“Control your emotions, Potter:” An Analysis of Grief Policing on Facebook in Response to Celebrity Death

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[1]As social media platforms become a larger part of sharing life, they have by necessity become a part of sharing death. In life, pop culture fans can have parasocial (one-sided, mediated) relationships with celebrities. Yet when fans of departed celebrities express their grief in public comment threads, conversations often result in disagreements about how to grieve. These disagreements consistently appear in response to the deaths of public figures, and have been broadly labeled “grief policing.” We performed a thematic analysis of public Facebook comments responding to the deaths of Alan Rickman, David Bowie, and Prince. Our findings describe prominent grief policing practices and explain how commenters may be importing norms from other contexts when shared spaces consist of transient interactions that make norm formation difficult. Our findings contribute to a broader understanding of how conflicting norms affect discourse in transient online spaces. Approaching online incivility through a lens of conflicting social norm enforcement may open doors for improvements in public discourse online.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing → social media**; *Information systems*; Social networking sites

KEYWORDS

Death; social norms; celebrity death; grief policing; Facebook; computer-mediated communication; social media

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1 INTRODUCTION

The first few months of 2016 were difficult for pop culture fans. In January, actor Alan Rickman and musician David Bowie passed away within days of one another. In April, musician Prince passed away as well. Fans of these iconic men gathered in remembrance all over the western world—raising wands in Orlando, FL,

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singing on the high street of Brixton, UK, and piling flowers at the gates of Paisley Park near Minneapolis, MN. They also gathered online.

Expressions of grief following a death are increasingly observable on social media platforms like Facebook. The bereaved create memorial pages, share photos of the deceased, plan memorial events, or even post messages to the deceased themselves [5,6]. In response to these activities, Facebook is working to increase the platform's capabilities to create spaces for community grief [8]. These efforts build on scholarship from CSCW and other communities that have documented practices and design needs with regard to postmortem data, particularly on social media profiles [5,43,48]. The work to date, however, has predominantly focused on cases of personal loss, in which the bereaved are personally connected to the deceased person. As Christensen and Gotved note, if research in this area continues to focus on intimate/personal loss, "we are in danger of reproducing patterns of disenfranchising certain forms of grief" [55]. Expanding this community's scholarship to include public grief of public figures will not only provide a more comprehensive understanding of online grief, but will allow us to examine larger issues of online incivility in a new context.

When a celebrity passes away, their fans experience the loss of what psychologists call a *parasocial* relationship: a one-sided, mediated relationship that people may experience with similar emotional strength to personal relationships [4,30,54]. In cases of parasocial grief, online communities can provide fans an ideal outlet for collective grief [56]. As one journalist notes, "The usual LOLcats and media links are pushed to the side like trestle tables to make way for an enormous virtual wake" [29].

However, the conditions of this "virtual wake" are not always clear. The complexities of parasocial grief, and whether it is grief at all, are consistently acknowledged and debated in the popular press following celebrity deaths [20,23,29,50]. These debates reflect the broader questions of when, where, and how one should express their grief following the death of a celebrity:

> *When it's for someone you know – we have some broad guidelines: the closest to the bereaved must take precedence […] When it's for a cultural icon who knew none of us, these don't exist and there's unease about response.* [20]

"Unease" from a lack of guidelines for parasocial grief is visible when fans and critics alike gather in the comments sections of public Facebook news pages. Despite the relatively limited amount of conflict and broad deference seen on post-mortem profiles, equivalent conversations on news pages are characterized by conflict [2,11,14–16]. Traditional memorial phrases, favorite lyrics, and tribute art become interspersed with attempts to sanction certain commenters who are seen to be out of line.

In this paper, we will examine the sanctions that the popular press has labeled "grief policing" following various celebrity deaths and other major tragedies over the past several years. The most famous use of the term was in a New Yorker piece about the families of 9/11 victims and their negotiations with the planners of the Ground Zero memorial site [34]. In an academic context, Walter describes "grief police" as "a term of abuse for those who might presume to tell others how, or for whom, to grieve." [57]. One writer specifies this behavior in online comments: "The grief police maintain strict yet unspecified standards of exactly who should be sad, and when, and how much. Step outside the boundaries, and they'll be there to scare you back to the safe zone." [51]. Our thematic analysis of public Facebook comments describes the details of these "unspecified standards" in terms of injunctive social norms [37], and offers a different definition of grief policing as *norm enforcement practices around grief.*

As grief policing occurs consistently in conversations on Facebook about celebrity deaths, what could initially appear to be a chaotic space without directions or rules becomes a fairly predictable arena of debate about the social norms of public grief. Online platforms enable new, more direct connections between celebrities and their fans [40]. Online platforms have also become a primary source of news for U.S. adults [25], so the space we examine is a primary "public square" where people receive and respond to news of a celebrity's death. Grief policing illuminates conflicting norms around parasocial grief in online public spaces. In a broader sense, our study of grief policing is relevant to work examining incivility online. The specifics of grief policing give shape to a problem space that is, at a deeper level, defined by differing definitions of grief and conflicting

online norms. Thinking about online grief at the level of the public and parasocial may open doors for researchers and designers to more holistically accommodate communities and individuals experiencing grief. Similarly, understanding online incivility as conflicting social norm enforcement may open doors for improvements in public discourse online.

2 BACKGROUND

Our study draws from three sets of literature. First, we draw from combined work in psychology and mass communications to understand the relationships that average people have with public figures: what the experience of that relationship can be, and how it shapes the experience and expression of grief. Second, we look to existing literature regarding online grief as both a framework for this study, and to understand where current research of online grief might be lacking. Finally, we look to literature regarding the regulation of online spaces to consider grief policing in the context of social norm enforcement.

2.1 Parasocial Relationships

To understand responses celebrity deaths, it is important to understand celebrity/fan relationships generally. Social scientists describe these relationships as "parasocial" [26,28]. Horton and Wohl originally conceptualized parasocial relationships in 1956 [28]. Over the past 60 years, a robust collection of research has expanded Horton and Wohl's original concept to television, film, and internet media. More recent research indicates that the experience of a parasocial relationship is comparable to that of a personal social relationship [30] in that both are characterized by a sense of belonging, social enjoyment, and emotional investment [19]. Indeed, social media has allowed fans to communicate directly with the stars they admire, and even created its own class of stars, further complicating the notion of "celebrity," and extending parasocial relationships to "networked webs of actual interaction, such as instant messenger, @replies, comments..." [40].

When we extend the literature on parasocial relationships to online spaces, we see that the death of a celebrity may cause fans to experience legitimate grief. Several past studies have examined mass responses to highly-publicized deaths, including Elvis Presley and John Lennon [45], Princess Diana [4], and Michael Jackson [56]. Across these studies, technology provides channels that strengthen fans' bonds with celebrities – bonds that can be quite personal. Walter, for example, examining online responses following the death of British TV star Jade Goody in 2009, observed that Goody's fans succeeded in the "remarkable" task of "linking cultural and personal memory" [58].

Yet, parasocial grief can be confusing to outsiders. Each of these studies acknowledges that parasocial grief is "absurd" to non-fans, highlighting the major difference between personal and parasocial grief: "There are no social conventions or social support for parasocial grieving, which in fact is often met by others with outright ridicule" [26]. DeGroot & Leith go so far as to call that ridicule "disenfranchising" to the parasocially bereaved [14]. In light of these studies, it is clear that a comprehensive understanding of contemporary grief must acknowledge parasocial grief alongside personal grief. As parasocial relationships (and therefore parasocial grief) are mediated, we must review what we know of interactions in the most widely-used medium of our day: the social media platform.

2.2 Death, Grief, and Memorialization Online

The intersection of death and technology has been a staple of CSCW, HCI, and new media scholarship over the last decade. A central contribution of this work includes research on experiences on social media. Studies have ranged from changing grief practices [59] to the design of memorialized profiles [8,46,48]. Social media may be changing the very experience of death in Western cultures [7,59], as "pictures of the dead, conversations with the dead, and mourners' feelings can and do become part of the everyday online world" [59]. While much of this work has focused on personal loss [55], here we survey literature as it relates to the memorialization of celebrities.

The death of a celebrity is followed by an explosion of social media activity. Similar to postmortem profiles and personal loss [6], scholars have argued that these practices shape and reshape our collective

memory of the celebrity's life [32,49]. Likewise, online spaces for parasocial grief may be beneficial [56], "help in the process of sense-making" [33], and provide legitimacy to parasocial grief [24]. In a study following the death of Michael Jackson, Sanderson and Cheong found that "social media served as grieving spaces for people to accept Jackson's death rather than denying it or expressing anger over his passing" [56].

In contrast to personal losses where a profile or memorial page often serves are the primary space for grief, parasocial grief may be less centralized, increasing the variety of participants and contexts in which grief is expressed. The diversity of contexts raises questions about who speaks, to whom one is speaking, and who's perspectives are privileged. On profiles following a personal loss, participants look to others for guidance on how to act. Brubaker and his colleagues have described a norm of directly addressing the deceased on MySpace [6], although more recent work suggests that interactions between members of the deceased's social network are increasingly common [60]. Marwick & Ellison, meanwhile, discuss a tendency to prioritize the needs of family members and close friends on Facebook memorial groups [41]. On postmortem profiles, interactions are civil. Participants are largely deferential to those closest to the deceased [41], allowing them to demonstrate appropriate behavior [7]. Given this, to what do we attribute the conflicts surrounding celebrity deaths?

Inconsistent or absent norms for parasocial grief may be the cause of the conflicts and disagreements we observe in our data. Klastrup attributes the lack of shared norms in these online spaces to the compartmentalization of death—its exclusion from other aspects of everyday life—explaining that people "no longer share a religious vocabulary (or belief) with which to talk about and deal with death" [33]. This thesis, referred to as "sequestration" [59], can result in uncertainty for the bereaved.

Disagreements and conflicts, however, can have positive outcomes. While only tangentially discussed in Sanderson & Cheong's study, the did find that "critical" and "defensive" conversations "*facilitated reactions from other participants who rose to defend Jackson against his detractors*" [56]. They continue by arguing that, "*in valiantly defending Jackson and confronting his critics, they hastened their acceptance of Jackson's death, and actively proclaimed his legacy and global impact* [56]. Even if disagreements can be beneficial, it is not entirely clear what behavior prompts these types of disagreements – the focus of our study here.

Online practices shape how we remember cultural icons [32,49], making the norms that govern these practices all the more consequential. What remains unclear is how the norms around death and bereavement are negotiated and established in online spaces when the bereaved are experiencing parasocial grief rather than personal grief.

2.3 Regulation of Online Spaces

As spaces for online interaction expand, regulation of these spaces is increasingly important. As any YouTube viewer can attest, comments sections can become notoriously toxic spaces, which can be affected by regulation [17,36]. Formal regulation commonly takes the form of website privacy policies, codes of conduct, or "community guidelines." These policies create legal protections for the website and allow moderators and users to remove or report abusive content. However, website policies may be inconsistent and difficult to enforce [52], or, in the case of Terms of Service, rarely read [22]. In addition to formal policies such as law and technical architecture or market pressures, Lessig puts forth social norms as an important source of regulation [38]. These are "collectively determined" informal rules, policed by informal sanctions that community members impose on one another [38]. Norms are particularly important in circumstances in which formal rules are unclear or conflict [21]; when confusion results, community-created social norms are often more important for regulating behavior than official rules [18].

Grief policing as examined here is one example of norm enforcement that commonly appears in online spaces where other sources of rules (such as law) may be irrelevant, confusing, or nonexistent. Speech that is not explicitly prohibited by the site itself may be unwanted by subsets of users, who turn to specific requests and responses to regulate comments and set expectations for conversations. In this way, *implicit* norms can become evident from the ways that community members informally define and police acceptable behavior, and eventually may become *explicit* when formalized (e.g., in community guidelines) [10].

For example, in their study of norms on Facebook, McLaughlin & Vitak found that overly emotional posts were not considered appropriate. They describe interactions with these posts in terms of "expectancy

violations," which prompt sanctioning that varies depending on user relationships [44]. Community sanctioning may take the form of corrective suggestions or public shaming [1], while positive reinforcement can be either overt praise, or simple Likes or upvotes. Therefore, whether users are told "do this, not that," "you were bad," or "you were good," all of these serve to communicate what the norms of the community might be. However, this communication can be challenging; implicit norms are often difficult for newcomers to a community to learn [35].

One reason that communication (and therefore, effective enforcement) of norms is challenging is that actual *collective* norms that emerge from community interaction may be different than *perceive*d norms that differ from individual to individual [37]. Similarly, we may perceive *injunctive* norms (how one should behave in a community) differently than *descriptive* norms (how community members actually behave)—and these can be antagonistic, providing conflicting information [37]. In a space where many may be newcomers (such as the comment section of a single news article), interaction generally occurs without much prior observation and thus no sense for descriptive norms. Therefore, in making decisions about how to behave, people may come with pre-existing notions of injunctive norms—possibly imported from another context. For example, in online spaces, people often import behavioral norms from the outside world [39,44]. In the case of Facebook, ideas for how one should behave in a *public* space may come from how one behaves in the more cohesive community of their private Facebook posts among friends.

Social norms in online spaces such as Facebook are often heavily tied to representations of self, with different social identities governed by different norms [47]. Therefore, in spaces where participants may not have a clear social identity, it may be more difficult for norms to crystallize. In fact, the effectiveness of norm communication is directly tied to social tie strength; strangers (such as the commenters on a single public Facebook post) are least likely to communicate norms in a way that results in changed behavior [37]. Though prior work has shown the existence of cohesive norms on Facebook among friends [44], these norms may or may not translate to contexts with different types (or lack) of social ties. In this study, we consider the process of norm enforcement and communication in the specific context of grief policing in these more transient online spaces.

3 METHODS & ANALYSIS

To explore the ways that commenters regulate each other following celebrity deaths in online comment spaces, we conducted a qualitative, thematic analysis of comments posted on Facebook in response to news articles announcing the death of celebrities. Our analysis focused on the three most notable celebrity deaths during the first half of 2016: Alan Rickman, David Bowie, and Prince. Each of these celebrities had significant fan bases, and their deaths prompted gatherings (online and off) that resulted in visible expressions of public grief.

We started our study with an exploratory phase in which we examined public Facebook comments, guided by an initial research question: "What are the public responses to a celebrity's death on Facebook?" Following each death, we reviewed news articles and responses related to the death that were posted to Facebook. Relevant posts were identified via Facebook searches for the celebrity's name and via Facebook's trending topics. During this phase, we read all available comments responding to the news post, and encountered a recurring pattern of arguments and disagreements. In particular, we were struck by the consistent presence of sharp disagreements over what types of comments and expressions of grief were appropriate––grief policing was ubiquitous.

After an exploratory phase, we identified the first Facebook posts published by CNN (see Figure 1) and The New York Times announcing the death of these celebrities. We selected the earliest Facebook posts announcing the death so as to focus on immediate and early responses. We then read all comments added within the first 24 hours after the news article was posted, in excess of 1,000 comments per post. During this process, we found that conflicts were typically concentrated in the top responses to an article. For this reason, we created a dataset comprised of the top 100 comments from each post (600 comments total) for our focused analysis on grief policing, excluding comments that were clearly spam or solely linked to other content.

We performed a thematic analysis of our data [3], adopting an inductive and grounded approach to the analysis [13]. We started with a close reading and open coding of the comments in our dataset. Across three rounds of coding, we made note of comments that were involved in disagreements, and of how comments referenced each other. Two authors then aggregated codes into preliminary categories such as "expression of sadness" and "reference to deceased's work." We organized the preliminary categories into broader themes, such as "defending a grief space," or "rejects legitimacy of parasocial grief." We then authored data memos to further elaborate how different types of comments attempt to correct, critique, or regulate others. Through a series of discussions, all authors collaboratively refined themes, iteratively comparing our themes to the data they describe, until we arrived at the themes presented below.

We present the comments as originally posted, with no changes for grammar, spelling, or clarity. As the use of verbatim quotes does raise an ethical issue of the possible re-identification of commenters, we took great care in considering what expectation of privacy commenters might have. In contrast to content in personal social media spaces, these comments appear in an explicitly public space, addressed to an unknown audience of strangers. In considering levels of disguise as proposed by Bruckman [9], we determined that the subject matter and context of the content pointed to allowing verbatim quotes, in line with typical practices with thematic analysis of news comments [12]. The decision to use verbatim quotes was based only on the particularities of this context. Future studies that use similar methods must consider issues of privacy and re-identifiability in context when deciding how to present data examples.

Fig. 1. Screenshot of CNN International's announcement on Facebook of Rickman's death. Comments and replies appear as shown, sorted by most popular.

4 FINDINGS

Grief policing occurred throughout the comment threads we analyzed, even in response to seemingly generic or innocuous condolences. While policing comments could be surprising, their presence provided a way to identify and understand the implicit norms that conversation participants used to regulate this space. In describing the social work that is being done in these comments, we expand Walter's description of grief policing as "a term of abuse," acknowledging that the so-called "grief police" neither deserve abuse, nor are necessarily abusing others. We therefore land on a different definition of grief policing as *norm enforcement practices around grief*. In the context of public Facebook news pages, we find that grief policing is indicative of conflicting norms about grief that may be imported from other contexts.

In our data, we saw three major themes. The first includes corrective or shaming comments that accused a commenter of not grieving in a space that is specifically for grief. Subcategories in this theme distinguish between commenters attempting to redirect attention to themselves, and redirecting attention to a larger cause or issue. The second theme describes policing comments that respond to inappropriate expressions of grief. The third theme includes comments that positively reinforce comments as ideal responses. For each theme, we start by describing the type of content that grief police are regulating, providing illustrative examples of the policing interactions.

4.1 Absence of Grief

When the death of a celebrity becomes public knowledge, comment threads on news stories become a space for grief. The policing comments we observed enforced common western cultural norms, including the proverbial wisdom that "one must never speak ill of the dead." Comments were policed if they referenced the deceased person in any negative way, including insults and references to alleged disreputable behavior of the deceased. The general claim of these types of policing comments was, "This is a space for grief, and your speech is not an expression of grief."

For example, as details about David Bowie's past emerged within the comment thread, commenters debated the appropriateness of discussing his alleged illegal sexual relationships. One such comment argued that Bowie's death was a moment for us to reflect on the seriousness of statutory rape and take action to address this issue. This comment, however, received multiple grief-policing comments objecting to the topic:

> *As a huge fan of Bowie it personally upsets me that people have chose the moment of his death to bring up his past. However bad his past actions may be, using a persons death as a platform to voice your opinions on that individual isn't the right thing to do. (Comment #74, Bowie)*

The Bowie fan who wrote this comment began their protest with a common policing tactic: asserting one's self as a mourner who is directly affected by norm violation, in this case, claiming the social identity of a "huge fan." Highlighting a personal connection reinforces the comment thread as a grieving space for the bereaved, a space in which they should not be subject to those who would speak ill of their dearly departed. Policers who claimed their identity as fans were requesting a positive maintenance of focus on remembering the person well. This finding represents a common expectation of behavior in grief spaces.

4.1.1 Attention Seeking

Personal attention-seeking and apparent exploitation were both ways that commenters were accused of not maintaining focus on the deceased. Our dataset revealed some nuance here, in that policing also occurred in response to what might appear as neutral or positive comments. Take the following exchange that starts with what appears to be a heartfelt and well-composed tribute to Prince from a fellow celebrity:

> *Michael Jackson, David Bowie, John Lennon, and Prince. There's gonna be one heck of a concert up there. Rest in peace. (Comment #1, Prince)*

However, this exact comment appeared on several other posts, a fact pointed out by a reader in their response:

> *Shut up. You posted this exact same thing somewhere else. You're not here to pay respects, you're here to get 'likes' and promote your own page. (Comment #2, Prince)*

In this reply, the commenter articulated why the original message was objectionable: the commenter had posted it in multiple places, presumably with the aim of self-promotion. The comment that policed this practice also articulated the norm by which acceptability of comments should be judged: the thread has become a place "to pay respects." The phrase contains an undertone of owing the deceased something, or of being present to *give* attention. *Taking* attention violated this norm, and was not tolerated. Policing comments in this category attempted to regulate comments that were perceived to divert attention from the deceased to the commenter. Comments accused of diverting attention (like the one above) were high in the comment thread (received many Likes and replies), and were often written by someone who could stand to gain from growing an audience (like the promotion of their own page). The accused comments sometimes attempted to connect the commenter with the deceased in a way that elevated or emphasized the commenter's importance in relation to the deceased. One commenter spelled out this accusation:

> *it disgusts me but it happens all the time, when somebody important dies many of the people making tributes… do it by reminding us how the dead person admired the tributer! It's so selfish, inappropriate and disgusting! (Comment #2, Rickman)*

Comments like this were especially common following Alan Rickman's death; recycled news regarding his work with author J.K. Rowling prompted many to believe that Rowling had announced something related to the character Rickman played in the film adaptations of her Harry Potter series. Many found this distasteful:

> *I'm sure she is honest and not trying to stay relivant by coming out with now instead of before he died what disrespect for such a great actor known for way more then one character (Comment #8, Rickman)*

In this example, commenters policed expressions of grief by accusing Rowling of making herself the center of focus. Similar commenters accused of attention-seeking were also called "disgusting," "inappropriate," and "sickening," all terms that indicate norm violation. Some comments may have attempted appropriate expressions of grief, but were perceived to be doing something else.

4.1.2 Exploitation

The second way that attention diversion appeared in our data is in response to comments that are interpreted as seeking gain for a specific cause. In contrast to comments that promote a personal agenda, these comments were perceived to promote a *non*-personal agenda and at times even pointed out the utility of the person's death.

One illustrative example started outside of Facebook, but bled into our dataset. Following Rickman's death, actress Emma Watson memorialized her colleague by tweeting several of Rickman's quotes, one of which was about feminism. Some found the reference to feminism to be distasteful, and told Watson so via social media. A few celebrity news sites reported this as a "major controversy." Following that, Facebook responses to Rickman's death included references to Watson's tweet. This prompted serious argument over what was "exploitative" and what was appropriate in remembering Rickman. One commenter agreed that the tweet was distasteful, and explained why:

> *There was NO need for her to post about feminism. […] She could have easily stated how he was a great actor and left it at that but no, that obsession with feminism had to come up. You*

can all say "oh its okay, the made other tweets about him" that isn't the point, the fact the she had to even think it was a good idea to post about feminism when he died is just wrong. (Comment #6, Rickman)

In this example, this commenter clearly disapproved of Watson's "need to post about feminism." They also stated the norms around grief that they wish Watson had followed: maintenance of focus on Rickman's career, and absolutely not about her signature social issue.

Accusations of exploitation seem contradictory: some enforced a norm that any personal opinions were inappropriate, while positive personal opinions made up most of the thread. The blanket disapproval of any negative comments was complicated by the controversial nature that can surround causes that the celebrity may have supported in their lifetime. Since social issues are subjectively positive or negative depending on one's opinions, the apparent contradictions here refer back to the "Never speak ill of the dead" norm. The policer may simply have a negative view of feminism, prompting them to leverage the norms that demand personal focus and reject negativity.

In these examples, policers attempted to eliminate negative conversations, as well as conversations on any subject other than the deceased. They spoke out against these comments in keeping with norms that were familiar to offline grief spaces. However, a different type of grief policing occurred enforcing the norm that an online comments section is *not* a space for grief at all. We turn now to these comments that do not recognize public grief for parasocial relationships.

4.2 Inappropriate Grief

Responses to news that an artist had died contained a wide variety of emotions. The expressions varied from lengthy details of the author's grief to lone emoji displaying sadness, crying, broken hearts, or flowers—tiny digital versions of traditional funerary decorations. Even these formulaic expressions were susceptible to grief policing. In our analysis, we found that expressions of grief-related emotions were the target of policing specifically because of the use of emotion. They fall into two sub-categories: emotions incommensurate with the relationship, and emotions incommensurate with grief altogether.

4.2.1 Incommensurate with Relationship

Facebook was flooded with reactions to Alan Rickman's death, many expressing strong emotional reactions. Just as Rickman's character in the fifth *Harry Potter* film called for Harry to "control [his] emotions," grief policers in this context found overt displays of sadness distasteful. They expressed a norm that grief is specific to personal, rather than parasocial relationships. One user went so far as to call for a general silence of expressions of grief about the actor:

Okay people!!! I understand that Alan Rickman was a pretty good actor (even if he usually played grumpy types)....but PLEASE- stop with the whole "Boo Hoo, I'm sooo sad!" shit. You never met him, you didn't know him.... move on to being sad about something that matters[...] (Comment #204, Rickman)

This is an example of the first form of emotional grief policing, which involves regulating displays of emotion that are perceived to not match a commenter's relationship to the deceased. Excessive sadness was the most commonly-referenced problematic behavior regarding expressions of parasocial grief. Sadness was often the general tone of an entire thread, only to be interrupted by policing comments such as the one above.

The second form of emotional grief policing regulates any grief expressed for celebrities. Some commenters seemed to dislike the very idea of the public grieving a celebrity, who may have been "just an actor," as opposed to a public servant or hero. Rather than calling out specific commenters, these grief police seemed to appear at random in conversation threads, and address a more general audience:

31 navy seals died late yesterday. All special forces and many who killed saddam Hussein. THIRTYONE. Anyone understand the impact of that??? (Comment #17, Rickman)

While this comment may have had stand-alone merit, its appearance in a discussion about Alan Rickman juxtaposed the importance of an actor with the importance of members of the military. A similar comment appeared in the Prince discussions:

It is to bad Prince is dead, but their are Serviceman and woman died everyday and CNN say nothing, THAT IS WHAT SAD (Comment #280, Prince)

While not necessarily negative towards other mourners, these grief police used the conversation to remind others of the democracy of death, or of the greater importance of other deaths. These policing comments may have also been attempts to elevate average people––often those who suffered the same cause of death as the celebrity. The commenters may have felt a sense of injustice at the volume of emotion for the celebrity, when average people that they feel are deserving of such remembrance did not receive it.

Excessive sadness was also policed when dedicated fans of the deceased perceived other commenters as less dedicated than themselves. Consider this comment about Prince:

I find it funny that all these so called "prince fans" wanna become fans all the sudden and label him a legend when yet... a couple of days ago... none of these "fans" weren't talking about or praising him... you people on here are nothing but some lying hypocrite losers! (Comment #15, Prince)

While this commenter did not specify their own connection to Prince, they labeled the volume of praise seen in the wake of Prince's death to be disproportionate to the number of true Prince fans. Accusing mourners of 'lying' and hypocrisy reflect this commenter's desire for honesty in reflections about Prince's death. Exaggerating one's love for the deceased betrays the social identity of fans as a group, a factor which strongly moderates the effectiveness of norm enforcement [37]. In these cases, the comments suggest that grief police object when they feel a stronger parasocial relationship to the deceased than others.

4.2.2 Incommensurate with Grief

This category mostly consists of instances in which commenters celebrated a celebrity's death. Celebrations were rare, but were the most heavily policed statements we found. Commenters in these threads expressed relief or even happiness that the person had passed away. For David Bowie, his alleged past misdeeds (as discussed above) prompted some to express a lack of grief. Additionally, his perceived involvement in politics prompted such a comment from one person who denied any well-wishing to someone who was apparently "anti-Palestine," even saying "Good riddance!" Other fans disapproved of this discussion, enforcing a norm prohibiting negativity at a time of death:

You are a sad little man. Anyone who gloats or takes joy in anyones death has an evil tainted soul. (Comment #51, Bowie)

In contrast to the comments that were incommensurate with the relationship, this subcategory is not necessarily negative. Some commenters attempted to remind others of the humanity of the deceased and typically responded to any of the traditional expressions of grief or memorial phrases.

People die everyday not just famously people (Comment #56, Prince)

These comments carried a much different tone than the previously discussed forms of policing. Other comments in this category reminded mourners to consider the grief of the deceased's family alongside their

own, or insisted that fans are not truly grieving the person who has died, but something else altogether [50]. This presented a compelling difference in where expressions of parasocial grief were focused. Fans' condolences freely referred to the late celebrity in any of their performed identities: Alan Rickman was Professor Snape to some and Hans Gruber to others, David Bowie and "Ziggy Stardust" seemed to be interchangeable terms, and only Prince's lifelong fans or family members knew that his surname was "Davies." Misrepresentations of any of these identities, even by accident, prompted policing. In one CNN thread, an Alan Rickman fan posted a popular (but fake) quote, to which another responded:

> *He never said this quote. STOP SHARING IT. You're disrespecting the dead. It's ludicrous. (Comment #78, Rickman)*

These conversations presented an interesting reality of parasocial relationships: fans often connect with the character or art created by the person, while not actually knowing the person themselves. Some comment threads were welcoming to fans' stories of which character or work first drew them to the late celebrity, while other threads sanctioned any emphasis of one character or stage name over another, or emphasis of any performance over the person's civilian identity.

These two types of emotional grief policing are both related to the ridicule referenced above [26], and represent a lack of recognition of the legitimacy of parasocial grief.

4.3 Approval and Defense

In contrast with the disagreements described above, we also observed positively valenced responses that affirmed the appropriateness of expressions of parasocial grief. These comments did the work of lifting up the types of responses that were acceptable and praiseworthy. Some were simple statements of approval:

> *Perfect! Thank you for your words! (Comment #2, Prince)*

In this first example, a fan was appreciating what the original poster shared. We may deduce that others felt similarly, as that post––an original tribute poem––was the most-Liked comment in the thread. Top comments, while technically popular, were still subject to criticism in concurrence with the norms described above that do not recognize the legitimacy parasocial grief.

Others expressed approval by defending comments. Take, for example, the comment below. Where one commenter policed, calling the original post offensive, another defended the original poster as being appropriately within the norms of the conversation:

> *How's that an offensive comment to his family?? He's expressing how incredible David Bowie was. We got to exist in a time that he did. Which was awesome cuz he was an amazing artist and human being. (Comment #13, Bowie)*

In response to ambiguous boundaries of correct speech in this context, this comment overtly identified acceptable behavior, and its rationale. But policing is not always so straightforward. In the following example, we see both sanctioning of criticism, and criticism of the commenter:

> *...please don't be co critical! Same thing is going to happen to us but with less to say. People lets there emotions out during these sad times! There is nothing wrong with that and to put them down for that, well i don't think many people will have anything good to say about you and im sorry for that! (Comment #37, Prince)*

Note that in this example, contradictory norm enforcement happened within a single thread. The disagreements between conversation show that grief policing may be the result of conflicting norms. Conflicts make norms explicit; notice that policing comments often followed a pattern of identifying a descriptive norm

with disapproval, ("Why is everyone doing this?"), followed by a correction based on an injunctive norm ("You should be doing ____.") [37].

With examples from a rich set of data, we have described three themes of grief policing, and what norms are being enforced within each theme. We now proceed to further discussion about the implications of our observations.

5 DISCUSSION

Throughout our data, we saw people in conflict over when, where, how, and who to grieve. While the conflicts are striking on their own, they are all the more so because conflicts surrounding personal loss are rarely visible [6]. Participants often defer to those closer to the deceased for appropriate behavioral cues [41]. As no such deferential party exists for public figures in a public online space, this norm is less relevant here. It is unclear if there are any shared norms specific to spaces such as the ones we studied. In the absence of shared norms, people imported and enforced norms from other contexts. On a deeper level, the differences in the norms that people imported reflect fundamental disagreements about what grief is, and how it should (or should not) be expressed online.

5.1 Norms in Conflict

One reason for the lack of clarity about acceptable behavior is the absence of existing shared conversational norms in a public comment thread. The practices we have described occur in an environment where the formation of shared norms is notably difficult [27,42]; therefore, many sets of norms converge [44], and (due to the weak social ties among commenters) are ineffectively enforced [37]. Grief policing thus provides an example of how norm enforcement plays out when norms conflict in online spaces comprised of transient interactions.

The transient ways in which we encounter and interact with public Facebook posts and their comment threads make it difficult for norms to emerge. This difficulty is compounded when posts reach large audiences, as was the case with the posts in our study. While the content may persist, the user's encounter with it, and the specific context in which it exists, is transient, resulting in a lack of consistent norms.

People learn how to behave on Facebook by watching others and importing norms from offline life [37,39,47,61]. When people see a public news post and its comments in their Facebook Newsfeed, they join thousands of others in a transient community comprised of one-off contributions that make it challenging for prevalent norms to emerge, let alone shape future behavior. As Lapinski found, social distance between people in a given context is a strong indicator of how effective norm enforcement will be. That is to say, norm enforcement among strangers, as in this context, is largely ineffective in changing future behavior [37]. Thus, we find an online space that lacks its own specific shared norms––norms that would emerge from consistent engagement over time, and in a manner unique to that space. In the absence of site-specific norms, it is reasonable to presume that participants are importing norms from other places.

5.1.1 Norms from Facebook

Given our dataset, the most prominent source of imported norms is most likely Facebook [44]. People encounter news stories like those we studied while browsing through updates in their personalized Newsfeed, browsing in Trending Topics, or when using Facebook's internal search feature.

In the Newsfeed scenario, Facebook displays the story of the celebrity's death in an identical format to any other post in Newsfeed. One might see the post unexpectedly, alongside updates from friends, family, and Liked pages. McLaughlin & Vitak found that Facebook users generally do not consider the platform an appropriate place for overtly emotional posts, or "private or sensitive grievances" on personal timelines [44]. If the threads we analyzed appear alongside personal status updates, it stands to reason that users would enact similar norms in responding to both types of posts.

Alternatively, when a person seeks information about a celebrity's death in the search feature, Facebook displays a feed that consists only of posts and articles about the deceased person. In this scenario, the person is seeking a more specific place to respond, and has likely had more time to be thoughtful about the death, in

contrast to the unexpected appearance in the previous example. Intentional seeking of information is comparable to someone who picks up a newspaper and turns to the Obituaries section: in thought and action, the person has prepared themselves to think about death and respond to it. Their intentionality forms a different context, and may cause them to think, "this is a grief space." News outlets (as well as any entity with a Facebook page) encourage engagement; they often contain requests for people to Like, Comment, and Share. So, when a user's search for information turns up posts that prompt engagement, this may create a context in which grief space norms seem most appropriate. As a comparison, intentionality is apparent on memorial "RIP" pages, where emotional posts are normal and expected [33,53]. Comment threads on public news posts present a hybrid context between a Newsfeed and a memorial page, so norms conflict.

One way to examine intentionality would be to consider dedicated Facebook fan pages of deceased celebrities. Because these are consistent, dedicated spaces for people who admire the person, they are both less public and less transient than news posts. Based on our findings in this study, we would hypothesize that established norms on fan pages would reduce the need for grief policing on fan pages, and that this would be an interesting direction for future work.

Though Facebook is unique in its volume and reach, it is not the only social media platform or online community. It possible that people are importing and enforcing norms from online memorials or sites that exist specifically for grief. Examples include online obituary sites like Legacy.com, or memorialized Facebook profiles and "RIP" pages [33].

5.1.2 Norms from Offline Culture

At any mention of a death, some people approach the comment thread as they would a funeral home book of condolences, writing mini-obituaries of their own [48]. In our data, commenters expressing grief addressed other fans of the deceased, or even the deceased's family, deferring to those who were closest to the person for how to act, what to say, or whether to speak at all. Broad cultural norms around death, while unique to people's varying local contexts [31], co-exist in these spaces. Policers who wish to enforce a grief space invoked injunctive norms from offline spaces, with comments requesting that people "please be respectful," "focus on good memories," and of course, "never speak ill of the dead." As an offline comparison, consider if someone at a funeral were to share negative information about the deceased––the injunctive norm is to allow for expressions of grief and remembrances of the deceased. Negativity would violate that norm, which we see imported into our data. At any mention of a death, some people approach the comment thread as they would a funeral home book of condolences, writing mini-obituaries of their own [48]. In our data, commenters expressing grief did this by addressing other fans of the deceased, or even the deceased's family, deferring to those who were closest to the person for what to say, or whether to speak at all. Broad cultural norms around death, while unique to people's varying local contexts [31], co-exist in these spaces. Policers who wish to enforce a grief space invoked injunctive norms from offline spaces, with comments requesting that people, "Please be respectful," and of course, "One must never speak ill of the dead." As an offline comparison, consider if someone at a funeral were to share negative information about the deceased––the injunctive norm is to allow for expressions of grief and remembrances of the deceased. Negativity would violate that norm, which we see imported into our data in comments policing "anyone who takes joy in anyone's death."

A public, online space where the family and loved ones are not present, is (according to some commenters) not a space for grief at all. For some, Facebook may be closer to the diner next door to the funeral home where people discuss what happened, and where there are fewer restrictions on what to say or how to act. Still other commenters may consider themselves to be at home reading the obituary of a stranger and respond without distinct grief or condolences, such as in comments on the cause of death. These commenters may not be aware of how public the comment thread is, and be confused by policing responses.

Among the people who do treat the space as one for grieving, their policing still falls in line with their cultural norms. Grieving a character or work that the deceased created does not make sense (as that lives on in perpetuity), so people police comments that, for example, mourn "Professor Snape" rather than Alan Rickman himself. Policing the grief of art maintains that grief is about an actual person. In this circumstance, the publicness of the grief does not offend.

5.2 Parasocial Grief in Public Comments

We have theorized that grief policing occurs as commenters import conflicting norms from differing contexts. Here, we further explain what specific norms commenters enforced in our data set, and what their attempts at norm enforcement may tell us about both parasocial grief and online grief.

The degree to which online grief should be public vs. private is a key tension we see in our data; many comments we read claim that grief should be personal and private. Online comment threads are neither personal nor private, so we see policing engaging that contradiction.

We also see a tension between different norms that people carry over from other contexts and the norms around grief more broadly. The death of a celebrity is of public interest, but feels personal to fans of the deceased. That is what much of the policing behavior enforces: grief is for those who had a personal relationship with the deceased, and the individuals commenting here are only related to the deceased parasocially, through public social media and popular entertainment. There is a contradiction in expecting that one should grieve privately over a public figure, especially when one's parasocial relationship may have been strengthened in a community with other fans. This contradiction illuminates both the validity and the complexity of parasocial relationships. The parasocially bereaved are seeking online spaces to express their grief, and to grieve with others, but are instead finding spaces that do not always accommodate their needs. As the comment threads discussed here are quite public, grief policing statements reveal the norms that are emerging about public grief.

When commenters enforce the norms of a grief space within the comment thread, we may deduce three things about their views of parasocial grief. First, the commenters inherently recognize parasocial grief as valid; fans who express their sadness at the celebrity's death are seen as legitimately bereaved. Second, these policers assert that fans deserve an online space for grief and, third, that this comment thread should be such a space.

In sharp contrast, other commenters do not treat the comment space about a celebrity's death as a space for grief. These policers behave according to non-grief comment thread norms, such as disagreement, disapproval, critical thoughts, or loosely-related topics. In policing those who do express grief in the comments, they argue three things. First, these policers disregard the validity of parasocial grief. The reason for disregard of parasocial grief is due to their second point: that grief is merit-based or relationship-based (which is quite subjective, and prone to its own set of arguments). The third argument involves using the first two as a basis for diverting attention to things that do deserve grief, especially fallen soldiers, or the family of the deceased. Enforcing purely merit- and/or relationship-based grief refers back to the previous section, in which we discussed the cultural norm of grief as personal and private. A few outlying policers who enforced Facebook comments as a non-grief-space seemed to state that, even if parasocial grief is valid, grieving in public at all is inappropriate.

Indicating a fundamental disagreement about grief, policing reveals disagreement about who or "what" has died. Some astute commenters mention this, reminding fans that "you still have the Alan Rickman you love in all of his movies" (Rickman #56). This is sometimes used as a consolation, but other times is used as an accusation. The tone can be easily confused. The roots of policing behavior also reveal something that personal and parasocial grief have in common: the loss of future experiences with the person. Despite that major similarity, one reason that non-grief-space policers may not respect grieving fans is that they may not understand the relationships between the fans and the celebrities. As such, the norms policers import do not fully understand the relationship that is being grieved. Death is a moment where we acknowledge the impact that people had on our lives, in personal relationships as well as parasocial relationships; if no impact is recognized, no space will be given for acknowledgement.

5.3 Limitations and Future Work

We recognize that, though the data presented here is rich in nuance, our study is limited by the use of observational data. We did not speak directly with commenters, and as a result cannot confirm their exact motivations or interpretations of the space. Likewise, while it is clear from our data that commenters are

enforcing social norms, the specific origin of a norm is not always clear. This is true of most norms scholarship in online spaces [10,39,44].

Public comment threads are also only a narrow subset of online interactions. We chose to look at public comments because we wanted to gain insight into *public* grief. The number of Likes, Shares, and Comments on these posts indicate their popularity. While we have documented grief policing practices that surround celebrity deaths and the comments on public Facebook posts, for now the generalizability of our study is limited.

Celebrity fansites in particular are one context worthy of future work. We suspect that fansites for the deceased would not contain policing as we have described here, as participants in those spaces would be more likely to share a group identity [47]. Examining the practices on celebrity fansites where participants have a shared identity and norms can emerge is a promising direction for future research.

6 CONCLUSION

In our analysis of grief policing after the death of celebrities, we defined different forms of grief policing, characterized how grief policing is a result of conflicting norms in a transient online space, and addressed how those norms either discount or legitimize parasocial grief in online spaces. While grief policing initially seems to be petty disagreements about the memory of the deceased, we find it to be about two deeper issues: people's interpretations of grief, and their interpretations of the space as a site for grieving––or not.

6.1 Implications for Parasocial Grief

While details of the celebrity's life, controversies, and cause of death are present in our data, we found such details to be tools for addressing an underlying disagreement about whether parasocial grief is legitimate grief. Disagreements about parasocial grief may reflect a larger cultural shift that coincides with ubiquitous digital social interactions, which have made parasocial relationships (and thus parasocial grief) more visible. Based on our data, it is clear that some commenters would benefit from an explicit norm or guideline that differentiates the comment thread as a space for grief (or not). Disagreement about the purpose of an online space is not unique to expressions of parasocial grief. In fact, this finding addresses the broader issue of incivility on the Internet. This paper highlights how the different expectations and social norms with which people enter a space shape how they engage the platform and how they understand themselves and others in their online interactions.

6.2 Implications for Online Norms

Development of norms may be critical to group formation [44], but commenters in the threads we examined are not forming groups. So, we speculate that this transient online space challenges the emergence of norms. McLaughlin & Vitak found people respond to norm violations on Facebook (and thus make norms visible) by deleting or hiding content or unfriending people [44]. But in a space where commenters have no friends to unfriend, and no control to delete content, the only remaining interactive option for recourse is to comment one's corrections and disapproval.[2] Such comments make up our data: corrections and disapproval directed toward expressions of parasocial grief.

Our findings, first, contribute to the understanding of how people express grief online and legitimize the need for online spaces that accommodate expressions of grief in public and parasocial forms. Second, these findings matter because transience is an increasingly popular feature on major social media platforms. Beyond reddit, hashtags, and interest-based streams, Facebook's Messenger Day, Instagram's Stories, and Snapchat all

[2] During our first rounds of data collection, Facebook's Reactions feature had not been released, and was not a function for individual comments until May 2017. Further work in this area should include the uses and effects of this emotionally communicative feature.

offer their users increasingly transient interactions. Our analysis of norms in the context of grief (both personal and parasocial) provides further understanding of how transient engagement challenges the emergence of norms. Insights in this area will prove important for both creators and users of increasingly transient platforms [27]. Finally, by understanding norm formation in a specific context, we can better understand the broader issues of civility and cooperation in online conversation. When we understand that norms, rather than existing statically, are being imported, contested, and ineffectively enforced, what appears as uncivil online conversation can be attributed, in part, to a lack of shared context and established standards of behavior. As such, our analysis addresses the larger question, "Why can't we talk to each other?" with the hope that our approach may contribute to the future improvement of human discourse online.

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