Article – Theme section

Covid-19 and the mediatization of the funeral industry in Australia and Denmark

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Abstract

This article focuses on the mediatization of funeral practices and customer relations in a business with human care and contact at its centre: the funeral industry. We analyse the impact of Covid-19 on the use of digital media in a comparative study of the deathcare sector in Australia and Denmark. Using surveys within the national funeral industries, qualitative interviews with funeral directors, and news media archives for 2020–2021, we identify four areas of mediatization: adaptations of specific technologies; interactions with the bereaved; transformations of funeral rites; and communications beyond the funeral service. In conclusion, we suggest that the mediatization process is a negotiation of, on the one hand, the need and growing demand for digital media into a traditions-bound business, and on the other hand, the funeral directors' wish to care for the bereaved families through tactile, in-person relationships and emotional support.

Keywords

Funeral industry, Covid-19, live-streaming, digital media, deathcare.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic marks a period in human history in which both individuals and entire fields of business and education have been forced to embrace digital technologies and to engage with unfamiliar technological formats (e.g., Zoom) on a scale and degree hitherto unseen. The deathcare sector, including funerals and body disposal, grief, and memorialisation, is a major part of our culture, and has been significantly impacted by technological shifts, although otherwise side-lined from attention in media studies. As part of a study into the deathcare sector in Denmark and Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic during the period inclusive of March 2020 and December 2021, this article looks specifically at how funeral directors and celebrants use digital media in planning and staging end-of-life celebrations. Funeral directors and celebrants are intermediaries between the just dead and the still living; their job is to handle the body of the deceased, give consolation to mourners, and organise the final send-off. During Covid-19, this job changed dramatically, as public health orders including social distancing guidelines enforced mediated ways of communication and ceremonial execution into a field of business that has traditionally relied upon face-to-face caring labour and analogue practices.

The study of Covid-19, media, and deathcare in Denmark and Australia presents an illuminative comparative case for several reasons. First, both countries are Western democracies with relatively secular populations emerging from a history of Christianity. Second, both have relatively high penetration of digital technologies across the general populace, including internet access (IMD business school, 2021). Both Australia and Denmark experienced an overall drop in the death rate as a side effect of Covid-19 public health measures and recorded less than 4,000 deaths attributed to Covid-19 in the period under consideration (Danish Bureau of Statistics, 2022a; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a). As such, the primary impact of the pandemic on deathcare services in both countries stem from public health measures and the uncertainties around the infectious status of the disease, rather than an excess of mortality (as experienced in other locales, such as the United States of America). Finally, after a series of lockdowns during the past two years, both countries have "opened up", following high rates of vaccination across the adult population. Comparison between these two locales highlights cultural variation within ritual traditions and social infrastructures for managing death, and correspondingly, differing trajectories of technological adaptation. Before Covid-19, most funerals in Denmark followed a historic and relatively uniform analogue script, rooted in the traditions of the Christian-Lutheran church (Rubow, 1993). In contrast, Australian funerals, responding to multi-faith and multicultural populations part of global diasporas, already offered a range of mediated options in executing the last goodbye. In both countries, we see how the enforced use of digital media and its interplay with changing local restrictions during Covid-19 can transform the experience of participating in and leading end-of-life rituals.

In this article, we focus on changes to media practices related to the funeral ceremony, including the planning and at the event itself. By "Covid-era funerals", we refer to all ceremonies held for the deceased, including those who died from Covid-19, from suspected infections with Covid-19, and unrelated causes entirely. Beyond this narrow focus, it should be acknowledged that deathcare workers experienced major disruptions to their practice, including increased levels of personal protective equipment and additional precautions taken when handling the deceased in mortuary practice. In both countries, public health planning stopped at death's door, with the people and services surrounding dead bodies seemingly forgotten (see Gould & Holleran, 2021). Even as these challenges are beyond our focus on mediatization, they appear prominently in collected data – surveys, interviews, and mass media reports.

A brief clarification of terms is necessary. We refer to those responsible for organising the funeral ceremony and administrative tasks related to the disposal of the body disposition as "funeral directors". By "funeral", we refer to any ceremonial gathering or service for the purposes of marking the passing of the dead, which may take place before or after a burial or cremation. Funerals can take place in any location, be that religious or secular, or at the graveside or crematorium itself. Finally, "celebrant" refers to the person in charge of leading the funeral service. This may be a religious leader, such as a priest, or a secular officiant.

Without a doubt, the global pandemic transformed funeral practices in both Australia and Denmark, and our comparative study highlights the deep permeation of digital media into a highly ritualised part of tradition and culture. Variations between Australian and Danish deathcare media use before and during the pandemic provide a timely lesson in the localisation of changes introduced by a global pandemic. Especially when dealing with a topic deeply rooted in repeated rituals, the contrast to other – and others' – traditions helps to distinguish the cultural constructions at play.

Mediatization in the funeral industry

We see the transformations which took place in the funeral and deathcare industry during the Covid-19 pandemic as reflective of the ongoing mediatization of society (Hjarvard, 2008, 2013; Krotz, 2007), in this context, understood as the influence of media and communication structures and institutions on cultural and social domains such as politics and religion. Mediatization entails the "transformation of many disparate social and cultural processes into forms or formats suitable for media representation" (Couldry, 2008, p. 50), a process which we also observed in this industry during the pandemic. Andreas Hepp (2013) points to the fact that the pandemic period was characterised by several processes of mediatization, including the repeat suggestions of "media-based 'solutions'" to (individual) problems (Kumar Putta & Anderson, 2021), which we observe also in the funeral industry, albeit more of necessity than inclination. In related areas, other research-

ers have pointed to the acceleration of mediatization also in the religious sphere during the pandemic. For instance, in Poland, religious services needed to be streamed to reach catholic church goers, leading to new questions regarding old practices, such as kneeling during mass, and whether this should be done at home during a live-streamed service (e.g., Hall & Kołodziejska, 2021). However, even though religious authorities were forced to mediate their content, this did not necessarily lead to a complete submission to the logics of the media. Rather, the church as an institution also resisted the forces of the media (Tudor et al., 2021), as we also see in our study.

In particular, our approach to mediatization is primarily focused on the socio-cultural implications of mediatization, that is, with attention to the "structural transformation of social worlds" (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2020, p. 170), with the objective of exploring "the interrelation between the change of media communication and sociocultural change as part of everyday communication practices, and how the change of these practices is related to a changing communicative construction of reality" (Hepp, 2013, p. 618). We do not aim to show how "media 'colonize' other social or cultural domains" (Hepp et al., 2015), but rather, as these authors argue, to explore the interplay between institutions, everyday practices, and media platforms, such as is illustrated above, by observing the impact of streaming services on the practice of kneeling. That is, we work with this understanding of mediatization as an overarching theoretical perspective, which implies looking more closely at acts of mediation within a specific sector, in this case, how emerging communicative norms and media frames inform the cultural practices entailed in planning for, preparing, and executing a funeral. Our study is inherently also an initial study of how, during the Covid-19 pandemic, funerals increasingly became sites of (media) production, and to a certain degree, also sites of media reception (Couldry, 2008). The intersection of death and digital media has received growing scholarly attention over the last decade, although research remains heavily focused on online commemorative practices, for example, Facebook memorial pages (Brubaker et al., 2013) or Instagram selfies taken at funerals (Meese et al., 2015), rather than the transformation of the funeral ceremony itself or the broader industry ecosystem (Arnold et al., 2018). In order to understand these latter shifts, we are analytically inspired by Schulz's (2004) analytical breakdown of "mediatization" into four processes: *extension* (for instance, extension of time and space), *substitution* (for instance, of analogue communication formats with digital media formats), *amalgamation* (for instance, integration of media devices in everyday funeral practices), and *accommodation* (for instance, of existing practices to be more "media-friendly"). We return to these processes in the analysis of our empirical findings, although we acknowledge that they do not necessarily occur in a linear order, and might even, as in our case, ultimately be reversed.

Thus, in this article, we investigate mediatization as an ongoing transformation of an industry by looking at, and discussing, specific practices in the funeral industry and how

they became mediated, and not least how these changes were experienced by the people who shape this industry.

Funeral contexts

Denmark

The Danish Church (Folkekirken) is Christian-Lutheran and a dominant player in the religious landscape in Denmark. Even though the membership rate is dropping, 74.3 pct. of the population (approximately 5.8 million people) are currently members. This declining membership is largely due to a slowly diversifying population; 90 pct. of those dying in Denmark are members of the Danish Church, while only 60 pct. of the newborns are enrolled (baptised) (Danish Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, 2022a). However, many adults affiliate with the Danish Church out of tradition and very rarely, if ever, attend services. The 25.7 pct. of Danes outside the Church are divided into many groups, with no centralised statistics available to describe them (Danish Bureau of Statistics, 2022b). Apart from a growing group of non-religious and atheists, the major world religions (Islam, Judaism, Buddhism) are present, together with small Christian breakaway churches and Norse Paganism. In the present research, all but one of the Danish informants came from the Danish Church.

Funerals are tradition-bound to the Danish Church and, in contrast to more festive events (especially weddings), follow a script with few variations (Rubow, 1993). In 2020, 85.8 pct. of the deceased Danes were cremated (National Association of Danish Crematoria, 2021), while the rest were buried. Most urns of ashes are interred in a small plot in the cemetery some weeks later, apart from the 10 pct. that are scattered over open water.

The Danish funeral companies organise transports of the deceased and coordinate any associated services. The deathcare industry is in general very hands-on, with limited digital media use outside of administration. Funeral directors tend to prefer in-person meetings with the bereaved, and with few exceptions, the media use before Covid-19 consisted of phone calls, a business website, and maybe a low-key Facebook presence. Furthermore, the funeral director regularly composes short Death Notices, in conversation with the chief mourners, and submits the chosen design and wording to selected newspapers. There is an option to additionally publish the Death Notice online, but no data exists about the frequency of that choice.

Australia

Australian death culture reflects its history of both colonisation and migration. Nearly 30 pct. of Australians are born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). Approximately 60 pct. of Australians are affiliated with a religious organisation, and "religious nones" are a significant and increasing percentage of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Approximately 43.9 pct. of the population identify as Christian, with

significant populations of adherents to Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Judaism. Religious affiliation does not necessarily translate to the practice of funerals in religious settings or format. According to a recent nationwide survey of religious respondents, only 10 pct. strongly agreed that religion or spirituality would impact their choices in funeral planning (BARE Cremation, 2022). Australia's diversity was not always recognised during Covid-19. Official guidelines published regarding attendance limits and restrictions on interactions with the body tended to reproduce an Anglo-Protestant, relatively secular death culture, in which public viewings are rare, and a "funeral" consists of a single event held in a public ceremony hall, and not a multi-stage or multi-day religious ceremony.

With some exceptions, funerals in Australia are organised through commercial funeral companies, who take possession of the body into their mortuaries and organise both the disposal and any associated rituals. The funeral itself demonstrates significant variation, regarding its location (church or temple, secular chapel, gardens/outdoors, community centre, etc.), religious elements, ritual format, and timing (whether it precedes or follows the burial or cremation). Approximately 66 pct. of deceased Australians are cremated each year, and ashes are often scattered in nature or a site of significance to the deceased. However, burial remains an important rite (and right) for many ethnic and religious communities in Australia.

Most dedicated ceremonial venues in Australia, whether they be secular or religious, are equipped with technology for audio-visual displays. Less common before Covid-19 was infrastructure for recording or live-streaming services. One notable exception is funeral companies that serve diasporic communities, many of which regularly live-stream and/or record services for audiences located around the world. For example, the Melbourne Chevra Kadisha (Jewish Burial Society) has been live-streaming funerals via its website since the technology first became available. Almost all Australian funeral companies have professional online presences via at least a website, often social media, and occasionally an interactive "chatbot" function to field enquiries from new customers.

The impact of Covid-19

During the period between March 2020 and December 2021, Australian and Danish governments introduced public health orders to stem the spread of Covid-19 within the population. In Australia, public health ordinances were issued by the respective State or Territory Governments (e.g., Australia Department of Health. Victoria, 2022). In Denmark, restrictions were almost all on the national level (e.g., Danish Government, 2022). Regulations varied in length and severity and included restrictions on socialising in public and private spaces, mandates for mask wearing, digital check-ins at venues, and orders to work from home. In Denmark, restrictions were imposed on indoor public gatherings, whereas impositions on indoor gatherings in private spaces were "strongly recommended". In Australia, public health orders inside and outside the home were enforced by police and

through substantial fines. Many public health orders impacted the regular operations of deathcare professionals. Arrangements were either conducted on funeral company premises or under tighter conditions of lockdown, via phone and teleconference.

In both countries, funerals (alongside weddings) were subject to a special set of guidelines. In general, these rules recognised the funeral as an essential event, allowing such activities to continue with severe restrictions on physical gatherings (see Figure 1). One notable distinction between Australian and Danish restrictions on funerals was that the former applied attendance limits to both indoor and outdoor gatherings (Garside, 2021), while in Denmark, density limits only applied to indoor venues (Danish Government, 2021). This saw a stronger demand for streaming services in Australia.

Beyond the severity of restrictions, a pattern of strict lockdowns interspersed with relative freedom exacerbated the impact of Covid-19 on the funeral industry. It caused confusion amongst mourning families and created peaks and troughs in demand for mortuary care, cemetery services, and funerals. This uneven pattern, combined with extensive staff shortages due to infections and isolation requirements, placed extraordinary pressures on the sector as a whole (Gould & Holleran, 2021).

Figure 1. Timeline of restrictions on funerals in Australia. Blue indicates the number of people allowed together indoors, orange indicates the number of people allowed at outdoor gatherings (for both, zero indicates "no restrictions"). (Sources: Australia Department of Health. Victoria, 2022; Garside, 2021)
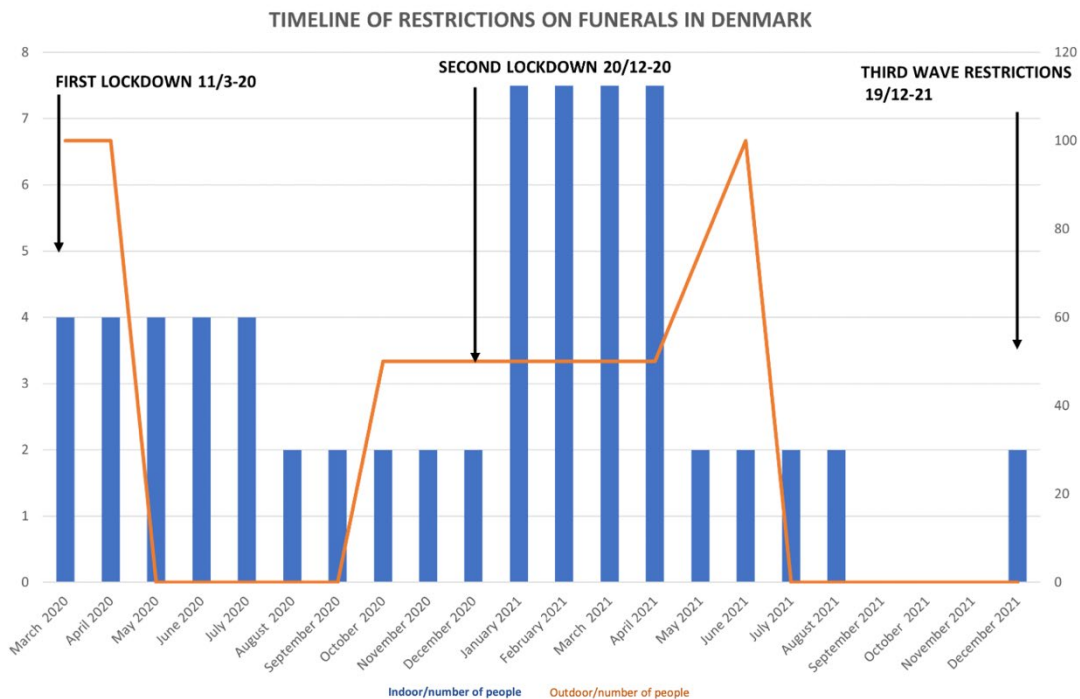
Figure 2: Timeline of restrictions on funerals in Denmark. Blue indicates the number of people allowed per indoor square metre, orange line (and rightside scale) indicates the number of people allowed at outdoor gatherings (for both, zero indicates "no restrictions"). (Multiple sources: Australia Department of Health. Victoria, 2022; Danish Government, 2021; Danish Parliament, 2022; Garside, 2021; Haahr, 2021; Ritzau, 2021; Sørensen, 2021)

The Australian and Danish funeral sectors were largely given independent responsibility for interpreting and implementing public health directives related to funerals. As a result, upon the public announcement of new restrictions, funeral companies were flooded with panicked calls from bereaved families regarding their upcoming services. Both were vocal in their appeals to governments, via the media and directly, for greater support and better communication. Deathcare was not formally recognised as an essential service, and funeral companies or cemetery authorities were not directly involved in emergency planning, nor given priority access to personal protective equipment, testing, or vaccinations.

Some deathcare workers even found themselves in the position of having to enforce the restrictions directly. In Australia, several funeral directors whom we interviewed remarked that this was a complete reversal from their usual attitude of acquiescence toward clients. Barrett, of the Australian Funeral Directors Association (AFDA), described the new-found role of funeral staff as "bouncers". In Denmark, as the restrictions were calculated as "people per square metre", it was ultimately the local priest who decided on how to count the size of the premises, and funeral directors had to wait for (and in a

few cases, enforce) this number of people at the individual funeral. A few of the Danish interviewees mentioned their role not just as carers, but also the unpleasant position of enforcers. The "bouncer" comment also emerged here:

> And I think it has been one of the hardest things I have tried in my career as a funeral director, to stand there, almost serving as a bouncer in a church, counting people and throwing people out of a door. This is [...] the last goodbye, and you don't get the chance [to attend] again, so it has been so hard to stand and reject people at the door, telling them "Sorry, the church is full". (Danish funeral director, female, 33 yo)

This is an indication of the severe strain that the pandemic put on funeral directors and, seen together with the more intensive use of communication media, shows the challenges they faced in managing customer relations.

Methods

This research project takes an iterative, grounded approach to the collection and analysis of data, building theory across disciplinary, geographic, and cultural borders. We took mediatization theory as our shared theoretical point of departure and collaborated to identify and analyse the multiple institutions and actors that drove processes of mediatization forward during the pandemic. This includes governmental institutions and social distancing restrictions; the press and their focus on funeral restriction and innovation; religious institutions and their technological solutions to restrictions; and last but not least, funeral directors themselves in their uptake and use of technology. Through conversations with funeral directors and from analysis of news media articles, we were further able to access insights into practices of the bereaved, including how they responded to innovative technological solutions when official institutions prevented them from participating in person in the last farewell. In our data, governmental agencies are represented in the graphs showing the imposition of restrictions over time and the news media in our analysis of stories about funeral technologies (also reflecting a public sensitivity to, and interest in, "mediatization stories"). Most importantly, we focused on funeral directors as actors, whom we engaged through surveys and interviews, allowing us to supplement quantitative data about the uptake of technology with a phenomenological approach to the *lived experience* of mediatization.

    In practice, data collection took place across three methods: survey, semi-structured interviews, and discourse analysis of news media archives. The survey and news media search were replicated in content and time period between Australia and Denmark, while the interviews occurred at a time suitable to the context and researcher availability. Due to continued interruptions related to Covid-19, the study became almost longitudinal: the Australian interviews are from June 2020 to June 2021, the shared survey is from Octo-

ber–November 2020, most of the Danish interviews are from November 2021, and the discourse research covers the whole of 2020 and 2021.

Survey

To study changing practices in the field, in October–November 2020, we circulated a survey to funeral directors in Australia and Denmark. The survey received relatively few responses, funeral directors proving a difficult group to engage. The survey contained 31–35 questions on services, media technology, communications, funerals, and wellbeing. The questions were translated and adapted to the local situation.

In Australia, the survey was entitled "Deathcare during Covid-19" and was launched as a Google Form in September 2020 and circulated via the mailing list of the Australian Funeral Directors Association, the mailing list of the DeathTech Research Group at the University of Melbourne, and on LinkedIn and other social media. We received 78 valid responses (n=78), up to and inclusive of January 2021.

In Denmark, the survey was entitled *Det sidste farvel og Covid-19* (The last goodbye and Covid-19) and was launched as a Google Form in October 2020. The link was sent by email to all funeral businesses (288) in the country, which were found by an extensive search of the web, local directories, and franchise contact lists. We secured support from the industry organisation (Danske Bedemænd) and the biggest and rather dominant player (Begravelse Danmark), and the latter took on the distribution of the survey directly from the head office. After three weeks, and several reminders, we ended up with 39 valid responses (n=39), up to and inclusive of November 2020.

Interviews

The interviews were methodically similar in Australia and Denmark. They lasted 30–120 minutes, were semi-structured, and focused on how individuals and organisations responded to the challenges of Covid-19. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were coded qualitatively in a grounded approach.

In Australia, the interviews were conducted via teleconference or in person, between June 2020 and June 2021. Interview subjects were purposefully selected for diversity of perspectives in the sector (including across different professions, cultural and religious backgrounds, levels of seniority, and company size), self-identification in the survey response, and via the snowballing method of introductions. A total of 30 interviews were conducted.

In Denmark, two early interviews were conducted via teleconference during 2020, while the majority were conducted by phone in October and November 2021. The first two interviews were with key players in the sector, and all the latter interview subjects were funeral directors self-identified in the survey. A total of 13 interviews were conducted.

News media archives

During 2020, the emerging streaming practices of the industry in both countries became news in itself, especially in Denmark, with local journalists covering technology use in several articles. As such, we decided to probe news media coverage of the funeral industry, both to develop a more rounded picture of innovative technology use and to supplement low respondent rates in the survey. In Denmark, we searched Infomedia (the Danish News Archive) for content relating to "funeral directors" and "Covid-19" and, in a later search, "churches", "streaming", and "live-streaming" too. We covered 2020 and 2021, and in total, we found 46 relevant articles. In Australia, we used the Ebscohost Research Platform to catalogue news media reporting on the keywords "funerals", "Covid-19", "technology", and "streaming". We covered 2020 and 2021 and in total, uncovered 131 articles.

Analysis

Based on our grounded, interpretative approach, we looked for emerging themes in our combined materials (interviews, surveys, and media coverage), reflecting the personal experience of mediation practices as well as the ongoing mediatization of the industry. The analysis has four main sections: technology adaptation within the funeral industry, changed (and mediated) interaction patterns between funeral directors and families, technology at the funeral ritual, and overall sector transformation. As discussed in the Methods section, we found it challenging to engage with funeral directors, and our material is far from representative of the entire industry. However, we believe our analysis indicates directions for future transformation of the sector.

Technology adaptation and spread

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic led to changes in the work life of the funeral directors and other industry professionals. In Denmark, before the pandemic, 41 pct. of the funeral directors worked at home (very often, often, or sometimes). After the pandemic, this number rose to 59 pct.. In Australia, 28 pct. worked at home (very often, often, or sometimes) before the pandemic. This number rose to 73 pct. post pandemic. This shift includes a greater frequency and diversity of use of communication media, both with internal colleagues and external partners or customers. Interviews suggest that core media were emails, mobile SMS, Skype, Facetime, and Zoom. Noticeably, more than one respondent emphasised that the pandemic created *more communication* in general, as matters required far more back-and-forth virtually than in face-to-face conversation.

Adopting the responsibility of interpreting, disseminating, and clarifying local and national public health orders, funeral directors found themselves positioned as key communication nodes within the sector. As mediators between the bereaved and wider community, the authorities, and other service providers (including the church, florists, caterers, etc.), this new role further exacerbated the time and resources devoted to com-

munications. One funeral company in Melbourne, Australia, for example, redeployed two full-time staff to a phone hotline to answer questions about restrictions and talk people through the process of accessing funeral streaming services.

We asked the respondents about their offering of video recordings and live-streaming before and after the onset of the pandemic. Both Australian and Danish respondents indicated that some of them offered video services and live-streaming for the first time after the onset of the pandemic. It became clear during interviews that the funeral sector overall experienced a strong demand for live-streaming and recording services, whether or not they offered them. Still, most of the Danish interviewees expected bereaved families, especially the younger generations, to organise the streaming independently. As one Danish funeral director noted:

> You realise that it [the technology] has been there all along, but suddenly, it is a trend that everything had to be streamed and downloaded to the mobile phone. So yes, demand has increased, and it is something that is here to stay. It is damn smart [...] but I haven't got the equipment for it [...] and then people do it themselves. There is always a young creative guy around who is 100 times better than I at holding up a mobile phone. (Danish funeral director, male, 55 y.o.)

Due to the open-ended wording of the survey, it is unclear whether funeral directors conducted streaming services themselves or relied on others. In Denmark, both open-text answers and interviews indicate that it was mostly the families themselves recording or streaming from devices such as tablets and mobile phones. In comparison, open-text responses in the Australian survey indicate that the uptake was embraced much more directly by providers, who organised streaming and recording services themselves. One respondent even noted that "at the height of the pandemic in New South Wales our live streaming was up over 800 pct. We now stream every one in two services to live viewers" (Australian funeral director, male, 64 y.o.). Overall, in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic, demand for live-streaming and recordings radically increased, also amongst older funeral attendees. Continued restrictions on international and interstate travel meant that live-streaming became popular even in states with few lockdown restrictions or Covid-19 outbreaks. However, in both countries, most of the survey respondents did not offer streaming and/or recording as part of their services.

The survey further questioned which services companies use for digital streaming. In both countries, there is a long list of different streaming options only mentioned once. Excluding those results and expressing the rest in percentages, we highlight those services that were used more frequently in both countries (see Figure 3).

Major differences are evident between the two locations. Put simply, the Danes used Skype and Facebook Messenger for amateur streaming, whereas the Australian businesses embraced a model of professional streaming through either their websites or through the dedicated funeral-streaming platform OneRoom. Follow-up interviews suggest that

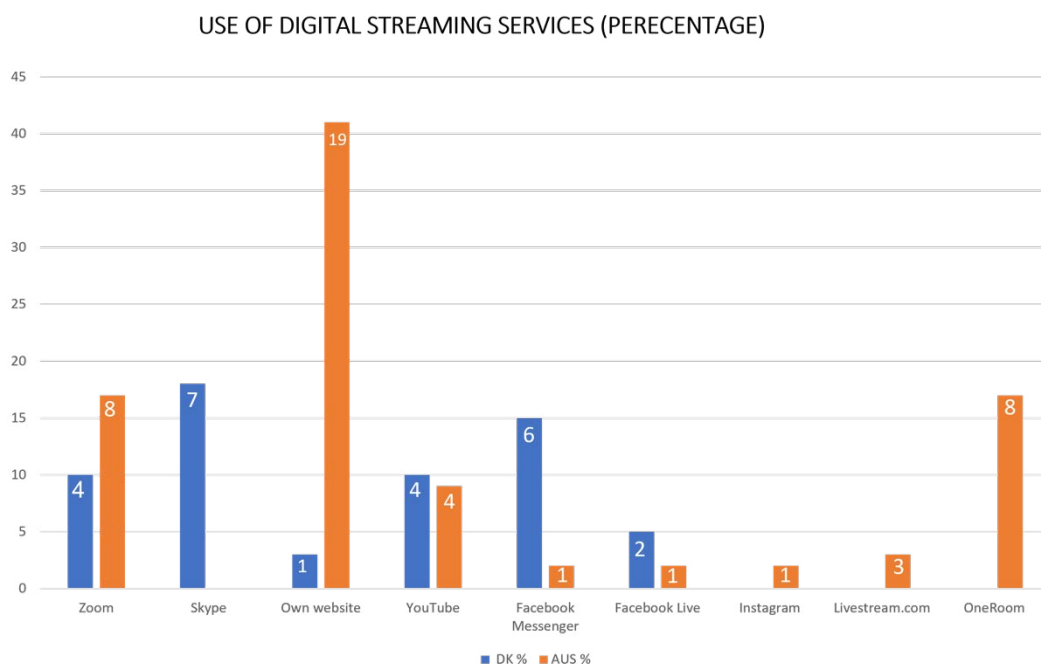USE OF DIGITAL STREAMING SERVICES (PERECENTAGE)

Figure 3: Distribution of the most popular digital streaming services across Australian and Danish survey respondents. Columns represent percentage of total "users of" in the respective countries using the service, numbers inside columns represent number of respondents who answered yes to each question. Total number of responses in Australia = 46. Total number of responses in Denmark = 39

the Australian integration of streaming into professional funeral services was motivated by several factors. First, it extended the services offerings of the funeral company, both simplifying the organisation process for families and maximising the service fees that could be charged. This was particularly important as Covid-era funerals restricted many of the offerings (such as catering) that funeral companies had previously earned profit from. Second, it speaks to funeral companies' concerns about privacy and control around the funeral stream and who could access it. This integrated, professional model did not emerge in Denmark. Examples of streaming offered by Danish funeral directors are scarce across all data points. Only a few early adopters in the business embraced this opportunity, and it remains very much up to the bereaved to organise vernacular streaming practices (in collaboration with the local religious leader).

The introduction of recording devices into a funeral service within the Danish Church is not a simple matter. Before Covid-19, live streaming from inside the Danish churches occurred rarely (this diverges from many religious sites in Australia) and only by private parties and with the consent of the local priest. Thus, when the Danish Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs endorsed live-streaming of the Sunday services (Diocese of Lolland-Falster, Denmark, 2020), it marked a turning point from long-established tradition. From news

media archives, we can see how local stories of streamed Sunday services during lockdowns were received positively by the public. However, for other ecclesiastical acts (weddings, baptisms, funerals) it is still recommended that the church (or the Parish Council) do not arrange streaming, as they are considered private, and the local priest still holds the power to reject streaming (Danish Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, 2022b). In the funerals investigated for this study, video recordings and/or live-streaming were managed by individuals not employed by the church, the funeral director or the family.

Interaction with the bereaved

As noted, working conditions for funeral directors during the pandemic necessitated more mediated communications with customers. The challenges this media shift introduced, both personally and professionally, were some of the most denounced impacts of Covid-19 for the sector. They were lamented in particular because of how the industry conceptualises and values "care" as an embodied, emotional labour that is performed through face-to-face interactions. As noted in other studies of the technification of death, the "equation of care with human-to-human interaction and human labour runs throughout critiques of the commercial funeral industry" (Gould et al 2021, p. 610; see also Gould & Holleran, 2021 and Troyer, 2021).

In the survey's open text answers, it became clear that the changes in contact with the bereaved made the largest negative impact on the funeral directors' job satisfaction. As one Danish respondent wrote:

> The very practical aspects of communication can easily be handled at a distance, by phone and electronically. But the absolutely, and equally important contact and communication in physical meetings, [the] hand shaking and showing of care and respect from one human to another, did change for the worse. When you think of [the fact that] the major part of our communication with each other is non-verbal, it can hardly be anything but a loss… (Anonymous Danish funeral director, 2021)

An Australian colleague concurred:

> [The change has been] disadvantageous. The value of interpersonal communications/ interactions has been taken for granted. Covid-19 has forced the realisation that the value of social interaction cannot be measured in pure numerical terms. You can work remotely, but it's highly impersonal. (Anonymous Australian funeral director, 2021)

It became very clear, looking at both surveys and interviews, that funeral directors and celebrants seek to cultivate a tactile, in-person relationship and emotional rapport with the bereaved. This includes visiting the home of the bereaved, sharing a cup of tea, looking over photographs together, and even sharing an embrace or handshake. Such caring labours are a core part of the contemporary identity of the deathcare sector and a source of professional pride (McIlwain, 2005). By priding themselves on being experts on grief

and death, funeral professionals distinguish their profession and justify their services. While they sometimes embrace digital technologies and their usefulness during a funeral or memorial service, it seems that this core relationship with the bereaved is still imagined as fundamentally analogue.

The importance of care, and the repercussions of lack of physical contact was often lamented by interviewees as shifting the tenor of interactions from the phatic to the transactional. One Australian interviewee noted:

> Traditionally when you'd sit down, it's really like you're meeting people and you build a rapport with people. You learn a lot more from conversations, go on tangents more, and learn about the person's life. But then when it's Zoom or telephone, I've found it's very much the nuts and bolts. Like, here's the form, let's go through the form kind of thing… you don't have that same level of comfort or maybe intimacy in being in a room and looking at photos and going through old picture albums and all that sort of thing. (Australian Funeral Director, male)

This feeling was mirrored by a Danish colleague:

> It has been a challenge not to meet those people, because you quickly assess what kind of people you are sitting across from. How are you going to deal with them? What is going on? It has been a challenge for us to make sure that we addressed their wishes. It is somewhat easier when you are sitting face to face with people who have lost someone, than if you [deal with them] on the phone. (Danish funeral director, female, 58 yo)

In this manner, mediated modes of communication with the bereaved were positioned not only as poor replacements of face-to-face interactions, but also as potential distortions or corruptions of the core work of the funeral profession.

Transformed funeral rites

In all our material, it is evident that new kinds of funeral services and new rituals emerged in response to the restrictions and conditions of Covid-19.

We asked respondents about which service or ritual elements their organisation had *not* been able to offer due to Covid-19 restrictions. In both countries, meeting with families came up as a practice which had changed profoundly (15 times in Denmark, and 19 in Australia). The customary Danish singing-out (where the first removal of the coffin from the home, hospice, hospital, etc., is accompanied by those present singing a hymn) were simply forbidden, while in Australia, in-person chanting or singing at the funeral service was impossible. Open casket viewing and other interactions with the body of the deceased (such as washing or dressing), both ceremonial and not, were cancelled or heavily restricted in both countries. Many (30 of 79) Australian respondents identified services at the graveside as being affected. This did not emerge as an issue in Denmark, where outdoor services were unrestricted but for social distancing. Respondents in both countries

further described the impact on rituals outside the official funeral service, such as wakes, vigils, and grave visitation.

At a first glance, the introduction of streaming into a funeral might appear to be a simple variation in the performative aspects of the event. However, the presence of streaming or recording devices can have significant consequences, many of which require careful management from deathcare professionals. For one, the presence of cameras can potentially disrupt those attending the funeral in person or impinge upon their privacy. Further, although streaming can radically expand the potential audience for funeral services, it requires funeral directors or others to fulfil a new role in providing technical support to attendees seeking to access the stream. Funerals are no ordinary event, and the emotional and/or spiritual impact of potential technological failure during the ceremony, such as buffering issues, attendees being unable to log in, or a camera angled in the wrong direction, is extraordinary. Funeral directors in Australia overwhelmingly reported that they preferred one-way streaming services, favouring, for example, the "webinar" rather than "meeting" format for Zoom. The limited interactivity provided for virtual attendees by this format precluded the necessity of real-time monitoring of the stream. Concerns about the privacy and security of live funeral streams were common amongst Australian deathcare workers. This is reflected (and reinforced) by early and sensationalised media coverage of "zoom bombing", in which uninvited outsiders disrupt a public livestream. Scholars have previously described this emerging phenomenon in digital death, both on social media sites like Facebook and in massive multiplayer online gaming platforms like World of Warcraft (Gibbs et al., 2013).

Creative practices were developed by both Australian and Danish funeral directors and their customers to circumvent restrictions and increase access to the funeral service. In Australia, the strict attendance restrictions led to some companies offering mobile, multi-stage, or "satellite" viewings of funeral services. In Denmark, outdoor loudspeakers were sometimes employed right outside the church, during the periods when restrictions on indoor attendance were most severe. Furthermore, we have several examples of local streaming, to the nearby Parish office, a huge tent, or to giant projector screens in the church yard. People also watched in their cars in the church's parking lot. These are all creative negotiations to meet the apparent need for the bereaved to get a sense of physical presence at the funeral, even if the service itself is mediated.

The funeral service, narrowly defined, was not the only death-related ritual to be streamed digitally during Covid-19. In Australia, funeral companies received requests for diverse forms of prayer services, memorials, and remote live-streaming of viewings, unheard of before the pandemic. They also reported an increase in vernacular practices of posthumous photography, with family members taking and sharing among the community, and sometimes more broadly via social media, photographs of the deceased.

Beyond the funeral service

Popular analysis in both countries focused on the digital transformation of the funeral service via streaming, but the impact of Covid-19 for the deathcare sector was far more extensive, touching the industry's regular service offerings, business administration, and communication practices.

Pre-Covid in Australia, digital media use within the funeral service stood in contrast to the analogue operating practices of many funeral companies, cemeteries, and crematoria. As such, many professionals welcomed the rapid digital revolution that Covid-19 forced, most notably the processing of digital death certificates, a change which had been strongly resisted by government authorities previously. In contrast, while Danish funeral services themselves were primarily analogue pre-Covid, the regular operating procedures of the sector held at least the potential for a high degree of digitisation. From 2015, a content management system called Nem Bedemand (Easy Funeral Director) has offered the opportunity of easy and safe administration, adorned by, e.g., the Danish Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs and the digital safety authorities (NemID, eBoks) (Nembedemand ApS, 2022).

Covid-19 further required new communications strategies from funeral companies, as they became key public interpreters and disseminators of government restrictions related to death and dying. As funeral company websites and social media presences expanded, several Australian companies deployed new staff to manage public enquiry. Public death and funeral notices now commonly include links to web-streaming services (information found in only a few Danish death notices) and memorial pages that are hosted on the funeral company's website. The memorial pages existed prior to Covid-19, but with reportedly low visitation and functionality. During Covid-19, the memorial pages at the funeral business Tobin Brothers Victoria, for example, expanded to include embedded live-streaming, a memorial book in which to share comments and images, links to facilitate sending flowers or food packages to bereaved families, and links to supported charities.

This new public role presented opportunities for funeral companies to expand their reach and craft a positive public profile. Small businesses may not have needed the digital presence before, but Covid-19 changed that:

> I have such a feeling, and I do not know if it is right, that people in my area always used word of mouth for recommendations – following a death, people visit each other [...]. So, when we were isolated, the activity [in my business] decreased. Also, fewer people died, so it's a little hard to figure out what's what. But I have had such a feeling that people have not talked the usual way about recommendations, which have otherwise been a big part of this business. (Danish funeral director, female, 48 y.o.)

Confronting taboos around the confluence of death and commercialisation, funeral companies have previously struggled with public marketing in a digital sphere, finding

themselves unable to reach out to new communities and markets (Arnold et al., 2018, pp. 105–107). Covid-19 brought new audiences to funeral company websites, although the hyper-mediated and emotional context of a funeral also may pose a significant risk of bad publicity to the sector.

Discussion & conclusion

The impact of Covid-19 on the work of deathcare professionals around the world provides an illustrative case study of sudden, forced mediatization of a sector that has been uniquely resistant to change and wary of digital technologies. We hope to have shown that also in our case, "to become mediatized […] means that organisations integrate ideas about the media in contexts where the media was absent previously, and eventually these ideas affect organisational activities, routines, decisions, resource allocation, and communication" (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2020). We have observed processes of *extension* of notably space (with the funeral being experienced outside or from home), *substitution* (face-to-face conversation with the bereaved being substituted by phone or Zoom calls, and funeral attendance substituted by going online), *amalgamation* (the ongoing use of mobile phones and cameras during funerals), and *accommodation* (the adaptation of both funeral industry services to include filming of the funeral and of actual practices during the funeral itself, such as paying attention to the mise-en-scène of the service part of the funeral). However, just as death rituals are deeply embedded in religious and cultural tradition, the sector is marked by strong conservatism and an aversion to risk the professional reputation (Arnold et al., 2018, pp. 101–102; McIlwain, 2005). Although some new media technologies and ways of working have entered the industry as a result of Covid-19 with relatively little fuss (e.g., Zoom and Microsoft Teams for work meetings) and even fanfare (e.g., digital death certificates in Australia), others appear to pose a more existential challenge and remain subject to discussion. Sanders (2012) argues that, in the twentieth century, Western funeral industries actively sought to cultivate a strong moral discourse around "care", positioning themselves as experts in navigating grief to counter popular critiques of commercialism. This caring labour has traditionally been demonstrated through embodied, face-to-face interactions with the bereaved and the body of the deceased. For many in the industry, the capacity of digital technologies to replicate this intimacy in an age of Covid-19, even when all other options are expended, remains questionable.

   The uneasy relationship between new media and intimacy is evident from our research data in both Australia and Denmark. Funeral directors wholeheartedly decried the layers of distance that telephone or video-conferencing tools introduced into interactions with bereaved families. Even when the media provided new routes to facilitate presence and participation from a distance, it was not always trusted by deathcare professionals. For example, for the funerals, Australian funeral directors tended to favour

live-streaming services that prioritised security and reliability. Professional third-party providers that could be integrated into company websites were thus favoured over social media services or Skype and Zoom, despite customers sometimes requesting more interactive, two-way forms of participation. In contrast, in Denmark, leaving streaming and recording to families (in terms of telling them to use their own devices or ask for the existing equipment in the church) meant that the potential for technological failure or disruption did not pose such a threat to professional reputation. In addition, especially in the case of smaller funeral companies, directors were wary of – or simply not able to – find the money, infrastructure, or human resources needed to offer digital services.

The hesitancy around media innovation within the sector is exemplified by the comment of one celebrant in Australia, who defended their professional role as "grief specialist", and not "technology specialist". The company this celebrant works for decided to employ a professional videographer to assist with filming funerals and interment ceremonies during Covid-19 (such professionals being eager for work due to shutdowns in the TV and film sector). Immediately, the differences of approach to streaming emerged:

> Those companies did not take into account attendees' possible distress at having lights/cameras graveside, as an example a family was asked to stand in a particular spot or look a particular way whilst the livestreaming of the interment took place. It was more like being part of a movie set than caring for the family. (Australian celebrant, female, 41 yo)

The fear that the funeral might come to resemble a movie set represents perhaps the most extreme vision of mediatization. Less extreme, but more common expressions of a growing consciousness, and indeed concern, for a mediatized industry landscape can be seen in several interviews when funeral directors expressed concern for the quality and upkeep of their social media presence, with worry for demonstrating technological savvy and funeral production quality to attract new customers. The tenor of these comments reveals how media can be presented as a threat to professional practice within the funeral sector, not to mention the potential distress for the mourners.

The long-term implications of these shifts described in this article is a hotly debated issue, both for scholars and within the deathcare sector in Australia and Denmark. Our interviews with funeral directors suggest a high degree of confidence that live-streaming and recording are here to stay, whether these changes are seen as positive or not. In both Australia and Denmark, the cultural expectation that people will attend a funeral only in person is subject to contestation. For example, in Denmark, one funeral director reported that young people no longer feel the same pressure to attend a funeral in person if they can attend it at a distance:

> It is amazing that these opportunities exist, so everybody can attend, whether you are sitting in China or Japan or Australia [...] But still, I am old school and think you ought to show up, and yes, handshake and a good talk face to face. (Danish funeral director, female, 33 yo)

This initial investigation into the mediatization of the deathcare sector has shed light onto the complexities of mediatization within a field of work which takes pride in human care and contact. More work is needed to uncover the forces which, on a more longitudinal basis, drive the uptake and domestication of media technology in specific sectors. In this case, the mediatization of the last goodbye highlights how profoundly our societies are changing due to digitalisation; even the most tradition-bound areas of our lives (and deaths) are altered. Out of lockdown necessity, industry competition, and customer demand, within the sector we observed an increased awareness of digital media use during the period in question (2020–2021). Under those extraordinary circumstances, there was a willingness to explore variations of mediation, often in parallel with an expressed longing for the tactile. Before Covid-19, internal forces were insufficient to shift deathcare into the digital age, but the pandemic fuelled processes of mediatization which would likely have not otherwise taken place at this pace, especially not in a Danish context. Still, many funeral directors experienced significant distrust toward digital technologies and concern for the future of the sector. Thus, we expect to see in coming years a sector with rather uneven patterns of technological adaption and application, where generational and cultural differences, as well as new expectations from the bereaved (the customers), are likely to shift the parameters of competition and the understanding of what deathcare is, and how we perform it.

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