NETWORKED PUBLICS AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DEATH, DYING, AND BEREAVEMENT IN A DIGITAL AGE

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Introduction

For the past two decades, as in so many other fields of our social lives, digital media has permeated the field of death, dying and bereavement. Death-related online practices keep emerging, offering a range of ways of dealing with death digitally. Online memorials, online support groups and grief-specific forums, expression of grief on Facebook, funerals on virtual worlds, digital legacy services and post-mortem online communication are but a few examples of the variety of such death-related online practices. To a great extent many of these practices are arguably transforming the contemporary social construction of death, mainly by making death public and creating death-specific networked publics.

While many scholars in the field of digital death and thanatology are fascinated with these processes, additional critical engagement with the limitations, challenges and exclusions implicated by these practices is required. By focusing on the specific practice of post-mortem online communication, this paper highlights some of these main challenges, linking them critically to some of the fundamental issues of networked publics in an increasingly digitsed media world.

A Shifting Social Construction of Death

During modernity the social construction of death was characterised by a tension between presence and absence: elimination of death from everyday life on the one hand, and on going presence of the deceased in daily life on the other. Specifically in Western societies during the 19th and 20th centuries, death increasingly became sequestrated, contained in specific times, spaces and practices, grieving was privatised, mourners were encouraged to severe themselves from deceased loved ones and death

became highly excluded from everyday public life (see for instance: Ariès, 1974; Mellor & Shilling, 1993).

Towards the end of the 20th century and increasingly so as the 21st century unfolds, scholars are describing a shift in the social construction of death as it becomes not only less excluded (for instance, with the emergence of the Dual Process grieving model, see: Stroebe & Schut, 1999) but potentially challenging the boundaries between life and death (Howarth, 2000). New practices such as sharing grief online and creating memorialisation websites have drawn the attention of scholars fascinated with the ways in which these practices are transforming some of the core aspects of the modern social construction of death in Western societies, mainly in relation to public expressions of grief and mourning, processes of enfranchisement of death and dying, enhanced forms of continuing bonds and everyday presence of death and the dead (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Gray & Coulton, 2013; Kasket, 2012). More extreme, perhaps, are practices of presence of post-mortem online communication.

Post-Mortem Online Communication

As popular predictions argue, within a few decades, Facebook will have more accounts of deceased users rather than living ones. Such digital remains are already becoming increasingly visible and widespread in users' experience of online communication (See for instance: Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2012). In this context, newly emerging services are enabling users to prepare for their digital afterlives, and configure ways for them to be active online after their death. These services open up new possibilities for post-mortem forms of interaction by enabling post-mortem "sending" of emails, "posting" on social networking sites and even "engaging" in conversation using AI. These services explicitly encourage their users to think about their posthumous online selves and prepare their continued participation on online media. For instance, *Capsoole*, invites users to "protect your digital being"; and *SafeBeyond* calls to "allow your digital identity to outlive you". Both services enable their users to send messages or post on Facebook at a specified time after their death. What makes such practices particularly challenging to the social construction of death is that by "sending" emails or "posting" on SNSs, through these websites deceased individuals can be active in a manner that is "common. Not particularly unique nor removed from ordinary online life" (Meese, Nansen, Kohn, Arnold, & Gibbs, 2015, p. 417).

Most scholars in this field focus on the ways in which the incorporation of death-related practices within networked publics enable individuals to overcome the loneliness and social isolation typically imposed in the context of death during modernity. This paper, therefore, explores the limitations and exclusions implicated by these practices, focusing mainly on access, design and materiality, and the implication of such practices on both the conceptualisation as well as practices of networked publics.

Design and Practice: Affordances and Limitations

This paper is based on the analysis of websites dedicated to post-mortem digital interaction. Search was conducted on three languages using three search engines: Google, Bing, and Yahoo! Search. The exclusion criteria was comprised of two

conditions: (1) users create messages to be sent at some point in the future (2) the websites explicitly defines these future messages as meant to be sent after the user's passing. At this stage, both active and no-longer active websites were included to account for changes and trajectories in the field. This search resulted in a corpus of 32 websites. A functional typology of the websites is presented, giving an overview of the existing services and the visible trends within this field.

Then, a multimodal discourse analysis of 12 websites is presented, focusing on the technological, social and cultural affordances and limitations to post-mortem online communication practices as constructed and encouraged through the websites. This includes both intra-modal (analysis of each mode of communication used on the website) as well as cross-modal (relationships between modes) levels of analysis. The analysis of the websites is then contextulaised with in depth-interviews conducted with 7 designers and founders of websites for post-mortem online communication.

Specifically this paper offers a critical discussion of practices of online post-mortem communication, focusing on the challenges of access, design, materiality, and trust, and linking them to the notion of networked publics and their central role in everyday contemporary life.

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