

Memorializing Newtown: Digital Rhetoric and Communication Activism in the “My Sandy Hook Family” Online Memorial

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On the morning of December 14, 2012 armed shooter Adam Lanza entered Sandy Hook Elementary School (SHES) in Newtown, C.T. and murdered 26 people, 20 of them first grade children, before taking his own life (Sendesky, 2013). What followed was an unprecedented media swarm and a rare and debilitating sweep of national grief. The community grief was intensified by the controversy over whether to release of the 9-1-1 call recordings, and the anniversary of the shooting, to which Newtown officials claimed the media could only help by “staying away” (Wolf, 2013).

On December 10, 2013 MSNBC anchor Rachel Maddow hosted an interview with the parents of Benjamin Wheeler, one of the children killed that day. One of the purposes was to explain, in their own words, their motivation for taking part in the “My Sandy Hook Family” (MSHF) online memorial that went live the week of the anniversary. This website, created and monitored by the families of those killed at SHES, serves as a central controlled space to channel national grief and individual desires for action. Instead of helping the families in a way that would prove unproductive and painful, MSHF guides the user via a short letter, biography, eulogy, or tribute written by the victims’ families, with links to foundations, charities, and other online memorials in an effort to channel the hurt into sanctioned action. Action that can serve as a template for families and a grieving community, state, nation, and world, after future tragedies. The heart below is a screen shot from the memorials’ homepage. To see more visit www.MySandyHookFamily.org.

ABSTRACT

This textual analysis of the “My Sandy Hook Family” (MSHF) online memorial aims to understand how online memorials can not only serve as a place for those directly affected by a national tragedy to grieve, but also as a prescriptive model for the public and media to channel that grief into positive action. Analyzed through the rhetorical lens of public memory, I argue that the MSHF web memorial is a fruitful case study to not only examine types of communication activism and digital rhetoric, but to perhaps act as a guide for future tragedies to lessen the pain of negotiating such difficult rhetorical, personal, and public spaces.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this case study was to better understand the communication of the MSHF web memorial and to further the growing body of literature on web memorialization, communication activism, and digital rhetoric.

METHODOLOGY

An interpretive thematic analysis was conducted of the memorial and surrounding contextual communication with sensitizing concepts of public and private and voice derived from the literature on public memorialization and web memorials .

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

This research adds to the rapidly growing body of research on digital rhetoric, web memorials, and communication activism, with a particular focus on the potential this site serves as a template for future tragedies and communication studies theories.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Public Memory Studies: This delineation of rhetorical critique concerns topics of public commemoration as spaces where public and private, voice, authority, agency and grief coincide as a way to construct national and personal identity, and negotiate past and present struggles. This study is informed largely by the work of seminal public memory scholars like Carole Blair and also the work of authors like Hess (2007), who are paying greater attention to web memorials as places worthy of scholarly attention.

Digital Rhetoric: Digital rhetoric focuses on “how traditional rhetorical strategies of persuasion function and how they are being reconfigured in digital spaces” (Zappen, 2005), that facilitate more complex notions of collaboration, space, identity, and potential for activism in this hyper mediated age (Losh, 2009).

Communication Activism: A concept originally constructed by Frey et al. (1996) and furthered by Frey & Carragee (2007), communication activism refers not only to the critical and rhetorical critique of communication acts that promote and create social change, but focuses also on the role of the researcher and our capabilities as scholars to blend theory and praxis into tangible progress for marginalized individuals and social groups.



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