

Introduction: Death, dying and participatory media + open section

Dorthe Refslund Christensen^{1*}, Carsten Stage²

¹ Associate Professor, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University, Denmark

² Professor, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University, Denmark

* nordrc@cc.au.dk

INTRODUCTION

With the increase in the use of social and digital media in general during the past decade, it is not surprising that social and digital media practices in relation to death, loss and bereavement have continuously increased in the same period. From the sharing of personal grief on dedicated online forums (e.g. Christensen & Sandvik 2013), in Facebook groups and on Instagram (e.g. Christensen et al 2017), to peer-to-peer communities of grief (e.g. Segerstad & Kasperowski 2015) and public engagement in politically motivated deaths such as terror, ideological killings etc. (e.g. Sumiala 2012; Sumiala 2021; Harju & Huhtamäki 2021).

During the last decade, research into digital death-related practices has grown accordingly as a strong subdiscipline of various academic disciplines. In 2013, the international Death Online Research Network (DORN) was established as a response to the then emerging field, and now, about ten years later, this network has become an important network for exchanging research ideas and results, for instance through biannual research symposiums. In 2021, the fifth symposium (DORS#5) took place at the IT- University in Copenhagen (in fact, online, due to Covid-19) with the attendance of researchers from more than 10 countries, and after the event, a number of presenters were invited to contribute to this special issue, and we are happy to present the results of these efforts.

Why this special attention to digital death-related practices? Because the expansion of media and platforms for sharing death and reflecting on death-related practices has changed and expanded how humans respond to and share death, loss and grief. Both when it comes to personal loss and/or the creation of temporal and enduring communities, and when it comes to more spontaneous responses to, for instance, terror and the death of celebrities or citizens as Jiwani's text demonstrates in this volume (see also Walter et al 2011; Sumiala 2021). Digital media simply allow people to share and reach out in ways not possible before, thereby also inviting people to share what used to be private practices and to integrate death-related practices in everyday life, not only in a close circle of co-mourners, but in a wider social context and, as Giaxoglou demonstrates in this volume, in various forms of participation and co-production. The remediation of death on social media has, in many ways, created platforms of empowerment that have led to new strategies, as argued by Christensen and Sandvik (2014). Furthermore, the intricate relations of media and materiality reflected on digital media allow for new interactions with and commemorations of the dead, as demonstrated by Segerstad, Bell and Yeshua-Katz. "Media are materialities that allow us to communicate with the dead or about the dead over the gaps between the world of the living and whatever spatial and temporal sphere the dead may reside in without being absorbed into the gaps ourselves" (Christensen & Sandvik 2014). This implies that the digital remains of the dead and, moreover, the

continued production of material presence of the dead on digital media are new kinds of practices that might resemble material death practices of other cultures.

Social and digital media have thus seemingly increased the potential for developing participatory practices of – and formats related to – death and dying. But what exactly happens to the materiality, language and politics of death and dying, when ordinary citizens are increasingly able to bypass traditional institutions through user-driven participation in media production, circulation and design? Has the power to shape processes linked to death and dying shifted from established authorities to ordinary users or rather to media and platforms with their own logics, affordances and restrictions? Will participatory media cultures motivate a wider and more creative set of practices related to death and dying? In addressing these questions, the first three articles of this issue seek to explore how/if user-driven engagement with media is changing, widening, reproducing or limiting existing practices of death and dying – and thus to what extent user-driven media participation can be a vehicle for diversifying how we die and mourn.

The first article, “A Sort of Permanence: Digital Remains and Posthuman Encounters with Death” by Ylva Hård af Segerstad, Jo Bell and Daphna Yeshua-Katz, explores the changed materiality of remains in digitized contexts and thus increases our understanding of the (post)human encounter with death. The key argument of the article is that the digital remains left behind by the deceased have come to play important parts in the lives of those who live on. The article uses a posthumanist perspective to explore how user-driven engagement with digital remains is changing existing practices related to loss and grieving. The digital remains can be seen as containing the “essence” of the deceased person embodied within the digital device. Based on interviews and observations gathered from the contexts of Israel, the UK and Sweden, the article thus investigates the role of digital remains in bereavement and what implications the eventual obsolescence of these remains might have for continuing bonds.

The second article, “From the Ground Up: Tactical Mobilization of Grief in the Case of the Afzaal-Salman Family Killings”, is authored by Yasmin Jiwani and focuses on the murders of members of the Afzaal-Salman family in London, Ontario (Canada) in June 2021. Immediately after the murders were reported, several social media hashtags were created, and this focused attention on the victims and the Islamophobia that resulted in their deaths and damaged the idea of harmonious multicultural Canada. The article conducts a critical discourse analysis of one of these hashtags, #MyLondonFamily, which was used on Twitter and Instagram, and shows how grief becomes a conveyer of subjugated histories and experiences of Islamophobia. The article also argues that social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram allow for affective expressions of grief, demonstrating a networked sociality and articulating politics of opposition from the ground up.

Korina Giaxoglou has written the third article, “Affective Positioning in hyper-mourning: Sharers as Tellers, Co-tellers and Witnesses”. Here Giaxoglou argues that in an age of social and digital media, users’ engagements with (social) media related to death, dying and mourning vary widely across different social and cultural contexts and changing platforms. Based on the discussion of selected examples, she illustrates how users’ social media engagements related to death, dying and mourning vary, depending on the narrative positions that sharers take up as tellers, co-tellers or witnesses to shared stories. The potential and limits of such engagements can be understood in the context of three overarching, dynamic practices of hyper-mourning, namely entrepreneurial, connective and activist. These are associated with distinct types of affective positions for sharers, audiences and displays of affect, forming the basis for projecting participants’ identity and affective claims. In that way, the article shows how the way we die and mourn is widened as much as limited by social and digital media story affordances and norms.

In addition to the three articles on digital practices of death and dying, the issue also includes two open section articles. The first, “Showing progress. Defining self-tracking as an aesthetic audio-

visual genre”, is written by Michael Nebeling Petersen and Tobias Raun. In the article, the two authors analyse ideas of men talking about and documenting their lack and growth of hair via Finasteride and Minoxidil. The aim of this is to explore these male self-representational videos on YouTube as a specific form of self-tracking enabled by the camera within a specific platformed environment. The authors argue that the camera is not solely a tool, but rather an aesthetic practice with performative effects. Self-tracking must be understood as always already entangled in and inseparable from mediating and aesthetic processes. The article then outlines the main characteristics of self-tracking videos as a self-representational audio-visual genre, defining them as momental videos and longitudinal videos. The authors thus claim that these defining characteristics constitute the central aesthetic principles of Finasteride and Minoxidil self-tracking videos, but that they are also applicable to other forms of videos preoccupied with representing and tracking transformation.

The last article of the issue is called “Threads of participation. Crafting female agency in a collaborative art project in Denmark”. It is co-authored by Tina Louise Hove Sørensen and Birgit Eriksson. The article analyses a particular participatory art project from 2020. Here Trapholt (a Danish museum for art and design) and textile designer Iben Høj launched a grand collaborative art project involving almost 800 embroiderers. The project, named Stitches Beyond Borders, was part of the centenary of Denmark’s reunification with Southern Jutland, and participants were asked to embroider their personal vision of borders. The article analyses how Stitches Beyond Borders, as a collaborative art project, created a strong sense of community and cultivated creative agency. It furthermore focuses on the discursive nature of the female publics created by the art project. Considering the rich and complex history of embroidery as an underestimated female activity tied to repressive power mechanisms, the authors finally discuss whether the project ends up merely (re) creating innocuous female publics by favouring a personal take on the border theme.

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