

# Feelings and Facebook: grief in social media

By [Jonathan Green](#)

Updated Thu Feb 25, 2010 2:06pm AEDT

## Strange days indeed.

What could be more horrific, more life freezing, than the violent death of a child? What could possibly alleviate the sense of loss for the surviving family?

Nothing can alter the fact. There's not much comfort in the best-intentioned sympathy, kind thoughts and deeds. Not immediately. No way of soothing the raw, primal extremity of the moment.

There are few things in life more intensely internal than grief. For the family concerned - a shattered, bereft little huddle - nothing will ever be quite the same.

How, you have to wonder, can Facebook help? How can the public exploration of agony be any sort of consolation? What modern tick of the internet light is this, that so many seem convinced that making a public play of loss and inviting the solicitude of strangers might somehow ease the pain?

And of course it's not just the intimates of the suddenly dead who create the tribute sites and Facebook pages. Outsiders running the gamut from family friends to total strangers do it too. Photos. Tributes. Awkward half rhyming stanzas of sympathy and support.

How has personal tragedy suddenly become such public property?

The current sparking point for these thoughts is the hoo-ha surrounding the disturbing and deeply sad death of eight-year-old Bundaberg girl Trinity Bates, a death that prompted a flurry of Facebook activity, some of it grieving, some of it in tribute, some of it online vigilantes gunning in guttural text for the man arrested in the case. Facebook was also front and centre after the stabbing death of schoolboy Elliott Fletcher.

There are a set of regulatory issues around who can post what, when and why on the internet and how that might be vetted and controlled... we're all well-versed in the issues, and in the wild west nature of life online, where anonymity emboldens the thick, the heartless and the cruel.

After days of hate, pornography and various forms of online bile, the hostile reaction to various Facebook pages relating to the Bates case has gained such popular momentum that it has become political. Queensland Premier Anna Bligh has weighed in, challenging the US proprietors of the network.

"Within the Queensland community, there are growing calls for a broader debate on the challenges posed by the new media. We need to try to do everything we can to prevent this happening in the future.

"And on this front, I seek your advice on what action Facebook intends to take to prevent a recurrence of these types of sickening incidents."

These online communities are normally pretty robustly self-censoring, but even if in this case that organic process has been ineffective, there's clearly an element of shooting the messenger in taking the medium to task.



*How has personal tragedy suddenly become such public property? (ABC News: Tim Leslie)*

Which is the greater evil: that a blank online space should exist on which ugly people can post disgusting things, or that those people should feel the impulse to take up that opportunity in the first place? Isn't the second the more appalling, a truer sign that something is rotten and torn in the social fabric?

But more interesting in a way, is the very real sense running through all this that tragedy is now some sort of collective moment. The thought that strangers online might host tribute sites to a murdered child is... well, somewhere between touching, desperate and weird.

There can't be any true solace for the grieving in a quick proliferation of gushing online banality, these remotely typed outpourings of high tech, greeting card empathy.

The thought that family and friends also take their pain online as some sort of social media offering is sad and troubling. Another sign that this post-Warhol era - in which fame can not only be briefly grasped, but seems also to be our permanent obligation - is well out of hand.

Sometimes, surely, we should just be alone with our thoughts. Far even from Facebook.

**Tags:** [information-and-communication](#), [internet](#), [law-crime-and-justice](#), [australia](#)

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## Comments (25)

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### • John Dillinger:

25 Feb 2010 2:54:52pm

Grief is a very personal thing & as such is only shared with those close to you, personally I would not post anything of my experience on any social networking site, it sometimes feels to me that society is becoming 'emotionally incontinent' and I think the media has quite a bit to do with it, you only have to look at some of the sensationalist coverage or some of the fly on the wall documentaries to see that, they can't get that camera close enough to the tears of the distraught.

[Agree](#) (2) [Alert moderator](#)

### • Krystal:

25 Feb 2010 2:58:27pm

I feel sorry for the girl who died i really do, what a tragic thing i think that the government should ban Facebook because it bring many horrific things.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

### ◦ Herr Kaleun:

26 Feb 2010 9:36:31am

Why should the government ban facebook because of some idiots' comments? That would be like banning all personal transport because some people are dangerous drivers. Yes, the comments are despicable, but by and large most comments on facebook are alright.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **Mike:**

26 Feb 2010 10:08:17am

The Queensland community can debate all it likes. The Facebook Terms of Use specifically state that it is governed by the laws of the State of California.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **Noguaranteeofsanity:**

26 Feb 2010 10:23:35am

Do we blame Telstra when people make offensive phone calls or use them to commit a crime? Do we arrest and charge Australia Post workers when someone uses the mail to send offensive material? Or do we just ban phones and the postal service altogether? The answer is no, as they are not responsible for the actions of others and the services they offer have simply been misused or abused by others. They cannot control what others do and are only responsible for their own actions.

Really, all of the people calling for Facebook to be censored or even banned, are actually also advocating an argument that all of our communication be monitored to ensure we don't offend others or break the law. If people's communication via Facebook is to be controlled, why not open, read and censor all of our mail, or have all of our telephone calls monitored, simply to ensure people do not communicate offensive material or for illegal purposes?

There will always be those who seek to offend, cause trouble and break the law, both offline and online, there always have been and always will. Facebook has 400 million members and of course some will cause trouble, while it would be almost impossible to monitor, censor or regulate all of the content they host, it is simply impossible to do so with so much activity on their site, even beyond the ability of any government or police force to control. Even if only 10 percent of their members were active and say made one comment each per day, that is 40 million messages and probably at least 400 million words that would have to be read and assessed for offensive or illegal material, each and every day.

Really the blame shouldn't be placed on Facebook, it didn't write the comments that were offensive, nor did it start the group and didn't decide to allow anyone with a Facebook account to comment on these tragic circumstances. It was the administrators that opened the group up to all of Facebook's 400 million members and allowed anyone to comment on their own personal tragedy. It is no surprise, that when you have large numbers of people involved, it wont take long before someone says or does something stupid, its simply the way people are. They had the option to make it private, yet they chose to make it public and allow anyone to comment, including those who's comments they found offensive. The results really should not be surprising to anyone.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **OmMarit:**

26 Feb 2010 11:44:59am

Only the naive would talk about banning Facebook. Because the reality is that it is just a user interface set up and paid for by advertisers (you may notice the adverts bar on the right of the Facebook home page). The same as MySpace or Hi5 or any other number of personal networking sites.

Close it down and a similar thing will just take its place. That is the nature of the internet. Especially where there is a dollar to be made.

I only got a Facebook page because friends kept sending me emails saying their pictures were on Facebook and I needed to join to see them.

And I am also not so naive as to think that only my "friends" can see what I post online even if privacy controls are enacted.

Why on earth anyone would want to post their most intimate secrets as some do, or a detailed description of what they do each day is beyond my understanding. Because ANYONE on the planet can read it if they want to.

As for online "community" thing. What a load of rubbish. Just because 400 million other people on this planet use the same online interface as myself to post information does not mean they are my "community", just as I am not part of the "community" of MS Office users.

And all these people that think they are so popular if they collect hundreds or thousands of online "friends". Do they ever actually phone up or talk to these people, have them over for dinner? Who are they kidding. At most a person would be very lucky to have 20 people in life whom they could call real friends and lean on in a time of crisis.

I read some of the comments on those tribute sites. And I know one thing. I would want very few of those people to be my friends. Let alone feel they have the right to intrude into my grief if something terrible happened to my child.

Looking at those sites was like looking into the face of the lynch mob. Amazed me that people could write such badly spelled, badly composed, abbreviated SMS speak examples of crud and gush. And you can see women who talked about the vile things they hoped would happen to the alleged killer of the little girl with every second word being F and C and yet when you looked at their pictures they were nice looking women who had their own family pics online for the world to see. Is that really how those nice looking family women speak and think?

I know I am certainly not part of THEIR "community".

Facebook is not the problem. It is the people who use it.

[Agree](#) (2) [Alert moderator](#)

- **Julie:**

25 Feb 2010 3:01:29pm

Something else I can't understand is how quickly some griefstricken relatives go on national television and cry. I also don't understand why they still refer to the deceased in the present tense: 'he's a great guy' etc. I know that part of this is denial, which is the beginning of the grieving process. But I have always felt that grief is a private thing. But as for the trolling on Facebook .... that is awful, and Facebook needs to start exercising some control.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **Mark:**

25 Feb 2010 3:11:06pm

It is weird and macabre that people post tribute sites, I think they do it because the internet makes everything so much closer it nearly feels like everyone is a neighbour.

Perhaps offering condolences makes the posters feel better somehow for not being able to prevent such horrific events from occurring, While I myself was saddened by the deaths of these two children I have no desire to post messages about the issue. It does concern me that fb is being used in this way though. I think that posting is so easy people think they can do something without really doing anything, maybe the posts are thought to be worthwhile

I have only had parents die, not children, the last thing I would want is for people who did not know them to be offering messages of support or condolence, I would have to read them and each message would bring the death back.

I think the social network response should be to take down the tribute sites, if you dont know the family personally why say anything?

What is interesting is the power social network sites have, fb must be the only organisation on earth that can mobilise millions instantaneously, I myself bought yet another copy of RATM to ensure that the X Factor did not get the number 1 spot at Xmas. FB is a society without borders, a unified voice, a very new concept that has enourmous potential and is a threat to incumbent social structures and policy.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

◦ **ScruffyRanger:**

26 Feb 2010 9:47:49am

I prefered it when anyone who used a computer was a nerd/geek.

You newbies take the internet waaaaaaay too seriously. It's scary, really. Take a look at yourselves.

[Agree](#) (1) [Alert moderator](#)

◦ **ScruffyRanger:**

26 Feb 2010 9:49:11am

"FB is a society without borders, a unified voice, a very new concept that has enourmous potential and is a threat to incumbent social structures and policy."

Oooo... I dunno about that, Grand Pa. Think you might have bumped your head.

Without borders... LOLS! What a joke!

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

▪ **OmMarit:**

26 Feb 2010 11:59:29am

Yes, I agree ScruffyRanger, serious bump to the head.

Its just a paid advertising networking interface, duh, like MySpace or Hi5 or the numerous other similar sites.

As for the society without borders, unified voice thing. I am very selective about who I even let to be my Facebook "friend", just as I don't talk to every person in the bus or chat to everyone who lives in my street. And one thing I know for sure is that the bulk of the people who posted on those tribute sites are not ones I would want as real friends or even cyberspace "friends".

The only threat most of those people on the tribute sites posed to "encumbent social structures and policy" was if they actually decided to meet in real time and form a physical lynch mob as opposed to the cyberspace one. Given that most couldn't spell and had no knowledge of grammar I don't think they will be writing any policy documents!

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **Maka:**

26 Feb 2010 9:39:37am

Demanding Facebook manage its content is like demanding Australia Post manage the contents of snail mail. The information age is currently SMS, Facebook, Twitter, pics and video from every mobile phone etc etc, and its headed for more and more real time video content. The Facebook tributes and the idiot element that defaces them are a reflection of how society communicates today. Instant, continuous, emotional but not always well thought through.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **Shane:**

26 Feb 2010 10:22:48am

The difference is an Australian government could (theoretically) require that Australia Post manages the content of snail mail and Australian telcos manage the content of SMS.

Australia cannot require Facebook or Twitter to manage content as they are in another country. Remember that Senator Conroy recently demanded that Google block certain content on YouTube to Australian users. Google quite rightly told him to go jump.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **OmMarit:**

26 Feb 2010 1:03:28pm

Is it also a reflection of how spelling and grammar are rapidly declining in our schools? "Instant, continuous, emotional but not always well thought through" could just as easily be a condemnation of the way our society is headed. Basically not actually communicating in a real sense any more but rather in short bites of information. A way to avoid having real conversations or taxing one's mind too much to think in a structured and logical manner.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **richyroo:**

26 Feb 2010 10:22:03am

I reckon that Facebook grief actually brings us closer to a pre-industrial model, where the whole 'village' knew everything which was going on and shared in the pain of people who they weren't particularly close to.

Public displays of grief are likewise quite traditional in most cultures, for example the many Biblical references to 'wailing' and 'ashen faces' (ashen faces wasn't a metaphor, they used to put ash on their faces to show that they were grieving for a loved one).

For instance in a ye olde village, the chief/lord/king/mayor would have known whenever one of the peasant children was hurt, without being close to the family. And even a passer by would know by the rent clothing and ash covered face that a person had recently suffered a loss.

Whatever the 'value' of these actions is, they are a very old part of our psycho-genetic pattern and unlikely to change any time soon.

Facebook is the new town square, it's where people exchange news and gossip. and unlike the old media model, where people passively read news as presented, it's a two way street, for good and ill, but meta-good.

Get over your obsolete baby boomer 'lets all live in isolation surrounded by objects we control' judgemental whining, and realise that the way things were in the 1950's- 1980's was an aberration caused by suburban sprawl growing faster than social networks and the isolating and controlling influence of the old media model. Facebook grief is as traditional and natural as putting ash on your face.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

◦ **OmMarit:**

26 Feb 2010 12:09:59pm

Don't know what village you hang out in Richyloo or if you actually read some of the comments on those tribute sites. I read a few pages worth of them and one thing I know for sure, I don't want to be in the same village as that lot!

My Facebook "family" is restricted to very few known individuals and we have a big wall around our compound to keep out the crazies in the village.

Also I am a baby boomer who used the internet in the late '80s before it was even heard of by the general public and possibly when you were still at primary school, to network with other activists on a global level.

You must be the sort of person who chats to everyone in the pub or on the bus. It's good to be that open and friendly though.

[Agree](#) (1) [Alert moderator](#)

• **J:**

26 Feb 2010 10:54:22am

If it was limited to the Facebook site, it would not be so bad, but when every media organisation continues to discuss it, it makes it many times worse. Why is a website with thousands of strangers leaving messages so feel a



bit better about their own lives newsworthy?

BTW, to those wanting to harm the guy arrested - how about innocent until proven guilty?

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

◦ **richyroo:**

26 Feb 2010 11:03:16am

As usual the media have a lot to answer for with their desperate amoral feeding on the pain of others.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

• **strangegirl99:**

26 Feb 2010 10:54:43am

Let me say first that I am not involved in any way in either of the tribute sites, but I think I can understand why people feel the need to post.

People in the olden days lived in small communities, and when a family suffered a loss the people in the community felt the need to help comfort them in some way.

Maybe by going to the funereal, signing a condolence book, sending flowers or giving a prepared meal to the family. Families were not isolated in their 'family greif' because others had experienced similar things and wanted to help them.

In this global age most people dont live in small towns, poeple and families are socially isolated. However people still have the same instincts and desire to be part of a bigger group, there sense of "community" comes from the media, and for many by social networking sites.

People feel a genuine sense of shock and sorrow for what has happened, and they know that they cant geniunely help the family, but they do care and may be these tribute pages are the only way that they can show that they care.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

• **pacificwolf:**

26 Feb 2010 11:20:42am

Isn't the person who creates the site called the "administrator".

Isn't it the administrators responsibility to moderate discussion on public FaceBook page which they created ... the same as a forum site or feed back page similar to this one ... ensuring irrelevant, nasty comments either don't make it onto the site or is deleted?

The administrator has to take FULL responsibility for published items on "their" site - while they may allow public entry, the administrators still the power to delete inappropriate content as they see fit on pages they have created - not monitoring and moderating "their" site is a failing of "their" responsibility.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)



- **TrixieMelodian:**

26 Feb 2010 12:08:10pm

I do find it quite obscene that strangers feel the need to publicly pour out their grief for someone they have never met - it feels like they believe it makes them a "better" person if they not only share their horror and sadness at a terrible crime with their family and friends, but demonstrate it to the world.

I disagree that this is a result of people feeling more connected to the "global village" due to online social networking, I think it is a broader, modern phenomenon where people are desperate to outdo each other in a frenzy of grief and despair - just look at the over the top displays around Princess Diana's death.

To everyone out there who feels the need to set up a Facebook page to mourn the death of someone you only know via news reports - show some dignity in your horror at what has happened (it's not really grief - you didn't even know them) and show some respect for those who are genuinely grieving and allow the media circus to subside.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **judyK:**

26 Feb 2010 12:47:06pm

This issue reminds me of the death of Lady Di- I just couldn't "get it" at all. Or those bunches of flowers/teddybears/photos stuck to power poles at places where car crashes have happened.

I find it quite weird that folk seem to feel the need to make such a parade of their "grief". I guess it must make them feel more virtuous than those of us who don't do these things.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **Garbo:**

26 Feb 2010 1:00:03pm

Well for many facebook is their main means of communication. There was a time when you would see this kind of information in a local newspaper obituary. But these days facebook, is the most effective way to get your message across. So its no suprise that people put up tributes to dead people on facebook.

But the fact is we still have a long way to go in learning how to use this new form of communication in a sensible way.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **TrixieMelodian:**

26 Feb 2010 2:01:47pm

Newspaper obituaries are at least however, written by journalists then edited and proofread. Facebook outpourings are just stream-of-consciousness emotion without any checks on their content and style.

People who contribute to death notices also usually have \*some\* connection to the dead person, as opposed to total strangers gushing to the world about how upset they are...

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

- **Pete S:**

26 Feb 2010 1:20:38pm

it is truley tradgic that our society has become so shameless.

everything is a disposable and fake, secure and insincere as it all now stems from the click of the mouse.

[Agree](#) (0) [Alert moderator](#)

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