Grief policing and the toxic online environment

Katie Gach

In the wake of the deaths of Alan Rickman, David Bowie and Prince in 2016, grieving fans flocked to social media platforms like Facebook, sharing their memories, expressing their condolences, and grieving in what researchers describe as a “virtual wake.”

But many fans found a surprisingly toxic environment online, where self-appointed “grief police” told people they had no reason to grieve for a stranger at all, and some dissed the dead saying they “deserved” it.

That’s the takeaway from a new study by CU Boulder’s Katie Gach (Gatch) that provides insight into death, grief and social media.

CUT 1 “My paper is about why people were being so mean to each other

over what I thought was kind of a sensitive topic. (923) What I would call, like, the ‘stereotypical’ example of grief policing is that someone would comment on a news article, ‘Oh my gosh. I can't believe Prince is dead. I'm such a big fan. I am so sad. I've been crying all morning.’ (:22) And grief policing would be somebody responding to that saying, ‘Oh my gosh. What is wrong with you? Why are you so sad over someone you didn't even know?’ “(:29)

Gach is a digital ethnographer at CU Boulder’s ATLAS Institute. She decided to study grief policing after one of her favorite actors, Alan Rickman died at around the same time rock icon David Bowe passed away. She says that’s when she noticed something peculiar about people’s comments.

CUT 2 “Part of the reason that I picked the celebrities that I did to do this study was that I thought that they would were different enough in terms of what the general public opinion of them was that it would reveal different types of grief policing. And I was surprised that it didn't because when you think of someone like Alan Rickman he never really did anything controversial. (:20) And especially compared to someone like David Bowie who had this kind of cutting edge idea about gender expression. And David Bowie was a much more divisive celebrity than Alan Rickman.” (:31)

For the study, Gach and her research team analyzed thousands of comments made on Facebook in the aftermath of celebrity deaths to glean broader insight into how people grieve death in the age of social media.

CUT 3 “Social media has become such a big part of us sharing life with one another. So, by necessity, it's also become part of sharing death. Telling one another about deaths that are affecting us. Responding to deaths that are affecting the general public. (:12) So, in some ways, social media has provided a place for people to maybe discuss their feelings with other fans when they wouldn't have had a space for it before.”

Gach says social media platforms could do a better job fostering civil discourse in such sensitive times. She says they could switch their algorithms away from emphasizing the most inflammatory comments and present news of death in a different visual way than, say, a cat video or new celebrity diet.

CUT 4 “The most popular comments in these threads will get pulled to the top. And popular is determined by the level of engagement. How many people click on it. How many people like it. How many people respond to it. (:11)) So what can happen is that the most popular comments will get pushed to the top of the thread and maybe something mean or disrespectful that caused a lot of negative reaction will get pulled to the top.” (:24)

The study called, *Control you emotions, Potter*, was recently published in a journal on human computer interactions. To listen to a podcast on grief policing click on <https://soundcloud.com/cuboulder/grief-policing?in=cuboulder/sets/lab-rats>.