DEAD ONLINE: PRACTICES OF POST-MORTEM DIGITAL INTERACTION

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Abstract

Since their nascence communication technologies have been associated with death, triggering fantasies of dismantling boundaries between death and everyday life. This paper, examines recently emerging digital platforms designed to enable post-mortem interactions as a site in which social meanings of death and the dead are formed, negotiated and modified. Using a multimodal analysis of websites dedicated to post-mortem interaction, this paper aims to answer the questions: How are practices of post-mortem digital interaction constructed through websites designed to enable post-mortem digital interaction? And what do these constructions contribute to the contemporary social construction of death?

Introduction

Communication technologies have long been associated with death. Electronic media in particular have repeatedly triggered fantasies regarding the presence of the dead in everyday life (Sconce, 2000). Most recently, digital platforms such as *www.deadsoci.al*, *www.lifenaut.com* and *www.liveson.org*, open up new possibilities for post-mortem forms of interaction that potentially allow an active participation of the dead through digital media. For example, by allowing the dead to "send" emails, "post" on social media networking sites and even "engage" in conversations. In so doing, these platforms arguably challenge conceptions of death as stillness, and the association of the dead with silence and absence. By empirically exploring websites and internet apps designed for users to plan and prepare for future digital interactions that will occur after their death, this project aims to answer the questions: How are practices of post-mortem digital interaction constructed through websites designed to enable post-mortem digital interaction? And what do these constructions contribute to the contemporary social construction of death?

Contemporary construction of death and communication technologies

Throughout modernity, the social construction of death was characterised by a tension: a desire to eliminate and remove death from everyday life; and a continuous and ever-

lingering presence attributed to the deceased in daily life.[i] This tension was manifested through practices of sequestration (Elias, 1985; Mellor & Shilling, 1993; Walter, 1994) on the one hand; and what I regard to as practices of *controlled presence,* on the other. In between these conflicting desires, communication technologies have repeatedly triggered fantasies of dismantling boundaries between death and everyday life. Modern communication technologies continually challenged such practices of confining the presence of death and the dead, while enabling them new forms of both elimination as well as inclusion.[ii]

Lately, the relationship between digital media and death has become a focus of attention for scholars. Some scholars suggest that such practices (as above mentioned) of confinement of the extents and forms of presence of death and the dead in everyday life are being challenged. Out of this emerging field of research, I offer to focus on the notion of *digital remains* (see for instance Bollmer, 2013; Kasket, 2012; Lingel, 2013; McCallig, 2013; Sherry, 2013).

Specifically, within the field of digital remains, I am interested in websites and internet applications that enable users to plan and prepare for their digital presence and activity for after their inevitable death at some point in the future. Using these websites and apps, users can be digitally active after they die in different ways including: sending emails, posting on Facebook and on Twitter, deleting their email or social media accounts and engaging in conversation with surviving loved ones through a digital avatar. This emerging phenomenon provides a potentially extreme case of the ways in which some of the aspects of the contemporary social construction of death are potentially being re-configured.

Methodology

My method of data collection and analysis is informed by two principles: 1) maximum variation and; 2) grounded theory. Since the phenomenon of post-mortem digital interaction is novel, there is a paucity of cases that exemplify it. *Maximum variation* (Dilaver, 2014; Flyvbjerg, 2001) is a strategy for case selection in which choice of a small number of cases is made on the principle of maximizing their diversity enabling a rich description of the cases. The *grounded theory* approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is an analysis strategy enabling categories to emerge inductively during the process of analysis. Since there is little prior knowledge about the attributes of the cases, a grounded theory approach will enable for the categories to emerge from the field of research itself.

The aim of this section is to provide an analysis of available platforms designed to enable post-mortem digital interaction. By such platforms I refer to websites and internet applications that specifically offer users the means to manage, plan and prepare future digital social activity that will occur after their passing.

An initial web-search will be run on 4 search engines: Google, Yahoo! Search, Bing and Duckduckgo[iii] using key words such as: "digital afterlife" and "social media after death". Results leading to specialized websites will be collected. Magazine articles and

technological blog posts featured in the results will also be searched for additional reference to relevant websites and search keywords.

The following filters will be used to refine the corpus: 1) seeking platforms that challenge practices of controlled presence by only selecting ones that enable a deceased person's digital identity to *actively participate in socio-digital interaction*.[iv] 2) Choosing platforms that encourage users for durable online activity rather than one-time interactions. 3) Applying the principle of maximum variation in order to analyze a diverse range of websites to gain a rich characterization of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

Death-related use of digital media is spreading with digital technologies' increasing permeation into everyday activities. The increasing number of digital "ghosts" is making questions regarding the idea of digital remains of growing relevance and importance. Consequently, death-related digital practices, specifically regarding post-mortem digital presence, are becoming a focus of concern for both individuals as well as institutions. By addressing a phenomenon within the field of digital remains that is scarcely regarded by the existing literature, this research contributes to the understanding of how death and the dead are mediated in the digital age.

Notes

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[i] This project focuses on death as a personal experience. That is, the possibility to experience post-mortem digital interaction, with a specific person with whom the survivor has a personal acquaintance.

[ii] See for instance: Barthes, 1981; Mulvey, 2006; Ruby 1995; Zelizer, 2010.

[iii] The Duckduckgo search engine doesn't track its users, therefore the search results do not depend on previous search or other user preference and information as can happen on other websites.

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