

‘The White Rose of Yorkshire’: Public Relations, Condolences and Grief Expression

Luke Strongman

Correspondence: Luke Strongman, Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, New Zealand.

Received: July 11, 2017

Accepted: August 21, 2017

Online Published: August 25, 2017

doi:10.11114/smc.v5i2.2544

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v5i2.2544>

Abstract

In public relations, there is always unpredictability. It is part of a public relations strategists' role to assess potential areas of crisis, to monitor the corporate mediascape for unpredictable events and to mitigate uncertainty for their clients be they organisations or individuals. But such public relations exercises are made more complex and unpredictable by the emotions experienced in public grieving. No recent commemoration has been so shocking and grief inspiring as that for British Labour Politician Member of Parliament for Batley and Spenningsdale in Yorkshire, Ms. Jo Cox who was shot and stabbed to death outside of her 'constituency surgery' in Birstall, West Yorkshire on June 16th, 2016. On her sudden and untimely death a nation and a Commonwealth 'erupted' into an expression of mourning, with some commentaries describing Ms. Cox as the 'white rose of Yorkshire' in a transient image, ephemeral pure and emblematic of their personal and public grief. As an MP who supported liberal causes, Ms Cox's untimely death was also a political event. It occurred exactly at that moment of juncture when the 'leave' and 'remain' factions of the BREXIT campaign were focusing their vitriolic fervor, all the more poignant as she died espousing the liberal cause that was defeated in the first Referendum held on June 23rd, 2016. In discussing the relationship between personal and private grief, this article will focus on the eulogies for Ms Cox and the condolence message phenomenon, primarily as a mediated organisational 'operation'.

Keywords: public relations, condolence messages, grief cycle, organisational strategy

1. Materials and Methods

Based on a literature survey and critical analysis of scholarly sources in public relations practice, intrapersonal communication literature of grief, sociological literature of mourning and organizational communication practice, this article examines and comments on the role of condolence messages in public relations strategy. The article engages in qualitative critique of the empirical literature of grief, and analysis of the literature on the strategizing of public grief expression as a form of social constructivism that is amenable to textual and organisational operationalization. The approach to the topic is one of reflective interlocution of defined topic areas.

2. Introduction

Public Relations practices involve the building of beneficial relations between an organization and an audience. Practitioners of public relations study public opinion, attitudes and socio-emotional factors of distributed demographics, as well as monitor the popular mediascape for aspects of influence, which effect the actions and plans of organizations, and they are involved in the evaluation of action and communication programs (Petrovici, 2014, p. 715). As Greer and Moreland (2003) suggest, public relations policy and organizational communication literature has long claimed the importance of 'openness and candour' (p. 428) in dealing with crises. The attempt in this paper, is to look beneath the surface of media comments to understand the deeper relations of the grieving process that takes place in an elision of private and public spheres in grief expression, from condolence messages to public relations strategy. The role of the organization and public relations practitioner in contexts of grief expression is critiqued and commented on.

3. Grief as an Organisational Strategy

Three operational strategies are observed in crises: Firstly, being open and available to the media; secondly, being willing to disclose information; and thirdly, being honest and ethically motivated (Mersham, Theunissen and Peart et al., 2009, p. 104). Given these three parameters, public relations strategists are advised to 'customise' crisis content to their business needs. But such 'customisation' is problematic when involving issues of grief and mourning, which involve both personal expression of emotion and organisational responses to loss and grief. Neimeyer, Klass and Dennis (2014)

argue that: “[i]n contrast to dominant Western conceptions of bereavement in largely intrapsychic terms. ... grief or mourning is not primarily an interior process, but rather one that is intricately social, as the bereaved commonly seek meaning in this unsought transition in not only personal and familial, but also broader community and cultural spheres.” (p. 485). This view accords with the position of the public relations strategist that grief is a process that needs organisational operation, even if not all stages reach media expression. But it may not entirely accord with the individual or psychological view.

Expressions of public grief take many forms. From a communication perspective, they may often be symbolic responses to sudden loss, markers of the onset of grief, boundary points at transitional moments in life, death, mourning and politics. Indeed as Liebsch (2016) notes, “[t]raditional rhetoric keeps itself pitifully alive at funerals: as praise of the dead (*laudatio*), as mourning on the part of the bereaved (*lamnetatio*), and as a concluding word of comfort (*consolatio*). The admonition of the bereaved mortals with respect to their own future (*exhortatio*), which used to be customary, has been completely eliminated” (p. 233). Yet perhaps from a social constructionist’s perspective, they will have ‘dissipated’ rather than become eliminated, as the conventions of grief and mourning have become operationalized as part of communal discourse and organizational behavior.

Symbolic markers of mourning are in effect ‘gifts’ for an absent receiver; they become communal gifts as tributaries, which help to maintain social relationships, help to form bonds, and invite ultimate reciprocation even if only as part of the acceptance of a social order (Mauss, 1990) While there is a difference between communicating to express grief, and the conscious act of the mourning process, the symbolic personal gesture and the corporate communicate may be elided in such moments; coalescing in a single or series of gestures of loss and reconciliation, in the public eye, local media and international press. Such boundary markatons (or demarcations) highlight the social constructionist view that emotions are narrative processes, as well as expressive life stages in which meanings are found and reassembled – they are exchanges between people.

Public relations practitioners are concerned with various categories of audiences according to market segmentation. Their communicative practices involve interactive relationships, and trust based connections between diverse audiences (Petrovici, 2014, p. 714). Public relations are a means by which organizations create a climate of confidence and sympathy among its own staff, stakeholders and clients (Petrovici, 2014, p. 715). Such time-bounded activities are challenged by the operationalisation of mourning and grief processes because ‘emotional time’ and ‘organisational time’ will not always coincide. As Liebsch (2016) suggests: “Grief was supposed to come to an end at last so that the griever could again become as fully capable of life as possible. Grief was permitted as an exception to the rule of normal, grief-free life, but with a time limit” (p. 232). But as with any process that involves human emotion, although processes are observable, who is ultimately to say where they begin and end?

The rationalist might claim in the manner of Liebsch (2016), that “[w]here grief is articulated publically and politically, by contrast, it is suspected of mere sentimentality. Is it possible to grieve for others whom we have not ourselves lost? History goes on, it is said.” (p. 237). Yet the unjustness of premature death tends to override such sentiment, and because of Ms. Cox’s life, belief and work as a politician, we can set apart her mourning as something other than the ‘grief on the part of a stranger for stranger,’ and the empathy entailed in imagining the grief experienced in her passing. The public display of grief also, invites critique of the instrumentalisation of mourning, it has as Liebsch (2016) notes “... antipolitical significance within the political: it publically reminds ‘politics’ that it always has to do with others who as others and strangers are not at its disposal” (p. 238). Hence there may always be an imaginative process in any mediated emotion.

As the bouquets and tributes were lain at the formerly cheerful and welcoming door of Cox’s constituency office in Batley, Mr. Cox’s gratuitous murder, on the street of her constituency, received media prominence worldwide in the context of the emerging revelations of BREXIT (or Britain’s Exit from the European Union), concerning which Ms. Cox was a ‘remain’ campaigner. Ms. Cox was well known in her ethnically diverse constituency and in British Parliament for her inclusionist and liberal views on immigration and in her support for refugees from the Syrian civil war. As Ms Cox had previously suggested in her support of refugees, European Union migrants have “... contributed 20 Billion pounds more to our economy than they’ve taken in benefits” (Staufenberg, 2016, para 3). Speculation was made Ms. Cox’s murder politically motivated, that she had become a victim of a deranged pro-nationalist movement. The man charged with the murder of Ms Cox, reputedly held extreme right-wing in his views, apparent in his claimed shouting ‘Britain first’ when he attacked Cox and “death to traitors, freedom for Britain” at his court appearance (Caesar, 2016, para 3).

As a strident campaigner for the ‘remain’ in the European Union vote, Ms Cox might possibly be seen as a ‘thorn in the side’ of those who sought to advance the cause of British isolationism and retrenchment from European ties. The extreme nationalism of such isolationist right-wing politics is arguably fueled by social resentment and highlights a divide between such factions and larger metropolitan Britain. The Referendum on whether the United Kingdom would

remain or leave the European Union was held on Thursday 23rd June 2016, a week after Ms. Cox murder, and the 'leave' vote won by 51.9% to the 'remain' votes' 48.1%. Arguably, it "unearthed old grudges" about Britain's acceptance of foreigners and resentments about immigrants among poorer areas (Caesar, 2016, para 4.), despite the fact that such people are themselves now British also.

Arguably were BREXIT to dissolve and the United Kingdom remain within a European Union, there might be less political and economic turbulence, and Britain would be free to pursue its own national agenda within the framework provided by the existing European Union and the shared opportunities it provides, not the least of which being the appeal to a higher European judiciary. As George Soros suggested in a speech to the European Parliament in June 2016, "[t]he Brexit vote was a negative shock but the tragedy no longer looks like a 'fait accompli,'" (Srivastava, 2016, para.1). So for many in Britain, Ms Cox's murder symbolised in a moment, instantly and forever, the poignancy that many thought was Britain's 'stumbling' attempt to leave the European Union, and which many believed did not reflect 'true' national opinion, despite the result of the referendum vote. Initially, commentators thought that Britain was set to lose out, firstly through devaluation of the pound; secondly through jeopardising good trading terms with European nations established since 1973; and thirdly through the added cost of renegotiating as a single trading partner; fourthly through the need to borrow capital to revitalise its industrial capacity; fifthly, it would also lose the social and economic stimulus gained through immigration; and sixthly, the polarisation of isolationist vs. liberal forces in the economy would lead to social ruptures, economic fissures, and tragedy. But should BREXIT go ahead, there will be British nationalist interests concerned that it would be a success, economically if not, at least initially, politically. But what mix would there be of public and private concerns in such newly invigorated British nationalism?

The emerging politics of BREXIT aside, the tremendously grievous effect on the people close to her – those Ms. Cox knew, and those she inspired within her constituency, her untimely passing also marked a 'spiral of recognition' throughout a global media. Condolence messages praising Ms. Cox's humanitarian work were received from the highest sources, including past and present Prime Ministers and Presidents, Kevin Rudd of Australia and Barak Obama of America, amongst them. Condolences were also received from cultural leaders with a video tribute from the band Portishead and tributes from U2's Bono and other prominent celebrity humanitarians. However, a media conscious public throughout the Commonwealth also recognized the poignancy of the loss. But the United Kingdom BREXIT debate, in which the result of the referendum of the English, Irish Scots and Welsh amalgam of nations remaining within or leaving the European Union and referendum vote was announced on June 23rd 2016, followed shortly after Cox's public funeral. The social, political and economic uncertainty of Britain's signaled intention to exit from the European Union overtook the salutations of grief, at least at the forefront of international media attention. Mourning and commemoration from friends, associates, political colleagues and the British Parliament and public nevertheless continued. For a moment, Ms. Cox's untimely demise, signified the mood of the times, something had happened that Britain could regret, or at least grieve. In New Zealand, Ms. Cox's passing would have been commemorated by a *tangihanga* (funeral) as a *tikanga* of the Maori world. As Ngahare (2016) relates: "[t]he tangi is about honoring the dead and looking after the living. Generally a tangi will be held over multiple days, but this is left up to the ehanau pani (bereaved family). During the tangi the *tupapaku* (corpse) is never left alone. In fact, the tupapaku is treated with the same respect as if he or she were alive" (para. 2, p. A6).

4. Discussion – Grief as a 'Multi-Levelled Phenomenon'

Grief is a "multi-level phenomenon" - at first a self-narrative that helps to organize life experience, and a negotiation of inter-personal viability, it becomes a public communication in the form of grief accounts, eulogy and elegy (Niemeyer *et al.*, 2014, p. 485). The indescribable emotion following the sudden, unexpected death of a widely admired public figure, has effects beyond those beyond immediate contact and shows how large a circle of influence a person might have in today's world of global media and political relations. It also demonstrates that there are at least three tiers of response to grief from a Public Relations perspectives: Firstly, the private and public personal expression of condolences, through flowers, messages and poems, secondly, the organizational response which acknowledge the stature of the contribution and the loss to friends, colleagues and public life through public relations statements, and finally the political and humanitarian message of consternation and condolences from international leaders.

Human beings are affective agents whom form bonds with their environment and their kind. Yet we live our lives in which change and flux is constant, we live in an impermanent world, in which people, places and objects come in and out of consciousness and indeed in and out of existence as we negotiate and co-construct meanings in our environment. As we form bonds and attachments with people, places and things, loss is a challenge, and not something, which those who have not suffered it, will understand. While convention in low context societies is that we deal with loss and its concomitant – grief - privately until dispassionate, it is nevertheless emotionally (debilitating), and also socially constructed and contested. Grief belongs to both biology and sociology. Yet as a form of expression, it would seem to have informal communal rules (Niemeyer *et al.*, 2014, 486). Some of these rules may become habituated in public

relations strategy, or they may be adopted to become so.

Grief is an emotion – a feeling, and it triggers remembrance and forces to grasp for other cultural and linguistic referents in order to process and understand our feeling of numbness, or of acute distress. Like the public grief, which followed the premature death of Lady Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales on August 31st 1997, when she and three other occupants of the Mercedes in which she was travelling were killed in a high-speed static collision on a Paris underpass; Jo Cox's premature death inspired a similar sense of trauma and grief, setting aside causal factors. The sense of public mourning experienced after Lady Diana's death is probably unsurpassed in modern times in Britain, but a no less intense grieving was experienced more recently when Jo Cox, the feisty British Labour party politician inspired a global gasp of regret following her passing, as the victim of the first killing of a sitting British MP since Ian Gow in 1990. That such a young inspirational figure of British politics with so much life before her could meet with such an undignified demise, was shocking. Ms. Cox was arguably less famous than Lady Diana and the media attention her untimely demise garnered, though intense, was far briefer, than that which accompanied the funeral of Lady Diana. Nevertheless, symbols of grief for Jo Cox and Lady Diana were similar, separated only by time and the profusion. As Brennan relates, for Lady Diana Spencer, some "50 million bouquets of flowers, weighing some 10 000 tons, were laid at Buckingham palace and Diana's London residence of Kensington Palace" (Brennan, 2008, p. 328). Bouquets, albeit more modest in number, were also laid for Ms. Cox at the Batly Town Hall showing the public focus and commemoration of private grief in a site related to the deceased.

A eulogy may be provided by someone who directly receives a loss, while condolences by someone who perceives the loss of others. Simultaneously, a parallel service to that at Batly Town Hall was also being held in Trafalgar Square in London at which Jo Cox's husband, Brendan, made a speech. In a moving eulogy, he commented that Jo Cox had come to:

... symbolize something much bigger in our country and in our world, something that is under threat – her belief in tolerance and respect, her support for diversity and her stand against hatred and extremism, no matter where it comes from. Across the world, we're seeing forces of division playing on people's worst fears, rather than their best instincts, trying to divide our communities, to exploit insecurities, and emphasize not what unites us but what divides us. Jo's killing was political, and it was an act of terror designed to advance an agenda of hatred towards others. What beautiful irony it is that an act designed to advance hatred has instead generated such an outpouring of love. Jo lived for her beliefs, and on Thursday she died for them, and for the rest of our lives we will fight for them in her name (Caesar, 2016, para 8).

As Walter (2001) suggests, as people in society become geographically mobile and their everyday lives become more fragmented, they come together for collective ritual, to crystallise 'meaning making' in public gatherings. The more disturbing the event, the greater tendency for mourners to come together in an attempt to glue the social bonds together (p. 498). Such was the momentarily coalescing of public feeling at Ms. Cox's funeral on June 20th 2016. The tone of the expression was inspired by Cox's husband, Brendan Cox, whose eloquent words responding to her demise, touched the hearts and minds of many in England and around the globe in a tribute from thousands in Trafalgar Square, central London: Insisting that Jo Cox's legacy be one of 'love, tolerance and unity' (Addley, Elgot, and Perraudin, 2016, para., 2), he had also said in a statement following her sudden demise that, "[t]oday is the beginning of a new chapter in our lives. More difficult, more painful, less joyful, less full of love. I and Jo's friends and family are going to work every moment of our lives to love and nurture our kids and to fight against the hate that killed Jo" (Cited in Finnigan, 2016, para 3). The eloquence of the sentiment is striking. While in one sense such public expression is 'unanswerable' in another it raises the issue of how the media and public relations strategists will deal with grief statements and messages of condolence both as in response to individual collective mood and out of a sense of social justice.

5. Five Stages of Grief

Grief is an interpretative communication activity. The social constructionists view lends itself to the appropriation of private cognitive activity to those of a wider organizational context. Fortunately, people do understand the emotion 'grief' and its conformity to certain characteristics, which may be replicated in social structures and conversations. Neimeyer et al. (2014) argue that grief is a an interpretative activity that strives to find meaning, reconstruct narratives in the wake of loss, negotiate social transition, retain a continuing bond with deceased, recruit support and conform to or resist expected cultural norms (p. 496). While an individualistic outlook characterizes the literature of the treatment of grief, the processes themselves may be lent to wider acculturation and organizational management, which are the concern of the public relations strategist.

If a client or an organisation is faced with a set of internal or external problems which threaten its integrity, or the reputation or existence of an individual or organisation, public relations practitioners will analyse a number of factors

physically affect the functioning of organisational system, threaten the organisation's identity, and examine events processes, and procedures which threatens the 'validity' or 'meaning creation' of the organisation (Petrovici, 2014, p. 715). For the British Parliament, and in particular the British Labour Party, the meaning creation inspired by Ms. Cox's untimely demise was influenced by the grief process, and there was a 'conflict' between the fulfilment of this process and that part represented by the media.

The following section outlines the key stages of the grief cycle, its relation to the 'meaning creation' of condolence messages and the relevance for public relations strategists.. For Axelrod (2016), grief is universal, an emotion experienced by many, it is an appropriate mourning response to illness or the loss of a close relationship. It has five stages which are described below.

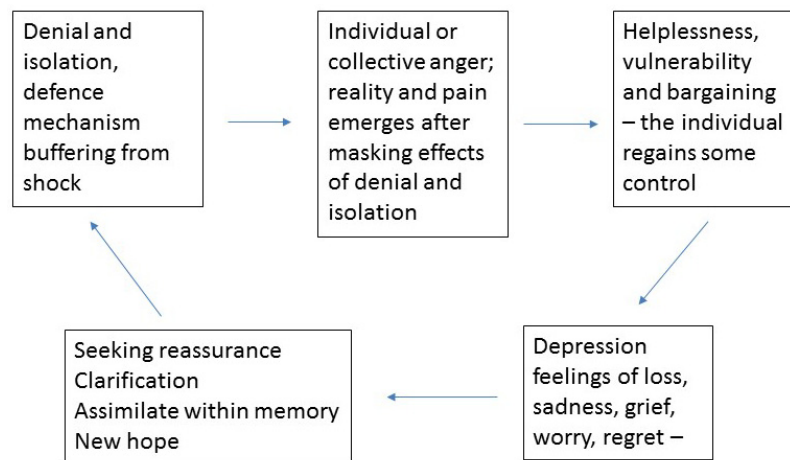


Figure 1. Showing Axelrod's 'Five stages of the grief'

As Theunissen and Mersham (2011) point out there are five dimensions to grief that the media may take part in expressing, in sharing sympathy and shock not only is 'solidarity created' but the media assumes an authoritarian role, interpreting events for others along an emotional dimension (p. 430). A cognitive dimension includes a preoccupation, "rumination, fantasizing and confusion" that is satisfied media focus and the attempt to reconcile personal and public beliefs (p. 430). There is also a physical dimension which may be inspired by a continual negative message but which is not itself reported on – a somatic and lowered immune function emotional and behavioral dimension (p. 430). The media no doubt helped fulfill the first second roles upon Ms Cox's death -- surprise, shock, grief consternation, anger and a kind of abrupt discontinuation of themes along these dimensions.

Applying five stages of grief to scenario; the death of Ms Cox did produce a sense of disbelief and created a 'ripple effect' in the speed with which the story resounded in the global media in June 2016. It produced an outcry against right-wing extremism, and sentiment that echoed Ms Cox's unitary politics. Media reports showed communal gatherings, and the public eulogies (such as that held in Trafalgar Square) clarified and assimilated the memory of the forthright politician as a person who brought hope and renewal in the public eye, tinged as they were with feeling of grief and sadness that new tomorrows without her presence would need to be forged.

Mourning is also a kind of vicarious grief, which is occasioned by public display, and "whether symbolic or real, individual or collective, loss of various kinds is routinely, if obliquely and enigmatically ... the event of death providing an opportunity for loss which has not been properly acknowledged ..." (Brennan, 2008, p. 1). As theorists of effective inter-personal communication advise, openness, empathy and supportiveness, and immediacy are factors which improve the conveyance of respect and togetherness (Mohan, McGregor, Saunders and Archee, 2008, p. 157). Mourning is dependent on identification with object, an attempt to repatriate to incorporate some of the loss experienced within the self of something mean something to someone else (Brennan, 2008, p. 3). In moments of sudden loss or grief, the ontological security of the present is disturbed.

A personal identity can be dislocated by loss, grief and mourning and it is very difficult to recover from it. It also has an organisational effect. Coping with grief entails expressing it and negotiating its meaning in interaction with other people. The expression of grief is also a necessary part of public acknowledgement and public relations practice that is often neglected, or perhaps only achieved partially and superficially, and which is sometimes divergent because of the separation of practicalities from the substrate of public emotive feelings.

Unfortunately, the sensationalism of the media which focuses on mourning 'events' tends to prime people for the

experience of grief but then disengages and refocuses on other 'newsworthy' events rather than participating in a more prolonged spectacle. This may result in a lack of closure amongst some publics. Conversely, speed of response in recognizing a 'public' emotion and effectively symbolizing it could be described as a first-mover advantage in crisis response'. As Doorley and Garcia (2015) state "whoever defines the crisis, the organization's motives, and its actions first, tends to win" (p. 311), (if there can be 'winners' and whether or not if the source of crisis is ultimately understandable) (Lerbinger, 1997). Despite the fact that there are frequently no ultimate 'winners' in a public commemoration, but rather respects are conveyed, people are mourned, some elements of a crisis are present, even if the trigger event is passed. The point is the awkward question of whether there is a 'maturation saturation' of commemoration inspired by grief events? And who is to judge when it has been reached, surely not the media, who will be responding to market demographics rather than psychological models. Characteristically there is an escalating intensity for the duration of the 'emotion', a period of scrutiny of media and public, interruption in normal business captivity, and consideration of ongoing public image by public relations strategists (Doorley and Garcia, 2015, p. 300). Frequently public commemoration be it grief or jubilation is 'captured' and reified in some way by means of public ceremony or symbol, such as wreath laying, this may also accord with the media model.

Painful emotions are not easily spoken but can be written, they are thus a form of distal communication (Brennan 2008, p. 10). Brennan argues that first person grief accounts are 'bolstered by pilgrimages to the site' and enable those not at the scene to identify, make sense, of the trauma of the events. Yet the media attention brought but such spectacles and the aftermath are also 'extravaganzas' that have potential for unchecked narcissism, given the outpouring of subjectivity and the predominance of first-person narrative view (Brennan, 2008, p. 14). Perhaps our mediated society already has a predisposition toward narcissism that is brought about by the erosion of values and short attention-span of commercialism, the soundbite sensationalism and spectacle of the media attention, for example. The belief that others should share one's experience and view of the world, is a feature of contemporary public mourning, but it may also be experienced as oppressive – a form of compulsory grief (Brennan, 2008, p. 14). More diffuse but no less pervasive is the feeling of loss or grief promulgated in the media, with no immediate source or outlet for the recipient or 'consumer' – a consequence of global dispersion of media influences. While the media 'stages' an event of mourning, it is curtailed by the pressing exigencies of public life, and can only be returned to retrospectively, or re-experienced as the sound bite moment, that may not be congruent with 'emotional' response stages. This prevents the cycle of grief from taking course in the public media, with corresponding audience effects. Despite the spectacle of the grief moment in the media, the 'stiff upper lip' rarely relaxes even if tears are brimming behind the eyes at the local level. There may also be national differences in media reactions.

6. Condolence Messages, Eulogies and Elegies

The most popular form of grief rite is the condolence message, and it is employed at all levels of the public relations spectrum, from the personal to the public and political. Brennan (2008) argues that condolence messages "oscillate between conservative structures of meaning; and contemporary 'structures of feeling'" (p. 326). There is a distinction between public and private in which modernity and tradition are destabilized by postmodern cultural forms that such media grief and mourning events appear to inaugurate, considered only as mediated responses, it may also produce an effect of disintermediation. A social platform for grief expression, for example through twitter, social media, internet, and newspaper, tends to atomize and commodify the private and public response. While personal condolence and citizen journalism may become blurred, the public relations practitioner is faced with the task of an organizational response to grief, which combines the personal and the public, the emotional and the professional. Condolence messages may also take the form of eulogies and elegies. As Niemeyer *et al* (2104) state, "[e]ulogies are the form of public address presented at funerals and memorial services whereby survivors and/ or clergy seek often to remember and memorialize the decedent, to assist the audience of mourners with troubling affect and cognition, and also to soothe their own raw emotions by expressing them (p. 490). Elegies differ in that they are forms of love longing and mourning which focus on the deceased, and are characterized by "sorrowful lamentation, idealization of the deceased" and melancholic emotions (Niemeyer et al., 2014, p. 490).

The social expression of grief enables a range of communications and serves to bridge gap between living and deceased; between the immediately bereaved and a wider community of mourning (Brennan, 2008, p. 326). Public mourning such as that experienced for Lady Diana and Ms. Cox, largely goes against an historical trend toward the privatization of grief and involves the vicarious grieving in both mourning events for a person or people personally unknown to the vast majority (Brennan, 2008, p. 328), though some senses of public 'knowing' may be conveyed by media, even if retrospectively. Although such mourning does have a form of participatory 'contagion' the expression and display of private emotion can also generate an undercurrent of alienation simply because it is almost universally distressing for the participant and onlooker (Brennan, 2008, p. 328). The result is something akin to 'numbness', through media can one become acculturated to mourning?

As Theunissen and Mersham (2011) observe that the emotion being expressed depends on ‘feeling rules’ (Furedi, 2007) which are defined by a ‘cultural script’ that determines norms about how emotions should be expressed. (p. 428). Nevertheless, expressions of grief and public mourning take place in ‘bounded’ spaces which bear marker’s and commemorations of a person’s passing. They frequently might take the form of poems signatures, epistolary messages – and when assembled in one space, condolence books (Brennan, 2008, p. 333). As Brennan (2008) points out, aside from the epitaph genre, poetry is suggestive of the need to ‘rekindle life in the creative imagination of the experient in response to his or her grief and loss’ who may otherwise convey awkwardness about what to say. Hence as Theunissen and Mersham (2011) point out a fourth dimension of grief is behavioral, and epitaph and poetry symbolically may facilitate or provide a focus for behavioral actions such as “crying, agitation and searching for ones” (p. 431). It may thus may a form of ‘imitation rite’ in respect to the deceased, a working through the innate repression of how to treat death, which itself may be the effect of socially produced behavior (p. 333). Brennan (2008) also argues that such condolences show the need for a vicarious relational ongoing, but mediated imaginary relationship with the deceased, which may have the characteristics of fandom but also of the continuing bonds theory – even if other publics (p. 333) share one side of this bond.

This points to a fifth dimension of grief which is existential, taking the forms of spiritual beliefs and values and its attitudes (Theunissen and Mersham, 2011, p. 431). Messages which are addressed personally to the deceased involve expression of an attempt to continue dialogue with deceased cut short by unexpected beloved’s departure, closure, opportunity to say in writing what couldn’t say in in speech (Brennan, 2008, p.335). As such, the continuing bonds theory describes a state in which there is a “... ‘working through’ in the form of detachment of emotional investment goals and memories linked to the bond of the deceased, in order to permit psychic and behavioral adaptation ...” (Neimeyer, Baldwin, Gillies, 2006, p. 716). The ‘working through’ is in part enabled by condolence messaging and should be acknowledged in public relations practice.

A personal thought in writing, condolences are addressed not to the deceased but to the bereaved. Their purpose is not only to commemorate but also to comfort and console (Brennan, 2008, p. 336). Like eulogia, condolences are rhetorical. They involve a rhetoric of persuasion by virtue of the symbolic attempts to reassure self and others (Brennan, 2008, p. 336). There is a tendency to assimilate a ‘new reality’ into pre-existing conservative structures of meaning (p. 339). As Neimeyer *et al.*, (2006), state “... continuing bonds appear to interact with meaning making in response to loss, such that those survivors who are able to make sense of loss in personally meaningful terms experience fewer symptoms of complicated grief” (p. 735). The expression of these emotions and the cognitions which modify them lead to the following inter-personal competencies that are characteristic of recovery.

Table 1. Showing Interpersonal Communication and Cognitive Experiences in Recovery from Grief (After Petrovici and Dobrescu, 2014, 1406)

Intrapersonal	Interpersonal	Adaptability	Stress Management	General mood
Self-awareness	Empathy	Problem solving	Stress tolerance	Happiness
Self- assertiveness	Relationships	Reality testing	Open mindedness	Optimism
Self-esteem	Social responsibility	Flexibility	Information control	
Self-actualisation				
Independence				

The spectrum of intra and inter-personal communication experiences shows how through the working through of a grief process it is possible to make peace with the need for continuing bonds with the deceased through authentic expression of emotion and socialisation with others. Public relations strategists should be mindful of the grief cycle and recovery process when composing messages to their publics as it will enable greater empathy and align with the needs of the stakeholder for recognition, and possibly to provide continuity and a path forward from experiences of mourning. Such re-accommodation of one’s worldview involves a realignment of relationships with the deceased, the “. . . affirmation of the once real existence of the decedent and also attempts to continue, and perhaps transform, the bonds of attachment ... in his or her physical absence” (Niemeier, *et al.*, 2014, p. 492). This transformation may be emotionally liberatory or confining. Lukaszewski (2013), points out that the ‘victim dimension’ can be managed, according to the needs of victims and those who empathise with them, “caring about the victims becomes key” (Doorley and Gracia, 2015, p. 305), those in the wider social ambit of victims and those emphasizing with them need a message of compassion and not to be ignored or discredited (Lukaszewski, 2013, p. 23). Sincere and positive responses can result in the cessation of victimhood. Thus in times of grief and mourning, and in providing condolence messages, practitioners will need design messages that describe, emulate and provide boundaries for the perceived emotional climate and generate connotations which are supportive and understanding, this may involve psychological as well as traditional business or organizational models.

7. Conclusion

Despite the fact that “meanings of the life and death of the deceased, and the meanings of the continuing bond within the community of mourners *are interactive meaning-making processes*,” not [only] individual phenomena, as the “radical individualism of contemporary capitalist consumer culture would have it” (Niemeyer, 2014, p. 493), grief messages and condolences are not something which organizations typically ‘manage all that well.’ This is because of variety of factors not the least of which are the exigencies of daily life and business, the non-coincidence of ‘emotional time’ (the experience of emotion) and ‘organisational time’, and the difficulty of aligning media responses with shifts in public sentiment. Too frequently grief messages and condolences can be cut short by incidental pressures or co-opted into other causes.

Although there may be a grief cycle to be observed, not all of its stages will necessarily be mediated. Hence for the public relations strategist, there is no one ‘right’ way of commemorating communally or from an organizational perspective the loss of a loved one and of dealing with grief. While an organization might want to provide corporate sponsorship to commemoration and provide an outlet for collective expression of personal belief, it will frequently go some way to distribute, absorb or defer grief expression or focus condolence in a symbolic way. After the eulogy, the most popular form of public expression of individual grief is the condolence message. As Brennan (2008) argues, condolence messages are exercises in “meaning making” which may have “personal and unexpected reactions” and are “discursive attempts to make death, as well as loss, intelligible” (p. 1). Such condolences when offered by the leader of an organization, or public figures are a ‘personal’ expression which carries a form of organizational support. Not simply an expression ‘on behalf’ of an organization it is a statement or disposition towards a societal understanding.

References

- Addley, E., Elgot, J., & Perraudin, F. (2016). Jo Cox: thousands pay tribute on what should have been MP’s birthday. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/22/jo-cox-murder-inspired-more-love-than-hatred-says-husband-brendan>
- Auden, W. H., & Isherwood, C. (1936). ‘Stop All the Clocks’. *The Ascent of F6*. London: Faber.
- Axelrod, J. (2016). The 5 Stages of Loss and Grief. Psych Central. Retrieved from: <http://psychcentral.com/lib/the-5-stages-of-loss-and-grief/>
- Brennan, M. (2008). Condolence Books: Language and Meaning in the Mourning for Hillsborough and Diana, *Death Studies*, 32, 326-351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180801974729>
- Brennan, M. (2008). Mourning and Loss: Finding Meaning in the Mourning for Hillsborough, *Mortality*, 13(1), 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270701783082>
- Doorley, J., & Garcia, H. F. (2015). *Reputation Management. The Key to Successful Public relations and Corporate Communication*. 3rd Edition. New York: Routledge.
- Finnigan, L. (2016). Jo Cox tributes: Husband of Jo Cox urges people to ‘fight against the hatred that killed her’ as tributes flood in for MP. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/16/jo-cox-shooting-david-ferguson-and-jeremy-corbyn-among-those-paying/>
- Furedi, F. (2007). From the narrative of the blitz to the rhetoric of vulnerability. *Cultural Sociology* 1, 2, 235-254. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975507078189>
- Greer, C. F., & Moreland, K. D. (2003). United Airlines’ and American Airlines’ online crisis communication following the September 11 terrorist attacks. *Public Relations Review*, 29, 427-441. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2003.08.005>
- Lerbinger, O. (1997). *The crisis manager: facing risks and responsibility*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Liebsch, B. (2016). Grief as a Source, Expression, and Register of Political Sensitivity. *Social Research*, 83(2), 229-254.
- Lukaszewski, J. E. (2013). *Lukaszewski on Crisis Communication: What Your CEO Needs to Know About Reputation Risk and Crisis management*. Brookfield, CT: Rothstein Associates Inc.
- Mauss, M. (1922). *The Gift: forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. London: Routledge.
- Mersham, G., Theunissen, P., & Peart, J. (2009). *Public Relations and Communication Management. An Aotearoa/New Zealand Perspective*. Auckland: Pearson New Zealand.

- Mohan, T., McGregor, H., Saunders, S., & Archee, R. (2008). *Communicating as Professionals*. Second edition. Victoria: Thomson.
- Neimeyer, R. A., Baldwin, S. A., & Gillies, J. (2006). Continuing Bonds and Reconstructing Meaning: Mitigating Complications in Bereavement. *Death Studies, 30*, 715-738. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180600848322>
- Neimeyer, R. A., Klass, D., & Dennis, M. R. (2014). A Social Constructionist Account of Grief: Loss and the Narration of Meaning. *Death Studies, 38*, 485-498. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2014.913454>
- Ngawhare, D. Tangi a beautiful expression of grief. *Taranaki Daily News*, pA6.
- Petrovici, A. (2014). PR in Crisis Situations. A Case Study. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences 149*, 714-718. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.08.269>
- Petrovici, A., & Dobrescu, T. (2014). The role of emotional intelligence in building interpersonal communication skills. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences, 116*, 1405-1410. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.406>
- Srivastava, S. (2016). 'Brexit tragedy no longer looks like 'fait accompli': Soros. *Europe News. CNBC*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cnbc.com/2016/06/30/brexit-is-a-negative-shock-soros.html>
- Stateman, A. (1997). Combating media-generated rumours. *Public Relations Tactics, 4*(12), 1-3.
- Theunissen, P., & Mersham, G. (2011). 'New Zealand's Darkest Day': The Representation of national grief in the Media: The Case of the Christchurch Earthquake'. *Alternation Special Edition, 4*, 420-440.
- Walter, T. (2001). From cathedral to supermarket: mourning, silence and solidarity. *The Sociological Review, 49*(4), 494-511. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.00344>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution license](#) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.