Chapter 57
Culture, Disorder, and Death in an Online World

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ABSTRACT

Death strikes everywhere, even online. Death poses problems personally, existentially, and culturally, and is potentially destructive to person and group. Yet many social theories of death posit some kind of social integration as normal, downplaying the potential for disorder. This chapter explores how people on the internet mailing list, Cybermind, dealt with death on two occasions: firstly, just after the group's founding, and secondly, when the group had been established for eight years, and was in crisis. On both occasions the group was rocked by the deaths, and struggled to make a meaningful and ongoing mailing list culture out of parts of offline culture, while transforming that culture within the constraints and ambiguities of List Life. This was a disorderly exploratory process, which verged on disintegration. Social disorder cannot be seen as simply pathological or an error; it is a vital part of cultural processes and must be taken seriously in itself.

INTRODUCTION

Death online is rarely explored.[1] This contrasts radically with the huge amount written about other aspects of life online, and makes a surprising gap given death's importance for indicating the disorderly differences, similarities, and ambiguous boundaries between online and offline life. Death,

ending and decay are vital parts of social life, and ignoring them implies that online life is somehow unreal, or remains untouched by fundamental existential and social problems. This is simply not true. I use ethnographic research to elucidate the death of Michael Current, a founder of the internet mailing list Cybermind, at the beginning of the List's life, and the death of popular member, Rose Mulvale, during a time of conflict. I analyse the

way List members dealt with, or failed to deal with, death in their ventures towards cultural creation. I begin with a short description of the List, discuss ethnography, culture and death, and then give a comparative account of the deaths on Cybermind.

CYBERMIND

For a full history and ethnography of Cybermind see Marshall (2007). Cybermind is an internet Mailing List founded in 1994 by Alan Sondheim and Michael Current to discuss "the philosophical and psychological implications of subjectivity in cyberspace." It has been a voluminous List and is still active today, although much reduced. Onlist conversation has wandered over many fields other than the advertised ones. People have talked at length about their offline lives, and have used the List to organise offline meetings and even a conference in Perth, Western Australia. They have conducted love affairs, given personal counselling, had flame wars, been invaded by other Lists, and carried out co-operative work, including the group authored "Cybermind Novel," a *ficto-criticism* of internet theory and List life (Rosewood, 2008). It is impossible to observe Cybermind and argue for a simple division between online and offline life.

Despite many members evincing ideologies of role-play and multiplicity, as has been widely reported, or anticipated, in the literature (e.g. Turkle, 1995; Poster, 2001), long-term members largely present themselves, and take each other, as real "authentic" people, although perhaps able to express more of themselves online than offline (cf. Kendall 2002, p.8-9). However, authenticity is always problematic as, despite claims of spontaneity, it has to be indicated by conventional "ritual displays" and etiquette (Marshall, 2007 p.105ff.). Consequently, manifestations of authenticity are frequently misconstrued, and struggles over authenticity and meaning form part of the group's dynamics, not least when faced with death.

Surveys over the group's history show that visible members were generally "intellectual middle class," usually with leftist politics, and precarious means of livelihood. Almost all members lived in the Western English Speaking World, and English was the only language used onlist. The majority of members seem to have been male, but the number of posts from women exceeded their proportion of membership. However, only a relatively small number of the total membership wrote frequently; the majority of the List posted rarely or never (Marshall 2007, p.281ff.).

While much of the frequently posting population was stable over the research period, the group experienced considerable membership change, making it hard to assess how changes in group behaviour relate to internal development, wider world events, or to change of population. Disordering and flux of group culture and membership, was ongoing. Flux and mess is as much part of living on Cybermind, if not more so, than is fixity, order and patterning.

ETHNOGRAPHY, CULTURE, AND DEATH

Ethnography

For detailed comments on online ethnography as a method, and its similarity to living online generally, see Marshall (2010; 2007, p.7-10). In general, ethnographic fieldwork depends upon living with people and engaging in extended observation as a participant. It aims to gain familiarity with ways and patterns of living, and modes of understanding, and to make a meaningful and relatively explicit model of social life. It is not primarily an interview or statistical method although it may employ both in its attempts to make sense of peoples' lives. Ethnography is destabilising, as there is only a messy difference between facts and analysis. What counts as facts, depends on meaning and

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