Cyber-Memorials in Our Post-9/11 World

The victims of the September 11 attacks came from all over the world, not just America. As a result, the Internet became a place where the dead were memorialized, because the Web is an international space. In the years since 9/11, acts of memorialization are increasingly being globalized due to the Internet.

by Jason Cristobal

Within hours of the World Trade Center towers collapsing, walls that were in the vicinity of Ground Zero became mural-like displays of "missing" signs, depicting New Yorkers who were feared dead. Shrines appeared in front of firehouses and police stations, honoring rescuers who saved civilian lives before losing their own. In the following days, similar improvised memorials would appear at the Pentagon, in Pennsylvania, and even in other nations. September 11 happened at the dawn of the 21st century, at a time when nations were increasingly becoming connected by digital media; millions around the world saw the video footage of Flight 175 crashing only minutes after it happened (in fact, live broadcasts made it possible to even watch it as it crashed). Digital media also offered news ways to express the subsequent grief and mourning. Countless e-memorials have sprung up on the Internet in the years after the attacks, the most notable being September11victims.com. Unlike physical memorials, such as parks, monuments, or the Ground Zero "missing" signs, September11victims.com can be visited anywhere in the world; it transcends national boundaries, making it a universal commemoration of human loss; this reveals how acts of memorialization have historically been constrained by national identity, and points to an Internet-driven post-9/11 future where these acts will no longer have this constraint.

CYBER-CEMETERIES

On the September11victims.com website, there is a link to a page titled "Victims List," which indexes the nearly 3,000 profile pages--one for each victim--that appear on the site. The list is organized into six columns: one for the World Trade Center, one for each of the four hijacked planes, and one for the Pentagon; in each column are links to individual victims' pages. By looking at these thousands of links fill the screen, one can start to visualize the humanity that was snuffed out in less than three hours on that Tuesday morning. Each link is a unique personality, a unique soul, whom the world lost on that day; the links orderly populate one's computer monitor as if to suggest a posthumous group photograph showing these people together. They are listed alphabetically by last name and the links also note where in the US they hailed from, or their city and country if they were from outside the US. However, this geography is ignored in the list's arrangement; American and international victims are mixed together and organized only by the location of their death, acknowledging the universality of human loss and recognizing 9/11 as a global tragedy rather than only an American one.

AMERICAN TRAGEDY VS. INTERNATIONAL TRAGEDY

Post-9/11 media and popular culture has, by default, labeled the attacks to be strictly an American tragedy, which was embodied in the patriotism that was immediately displayed. **American flags popped up everywhere**, on the porches of suburban houses, in car windshields, in the store windows of Arab-American businesses, and even in the British capital when the US national anthem was played at Buckingham Palace on September 13.[1] On the same day, the French newspaper *Le Monde* declared "We Are All Americans." September 11, 2001, as a cultural event, was so thoroughly Americanized that people seemed to be ignoring the fact that the death toll had citizens of 82 nations.[2]

No matter how un-controversial a physical 9/11 memorial may be, its projected meaning will be constrained by where it's located; the Crescent of Embrace and **Reflecting Absence** may honor the tragedies of their respective locations, but the fact that they are physically located in the United States subtly reinforces those tragedies as being American, not giving enough attention to the multinational death toll. Of course, it would be physically impossible for a 9/11 memorial to be in a nation-neutral place, unless it was somewhere that is free of any geographic and geopolitical meaning. The only such "place" on Earth with this bizarre kind of neutrality is Cyberspace, which is a mysterious dimension where physical matter does not exist, and where our global society is transformed into limitless digital information. Cyberspace is also the location of September11victims.com, where the lack of national boundaries blossoms in the profile pages of individual victims. On each of these pages, visitors to the site can leave comments, which are usually eulogies, and on many of these pages are comments from people outside of the US. Visitors will occasionally write these in their native language, reflecting the global audience of this e-memorial, as well as the universality of human loss. It is in this way that September11victims.com honors the multinational tragedy that is 9/11, more so than any physical memorial ever could, because it would almost always be confined to a specific nation.

MATERIAL AND HUMAN LOSS

September11victims.com's act of memorialization is geographically neutral because it's located on the World Wide Web. Not only does this neutrality make it an appropriate place for memorializing 9/11 as multinational, but because there is no material existence on the Web, it also serves as an appropriate metaphor for the incalculable loss of physical matter that have marked the attacks at Ground Zero; everything from the disintegrated 110-story towers, to the victims' remains, many of which turned into ash and may never be found. In her analysis of Ground Zero's post-9/11 meanings, Marita Sturken examines how this massive material loss has become a profound characteristic of 9/11's aftermath; she uses her niece's reaction to the attacks to illustrate how unbelievable it was for so much to have vanished so quickly:

There was an unbelievability to the transformation of such formidable buildings into particles of dust. My niece responded to news that her father's office in the South Tower had been destroyed by asking about the fate of her drawings that had been on display there-- what had happened to them? Initially, I thought this response exemplified the narcissistic world of a six year old, but then I wondered if she was not asking the very question that was the most difficult to understand--the question of materiality. How could those buildings, those objects--those people--suddenly be gone?[3]

She also notes that it could be problematic to replace and/or memorialize this material loss by creating something new, because of the different meanings now associated with that location:

In the months and years since September 2001, Ground Zero in lower Manhattan has become a site of destruction and reconstruction, of intense emotional and political investments, a highly overdetermined space. It is a place inscribed by local, national, and global meanings, a neighborhood, a commercial district, and a site of memory and mourning. The narratives that have been layered on Ground Zero reveal the complex convergence of political agendas and grief in this space, as if, somehow, the production of new spatial meanings will provide a means to contain the past, maintenance the grief, and make sense of the violent events that took place there.[4]

Indeed, how exactly to go about this "production of new spatial meanings" has been a controversy since 2001. There has been, and still is, debate over what should be done with the space at Ground Zero; some people would like to see a new office building replace the original WTC, others would like a memorial, which is an additional controversy in itself because some of the proposed WTC memorials have been criticized for their designs.[5] September11victims.com, however, is unaffected by issues of spatial meanings, because it technically doesn't have "space" in first place due to being on the Internet. This allows it to be a more neutral and global act of memorialization whose meaning is not influenced by its location, allowing it to also honor the Pentagon and Pennsylvania attacks, in addition to the more well-known ones in New York; this means its memorializing range reaches much farther. This range, which is a staple of e-memorials in general, has caused them to reach far beyond a 9/11 context as well.

POST-9/11

In the years since September11victims. com started, e-memorialization has seen a surge in popularity in the US and elsewhere in the western world. One can now search the Internet to find e-memorials for the victims of the 2005 London bombings, and Spanish-language e-memorials for the 2004 Madrid bombings. Non-terrorism tragedies in the US have also been memorialized online, such as the Virginia Tech massacre and Hurricane Katrina.[6] People's individual deaths, those not related to any mass tragedy, are increasingly being cyber-mourned as well. In recent years,

whenever a high school or college student in the US passes away, classmates and other well-wishers will often leave eulogies on that person's Facebook or MySpace page online. Like on the victims' pages on September11victims.com, these eulogies can potentially come from anywhere in the world, due to Cyberspace's lack of national boundaries, and this effectively gives these kids a global e-funeral with cyber-attendees in many countries. One example of this phenomenon is the case of **Anna Svidersky**, a 17-year-old from Washington who became somewhat of a posthumous Internet celebrity after she was extensively e-memorialized following her 2006 murder. Svidersky, who was born in Russia and grew up in the US, attracted web users' attention in many other countries due to online tributes that her friends made for her on the MySpace website, where she was an active member. The British newspaper *The Guardian* described how her e-popularity unexpectedly spread to the UK and to other nations as a result of the Internet being a global space:

> Tragic as it was, (Anna Svidersky's death) was never destined to attract worldwide attention. Until, that is, Anna's friends posted the news of her murder on MySpace. Together, they composed a tribute to Anna - complete with a collage of photographs - and sent it out to all their contacts. They wanted to let people know what had happened and to keep Anna's memory alive. Soon it was circulating around the entire MySpace community, along with pleas to forward the message. Just a few days after Anna's death, the story had reached much of the online world. People started taking virtual pilgrimages to Anna's profile while others made video tributes and posted them online. Anna's death had once again showed the power of the internet to spread information across the world almost immediately: while few, if any, British news sources have covered the story, tens of thousands of British web users know about Anna.[7]

Real-life memorial for the Virginia Tech massacre

If she had died in a pre-Internet era, Svidersky likely never would have been known outside of her hometown of Vancouver, Washington, let alone memorialized outside of the United States. Likewise, the 9/11 attacks, which occurred in the US but had some victims from other countries, never would have been sufficiently memorialized as a global tragedy if the globe had not been Cyber-connected. This exposes how acts of memorialization have historically been confined to a geographic space, usually a nation, and that the advent of e-memorials is ushering in a new era where the memory of those who have passed away will no longer be limited by national boundaries.

Most 9/11 memorials, in one way or another, emphasize how American the catastrophe was, which is further augmented if the memorial is located in the United States. While the attacks did happen in the US and most of the dead were Americans, human loss is something that is universally mourned and the dead of 9/11 did, in fact, hail from dozens of nations in addition to America. To properly memorialize 9/11 as an international tragedy would be best carried out in a place that is neutral to the concept of nation, because no one country represents all of the victims. The only such neutral "place" that exists is the World Wide Web, where our planet becomes a nationless digital environment. Acts of e-memorialization such as September11victims.com, as well as the post-9/11 cyber-mourning of Anna Svidersky, indicate that our increasingly interconnected global society needs ways to honor the memories of the deceased without having to be limited by national boundaries.

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