

THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN OBITUARY

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Table of Contents

I. INTRODUCTION	2
II. OBITUARIES: THE HISTORY	5
o Death Notices vs. Obituaries	
o Demographic Differences in Who Receives Obituaries	
o The Style of Historical Obituaries	
o Remembering the “Common Man”	
III. THE OBITUARY LANDSCAPE TODAY	11
o Why People Read Obituaries	
o How Newspapers Classify Obituaries	
o How Newsrooms Handle Obituaries	
IV. NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEMORIALIZATION	18
o The Emergence of Online Memorials	
o The World Wide Web’s Subversion of the Print Media – and Implications for Obituaries	
V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	25
o What the Future Holds	
o Recommendations for Media Stakeholders	
o Conclusion	
VI. ABOUT THE AUTHORS	29

I. INTRODUCTION

The way a culture chooses to commemorate its dead reflects a great deal about the character and nature of that culture. At the beginning of the 21st century, just as for much of the 20th, memorializing the dead in the United States very often means publication of the details of an individual's life and accomplishments in the form of an obituary or death notice. In the mid-1990s, obituaries began appearing online as well as in print, making individual obituaries easier to find and less restricted by the geography of either the reader or the deceased.

This act of making public the details of an individual life becomes, in a sense, more lasting and permanent than a stone monument erected at a grave site. A public notice often can be viewed, or visited, more easily than any grave. By publishing a story of a life, or by contributing individual remembrances with others who knew the deceased, we commit to our collective memory a snapshot of that person's life, times, and impact on those around them. The marble headstone may one day crumble, but by adding our memories of an individual to the persistent digital archive of the Internet, we fix them in a place, in a time, and make them accessible to all those who succeed us in history.

This report is an attempt to examine the nature of the contemporary American obituary. Beyond mere classified advertisements, or a roll call of the recently dead, obituaries tell us about our neighborhoods, our communities, our countries and ourselves. They also constitute an important content category for modern newspapers – and, increasingly, for publishers in other media, because in a very real sense, they are the dictionary definitions of “hyper-local content.” And like many content categories, obituaries are being transformed by changes in audience behavior and media technology. An obituary can now include multimedia, and mourners can gather not just in a church or funeral home, but also on social networking sites and memorial pages that live on long after the lives that inspired them have ended.

The Interactive Innovation Project class – eight students finishing their master's degrees at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism – has spent the fall exploring the world of obituaries and online memorials. We have studied the history of obituaries, conducted in-depth interviews with users and potential users of obituary-oriented Web sites, talked with journalists who specialize in obituaries and surveyed more than 300 visitors to Legacy.com, a Web site that aggregates death notices for much of the U.S. newspaper industry. Here are our key findings:

- A substantial group of dedicated obituary readers flourishes today. Some individuals regularly check the obituary pages in their local newspaper (or its Web site). Others make a habit of examining the obituary pages of newspaper Web sites from cities that they once lived in, but they no longer call home, looking for the names of acquaintances who may

The State of the American Obituary

have died. Our research shows these enthusiasts are attracted to obituary content for disparate reasons: to find information about their own friends and family, to read about the interesting lives of their contemporaries, and to appreciate the literary merits of the obituary form.

- New ways of commemorating lives are emerging on the Web, including Web sites where users can create interactive memorial pages for their lost loved ones that include “guestbooks,” photos and videos. When a person dies, his or her Facebook page is sometimes converted into an online memorial. Online chat rooms for different categories of grievors have also emerged.
- Obituaries have become increasingly “democratized” in the sense that women, minorities and common people are more likely to get obituaries now than in the past. However, subjects of so-called “news obituaries” remain disproportionately male and white.
- Obituaries and paid death notices continue to be a critically important audience draw for newspapers. Research at Northwestern has shown that improving obituary coverage is a proven strategy for building readership in print.¹ And online, obituaries constitute some of the most popular and widely searched-for content on newspaper Web sites. As newspapers refocus their content strategy on local news and information in an environment where they have to cut costs, many have sought to preserve obituary coverage as a driver of audience to their print and online offerings.
- Paid death notices are a substantial revenue stream for most newspapers, at this point largely untouched by the Internet-driven disruption that has devastated most classified advertising categories. Readers, friends and family members of the deceased, and funeral directors continue to assume that information about deaths in the community should be published in the paper.
- Yet, the central position that newspapers have held in the world of obituaries is threatened by changes in technology and audience behavior. The new forms of memorializing loved ones may draw away audience members who want not only to read, but also to interact. At the same time, new online competitors are trying aggressively to seize the obituary business. These changes have important implications for the future of the obituary, for the journalists who produce them and for the public that relies on them.
- Through partnerships with newspapers, Legacy.com, which sponsored our class, has built a thriving online obituary business. With 7 million unique visitors per month according to comScore Media Metrix, Legacy.com is one of the nation’s 100 most-visited Web sites.

¹ "How to Improve Obituary Coverage", Readership Institute, Media Management Center at Northwestern University, Nov.30, 2001.

The State of the American Obituary

But the site has important content gaps— especially for people who are interested in reading well-crafted stories about interesting lives.

Historically, the average person might be mentioned in print only once or twice in his or her entire life - with an obituary the most important and notable instance. It is with this in mind that we want to examine the art of obituary writing, the social constructs that surround the publication of obituary content, and the implications that the emergence of new media may have on the business of obituaries.

II. OBITUARIES: THE HISTORY

In this section, we will first look at some history of the obituary art, including the context in which it first arose. We will then examine current trends in obituaries. And finally we will speculate about what the future might hold for obituary writers, publishers, those who are memorialized, and those who seek to learn or remember. The topics explored in this section include:

- **The blurring of the line between paid “death notice” content and the “editorial obituary”:** This has been driven by economic concerns of newspapers, including their need to diversify their revenue streams, as well as an imperative to reduce staff costs to increase or maintain profitability.
- **The continued demographic disparities of the subjects chosen for editorial obituary treatment at major metropolitan newspapers:** While obituary editors will claim that the medium has been democratized substantially, in fact recipients of obituaries are still cultural producers, politicians, and other social elites. Women and minorities are still disproportionately passed over for remembrance in obituary pages, although this is slowly being overcome by the increasing reliance on paid death notices rather than obituaries that originate in the editorial department.
- **The changing nature of the style and content of modern obituaries:** Over time they have become more secularized, less concerned with the details of an individual’s death and more concerned with the story of their life.
- **The rise of the so-called “common man” obituary:** The idea of featuring average people who lived interesting lives, though not “important” or notorious ones, flourished in local newspapers and in some larger national publications during the early 1980s. The “common man” obituary remains very popular.
- **The growth of alternative memorial forms in the age of digital media:** Online memorials are changing the way that Americans grieve for the departed. Social media is democratizing the memorialization process by facilitating the publication of interactive online memorials, as well as enabling griever who face similar issues to form support groups.

Death Notices vs. Obituaries

For most English-language newspapers, the term “obituary” is reserved for staff-written obituaries, and terms as “death notices,” “death announcements,” and so forth are used for family-written ones. The staff-written obituaries are always seen as news items which tell something of the deceased’s life story rather than simply supply biographic information. The death notice, generally treated as a paid advertisement, is considered as a short announcement of the person’s death, often with only very basic information about the deceased.

This distinction was not always so clear. The first commonly cited examples of obituary publication were the collections of short biographies published in Great Britain in the last decade of the 17th century, entitled *Brief Lives*, written by John Aubrey.² These brief biographical sketches focused primarily on participants in the fields of philosophy, arts and sciences, and politics.³

The very first modern obituaries that appeared in newspapers or periodicals, announcing an individual’s death and providing a biographical sketch, first appeared in 1731 in a publication called *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, published in London. These 18th-century obituaries were unusually inclusive demographically. They included obituaries of a variety of “eminent persons” including individuals such as an astronomer, a man with thousands of descendants, and a poacher.⁴ Obituary writing of this period often featured pious, biographical accounts of illness with graphic details of how a person died.⁵

This level of inclusiveness would not continue for long. By the mid-19th century, the *Times of London* had begun publishing an annual record of “Death’s Doings,” a list of deaths which had occurred during the year in order of precedence, beginning with members of the House of Lords and other aristocracy, continuing with those in the world of arts and sciences, lawyers, soldiers, doctors, and finally, foreign dignitaries.⁶

Demographic Differences in Who Receives Obituaries

In the past, subjects chosen by news organizations for obituaries were predominantly well-educated men of high social status. Bourgeois cultural producers, such as artists, scientists,

² John Aubrey, *Brief Lives: Chiefly of Contemporaries, Set Down By John Aubrey, Between the Years 1669 & 1696* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898). This work is available online at: <http://books.google.com/books?id=R6wDAAAAMAAJ>

³ Bridget Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Nigel Starck, "Posthumous Parallel and Paradox: The obit revival on 3 continents," *Journalism Studies* 6 (2005): 267-283.

⁶ Bridget Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 6.

or musicians, were occasionally chosen, but working-class men and most women were not considered appropriate subjects.

Bridget Fowler, in her sociological examination of obituaries, *The Obituary as Collective Memory* (2007), observes that the *Times of London*'s obituaries of 1900 "[are] largely restricted to the aristocracy. Within that class, it features particularly the Army and the Navy and to a lesser extent, the second and third sons, who traditionally enter the clergy. Curiously, in a newspaper filled with factory advertisements for an industrialist public, the bourgeoisie are hardly featured at all. When they are featured, they appear at best as having been function for the economy, and at worst as the objects of class condescension."⁷ As for women, they "largely appear only as agents of family reproduction, or Lévi-Strauss's 'objects of exchange': indeed, in the 146 obituaries printed in 1900, there are only two precursors of today's more emancipated women."⁸

To a large degree, this remained true for most of the 20th century. The *Times of London* was considered the de facto standard for obituary writing around the world, including the United States. In the *New York Times*, even as social movements such as women's rights and desegregation transformed the nation, the representation of women and minorities in the obituaries was still minimal. "These exclusions, these textual silences on obituary pages, also reveal something about American values and culture, helping to provide an understanding of exactly who and what were forgotten."⁹

Obituaries flourished in American papers during World War I. However, obituary coverage declined during World War II, when the supply of newsprint was limited and war news took much space. Consequently, death notices supplanted editorial obituaries in newspapers until the war ended. After World War II, obituary writers refocused from "heroes of production to heroes of consumption" like sports stars, musicians and Hollywood actors. This trend has continued in contemporary times, when obits commemorate those who, in the arts and sciences, produce some kind of cultural value. Obituaries about people from developing countries tended to focus on those who "fight for injustice and speak for the voiceless" in their countries.¹⁰

The Style of Historical Obituaries

Nineteenth-century obituaries focused on character, "with a worthy life nearly always framed as a virtuous one filled with gallantry for men and gentle piety for women." But 20th-

⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 24.

¹⁰ Bridget Fowler. "Collective Memory and Forgetting: Components for a Study of Obituaries," *Theory, Culture & Society* 22 (2005): 53-72.

century obituaries often represented the individual's life "as a long list of business or social association and downplayed individual character."¹¹

At the beginning of the 20th century, obituaries often utilized language that "provided significant and substantial amounts of detail about the bodily experience of death."¹² During this period, obituaries paid more attention to the deceased's physical experience by giving details that would allow the reader to more fully construct a narrative about the decedent's end-of-life experience. According to Jason Phillips' research on obituaries from the *New York Times* in 1899¹³, obits of that time often detailed:

- The time of death, sometime to the precision of within five minutes
- The names and treatment strategies of attending physicians
- The condition of the deceased
- The discussion of complications from medical procedures
- Attempts at recuperation and resuscitation
- Levels of pain
- Levels of consciousness

This kind of information is not emphasized in more contemporary obituaries.¹⁴ The proportion of language related to physical death has fallen over time, as the influence of rationality, embodied in institutions such as the medical profession, came to influence the cultural conception of death. Reporting of the biological process of dying has become less significant to the cultural idea of what it means to "die well" in modern society.¹⁵

Remembering the "Common Man"

In October of 1982, Jim Nicholson was hired to write obituaries for the *Philadelphia Daily News*.¹⁶ Nicholson promoted the idea of so-called "common man" obituaries to larger metropolitan newspapers. These obituaries were biographical sketches of ordinary citizens in the

¹¹ Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 153.

¹² Jason Phillips, "The Changing Presentation of Death in the Obituary, 1899-1999", *OMEGA* 55 (2007): 326.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 327.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 335.

¹⁶ Marilyn Johnson, *The Dead Beat* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 91.

The State of the American Obituary

Philadelphia area who had, for one reason or another, lived interesting lives. Nicholson turned these ordinary lives into literary tributes, often by reminiscing on individual idiosyncrasies or providing insights into a person's life based on occupation, for instance. Obituaries of ordinary citizens were common in smaller papers of the time, but for the first time, they began appearing in publications with a national footprint.

Nicholson further promoted this new style of obituary writing by creating kits with advice and lists of characteristics for would-be obituary writers to ask about, along with samples of obituaries that he had written about "average Joes." These obituary kits were sent to writers at a variety of publications around the United States. As a result, the "common man" obituary became much more widespread.¹⁷

Four years later, in the United Kingdom, the *Independent* was founded and James Fergusson was appointed its obituary editor. Fergusson based his vision for obituaries in the paper on those that were found in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, a monthly digest in the late 18th century that covered general news of interest to the educated class. Originally a dealer in antique books¹⁸, Fergusson introduced several innovations that would change British obituaries. First, the obituaries in the *Independent* had bylines. Furthermore, Fergusson introduced photography as illustrations to obituaries.¹⁹ Prior to Fergusson, photographs included with obituaries were usually simple head shots as opposed to illustrative examples which captured part of the deceased's life. He also introduced the use of breakout boxes for the details of an individual's death, which resulted in increased capacity for creativity on the part of obituary writers, who were now no longer confined to summing up the death of the individual in the lead of the obituary.

The *Economist* introduced a weekly obituary column in 1995. These obituaries follow the British tradition in that they avoid the chronological approach to a person's life, focusing instead on the pure essence of what made an individual's life significant and noteworthy. They are also elegantly crafted to be both compelling and concise.

Major American newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have long considered obituaries an important section of the paper, and have devoted resources to producing high-quality editorial obituaries.²⁰ However, American obituaries differ stylistically from their British counterparts. American obituaries frequently focus on professional

¹⁷ Ibid., 97.

¹⁸ Ibid., 171.

¹⁹ Nigel Starck, *Life After Death: The Art of the Obituary* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Publishing, 2006), 72.

²⁰ Nigel Starck, "Posthumous Parallel and Paradox: The obit revival on 3 continents," *Journalism Studies* 6 (2005): 267-283.

accomplishments, social connections, and manner of death, while British obituaries are more likely to focus on individual idiosyncrasies.

“The consensus on the part of the obituary writers is that ‘a great flowering at the end of the twentieth century’ has occurred,” writes Bridget Fowler, author of a book on obituaries as a reflection of the cultural landscape. “The obituary has opened up, just as Liz Stanley has detailed the expansion of the auto/biography more broadly to ordinary working-class lives, to women, and even to those whose lives are characterized by disorder, waywardness or fragmented experience.”²¹

Further democratization of the obituary form came about in 2001 after the September 11th terrorist attacks. In addition to its standard obituary page, the *New York Times* began a series that came to be called “Portraits of Grief.” These portraits were short, non-critical essays about September 11th victims who were killed or missing. This form was the brainchild of Christine Kay at the *New York Times*, and was mimicked in newspapers across the country.²² These brief pieces were not bylined. They also received some criticism for being too “sunny”.²³ However, they proved enormously popular among readers.

“The Portraits were not obituaries, per se, at least as the *Times* defines them,” said the *New York Times*’ Charles Strum in an interview with Johnson. “They were memorial sketches, if you will. You’ll find very little in the way of skepticism or analysis [in them]. Portraits was a fine idea. It was right for the moment. It captured the mood. It created a pitch-perfect insight into the human tragedy that became the heart of all the posturing, politicking, and national and international wrangling that emerged from the Trade Center wreckage and that continues today. It was a smart thing to do.”²⁴

Group memorials for those killed in national tragedies have become increasingly common. Facebook groups have been created to honor victims of Hurricane Katrina, September 11th, war veterans, the Virginia Tech shootings and the recent Fort Hood massacre. Legacy.com has created a popular online remembrance page for war veterans; when the link to the page on Legacy’s homepage was temporarily removed and replaced with a survey for this project, users immediately sent in complaints. Recently, Legacy.com created an online remembrance page for victims of the Fort Hood massacre.

²¹ Bridget Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 7.

²² Marilyn Johnson, *The Dead Beat* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 64.

²³ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

III. THE OBITUARY LANDSCAPE TODAY

Why People Read Obituaries

According to our research, people who are motivated to read obituaries and death notices can be largely divided into the following four broad categories:

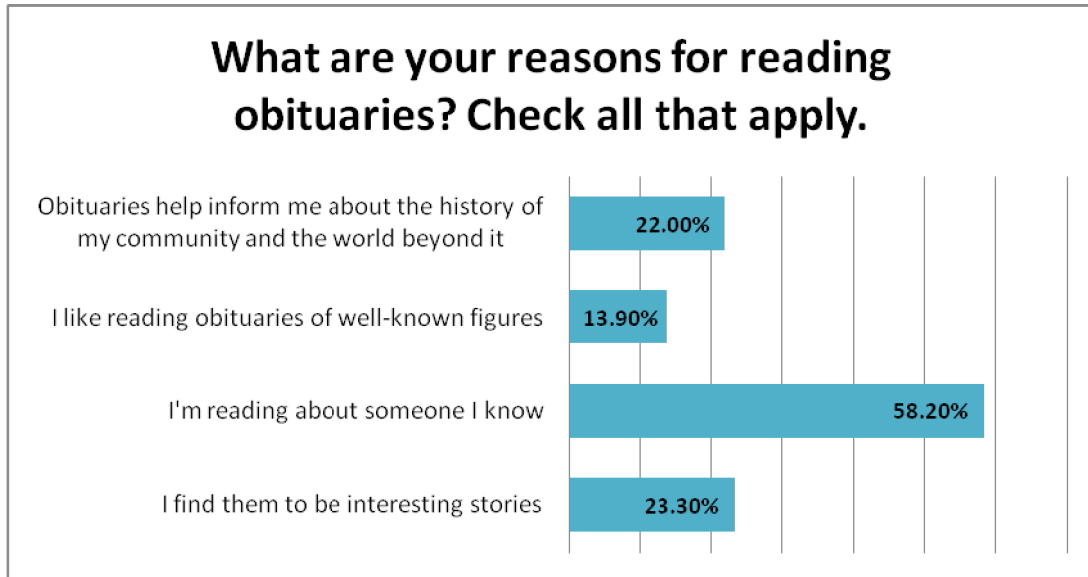
- Family members of the deceased usually want to publish a memorial to the deceased, as a memorial to that person's life.
- Acquaintances of the deceased may wish to learn more about the life of the person they knew, and find details about the funeral, visitation and burial.
- Participants in clubs, organizations, or other affinity groups may wish to learn about the life and death of a given group of individuals – sports stars, for instance, or well-known artists – who relate to their interests.
- Obituary enthusiasts find the form of writing interesting, and usually seek out obituary content regularly. They want interesting stories of people they may never have known, told in a compelling way. They may be interested in obituaries for educational or research purposes as well.

We surveyed Internet users visiting Legacy.com over the period of a month. We received responses from 404 people, with 301 of those individuals completing all questions. Respondents to our survey were:

- Overwhelmingly female (71.8%)
- Older than the average Internet user (55.5% were between age 45 and 65, while only 10.5% were under age 35)
- Very likely to identify themselves as Caucasian (73.4%)
- Very likely to identify themselves as Christian (67.8%)
- Very likely to have at least some college education (74.7% reported some college and above)
- Very likely to be interested in genealogy (66.9% somewhat or very interested)

The most likely reason for reading obituaries, by a large margin, was to find information about someone they knew personally. But many people also said obituaries “help inform me about the

history of my community and the world beyond it” and agreed with the statement, “I find them to be interesting stories.”



Others commented that they preferred to read quotes and anecdotes from those who knew the deceased well. “I would like to hear about them from people who were a meaningful part of their lives,” Paula Sites, an Indiana resident, replied in an interview. Michael Gsovski, a college student who lives in Evanston, Illinois, agreed. “Especially in a small market where you’re on closer terms with people, they serve a purpose. It’s good to know when close acquaintances die,” he said. Dan Loria, a young New Yorker, defined his local community more broadly. “My idea of ‘community’ is my interests. The sports I watch, the arts I am interested in. There’s not really a geographic place or a geographic context.”

People also said they are interested in obituaries beyond their immediate social circle or community. “Well-known people, or some unusual death, or the death of someone very young—those kinds of things would make headlines,” said Danielle Perlin, a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign student. Gsovski commented that he was especially interested in reading compelling biographies. “I want to know about people who succeeded,” Gsovski said. “I enjoy long-form pieces about people who’ve done something with their lives.”

How Newspapers Classify Obituaries

Space and cultural considerations have caused the decline of birth and wedding announcements in many U.S. newspapers, leaving the obituary as the last resort for public acknowledgement of an ordinary life. Even before recent staff and expense reductions at

The State of the American Obituary

newspapers, financial concerns were leading some newspapers to run fewer, shorter obituaries, or shift them from a news item to a classified advertising revenue category.²⁵ In other words, they have been treated more as death notices than editorial obituaries. However, in some papers, there is a “gray area” where a given obit may be located either within the territory of the editorial department or the advertising department, and occasionally in both.²⁶

Staff-written newspaper obituaries are usually longer feature stories that are treated as news. In a staff-written obituary, the newspaper decides “who is important enough to receive attention, what details of the person’s career and personal life are to be reported and emphasized, and how the piece is to be formatted and presented to the public.”²⁷ With a family-written obituary, however, a newspaper leaves these decisions to families. They are treated as classified ads, printed in most cases exactly as received by the newspaper.

In general, the funeral home usually collects information for generic death notices as well as some longer obituaries. Funeral home directors offer grieving families a form that is filled out with pertinent information about the deceased. The funeral home then provides local newspapers with this information and newspaper staff will then write the death notice or obituary itself. The choice of subjects for lengthier editorial articles depends on the size of the community and the prominence of the deceased or the deceased’s family. These reporters may conduct more in-depth interviews with family and friends. Some newspapers allow the families to write the deceased’s obituary themselves. While newspapers clearly have varied practices, the funeral home often remains the mediator between bereaved families and the newspaper. In fact, the cost of the newspaper death notice is generally included in what a family pays a funeral home, which passes the revenue along to the newspaper.

According to a 2001 report from the Readership Institute at Northwestern, newspapers have had three general approaches to their obituary coverage, which our research this year tended to confirm:

- A few newspapers – both large and small – maintain a policy of writing news obituaries for every person with any connection to the circulation area, however tenuous. Some of these newspapers in fact do not offer paid obituaries.
- A few newspapers have transferred the obituary function entirely to the classified department where paid notices are sold, and no news obituaries are written at all.

²⁵ "How to Improve Obituary Coverage", Readership Institute, Media Management Center at Northwestern University, Nov.30, 2001, 1.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Mushira Eid, *World Of Obituaries: Gender across cultures and over time* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 24.

The State of the American Obituary

- The most common practice is to provide both news obituaries and paid obituaries, with the length and detail in the news obituary varying from the barest essential facts (name, age, date of death, name of funeral home handling the services) to expansive chronicles of every life. Some of these papers publish a news obituary for anyone whose family submits the information; others are selective, with the news staff deciding which to publish and which to discard.²⁸

The *Greeneville (Tenn.) Sun* is a paper that writes news obituaries for anyone who dies in the community. John Jones, the executive editor, told us, “We seek out everyone, we run them free, we encourage detailed obits, and we are glad to have pictures. All of that is without charge....If someone major in the community dies, in addition to the obituary we write a news story about the accomplishments of the person who died that affect the public.”

An example of the second strategy is the *Argus Leader*, the daily paper in Sioux Falls, S.D., which switched to paid obituaries in 2001 after providing free obituaries for decades. Today, the news desk never touches obituaries, leaving all of them to advertising department. They received substantial negative feedback when they first switched the policy, so they have more recently adapted it to “a limited free space” offer – they provide the first 3.5 column inches free and then charge \$35 per inch thereafter. “The quantity [of space devoted to a death notice] is really up to the family and how much they are willing to spend. Most people want to do more than 5 inches. They want to put more details on the obituary,” said Nanke Wiekert, of the *Argus Leader*’s ad department.

Chicago Tribune obituary staff writer Trevor Jensen said in an interview he thinks that most larger newspapers, especially national ones, are giving more column inches to news obituaries rather than paid death notices today, while “community papers would pretty much run family-submitted [obituaries] and for some small town newspapers, they might just run anything that [the funeral homes] gives them and they charge for that, or [give them away].”

The Readership Institute, based on its comprehensive study of the factors that drive newspaper readership, found that improving obituary coverage was one of the key strategies for building a strong local audience, with the prominence of the content more an indicator of success than whether the notices were “paid” or “free.” Evidence suggests this continues to be the case online as well. Based on our interviews with both national and local newspapers, obituaries and death notices are among the most heavily trafficked on news Web sites, and the most searched-for content on the site.

Perhaps the strongest indication of local readers’ interest in obituaries is that the print obituary section has so far seems to have survived relatively unscathed by the newspaper

²⁸ Ibid., 1.

industry's precipitous decline. As a younger generation of consumers comes to get its news primarily from the Internet, however, the future disappearance of some print newspapers – and, with them, their obituary sections – has clear implications for how America commemorates its dead. Moreover, the growing importance of online memorials and social networks will have its own effect on the locus of content and activity related to grieving and remembering.

How Newsrooms Handle Obituaries

Newspaper obituaries not only tell stories of the lives of individuals, but also legitimize those stories for a mass audience to reflect the social mores, and to influence people. Obituaries contribute to a society's well-being “by strengthening it collectively and by highlighting the importance of its individual members.”²⁹

Editorial obituaries also offer a window into contemporary American values. As Janice Hume points out in *Obituaries in American Culture*, specific values emphasized in obituaries “changed significantly following major turning points in the nation's political and cultural history, times when the nation was becoming more inclusive. In these eras—Andrew Jackson's presidency, the Civil War, and the years surrounding the granting of women's suffrage—the new inclusion was reflected not only in who was commemorated in newspaper obituaries but also in how they were remembered.”³⁰

Examination of editorial obituaries alone shows that subjects still tend to be politicians, cultural producers, and male. Women and minorities are still vastly underrepresented in editorial obituary pages. “In the eyes of newspaper editors, the obits are in the grip of a long revolution, prompted by democratization and the end of patriarchy,” Fowler writes, “Yet the present research reveals that the obituaries continue to feature more prominently members of a largely masculine elite who themselves come from privileged social origins.”³¹

Marilyn Johnson, in her 2007 book *The Dead Beat*, quotes the obituary researcher Nigel Starck on demographics in the modern obituary: “Three big academic studies have analyzed the modern obits page, and all three found that women account for only 18 to 20 percent of the obits, even in contemporary New York. Minorities continue to be grossly underrepresented. Gay Talese had it right forty years ago: on the obits page, ‘women and Negroes hardly ever seemed to die.’”³²

²⁹ Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

³¹ Bridget Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 7.

³² Marilyn Johnson, *The Dead Beat* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 117.

The State of the American Obituary

The reason for this demographic disparity is that obituary editors choose the subjects for their writing based on personal notions of what constitutes an “interesting” life. Editors and writers memorialize subjects that they themselves find interesting, and their selections reflect deep currents in the culture. Politically influential individuals make for more interesting stories, and consequently become the subject of obituaries more often than, say, a blue-collar worker who toiled in virtual anonymity for his or her entire life. While that worker may indeed make an interesting subject for an obituary, limited space ensures that the blue-collar worker will get a paid death notice, rather than an in-depth treatment by a skilled journalist.

Patricia Sullivan, an obituary writer for the *Washington Post*, said in an interview her criteria for selecting worthy subjects for their *Post Mortem* blog about obituaries is “whatever we think might be interesting to readers.” Since “the news obituaries are becoming more popular throughout the country and world,” the paper has to make its obituaries more readable, she said. “We started writing stories of their lives,” she said.

Jensen of the *Chicago Tribune* agreed. He said he always wants an interesting obituary which can “make people feel like either you knew the person or you’d like to know the person.” Jensen recalled an interesting obituary about a man who lived in the same home for 70 years and ate dinner in the same place every night for 30 years. “He just had this very [same] routine,” Jensen said, “but within that routine, he built a real kind of interesting life for himself. So, I really want something that makes one stand out, makes the person pop as it would if you’re doing a feature when they’re living.”

According to interviews we conducted to discover audience opinions about obituaries, we found that many readers agree with the goals of these journalists, saying that they value obituaries as a window into the lives of interesting people. Paula Sites, a middle-aged Indiana resident, said in an interview, “I’m fascinated by details of people’s lives, but I don’t think of them as being about people dying, [rather] I think about them as glimpses into people’s lives.”

Laura Palenica, a young Chicago resident, is a big fan of the *Economist*’s obituaries. “The reason I read the *Economist* is because there are longer news pieces and they tell a story not only about what happened but also what they think of it,” she said. “Some people think news shouldn’t have an opinion, like a news story just focusing on the facts, like this is what happened without interpreting it. I preferred an interpreted obituary than just a fact. I find that a lot more interesting.”

As an object of study, staff-written newspaper obituaries have many advantages. They can be, as noted by Knutson, “formal pieces, designed to eulogize important community and national figures”.³³ Jensen had the same feeling for different reasons. He said the bottom line was

³³ Mushira Eid, *World Of Obituaries: Gender across cultures and over time* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 23.

The State of the American Obituary

that news obituaries are news. “We don’t want a friend to write about the obituary, there can be bias when you write about someone close to you,” he said.

IV. NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEMORIALIZATION

The Emergence of Online Memorials

Based on studies of grief, life and death are not separate, meaning that “normal grief need not and does not eliminate continuing bonds with the deceased.” These articles suggest that the bonds between the living and the dead continue into the “indefinite future.”³⁴ It is therefore not surprising that “virtual memory gardens” and “memorial nets” began appearing on the Internet about the same time as the first widely available Web browsers, by 1994. And despite the continued prominence of traditional obituary forms today, there are some audience needs that cannot best be addressed in print:

- Family members of the deceased may want to read, or share, much more than just written text. They may want to see more photos; put video clips of the loved one on a Web site; share feelings and experience comfort by reading and exchanging messages with others; or extend personal invitations to attend the funeral.
- Friends and acquaintances may want to express condolences publicly, share memories by posting their own stories and anecdotes about the deceased, send flowers to the family or make a donation to charity in the name of the person who died.
- An obituary reader may want to share stories and anecdotes about the deceased with others who have a common interest. Such a person may also want to read related obituaries of people in the same category – other NFL players, or scientists, or stars of Broadway musicals.

One consequence of this expansion of the memorial form thus is the appearance of collectively written online memorials. In many cases, the writing will be less formalized, be associated with multimedia content, and essentially move the act of grieving from the church, funeral home, or cemetery to the laptop.

A study by Francis, Kellaher and Neophytou found that there are four key visual characteristics to define an English cemetery: the solid enduring gravestone, the words on the stone, the intensity of feelings expressed by those visiting the cemetery, and imagery of nature.³⁵ Each of these elements is present even in the very earliest online memorials. “They promise continuity, are text-based, involve intense feelings, and use imagery of nature.”³⁶ Thus, visits to

³⁴ Miriam Moss, "Grief on the Web", *OMEGA* 49 (2004):77.

³⁵ Francis, D., Kellaher, L., & Neophytou, G. (2001). The cemetery: The evidence of continuing bonds. In J. Hockey, J. Katz, & N. Small (Eds.), *Grief, mourning and death ritual* (pp. 226-236). Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press

³⁶ Miriam Moss, "Grief on the Web", *OMEGA* 49 (2004):78.

both the traditional cemetery and to online memorials are combined as the post-death rituals symbolizing private mourning in a public space today.

Online memorials tend to offer a sense of empathy and support, within a community of similarly bereaved persons. Miriam Moss found that the person who set up an online memorial often considered online friends to be more supportive than the people in their lives.³⁷ We do not know the degree to which Web memorials offer a good substitute for an offline support community. Online memorials are, however, currently a growing way for people with similar losses to commune together, to interact, and to find comfort and understanding.³⁸

Within the context of online memorials, recently a new development has arisen – the social media site. When a loved one passes away, the family or friend might create a memorial page using Facebook or MySpace to memorialize the person and share the memory or sorrow with others. Or they may convert the deceased person’s existing online profile into a memorial.

Social networking sites have seen exponential membership growth over the past several years. On its Web site, Facebook boasts more than 300 million active users, 50 percent of whom log on to Facebook at least once per day. Interestingly, Facebook also reports that its fastest growing demographic is those 35 years and older. Before the Internet, most Americans learned of the death of a friend or acquaintance through a phone call or a newspaper obituary. Now, Americans may also learn this news through e-mails, online memorials, or social networking sites: “As the Web has changed long-established rituals of romance and socializing, personal Web pages on social networking sites that include MySpace and Facebook.com are altering the rituals of mourning.”³⁹

“When a friend dies, it becomes a portal, a way to connect with his or her memory. For my generation, it feels natural. For most of us, communicating through Facebook is as instinctive as talking,” college student Elizabeth Weingarten wrote in an article about grieving on social networking sites, “But Facebook isn’t the only digital footprint of the deceased. Twitter, too, can remind us of a loss.”⁴⁰ Weingarten also mentioned the reason she thought that encourages people to leave a digital message for a friend after death. “It’s a comfort, I think, for friends to return to what hasn’t changed. A Facebook page will remain on the Web forever. It won’t grow old and it won’t disintegrate.”

³⁷ Ibid., 78.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Warren St. John, “Rituals of Grief Go Online as Web Sites Set Up to Celebrate Life Recall Lives Lost”, *New York Times*; Apr.27, 2006, A19.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Weingarten, “The Facebook grave site”, *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 5, 2009, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chi-oped1105facebooknov05,0,3976116.story>

The State of the American Obituary

Still, Facebook has had problems with memorial pages on their site. In October of 2009, a considerable controversy erupted when Facebook began recommending to users that they should “reconnect” with specific people with whom they had not communicated in some time. Unfortunately, they neglected to limit this function to the profiles of living people, and many individuals complained that the automated system was encouraging them to reconnect with people who had died some time prior.⁴¹

The extent to which Facebook alters a profile to reflect a death is cursory as well. At the time of writing, Facebook disables some functions of a deceased member’s profile, including mechanisms for communication, and the profile becomes “private” – that is, only those members that were previously confirmed friends with the decedent can view the page or post new messages. This removes the possibility of utilizing the profile as a public memorial. To get around this limitation, some members have been creating public groups to memorialize deceased loved ones. These groups allow anyone with access to the social media network to post condolences and messages to surviving family and friends.



An example of a public group memorial on Facebook, November 2009.

Many of the personal Web pages on social networking sites have suddenly changed from daily diaries into online shrines where grief is shared in real time. “I still believe that even though she’s not the one on her MySpace page, that’s a way I can reach out to her,” Jenna Finke, 23, a close friend of Deborah Lee Walker, a young woman who died in an automobile accident in

⁴¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2009/oct/27/facebook-user-memorials>

The State of the American Obituary

Georgia, said to the *New York Times*. “Her really close friends go on there every day. It means a lot to know people aren’t forgetting about her.”⁴²

The opportunity to interact with an online memorial makes it an especially cathartic option. “That’s a medium [Internet] that we use that connects people. You can read a little longer piece about the person, and then you can post your own condolences,” Paula Sites told us in an interview. “When death happens, we’re so alone,” said George Bonanno, a psychologist at Columbia University, in an interview with the *Washington Post*. “It would be nice if we had a sense of community, and maybe that’s what the Internet provides.”⁴³

According to a *Washington Post* article, online memorials help Americans build rituals and communities in a culture that otherwise tends to be more individualistic. The author writes, “While many non-Western cultures build rituals around death that allow a person to grieve over time, in highly individualistic societies, losing a loved one can be isolating, some psychologists say, which may be why some turn to the Web to reach outside their traditional social network.”⁴⁴

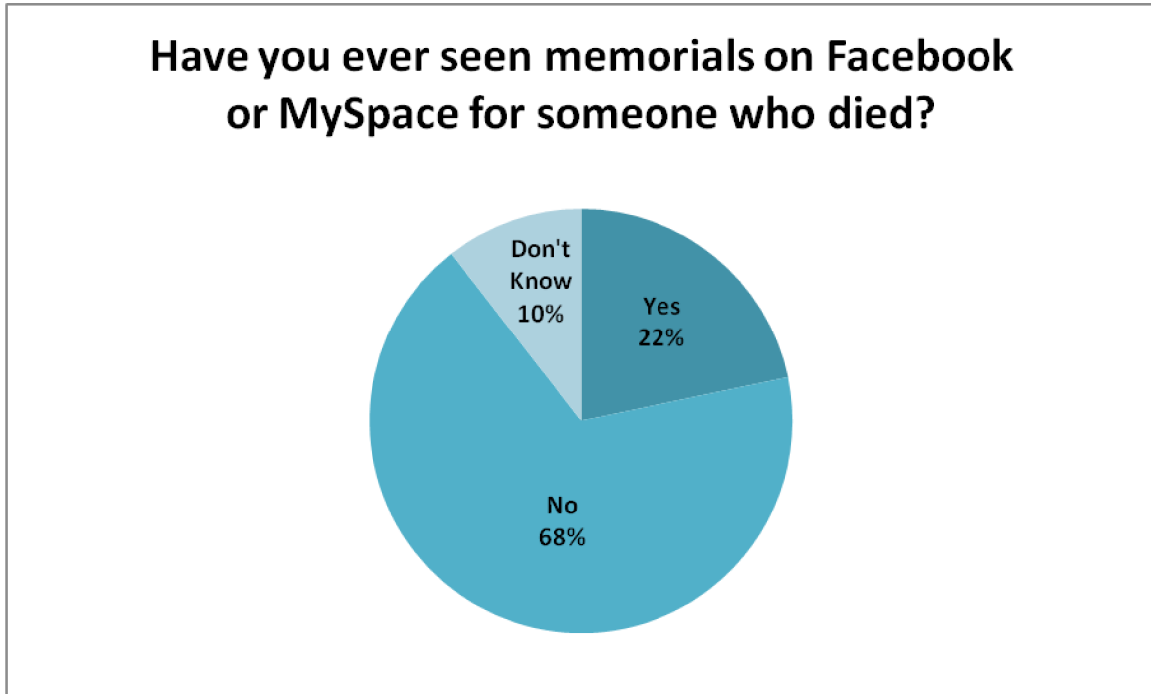
The emergence of online memorials changed the style of grief. It allows almost everyone to memorialize the deceased in an innovative, personal and creative way. Social conventions are only now becoming established.

Online memorials are not yet in a position to threaten the primacy of the traditional obituary. More than 80 percent of respondents to our audience survey reported having visited the obituary section of their local newspaper, while only 22 percent of respondents had seen an online memorial on a social networking site. However, the high usage of Facebook, even among older people, is noteworthy; more than 50 percent of our survey respondents over the age of 45 had visited Facebook within the last month.

⁴² Warren St. John, “Rituals of Grief Go Online as Web Sites Set Up to Celebrate Life Recall Lives Lost”, *New York Times*; Apr.27, 2006, A19.

⁴³ Yuki Noguchi, “Online Memorials Bring Strangers and Friends Together in Community of Grief”, *The Washington Post*, May 29, 2006, A01.

⁴⁴ Ibid.



While this data demonstrates that the vast majority of the current audience for obituaries still looks to traditional outlets, primarily local newspapers (and their Web sites), we fully anticipate that this will change. As younger users now fluent with social media continue to age, and as social networking use continues to expand among older adults, we believe online memorials within the context of social networks will increase in importance and will begin to erode the primacy of print obituaries.

The World Wide Web's Subversion of the Print Media – and Implications for Obituaries

The obituary and death notices sections have perhaps never been more important for local newspapers, struggling to stay afloat as they lose advertising revenue and readership to online competitors. Local newspapers are also threatened on another front: some individuals and funeral homes are beginning to write their own obituaries and/or create their own online memorials, attempting to bypass the papers and their Web sites. These individuals and companies are betting that Americans will see limited value in placing obituaries in print and will focus their efforts exclusively online.

Until the early 1990s, national and local newspapers seemed to be on a stable trajectory. While circulation and penetration were gradually declining for many newspapers, most still enjoyed double-digit profit margins, a feat rarely achieved in other long-established industries. Advertising represented the primary source of revenue for newspapers, and many free weeklies

sustained themselves profitably on advertising income alone. While the rise of the Internet has contributed to the precipitous decline of the print media in myriad ways, it is well documented that the most devastating hit has been in the advertising arena, particularly the high-margin classified listings that helped to underwrite much of the newspaper's operations.

Until recently, newspapers were the primary place to post classified ads for real estate, cars, jobs, private-party merchandise and services, and other purposes, and there was no more efficient way of reaching a mass audience efficiently. Now, a majority of consumers shop online for homes, cars, and jobs, and even those who do not execute their transactions online research their purchases there, eroding another print franchise. Finally, in the online world, advertisers can tailor their ads to a specific audience, receive quantifiable measurements of their ad's effectiveness and reach that targeted audience at a generally lower cost. It becomes a rational act to move marketing dollars to a lower-cost, more efficient medium.

Adding to newspapers' revenue woes is the fact that consumers can get online news from a vast variety of sources, they can get it for free, and they can get it immediately—delivered in real time to their e-mail account or iPhone. Like marketers, consumers believe they are making a rational choice, and newspaper circulation and subscription rates are plummeting. The impact of this behavioral shift can be seen in newspapers across the United States. In 2008, the Internet displaced newspapers as the second-most relied upon news source for American consumers (television remains the number one source).⁴⁵ Nearly 1 in 5 journalists have lost his or her job since 2001, and in the first five months of 2009 alone, more than 9,000 newspaper jobs were lost.⁴⁶ Even more precariously, at least 100 American newspapers have shut down entirely.⁴⁷ Other newspapers are struggling to stay afloat by reducing page counts, creating flashy new print designs, charging for online content, or bolstering their interactive presence on the Web.

Approximately 750 American daily newspapers, including 127 of the 150 largest, currently outsource the monitoring and maintenance of their online obituary section to Legacy.com, which provides services such as comment screening on obituaries and their associated guestbooks. Revenue flows in both directions between Legacy.com and the newspapers; still, the broad acceptance of this outsourcing solution perhaps is an indication of the value newspapers place on ensuring that obituary readers are well-served, even as these papers cut costs elsewhere.

Legacy.com has begun to compete in the online memorial arena as well. It allows readers to purchase "online memorials" with photos and videos of their loved ones and participate in

⁴⁵ "Internet Overtakes Newspapers as News Outlet," Pew Research Center, December 23, 2008.

⁴⁶ "State of the News Media 2009," Pew Research Center, March 16, 2009.

⁴⁷ Erica Smith, "2009 Total," *Paper Cuts*, <http://graphicdesignr.net/papercuts/>

chat rooms about the grieving process. But it is not alone in recognizing this market. Another online obituary site, Tributes.com, is seeking to overtake Legacy.com, though, according to comScore Media Metrix, it currently averages only 176,000 unique visitors per month to Legacy's nearly 7 million. The site was founded by Jeff Taylor, the creator of the early job search engine The Monster Board. Taylor is someone quite familiar to newspaper publishers, who saw Monster.com take away a large share of their market for help-wanted advertising.

A concern both for the newspaper industry, and for Legacy.com as its aggregator, is that as newspapers cut costs – for instance, eliminating print publication on certain days of the week – they may be making it easier for competitors to take their historic position as the home for obituaries. For example, a CBS television affiliate in Saginaw, Mich., is generating revenue by running on-air and online obituary ads after three of the region's four daily newspapers reduced publication to three days a week. The station will run the deceased's name and photo on-air and publish a full-length obituary on ObitMichigan.com for \$100. Full-screen graphics listing names of people who have died are broadcast during the local station's morning and noon shows Monday through Friday, as well as on weekend morning shows. Viewers are pushed to the Web site for more information about the deceased as well as funeral-services information. The venture could make obits "one of our top billers within two years," said Jeff Guilbert, general sales manager of WNEM, in an interview with *Advertising Age*.⁴⁸

Douglas J. Luczak, owner of Gephardt Funeral Home in Bay City, Michigan, said the new obituaries are also prompting a change in the way people go about their daily routine. "The biggest issue that we have is the elderly people that don't have the ability to pay for Internet access or don't have a computer," and who no longer can count on seeing an obituary in the newspaper soon enough to act on it. "Now they see it flash on TV and those that don't have a computer can call the funeral home and ask for information," he said.

⁴⁸ Brian Steinberg, "Local TV garners revenue from obits; With papers printing less often, CBS affiliate taps a new revenue stream", *Advertising Age*, Oct.19,2009, Pg.6.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What the Future Holds

As digital content and services evolve and displace traditional media, we can expect continued transformation of the way our society takes note of deaths and commemorates the lives of people who are no longer with us. Based on our research, we have some predictions:

- The trend toward democratization of obituaries will continue, driven by the rise of digital media and social media, which enable new forms of memorial content open to any member of a community.
- This democratization will open obituary sections to more women and minorities.
- Tragedies that cost many lives will continue to inspire online commemorations, further contributing to the democratization of obituaries.
- As social media continues to expand, the obituary-writing and memorializing process will become even more “loved-one-driven,” because the Internet makes it easy to share information, publish multimedia and efficiently access quotes and remembrances from friends, family and colleagues.
- As the Baby Boom generation ages, obituaries of people who have influenced their world are likely to be of great interest. So the audience for well-crafted obituaries of prominent people from this generation is likely to be large and growing.
- The economic challenges facing newspapers will continue to exert pressure to reduce space and journalists’ time devoted to news obituaries. This is especially true at newspapers in major markets. Papers that serve smaller markets and more closely knit communities will maintain a stronger commitment to devoting substantial editorial space for obituaries, but even they will grapple with the implications of reduced publication schedules.
- As is the case today, most published death notices and obituaries will continue to be written by the family of the deceased, or by funeral directors acting at the family’s behest. With economic pressures expected to continue, editorial obituaries will slowly lose ground to paid death notices and online memorials.
- The growth of digital media means that many consumers will come to rely for news on online sources and on social networks to determine what information is relevant to them.

The State of the American Obituary

All news providers, including obituary writers, will need to integrate themselves into these social networks to remain relevant.

- With simple, factual information available online from a variety of sources, news obituaries will need to provide something different. This may lead toward more interpretive obituaries – like the style used in the *Economist* – for people who have lived in the public eye.
- As print newspapers shrink, funeral homes will gain additional leverage to publish obituaries on their own Web sites instead of the papers' print and online editions.

Recommendations for Media Stakeholders

Local newspapers and partners such as Legacy.com must adapt to changes in the media landscape and the ways in which people memorialize the deceased. Simply publishing death notices and a few news obituaries each day will not be enough. Here are our recommendations for these stakeholders:

- **Maintain resources devoted to obituary coverage.** Economic pressures will tempt publishers to reduce space and/or staff devoted to obituaries, but this is risky given the interest in obituaries and the size of the Baby Boom generation now in the life stage when interest in obituaries is most likely to be highest. Its essentially local nature makes obituary content among that most likely to retain importance with a local publisher's audience.
- **Connect online obituaries to social networking resources.** A growing number of people learn news through their social networks, so it is important to make it easy for users to share stories with friends and family through Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and whatever sites come next.
- **Allow obituary readers to post comments, pictures and videos of the deceased.** If online obituary sections do not respond to users' growing interest in interactivity, the users will easily find interactive memorialization opportunities elsewhere.
- **Offer computerized "obituary alert" services:** Newspapers or online databases like Legacy.com could earn additional income by offering "obituary alerts" to their readers. For example, a college alumni office might ask to be alerted whenever one of its graduates passes away. Legacy.com already offers this kind of service as a paid subscription, but it covers only 7 out of 10 daily U.S. deaths – a large percentage, but one that needs supplementation.

- **Make obituaries easily accessible to people with niche interests.** By tagging and sorting obituaries into different subject groups, newspapers could better target those who might be interested in reading obituaries about particular types of people. For example, people who have served in the U.S. Army might be interested in reading obituaries of fellow veterans.
- **Create a “one stop shop” for mourners:** Make it easy for obituary readers to find other information they may be seeking, such as funeral dates and times, counseling services, places to buy flowers and books on grieving, etc.
- **Capitalize on potential uses of obituary databases.** In the past, obituaries often disappeared into forgotten government file folders after publication. Now obituaries are stored in computerized databases, some of which are publicly accessible, such as the obituary database on Legacy.com. At present, much of this data remains untagged and unsorted, limiting its potential uses. Sorting this data by subjects such as job, home address, number of children, nationality and cause of death and would open obituaries and death notices to a broad range of researchers. For example, a medical researcher might be interested in exploring the frequency of cancer deaths in a certain geographic area. An army veteran might be interested in reading the life stories of fellow veterans from his unit. Or a genealogist might be interested in accessing the obituaries of his distant relatives.

Conclusion

The recent explosion in social networking, especially among those over the age of 45, the growth in “everywhere” access to the Internet and the economic woes of the newspaper industry have placed the business of publishing obituaries and death notices on the brink of rapid, discontinuous change.

Today, because the printed obituary still is seen as the most effective way to reach most people interested in a given death, the majority of the economics related to notifications is still associated with print. But as the printed audience shifts online, it is likely that, just as was the case with homes, jobs, and cars, the printed notice may ultimately be viewed as secondary by important parts of the audience.

If so, a different economic model will be needed to support the continued creation of editorial obituaries, one that is likely to depend on the development of new products and services that meet the needs of the bereaved (and the funeral director) in ways that they cannot easily or conveniently replicate. If these new ideas are able to capture what is important to grieving

The State of the American Obituary

Americans in the 21st century, the publishers or entrepreneurs who create them will have succeeded in perpetuating a historically and societally important group of functions: remembering, learning from, and honoring those who have gone before us.

VI. ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ashley Bates is earning a master's degree in economic reporting and has freelanced for the *Chicago Journal*, the Medill News Service and *Ha'aretz*, an Israeli newspaper. She graduated from Amherst College in 2004 with a degree in political science and worked for four years with non-profits in Jordan, Israel and Palestine. More information about Ashley is available on her Web site: www.ashleyebates.com.

After graduating from the University of Illinois in 2005, **Jake Bressler** worked for more than two years as an SEO and search engine marketing analyst for a Chicago advertising agency and a large client. His graduate studies at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism have focused on new media, and he hopes to work for a news Web site in the future.

Alina Dain attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign before enrolling at Medill. During her time at Medill, she reported on health and science for the Medill News Service. Besides English, Alina speaks Russian, Hebrew, French and German and hopes to use her language and multimedia skills to report on European and Middle-Eastern affairs. Upon completion of her journalism Master's degree in December, Alina is embarking on a public affairs reporting internship at *Deutsche Welle English* in Bonn, Germany. For more information, visit www.alinadain.com.

Chris Deaton is a freelance journalist from Chicago, IL, and contributing writer to SLAMonline, the Web home of the nation's largest basketball magazine.

Tiffany Glick, a native of Miami, FL, graduated from Southern Methodist University in 2008 with a BA in journalism. She has written for the *Dallas Morning News*, *D Home Magazine*, the *Miami SunPost* and the Medill News Service. Upon graduation from Medill, Tiffany will be working for Southern Progress Corporation in Birmingham, AL.

After graduating from DePaul University, **Kate Goshorn** worked for nearly a decade in the fields of education and social work before returning to school, and is interested in working with agencies and not-for-profits to advance community empowerment.

Ian Monroe is a journalist, programmer, and technology geek. He worked for seven years as web editor and IT manager for *Orlando Weekly* before coming to study at Medill. He can be found online at www.ianmonroe.com.

Ming Zhuang is a journalism professional from China, with great passion in media industry, where she has been trained for more than ten years. She is experienced in all types of media, including print, television and Web, as both a researcher and producer. Now she's directing her efforts to contribute to business and political reporting from a global perspective.

Rich Gordon, associate professor and director of digital innovation at Medill, was the first online director for *The Miami Herald*, overseeing the launch of herald.com, elnuevoherald.com and miami.com. He worked as a reporter and editor for the Herald, the Palm Beach Post and The Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch.

Owen Youngman, Knight Professor of Digital Media Strategy, spent 37 years at the *Chicago Tribune*, where he developed and launched products such as chicagotribune.com, metromix.com and *RedEye*. His longstanding interest in obituaries led him to champion Tribune Co.'s early investment in Legacy.com, which he currently serves as an independent board member.