

One-Click Condolences

Social media expedites the mourning process.
But it offers little comfort to the grieving.



By Amy Webb



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I first learned of Robin Williams' death on Twitter. On my computer monitor, I saw two "RIP Robin Williams" posts mixed in with all the other tweets.

Seconds later, a few more RIPs. Then my Twitter stream completely transformed. Everyone I follow posted a version of RIP, but now with hashtags. #RIPRobinWilliams. #MyCaptain. #OCaptainMyCaptain. Next came retweeted links to CNN.com and USAToday.com.

Within the hour, nine of the Top 10 trending topics on Twitter were related to Robin Williams. I started to see quotes and screengrabs from *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Good Morning, Vietnam*, and *Dead Poets Society*, and the speed at which I watched people posting video clips and photos left me with an odd sense that rather than sharing in a collective sense of grief, they were simply rushing to share a fresh micro-bit of the news.

The outpouring started to seem almost competitive. Who could find the rarest photo? The most apt movie quote? The best quip to sum up a man's entire life in 122 characters? (That's 140 minus 17 characters plus a space for #RIPRobinWilliams.)

Now more than ever, we are using social media and online forums to connect with each other during difficult times. When tragedy strikes, many of us are more likely to express our sadness on Facebook than in person or even on the phone. We hear of the tragedy on social media, and we react in the appropriate way for that medium; we see the bad news, we share the bad news—or we like or retweet or favorite—and then we move on to the next story.

My observation is that the convenience of one-click condolences might be making the grieving process more difficult for those experiencing loss.

Our communication style interrupts our grieving process in the worst possible way.

Two weeks ago, I lost a friend—a journalist and author, who was just starting a new consulting venture with his lovely wife. It was a sudden, horrible loss. He was something of a public figure, so I expected to see a certain amount of broadcasting throughout social media. The same pattern emerged as with Williams: First the RIPs, then the hashtags,

then links to news stories and personal photos. It felt as though in tweeting about what happened and posting photos on Facebook, the conversation was less about remembering him and more about an eagerness to share the news. What's worse, those who didn't know him or that he'd just passed were including his Twitter handle in the messages, as though he was still there to read responses.

Using social media to broadcast the news of a tragedy is a good way to help inform a community, but one-click condolences don't help people deal with loss. In fact, it accelerates a social norm that would otherwise take several weeks: sending heartfelt letters, sharing memories in person, even showing support by spending a few hours together to help sort paperwork or mail.

I would never argue that digital platforms aren't enormously helpful in times of crisis. For instance, when the 2010 earthquake ravaged Haiti, [a Facebook page](#) brought the community together, providing an outlet for grief and for survival. **Modern Loss** is a brilliant site and social community offering candid conversations about death. These platforms are about remembering, coping, and starting again. But they're rare effective examples of how we use social media to help those who've been left behind.

Propagating the news of a loss on Twitter isn't the same as helping activate people during a natural disaster, where spreading news quickly may be a means of survival. Clicking a button on someone's Facebook wall isn't the same as sharing a personal essay on what to do in the aftermath of losing a loved one. The retweets and likes—all those clicks—distance us from each other. They become substitutes for the tangible, real-life human connections that, ultimately, we all need. Clicking "like" excuses us from making a phone call. Or, in the cases of depression, we might acknowledge that someone is suffering because of what they're posting—or because they've stopped posting at all—but forget to check in and have a conversation.

When my own mother died after a grueling bout with a rare, incurable form of cancer, I was emotionally depleted. In the hours after her passing, I involuntarily collected data on who had been in contact with my family, making a mental list. I think we all do this when someone close to us dies, as a way to help process what's happening. I kept a list of the extended family and relatives we hadn't heard from; my assumption was that if the phone hadn't rung, they probably didn't yet know she was gone.

On Facebook, I actively tracked that data. It's impossible not to. The number of likes, comments, and shares was right there, beneath every post. People I hadn't talked to since high school posted on my wall. So did co-workers, people I'd met once at conferences, the guy who owns my favorite restaurant. In what I assume was a show of support, a few dozen of my Facebook friends "liked" that my mom was dead. My mom was a teacher for 35 years, so when we unexpectedly received cards and phone calls from the hundreds of students she'd taught over the years, it filled a small but important part of the void I felt. When I heard from the guy who—I think—sat next to me in chemistry class, I felt raw and vulnerable. Was he messaging me out of obligation? Why was he suddenly privy to this part of my life? And when the person who'd been my closest friend for many years didn't post anything at all, I became incredibly angry.

The number of likes was completely subjective and based on myriad variables that run counter to common logic. Liking, or even acknowledging the post, bore no real relation on what people actually thought. It's possible the Facebook algorithm just wasn't showing them my post. Or that the people I'd connected to on Facebook just preferred to email me. Or that their computers were broken.

Yet I paid close attention to that Facebook data. Only a few dozen people liked the post about her passing. What did that mean? Why didn't some people—who I actually did consider to be my friends in the real world—post anything at all on Facebook, or on the listservs I belonged to? What did that say about my mom, I wondered? About me?

It's human nature to grieve together, to share stories, to talk through loss. Our comfort level on social media has changed. Those private, intimate moments of grieving are supplanted now by public pings, interrupting our grieving process in the worst possible way. Social media has transformed death into a sort of public spectacle. For some people, that may help them in the first few hours. But one-click condolence calls are a quick acknowledgement of loss that provides little relief or emotional support to those who need a shoulder to cry on in the real world. There is a certain comfort in crying in the presence of other people, I've learned.

The challenge is squaring acceptable social media behavior with what people need in real life. It's a matter of using the tools readily available to share the most important information quickly, and then relying on our basic humanity for all the rest. Pick up the phone. Write a personal letter. Gather together in person with flowers, photos, candles, or whatever else makes sense for the community in mourning. Twitter and Facebook offer a lot of efficiencies, but speeding up the natural grieving process can't be one of them.

Webb, Amy. "One-Click Condolences." *Slate*. 13 Aug. 2014. Accessed 10 Aug. 2017. <http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/data_mine_1/2014/08/facebook_twitter_and_grieving_how_social_media_makes_the_grieving_process.html>.