of pilgrimage and, significantly, taking the ordering principle of memorialising conventionally found in graveyards into a different provenance. Nonetheless, thananetworking is an examination of mourning practices found within digital environments. These are observable on all social networks as well as in specialised sites including the site of our focus, *gonetoosoon.org*.

Belief and ritual

Piddington (1950) developed a structured approach to the understanding of magico-religious beliefs and practices which provides a framework for systematic investigation of how individuals manage and respond to uncontrollable life events. Within this understanding there is also recognition of the punitive attempts that are collectively taken in an endeavour to control these events with steps that craft hope and inspiration for those involved and to establish forms of action and belief that systematise these hopes. In his examination of the significance of mythology and story-telling within Magico-Religious (M-R) communities, Piddington argues that the most significant belief systems for M-R communities are found within their mythologies and purports that mythologies offer a systematic accounting for the 'how' of the world. This comes in the form of specifically offering explanation for the origins of various cultural institutions that provide the key tenets for everyday practice. Story-telling then, in this context, interlocks with other belief systems as an agency for the reinforcement of prevalent and dominant cultural understandings. Stories provide reference for contemporary operations of supernatural or, more simply, external, forces ensuring an integrated belief system with the recitation of myth and the identification of miracle complementing one other. The systemic worldview that is crafted through these actions of magio-religious practice provides a charter of practice for existing institutions and perpetuation of a stable continuous *status quo*. Within the specific environment of a memorial site such as gonetossoon.org the development of place specific mythologies and the conflation of miracle with media popularity along with the delineation of acceptable mourning practices are all readily observable. New memorials in this space consequently adopt the previously observed actions found within this space and bring them to the context of the new memorial.

The systematic and reinforced set of beliefs constructed in this way serve (Firth, 1938) to frame the facts of emotion within an intellectual and rationalised worldview. The belief of immortality amongst most widespread mainstream religions is equated with the survival and perpetuation of a conscious soul after death (Levene, 2009). For Piddington, expression of belief is structured within a system containing three levels of experience - the nuclear is the central core that is never challenged by committed believers; the ancillary where personal elaborations are enacted upon nuclear beliefs; and the peripheral, which are those beliefs that are more flexible with more indefinite formulations and lacking strong degrees of certainty or conviction. By utilising Piddington's structure it is clear that *GoneTooSoon* and other online memorials are not challenging the nuclear core of traditional beliefs but rather are appending and expanding on the ancillary; simplistically evidenced, for example, by the extended use of 'angelic' imagery and ASCII art on *GoneTooSoon* to embellish elegies. For the majority of memorials on *GoneTooSoon* the relationship to the central 'core' set of Christian beliefs are clearly evident and is noticeably shaped by the technical capabilities of the site itself which would make the construction of any 'non-Christian' memorial potentially problematic. For magio-religious communities the character, form and significance of the concept of immortality and the soul is variously positioned and defined within these levels of experience. For example, across a range of theologies, it is sometimes only the people of certain rank whose souls are immortal, sometimes it is not a perpetual existence and is restricted to a period of time, or immortality takes the form of reincarnation. Beliefs in immortality, together with mortuary rituals including mourning can be read as human protest against specific individual loss and the social, economic and cultural disruption caused by a death as well as an attempt to negate the nihilism of individual annihilation.

GoneTooSoon also presents an 'alternative' perspective to the mainstream reporting of death and murder. The shifting and diminishing power of traditional mediums to everyday practice is equally important in understanding how mourning practice have come to be associated with new actions and spaces of experience. Many of *GoneTooSoon's* memorials capture and record (through a form of unintentional serialising) recent British social history including knife crime in London, gun crime in Manchester, various hate crimes, the abduction and subsequent

murder of teenage girls across England and the murder of prostitutes by men seeking fame as 'modern day' Jack the Rippers. These sensational deaths heavily reported by mainstream media overshadow memories of the individuals' life and endangers personal memorials of life into becoming recollections of death and violence. These forms of memorial also potentially offer a form of social memory and the fame originally sought by the perpetrators of the murders. However, the need for media spectacle in order to mourn death – and particularly death outside the 'norm' of old age – has become increasingly necessary in order for mainstream media to gain the attention of its intended audience above the massive range of choice and the noise of other sources including, somewhat ironically, social media itself. Foote (1997) recognises the importance of this interrelationship of media and mourning in relation to 'terrorist' attacks on US territory. 'The images, artefacts and rituals of these visibly public death-shrines in Oklahoma City and Littleton framed issues of memory, tribute and collectivity in contemporary America; their visual and performative dimensions clearly embodied a vast collaboration of mourners and media.' Rituals of memorialising and mourning within ostensible 'Christian' societies have become more and more spectacular as the actions associated with them have shifted beyond the boundaries of the formal graveyard, private household or wake to occupy more public spaces including road-sides and social networks. The potential consequences of an increased obsession with teleological fatalism is already well-evidenced historically in a range of cultures but most famously among Pharaonic Egypt (Meskell 2001).

The *GoneTooSoon* memorial website – as well as many of the memorials found on other popular networking sites such as *Facebook* and *BeBo* – articulates the interrelationship of grieving practices expressed through actions such as social networking with the imperatives of fame-oriented culture as well as the fundamental duality of life and death. Similarly the increasingly wider boundaries of acceptability and decency within contemporary culture (Thompson 2011), itself influenced by cultural obsessions with fame and exasperated by the ready availability of network technologies, mean that many memorials are detailed and graphic focusing on the details of death rather than those of life. This has been aggravated on *GoneTooSoon* with the addition of memorials focused on some of the most recorded murders in recent UK history by the site's 'Admin' who has no direct family or friendship connection with the individuals recognised by the memorial.

By utilising the methodological practices of ethnographic observation and examining the combined evidence offered through document analysis and direct presence in the spaces that evidence thananetworking cultural practices, this paper explores the complexities and intricacies of social networking around mourning, the remembrance of life and, of sensational death. While recognising that there is a shift in specific cultural actions (moving from the use of a gravestone to forms of digital *memento mori*) there remains a continuation of cultural practices at a number of levels (including recording vital details and the relationships of the person remembered). This paper challenges the theoretical propositions of boyd (2003) where the 'real and virtual' works of social networking are separated and instead argues that culture and cultural practices permeate 'all' lived experiences and continue to perpetuate and evolve irrespective of the mediating presence of wires and networks. The differences – if differences are to be sought – between traditional and contemporary practice are found in the rapidity, frequency of and accessibility to specific actions of memorial and mourning. This nexus of difference provides immediate higher visibility for social campaigns founded as a memorial to a deceased family member such as S.O.P.H.I.E (www.sophielancasterfoundation.com) – a modern version for the traditional miracle. An equally significant question raised by the popularity of gonetoosoon.org is how innocence and agency has become constructed within digital spaces of contemporary culture and how these environments offers wider potential for their construction through association and juxtaposition. When the relatives of murdered prostitutes associate themselves through tributes with the deaths of 'innocent' teenage girls – as we identified in our research – the meaning of this association and the role it performs in

the personal grieving process of the relatives is publicly revealed and problematised. This observation echoes Doss's (2002) own claims,

contemporary debate surrounding abortion, AIDS, euthanasia and gun control, however, as well as increased popular interest in “good death”, the afterlife and bereavement therapy, suggest the questioning and perhaps the lifting of certain death-related taboos. By extension, visibly public material culture rituals pertaining to death and grief suggest broad and diverse interests in “reclaiming” death, in making death meaningful on personal, individual levels.

Similarly Riches (1998) says,

‘that the portrayal of death in modern society serves a cultural and symbolic purpose. Individuals whose lives have been unremarkable may gain fame if their death is extraordinary. Newsworthiness lies in the “sensational” nature of the death and in [audiences'] identification with the “ordinary” lives it has devastated. These stories contain messages about how individuals grieve, offering the public examples of socially appropriate reactions (Walter *et al.*, 1995) whose lives have been unremarkable.’

These processes and approaches to death are the philosophy of *GoneTooSoon* and is the underpinning basis for thananetworking.

Contemporary culture and death

Discussion of the rituals and practices associated with death and dying are well rehearsed and remain a source of continued interest for a broad range of social science researchers (Hart *et al* 1998, Gibson 2004, Gibson 2007). As more time is spent gaining experience in the digital domain and a variety of intimate and public cultural displays are extended into these spaces it is increasingly appropriate to critically examine what links to traditional rituals and practices are being displayed in the virtual domain. This examination necessarily includes consideration of the mechanisms by which mythological belief systems are constructed, reconstructed and perpetuated. We take up this examination by exploring the problematising of ritualised actions and cultural meanings being presented online that have been reconstructed from conventional and traditional rituals associated with death. In particular, within thananetworking practice, there is an identifiable blurring of the meanings of fame and infamy and of the boundaries between public and private forms of grieving and emotional displays. Thananetworking, along with roadside memorials and other memorialising of death, also move the conduct of mourning rituals beyond clearly defined domestic or 'sacred' places. Doss (2002, 80) sees this as a cultural shift. ‘The visual and material culture of grief in contemporary America seems to suggest heightened popular commitment to shift the discourse on death from medicine to culture, and distinctive efforts to make death meaningful —memorable— on personal and public levels.’

Reimers (1999) highlights another rationale for the move to memorialising through thananetworking.

Markers of social position violate what in the funeral law is designated as “good grave culture”. The meaning of this expression is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is stated as a major rule that the bereaved should be free to decide the appearance of the gravestone. On the other hand, it is up to graveyard authorities to decide the boundaries within which the bereaved can make these choices. These limitations, at least at modern cemeteries, usually prescribe that every gravestone be kept within a clear shape, size and design.

Thananetworking overcomes one form of constraint regarding the construction of formal memorials but in doing so presents other constraints. What is, or is not, possible within the ecosystem of *Facebook*, *Bebo* or *GoneTooSoon* represent a different series of specific constraints to action. However, in contrast to 'good grace culture' these restrictions are generally 'technical' in nature rather than existing in relationship to other memorials or to received notions of what represents 'good taste' for a memorial and respect. The most obvious shift is from a necessity for brevity with a single photograph (if this is allowed at all) and a specified number of words or letters to an active encouragement for textual and visual verbosity through photographs, clipart, ASCII art and extended narratives.

This understanding leads directly to the question posed by our research. Are the actions and communications found on memorial websites (such as *gonetoosoon.org*) contemporary enactments of continuing magico-religious belief practices? And, more fundamentally, can thananetworks be considered and interpreted as magico-religious communities?

***GoneTooSoon* – a site description**

Gonetoosoon.org is a social network. It encourages its participants to inscribe thoughts and memories as well as photographs and their own creative work. This description does not provide any distinction from *Facebook*, *Bebo*, *LinkedIn* or even *Twitter* or one of the many readily available blogging systems. What distinguishes *GoneTooSoon* is the focus upon mourning and the memorialising of individual death – the key distinction that we utilise as the basis to claim that thananetworking represents a specifically identifiable sub-category of social networking. While members of the site can themselves have a profile the focus of the site is upon the memorials created for deceased individuals. In effect, living members 'friend' these memorials and create networks with the living members of this site through the memorials of the deceased. In this sense, the dead take priority in the *GoneTooSoon* space and represent the 'hubs' of the social network of the living. There are few restrictions within the site – anyone can create memorials to anyone and in the case of celebrity deaths there are often a number of separate memorials that form separate hubs within distinct sub-networks of members. The ability for anyone to create a memorial results in a disproportionate number of memorials for 'famous' people – as the financial and etiquette restrictions of a physical memorial are removed within the *GoneTooSoon* space (an observation that should also be contrasted with the Michael Jackson memorial unveiled in early 2011 outside Fulham Football Club's stadium). Importantly, the memorials of *GoneTooSoon* provide significantly more detail about the life and death of the individual than a physical memorial. This ability is also one of the close connections of thananetworking with thanatourism. Thanatourism involves visiting the burial site of an individual but the rationale for visiting is tied to the actual story that makes the individual famous, infamous or at least notable (Walter, 1996). This inclusion of deeper narrative within *GoneTooSoon* constructs – and mythologises – an individual beyond death, and, in many examples, because of their death. This also connects thananetworking to the mass medication of everyday life - the desire to know about the famous or at least those who are currently figuring prominently within mainstream media reporting (McAvan, 2010). This desire to know is tied into the compelling features of social networking including the ability to befriend people who are famous and the capacity to express and show this association. But social networking, particularly in its conceptualisation as the Read/Write Web and Web 2.0, is also about the desire to inscribe and actively engage in the construction of meaning (Latour & Woolgar 1986). This invitation and desire to constantly record and annotate association results in the *GoneTooSoon* memorials actively contributing to a more general cultural blurring of fame, infamy and notoriety, while also contributing to the ongoing construction of individual fame after death. The ability of social media to continue to actively construct an individual's identity after death raises a number of contradictions and engages these individuals within a range of broader issues including the degree to which a public individual has active control over their identity and the veracity of

any given identity. The presence of an aging population coupled with the creation of generations of 'digital natives' increases the likelihood of memorialising in this way to increase. This further raises concerns about the digital assets of the dead and what happens to these assets after an individual dies. The rise of thananetworking highlights that there is no individual or family control over a 'social' memorial and how in many respects control has been passed over to the 'Admin' of the various social networking sites. Doss (2002, 70) similarly recognises this complexity and contradiction in roadside memorials,

The relationship between mourning and material culture is timeless, of course, and both older and contemporary American monuments testify to human desires to capture and represent memory, to pay tribute, to validate certain historical, political and social perspectives, and to grieve. Yet the spontaneous, often impermanent, and distinctly "unofficial" nature of many of these roadside shrines, grassroots memorials, offerings and ritualistic behaviours seem less concerned with producing a critique of historical moments and tragic events than in catharsis and redemption. This may relate to the nature of trauma itself, and to the ways in which memory can fail because of traumatic events and episodes of child abuse, civil war, torture, disease, natural disasters or the murder of family members and loved ones.

The mythologising of the dead by the living can be considered as an attempt to further define their own living identity (Doss 2002, 76). Within fame-oriented culture this identity work includes attempts to define relationships with people – both living and dead - who are or were famous as well as individuals popularly defined as 'good'. Within *GoneTooSoon* this ongoing identity work constructs relationships around remembrance and grieving that in turn mediates and connects like-minded living individuals.

Analysis of observational data from gonetoosoon.org included identifying and tagging those events and instances of activities associated with ritualised practice, examples of mythologising or magico-religious activity and how and when intention and transgressions occurred with community participants who were associated with the celebration or mourning of the dead. This body of evidence was subsequently scrutinised and examples extracted to exemplify the magico-religious practices and social relations enacted within these communities.

Famous deaths vs death of the famous

A visible feature of *GoneTooSoon*, and arguably a key source of its appeal, are the range of 'famous deaths' that it records and memorialises to a degree of detail that would not conventionally be found within newspaper or television reporting. These memorials contrast significantly with 'deaths of the famous' - which is more regularly the focus of thanatourism research - including retrospective memorials that reference deaths that occurred before the establishment of the site. Famous deaths are also increasingly marked by the development of a campaign or a charity that remembers the victim and takes up issues surrounding the nature of the famous death itself. It is within the collection of famous deaths that the visible creation of thananetworks are attenuated.

We offer the following series of vignettes to assist in defining the nature and impact of famous deaths that are documented through *GoneTooSoon*.

Ben Kinsella

Ben Kinsella was the school aged victim of knife crime as well as the half brother of the former *Eastenders* actress Brooke Kinsella. 'Lisa' who joined *GoneTooSoon* in August 2008, created the memorial and has never logged on since (benkinsella.gonetoosoon.org). There have been over 3,400 visits since the memorial was created. There are nine photographs on

the memorial but only two of the photos are of Ben including one of the images that was heavily used by the media immediately after he was murdered. Two of the photographs are of the family after the murder; one is of a march with a banner, 'Why Ben', while the remainder of the images are memorial cards and bears with varying degrees of Christian religion references. There are also 50 candles that have been 'lit' for Ben. Living members of the *GoneTooSoon* community have been lighting these candles continuously since 2008. In contrast the 6 tributes that have been left are confined to the month immediately after Ben's death.

Since 2008 the Kinsella family, but most notably Brooke, has been involved in campaigning against knife with the foundation of the Ben Kinsella Trest (benkinsella.org.uk), a television documentary and support for the increase in prison sentences for knife crime. Brooke Kinsella has subsequently received an MBE (Member of the British Empire) for her campaigning against knife crimes in London and elsewhere.

Robert Knox

Robert Knox was a hopeful actor who appeared as an extra in one of the Harry Potter films. He was also a victim of a knife attack in London in 2008. The memorial (robert-knox.gonetoosoon.org) was created by 'Donna' who has also created memorials for Steve Galsworthy a landlord from Bournemouth who was stabbed by a gang in 2007, to Richard Frank Cutler who died in WWII aged 23 (her grandfather), Danielle Perrin the mother of a child at Donna's child's school who was the victim of knife crime in 2008 in Poole and Keith Cutler (her brother) who died in 1962, 8 years before Donna was born. She has also created other memorials for violent crimes around Bournemouth (including an attack on the same street as Steve Galsworthy's pub). This memorial has been visited over 2,700 times since it was created and has received 122 candles since then. Other memorials also exist for Robert – none of these have not been created by members of his direct family. The photos on Donna's memorial include one of Robert on the set of Harry Potter, two portraits and two of the flowers, gifts and balloons left at the site where he died. The memorial includes a lengthy description of the attack and the subsequent court case drawn from another website evidenced by the bracketed word 'advertisement' left within the body of the description.

Sophie Lancaster

Sophie Lancaster was the victim of a hate attack in Rossendale in 2007 (not Lancaster as the memorial claims) (sophie-lancaster.gonetoosoon.org). Sophie and her boyfriend were attacked by a group of youths primarily because they wore 'goth' fashions. Sophie rushed to support her boyfriend who was initially attacked and as a consequence suffered head injuries that placed her in a coma from which she never recovered.

This memorial was created by 'Admin GTS' who has created over 600 other memorials. There have been over 4,600 visits to the memorial since 2007 and 255 candles left up to date. There are 41 photographs included in the memorial but only two feature Sophie and these are themselves duplicates. The majority of the remainder are memorial cards, many with overtly Christian imagery – including a celebration of Sophie's 2 year anniversary as an angel - others feature the face of Bonnie Barrett (and 'Jackie'), one has an image of 'Sharon' wearing the armband of the S.O.P.H.I.E. campaign. Both Sharon and Jackie are active contributors to *GoneTooSoon*. Sharon has created 5 memorials and 'Jackie' has created 9 memorials.

Since Sophie's death her family created the Sophie Lancaster Foundation (sophielancasterfoundation.com) which has campaigned for widening of the definition of 'hate crime' and been actively involved in fund raising primarily within the North West of England through art events and music concerts.

These three short vignettes reveal the relationship of actions and efforts to protest against individual loss that are consolidated around the memorials found on *GoneTooSoon* as well as elsewhere. In all of these examples *GoneTooSoon* is not the site or focal point of memorial or remembrance for the family of the murder victims but rather a space for more distant personal friends and strangers to express grief and association and to recount the details of the famous murder. The individual distance from the specific death opens up the degree to which an individual's death and more broadly their life can be mythologised. The photos on Sophie Lancaster's memorial are wide-ranging in their meanings and their sentiments making it evident that they are more a reflection of the poster's attitudes and worldview than anything to do with Sophie Lancaster's lifestyle or own beliefs. Similarly tributes such as 'Sorry Sophie, hadn't been on here for quite some time until recently but you are always in my heart & thoughts. Love Gill xxx' convey more about the day-to-day commitments of the living and the way in which memorials such as that for Sophie is a place to pause and reflect away from these commitments. Actions and sentiments that mirror those expressed in traditional places for mourning.

Other tributes are more clearly theological in their intention. Such as the message on Sophie's memorial from 'Jackie' (Figure 1). All of these tributes can be read as ways of mourning defined by the personal context of the mourner. The majority of the tributes, candle messages and photographs on the memorials do not directly reflect the individual grief of personal loss or the social and cultural disruptions caused by death. However, it is in the action of thananetworking that this personal grief and disruption can be identified through the networks of the dead whereby the grief of the living is expressed and distributed across multiple sites and through differing actions. As members of *GoneTooSoon* build a network by adding other memorials to their personal 'gardens' as well as creating new memorials, they also friend 'living' members. This enables the potential for circuits of exchange whereby the distribution of individual grief is spread across a range of memorials with reciprocation from other grieving site members coming in the form of giving candles or tributes often with reference back to their own cause for grief..

The development of a thananetwork as a distributed network of grieving also enables the mythologising of individuals who have died and retrospective identity work in their favour. In our research the case of 'Jackie' is both indicative and an exemplar. As the mother of a murder victim, 'Jackie' is one of the most notably active member of the *GoneTooSoon* community and is active on a number of the memorials that have a connection with her daughter's own circumstances and specifically the murders of known sex-workers by men seeking some degree of fame or notoriety. This association also highlights the way in which mythologising is also intimately tied to the construction and representation of innocence.

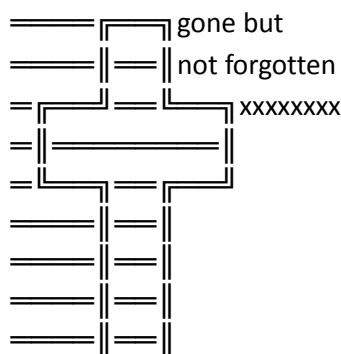


Figure 1: Jackie's tribute on Sophie Lancaster's memorial

The construction of innocence, fame and memory

'Jackie' was the mother of Bonnie Barratt (bonnie-barratt.gonetoosoon.org), a sex-worker with addictions who was murdered in 2007 by Derek Brown, a Preston Truck driver who wanted to become the 'modern Jack the Ripper'. Alongside the memorial that Jackie has created to Bonnie there is also a memorial to Xiao Mei Guo the other woman murdered in Whitechapel by Derek Brown as well as Stephen Booker, a victim of knife crime in 2000. Bonnie's memorial, in contrast to counts of the previous examples, has since had over 42,000 visits and over 22,500 candles lit (with the newest candle always 'minutes ago'). 'Jackie' has left over 10,800 tributes and lit 8,600 candles while she has been an active member of the site - approximately 10 tributes and 8 candles a day since she joined. However, she has created no new memorials since 2008. The fact that Jackie has clearly actively worked at establishing a network on GoneTooSoon around the memorial she has created for her daughter is evidence of the importance of reciprocated exchanging of candles and tributes that assist in the establishment of an active thananetwork formed through practices that are based around remembrance of the dead. The description of Bonnie Barratt's memorial has been altered a number of times since 2008 with initially a description of the circumstances of the death and then the subsequent court case. This developed rapidly to include a series of notes for other victims of violent crime as well as the beginning of a campaign called F.A.M.E. (Families Against Murders Escalating). This campaign is then continued on other web pages (www.myspace.com/474417923 and fame-barrett.webs.com/). While the mySpace site is relatively unpopulated, the webs.com site is primarily a long list of images of murder victims directly drawn from GoneTooSoon. As part of establishing the F.A.M.E group, 'Jackie' asked through the memorial to her daughter on *GoneTooSoon* in 2009, 'PLZZZZ ANY ONE ON MY GARDEN WHO HAD SOME ONE MURDERD CAN I USE THERE PIC TO PUT ON F.A.M.E BANNER IF YOU DONT MIND CAN YOU PLZZZ LET ME NO ASAP PLZZZZZ.'

The mySpace site describes the circumstances of Bonnie's life from Jackie's perspective.

To many My daughter was seen as 'No Angel', as she was trapped in voilent relationship and a life of drugs and prostitution, but to me she will always be My beautiful daughter and mother to my young grandson who was robbed of his mum before his life had really began.

Bonnie was taken after she had made up her mind to turn her life around and get back to the person she used to be, she wanted to stop the drugs She wanted her life back and wanted to make it up to her family. She made plans to improve her life but she never got the chance.

However, references and details to Bonnie's life have become scarcer since 2009 and increasingly Jackie has introduced large amounts of ASCII art in creating her tributes on other memorials with increasingly straightforward references to Christian iconography. Clearly, any murder is wrong but the construction and mythologising of innocence is significant and is related to the degree and manner in which the creator and maintainer of the memorials has simultaneously worked at maintaining a memory of the individual while constructing a myth around their life.

For Jackie, mythologising individual lives is a fraught activity. In 2008 the day after the conviction of Steven Wright and the murder of Anneli Anderton she left a candle with the note, 'r.i.p my heart go out to your family as my daughter was murder and othe lady was to in 2007 there bodys have not been found yet' (annelli-alderton.gonetoosoon.org – the name is misspelt on the memorial). One of the photographs on Anneli's memorial is from Jackie and is a sombre cartoon style image of the Bible with the annotation, 'r.i.p. no more pain xxx'. There are many parallels to the circumstances of Anneli Anderton and Bonnie Barratt murders

and their lives beforehand. However, Anneli's memorial was created by 'Admin GTS' in 2006 and has received less attention than many more recent memorials. The photographs include only two images both of which are low resolution and the main image used on the memorial is drawn from the CCTV image of Anneli on the day she died. This image has been a cause of contention as a proportion of the small number of tributes that have been left indicate, 'i met annelli just 4days before she was horribly murdered and she seemed a very nice woman i hope she is happy and i would like 2 say that this isnt a very nice pic off her she looked a lot different very pretty r.i.p'. These tributes also attempt to begin the process of mythologising, 'You did not deserve to die. you were so, so much more than a 'prostitute' and 'drug addict' as the papers keep calling you, you were a beautiful young mum who ended up in the horrible world of addiction. I have been there and even though it changes you so much, the little girl you once were is always still there. I really hope your mum can see this and that she remembers you for the girl you were before addiction took over because that is the real annelli.'

Unlike many of the other famous murders from Ipswich or more broadly across the UK through the 2000s Anneli is not remembered with a foundation or campaign and there is no other visible online presence remembering Anneli. These differences are reminiscent of those found at well tended or poorly tended physical graves.

Through a consequence of her own circumstances and her conscious choice to utilise *GoneTooSoon* Jackie is contributing to the maintenance, remembrance and ongoing mythologising of a number of woman who parallel her own daughter's situation as well as contributing to famous murders that have been portrayed publicly and through the media as 'innocent' deaths – rather than the description regularly attached to Anneli as 'tragic'. The examples of Ben Kinsella and Sophie Lancaster confirm that *GoneTooSoon* is not the only location for thananetworking and that maintenance of memory of deceased individuals is being conducted through other websites – primarily the websites and actions of the respective foundations that are the memorialising and mythologising spaces of the more direct families of the victims.

Conclusion

Magico-religious beliefs and practices provide a lens through which it is possible to explore the everyday interactions found on the *GoneTooSoon* network. While in no way do we claim that the exemplars that we have employed provide a full or complete accounting for *GoneTooSoon*, what we have identified within the *GoneTooSoon* community in describing the actions and interactions of online grieving process is what we describe as thananetworking. Thananetworking itself employs many of the magico-religious practices that Piddington (1950) identified in his earlier anthropological studies of traditional cultures. What is distinctive in the actions of thananetworking however are the links that can be identified between contemporary forms of narrative and the association of thananetworking with the expectations found in the construction of celebrity within fame culture. These explorations lead us to consider what building a profile means for memorialising the life and death of an individual and its subsequent upkeep and maintenance for both the living and dead. Personal separation and temporal distance from a specific death opens up the degree to which an individual's death and more broadly the entirety of their life can be mythologised.

By drawing on Piddingtons approach we see that the *GoneTooSoon* site provides

a) an explanation for the human response to the uncontrollable events of human life and death by for those connected through a desire to associate with fame or at least famous death. In contrast, the response of families is seen in the establishment of foundations, for example those developed by the families of Ben Kinsella and Sophie Lancaster. In both of these

examples continued engagement and activity rallying against the specific actions that brought about the death of the eponym of the foundation gives friends and relatives of the bereaved a sense of hope that their death was not in vain. In both these examples the eponymous individual has a mythology crafted around their life that implies that they are representatives of the opposite sentiments to the type of crime that killed them without necessary any specific examples of this opposition by the individual in life. In contrast, through the thananetwork post-mortem analysis and presentation of a life is employed by families and friends as well as 'fans' to construct a mythology of life that is partially premised on the lives of others brought into complementary orbits through the reciprocal actions of thananetworking. The example of Bonnie Barratt and her mother Jackie is indicative of this attempt to respond to unexpected death. In death, Bonnie Barratt's life has become associated with those of the women murdered in Suffolk as well as more loosely with those of the Soham murder victims and other young women. This mythologising is an active rewriting of Bonnie Barratt and the lives of others from a position of being in a vulnerable situation as sex-workers and drug-users. Mainstream media chooses to use the euphemism of a 'tragic' death in distinction in contrast to one of 'innocent' death. Making this transition, as the thananetworking activity attempts to do, shifts the claims around the 'famous death' so that these deaths too can be likened to those of the Moors Murder victims or those of Soham. This moral observation overrides the complex and dangerous environment that drug addiction and sex work places anyone including the increased risks of violent attack and generally prohibits critical debate. This, however, is the point – for the family - of constructing this type of myth.

Piddington's explanation also show how

b) there is a punitive attempt to control the events associated with death in a way that enables those influenced to express their hopes and to establish a form of faith in which these hopes can be realised. This is most readily evidenced in the association of 'famous deaths' with foundations subsequently organised by the families. However, in contemporary culture, this is also where the important parameter of fame intersects with more traditional forms of memorialising and even ancestor worship in that collective cultural memory increasingly blurs with the concept of fame. Thus preservation of the memory of an individual necessitates constructing them with some form of fame – even if this fame rests solely on the circumstances of their death. Bonnie Barratt's murder had relatively minimal reporting initially but through the actions of Jackie and her use of *GoneTooSoon* to record the details and progress of the police investigation and subsequent successful court case on Bonnie Barratt's memorial the story continue and awareness of the story became wider. Bonnie Barratt's name and story has been shared across the network with tributes, candles and memorials that Jackie has created on *GoneTooSoon* in effect carrying the story of her daughter beyond the initial media reports and into direct association with the grief and mourning of others. The commitment of individual time to continue this memorial and the scale of the work being undertaken by Jackie ensures that the myth and the memorial continues to build years after the initial murder. This itself is the contemporary 'miracle' of thananetworking practice. Ongoing public presence of the dead is possible within social networks that can mirror and even imitate the presence of the living.

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