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FACEBOOK – THE COUNTRY OF ZOMBIES:
HOW DEATH IS REPRESENTED IN SOCIAL MEDIA.

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Abstract:
Many trends and changes made by new forms of media are well observed, researched, and predictable. However, the representation of death in *virtual reality* and its impact on *non-virtual* life remains undiscovered. This is largely due to a cultural taboo which prohibits mentioning personal death. Nonetheless, the *net generation* has escaped this taboo and far more freely deliberates about passing away. Social media has become the primary tool for sharing this kind of experience. This virtual penetration into non-virtual reality (and visa-versa) has stimulated unobserved trend, the social media's acceptance of death. Attributes of death have materialized into mainstream media; people write blogs and posts about those they have lost, and relatives will often maintain accounts on social networking sites of those who died. Analysis in this paper focuses on the last seven years (since 2006). However, an explanation of taboo surrounding death has a wider theoretical context, and must start at the end of 19th century. The goal of the paper is to examine how the familiarity with death throughout social networking with the inability to differentiate between virtual and non-virtual reality may create a form of zombie networking, and what it means for companies and society.

Keywords: social network, innovation, solidarity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Death has not always been a social taboo. Once people were not afraid to talk about it, or share their grief. Moreover, they were often present while their loved ones were dying. In "Death and Bereavement Across Cultures" Colin Murray Parkes, Pittu Laungani and Bill Young explain evolution of loosing ability to cope with death by urbanization, and civilizational progress that was made. With the end of 19th century hospitals were more popular, due to technology development and wider access to them. As a result most people died in clean and silent hospitals behind closed doors. Before that happened people had seen how their beloved died at home, they knew how to share the news of death, and how to handle it (Laung, Parkes & Young, 2001, pp. 5-40). Experiencing death was a rite of passage which was cultivating in a sequence of symbolic acts. These acts, which are more for the living than for those who died, are a tool for coping with a loss (Gryglewski, 2005, p. 58). Specific symbols varied among regions, but some sequences are the same around the globe, for example: the material and mental dimension, time for family, prayers, dispose of body (Gennep, 2006, p. 223). But as death became a more isolated event, these symbols began to fade from practice.

The 20th century is the age characterized by wars and impersonalized death, millions of lives were lost in the two world wars and a great deal more resulting from violent dictatorships and ethnic wars. Joeseph Stalin notably remarked, that one death is a tragedy however, one million is just a statistic. These numbers are often incomprehensibly large, making it easier to accept this kind of death – mass death, as called by Zygmunt Bauman. At the same time death became so obvious and pervasive that people tended to forget about it and refuse to speak of it. Where is death in today's discourse? Due to impersonalization of death one has no idea how to handle death, and more importantly, cannot talk about it, since it is not accepted by the society. This is due to the fact that others have no idea how to behave when they hear about someone's loss. The society is supposed to support an individual, especially in moments of losing someone. Otherwise, one ends up in stagnation, which kills their productivity and vital strengths.

In today's world the society helps. A distinctive feature of generation web 2.0 is creativity and lack of self-control. It means that one more freely shares one's experiences. It is much easier to write about death than to talk about it. So people will write blogs, social media posts, or even place tombstones in a virtual cemetery. At the same time, there is a problem with the web accounts of those who died, since laws do not regulate what will happen with them, as it does in the case of other belongings.

Social media can fulfill most social needs of a human being. As Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein explain „Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60). Social Media main futures are: openness, ubiquity, and delocalization. It should be explained what it is mean by web 2.0. As Paweł Ankowiak explained it is interactive web site, that is constantly developed by it's users who create it's content; by doing it users crates own groups, web and draw from this kind of web site information (Antkowiak, 2009). Manuel Castells also pointed out how fast everything happens in electronic media, and in today's world; he used a term "timeless time" (Castells, 2007, p. 21) to express dinamism of virtual reality. It is common point of view that one looks for acceptance in social media. Furthermore, many individuals derive reality from what comes through media (Bendyk, 2004, p. 94). This kind of media lets one share their activities and thoughts, while enabling them to discuss experiences with other individuals that they selected („friends", „followers" or „circles", etc.). Social Media allows one also to keep it touch with others and, just like in real life, an individual can even bully another. Denis McQuail in his book „Theory of mass communication" specified five tasks of media: information, correlation, continuity, entertainment, mobilization (McQuail, 1983, pp.98-100). All of those functions are provided by Social Media.

For purposed of this paper we will focus on Facebook as an example of Social Media. Although, great example of Social Media with large death representation are games, this paper will not mention it. The reason for excluding them is that case of games needs separate essay due to large representation, and death rites with which players are familiar, and are cultivating. FB is the most popular web network today, and it's users are very active. This limitation enables us to conduct research among Polish and Americans. Moreover, there is a great volume of articles, essays and other works written about this media, some of them are about left profiles, and were of ineffable help in writing this paper.

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2. DEATH REPRESENTATION

Facebook, the biggest outlet of social media, with over 620 million active users[1] monthly, over 1 billion users in total (Fowler, 2012), and has more than 30 million accounts that belong to deceased people (Kaleem, 2012). However, the number is hard to evaluate since the only way for Facebook to create this statistics is to be notified that someone has died, and to receive proof of death. When it is notified profile becomes on-line memorial, where family and friends can comment and push „like" button. Why would people do that?

Conducted research helps to answer that question. Most Polish respondents are not familiar with the issue, just 23.8% have had a friend on a social network who has died. It is a more popular concept in the USA, were 68.3% of surveyed people are familiar with deceased profiles. There are two primary reasons for the creation of content (for instance pushing „like" button or posting a message) on a deceased user's profile. One reason is to comfort the person who creates the content, and another reason is to comfort the family of the one who passed away. This first group of people contains personal confession, often written to deceased person (just like it used to be in case of letters; written in first person narration). It is interesting that 65% of Americans reported that posting on someone's wall made them feel closer to that person, a sentiment not shared by Polish respondents, since only 5% of them feel this way. One of American respondents acknowledged several key concepts behind this trend: „I suppose it was a way to offer comfort to the other friends and family whom I knew were visiting his page. Lots of us posted favorite memories, photos, and songs in the days after he passed. For me, it felt like a virtual memorial service – especially nice for those of us who were too far away to attend the in-person services." The quintessence of Social Media lies in its limitlessness and insusceptibility to geographical distance. It enables people to show their solidarity, and to participate in saying good-bye wherever they are. It also allows one to not fully accept reality, as one Polish during the research said: „After my friend's death I heritage her Facebook profile. I shared there photos, and wrote posts. It does not make me feel she is closer or something, but i think she is somehow still alive." It is possible that one day everyone will think in a similar fashion, which leads to loss of balance between the virtual reality and non-virtual world.

This loss of balance would not be so easy to achieve, if the deceased were not able to continue creating content. Deceased people can still become fans of pages on Facebook (Meisler, 2012). It should be explained that Facebook sells "likes" and promoted posts. Companies advertising on Facebook pay for each click of the "Like" button, and on inactive profiles this process can become automated, and the company that ordered an advertisement is losing money, since „like" does not convert into increase of sale or engagement. As a result, even deceased users will continue to 'like' pages or repost material. While I asked people to take the survey many asked: "What if I do not know if all my friends from Facebook are still alive?". Because we see an active profile, and most respondents have more than 500 friends it is hard to keep a track who is alive and who is not.

Gravediggers for ages have understood how profitable death can be. Now it is time to profit on death through every kind of media, including social websites.

Selling „likes" from deceased profiles is not the only method of cashing in on one's death on Social Media. Another involves well-known people's profiles or fan pages. A great example of this is Reeva Steenkamp's fan pages. There is many profiles and fan pages that could be chosen for exemplification. This one was chosen, because it is recent, and it is seen as notable illustration of death in social media. Moreover, it id due tragic death that Reeva Steenkamp became recognized, and well know around the world, before she was just a new girlfriend of athletes Oscar Pistorius. However, there is many similar cases, for instance Michael Jackson fan page or Michael Clarke Ducan. That said let's have a closer look on Steenkamp's case. On her profile one can see condolences, but they are also on fan pages. Since her tragical death to the moment this paper was written, five R.I.P.-kind of pages were created. Including one fan page created while she was still alive. As for now, one cannot earn money by setting up a fan page, although moderating content on a social media account is great responsibility, and good business. However, Reeva's R.I.P. fan pages are not commercial, or profesional. People created it as act of solidarity, admiration or co-feeling of grief.

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[1] Facebook, Key Facts, on-line access: http://newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts [April 10th 2013]

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Regardless money is still made by it. How it is possible? First of all, some users post links to personal websites or virtual cemeteries. Secondly, there are multiple posts promoting books about violence, and finally, promotion of her last show and the news channel that had featured her funeral, career, or Oscar Pistorius' trial (or even his brother's trial). Journalist post their opinion or work. Every post of this kind has the influence of personal branding, which leads to the conclusion that while it may not be a direct flow of money, there is indirect profit though advertisements and public relations. Of course, not always does someone who posts information on books or news have the interest of promoting them, and may simply post in the trend of sharing the information. Despite this, those posts might have financial impact on other individuals.

It should be also pointed out that not everyone accepts one's popularity after one passes away. Often the family is bothered by an event invitation sent to deceased person's profile or simple posts and comments, as one respondent admited. Some families have no access to individual's profile and the only way around this is to ask Facebook to erase this account. However, the company is not willing to do that (Kunkle, 2013). Sharing their feelings and grief is acceptable; finding out that one's kin passed away but still authors posts is shocking and may be seen as disrespect for family (Moire, 2011).

There are many more representations of death in social media not described above. There are profiles and fan pages to honor authority or writers, for example: Virginia Woolf, Ayn Rand or Ann Frank. People set up those channels to commemorate their lives, and work. It is believed that those kinds of contents are an expression of one's passion. By posting quotations or giving examples from recent events one can have the feeling that an individual's philosophy and works are ageless. This activity also helps promote this person, which may have some impact on how recognized he/she is which directly correlates to sales of their merchandise. Although, all work through social media have not such an impact as for instance movie production, the conglomerate effect is still noteworthy.

Furthermore, when an individual dies in a public manner, social media becomes a channel to mobilize others to do or change something, often in respect for a political cause. For instance, in February a young adult in one of Polish cities was killed. People on Facebook did not need much time to organize a march against violence as a commemoration of this person. Mobilization through social media often is a threat against the *status quo*, as it was during Arab Spring or in 2001 in Philippines where it successfully broke regimes. A public death is often a main factor behind mobilization.

Facebook is not the only place where death exists. The virtual word of Zombies may come about thanks to websites like DeadSoci.al, ifIdie, Twitter applications or postsecret.com. What happened on PostSecret was an unplanned, and impulse created situation. Frank Warren, a founder of this website, started by giving unwritten postcards to people on the streets of Washington DC. They supposed to write their secret and send the post card back. They did. Thousands of people, even these who have not received postcard with a stamp from Warren sent him secrets. One person wrote that she never erased her voice mails in case someone who she loved were to die and she would never be able to hear him or her again. Warren posted that postcard and then people start to send him their voice mails. This way everyone is able to hear someone's voice, even these who died. Maybe someone will find a record of one's friend by accident.

DeadSoci.al, ifIdie or any other applications, a number of it is growing, are a commercial means that allow us to post and send messages on our social media account from the grave. Before death one can scheduled posting messages for years, even for a century in advance. This way one can have a contact with their children and even grandchildren of their grandchildren. While we finish this paper Google announces that as of now one is able to schedule what company should do with one's account (e-mails, documents stored on drive, photos from Picasa, etc.). Google user can chose if his/her profile should be erased after 3,6,9 or 12 months of not logging. Before scheduled time the company will contact user through text message or another e-mail address. If one still will not log into Google account it would be erased and assigned people will be informed that this person may be dead. It is said that it may bring a comfort for these who remain alive, but the tradition shows that true comfort lies is in letters or other information passed down by the family.

DeadSoci.al and it's growing popularity means that one day social media may be transcendent of death. Meanwhile, most Polish respondents wanted their Facebook account to be erased after their

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death. American respondents are more willing to still have their profiles after passing away. Moreover, they find a comfort in grief in social media. This simply reflects a difference in culture. While Americans are optimistic and open, Polish are often distant to other people, and attached to beliefs and tradition.

3.   SUMMARY

Preliminary research has proven that it is acceptable to talk about death in the social media. Moreover, a new etiquette has been created: people will "like" posts following someone's death, they post comments under the news or photos of a deceased person. If they know that person, these messages are often very personalized. People want to share their experience; it is a simple need of human beings. As Michaelanne Dye, and expert of cybertechnology and culture, said: "However, in the past 20 years, researchers have begun to explore the healthy benefits of maintaining a tie to the deceased... Considering this, Facebook appears to be a natural way for people to work through grief over the loss of a loved one" (Buck, 2013)

Furthermore, thanks to such a wide representation of death in the electronic media, the taboo seems to be breaking down. Thanks to mobile phones and other devices with an Internet access we can easily visit a dead person's account everywhere, and see his/her photo, leave a comment, etc. A virtual cemetery seems to be a similar case. It is also very likely that a market, especially the demand on targeted applications, would grow. Moreover, websites like DeadSocial or PostSecret show that people want to keep not only memories of someone who passed away, but something more tangible. Mainly because no one likes to lose, and new technology gives us a great possibility to have an access to movies, pictures and recordings wherever we are. It is hard to predict how this will influence our mentality on death.

This may all lead to a world where one will not be able to keep track who is dead and who is not. Although, It is quite futuristic vision. However, it may become true. Especially due to the blur between virtual and reality many individuals experience as a result of social media (Bendyk, 2004, s. 94). Furthermore, social media companies have no interest in erasing a deceased person's account, because their income depends on it. Death representation may constitute a small source of income, but more importantly is the change that may come to our culture concerning the evolution of funeral tradition and coping with mourning.

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