

In Online Mourning, Don't Speak Ill of the Dead



Sally Ryan for The New York Times

Screeners for Legacy.com in Illinois monitor obituary guest books to weed out inappropriate remarks.

By IAN URBINA

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EVANSTON, Ill. — Long-silent mistresses, disgruntled former employees, estranged family members — Katie Falzone has seen them all.

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Legacy, which gets more than six million visitors a month and one comment every five seconds, says it vets everything before it is posted.

They turn to the online guest books at the obituary Web site where she works, [Legacy.com](#), to convey unflattering thoughts about the recently departed.

It is Ms. Falzone's job to stop them.

In a room here full of glowing computer terminals and hushed conversations, she and 44 other screeners pore over the 18,000 notes sent daily about the newly deceased, hoping to catch the backhanded compliments, meanspirited innuendo and airing of dark family secrets.

Dissing the dead, as these screeners call it, has become a costly and complicated problem for Legacy and other Web sites where people gather to mourn online. Legacy, which is now eight years old, carries a death notice or obituary for virtually all the roughly 2.4 million people who die each year, but few foresaw how nasty some of the postings to its guest books would be.

Some of the snubs are blunt. "Everyone gets their due," a former client writes of an

embezzling accountant. Or, “I sincerely hope the Lord has more mercy on him than he had on me during my years reporting to him at the Welfare Department.”

Others are subtler: “She never took the time to meet me, but I understand she was a wonderful grandmother to her other grandchildren.”

“Reading the obit, he sounds like he was a great father,” says another, which is signed, “His son Peter.”

Hayes Ferguson, the company’s chief operating officer, said, “Most often it’s cases of Sue posting that he was the love of my life and then we check and the wife’s name is Mary.” The company said none of these snubs made it online.

Legacy is paid by more than 300 newspapers, including The New York Times, to publish their death notices and obituaries, and mourners can pay a fee to keep the guest books up longer. By attaching a publicly accessible guest book to most of the obituaries, the site has provided a new way to grieve, and in the process has all but cornered the market.

The company dedicates at least 30 percent of its budget, and 45 of its 75 employees, to catching the personal attacks and other inappropriate comments, nearly 200,000 in all, submitted each year.

“The amount of material from people claiming to have been molested by the person is the only thing that still surprises me,” said Ms. Falzone, who has been policing the site for four and a half years.

If the Internet has increased the ease and anonymity of communication, it has also weakened inhibition and decorum.

“When they’re face to face at a funeral, people don’t have the guts to do something like that and write something offensive,” said Justin Rowan, embalmer for the Freyvogel Sons Funeral Home in Pittsburgh. “On the Internet, people might not even know the guy, but they might feel free to write something.”

Kenneth J. Doka, a professor of gerontology at the College of New Rochelle in suburban New York, agrees that one-click immediacy has fostered a culture of candor that increases the likelihood that people will say something they might not if they had to write it in a letter and take it to a mailbox.

“In more than 35 years of grief counseling,” Dr. Doka said, “I can cite only a couple of instances of people communicating mean things to family of someone who died by sending a letter or writing in the paper guest book. On the other hand, I’ve talked to a lot of funeral directors who have put up online guest books, and they say the level of screening required is a real problem.”

So Legacy's struggles are hardly unique, even if no other obituary Web site compares to it in size: more than six million visitors a month and revenue, according to research by the Information Access Company, topping \$5.9 million a year.

"It's a huge problem for us," said Jim Tipton, founder of findagrave.com, which lists the locations of more than 13 million grave markers and offers a way to post comments. At least once a week, the site bans comment for specific pages because the back-and-forth becomes so ugly.

Mike Patterson, founder of MyDeathSpace.com, which every day features the profile pages of about 25 MySpace members who have died, said so many people had been writing nasty things that he removed the comment function from the site in June. Mr. Patterson restored it two months later, after adding software that flags keywords and requiring users to register if they want to post comments.

Still, problems arise.

Pamela Tay said she felt ill when she discovered a discussion on MyDeathSpace about her 18-year-old daughter, Kelli Laine, who was killed by a drunken driver in 2001.

"It was Mother's Day when I came across it, and that is the hardest day of the year for any mother who has lost their child," Ms. Tay said. "They were joking about her sexually. They were saying it was my fault for letting Kelli go out that night."

After she complained about the postings, they were taken down, only to re-emerge later.

"It is so incredible to me that people say these things," Ms. Tay said.

With one comment sent every five seconds, Legacy's workload is steep; the company vets everything before it is posted, unlike smaller sites with obituary content.

"The goal is to ensure no one gets offended and to maintain the quality of the site," said Ms. Ferguson, the chief operating officer.

Much of the work stems from spammers' use of the guest books to sell religions, coffins, even Viagra.

Craftier postings are harder to catch. For example, a former parishioner sends a long and fawning testimonial about a priest who has just died and parenthetically includes a link to a site accusing the priest of sexual abuse.

Words in capital letters are an immediate flag, said Isaac Adamson, a Legacy screener. "He was a great father to ALL his children," for instance, is usually an effort to disclose that the deceased had more children than are cited in the obituary.

Some disclosures are inadvertent. A friend writes of having met the deceased at Alcoholics Anonymous, but the surviving parents are unaware that their son had a drinking problem. A relative mentions the suicide of the departed, but the deceased's children have not been told the cause of death.

Grief often brings a desire to get things off one's chest. Many people write with brutal candor about domestic violence. "With the molestation ones," Ms. Falzone said, "there is really no point contacting the police, because the accused is already dead."

Cries for help can be especially taxing for Legacy. Ms. Ferguson described the time spent tracking down the operator of a local funeral home to check on a grieving father who had said in his son's guest book that he was thinking of killing himself.

Audio entries are the toughest emotionally for the screeners to handle. Many Web sites allow people to submit photos and recordings to enrich their tribute. Reading the words "tears are rolling down my face as I write this" does not capture the aching of an old man or a toddler who is heard weeping in trying to say goodbye to a beloved, Mr. Adamson said.

But inspirational entries bolster the screeners. For five years, the mother and the grandmother of a dead teenage boy have posted in his guest book twice daily. The entries are always written directly to him.

The pages for teachers, obstetricians and drug abuse counselors regularly draw the heaviest outpourings of gratitude. Lessons taught, babies delivered, lives fixed.

"I think it's true," Mr. Adamson said, "that death brings out the best and the worst in people."

Sean D. Hamill contributed reporting from Pittsburgh.

When did it ever become ok to speak ill of the dead? I find it deeply uncomfortable how vitriolic some of the comments are about Lady T, only 48 hours after her death. In more respectful days, one used certain phrases to subtly speak critically of the dead. If someone was a 'tireless and dedicated worker' it meant they never saw anything of their family. 'A tireless raconteur' translated into a crashing bore. 'He was good company', meant he was an alcoholic. 'Held robust views' meant he was a bigot. He was a 'Bohemian', meant he was an alcoholic Robert Wilde. Nazir complained as he stepped out of Dee's car and looked around. "We are not reduced to anything, this is a good idea." Dee was getting out of the driver's position, and she looked round at the ...target before them. "It's like going to your customers instead of waiting for them to go to you," Joe explained. "You sound like someone off the Apprentice. Both of you." "I watch the Apprentice," Pohl revealed. "I suppose there aren't enough tentacles for Joe." Dee smiled at him. "That's Hentai, I watch science fiction." Dee was going to make a comment along the lines of "you watch Dissing the dead, as screeners call it, is now a problem for Web sites where people gather to mourn online." They turn to the online guest books at the obituary Web site where she works, Legacy.com, to convey unflattering thoughts about the recently departed. It is Ms. Falzone's job to stop them. In a room here full of glowing computer terminals and hushed conversations, she and 44 other screeners pore over the 18,000 notes sent daily about the newly deceased, hoping to catch the backhanded compliments, meanspirited innuendo and airing of dark family secrets. Dissing the dead, as these screeners call it, has become a costly and complicated problem for Legacy and other Web sites where people gather to