IMAGINING THE ENDS OF IDENTITY: BIRTH AND DEATH ON INSTAGRAM

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Introduction

While social media is communal by definition, the use, regulation and understanding of social media is frequently limited to individuals (even if those individuals add together as a group or community of some kind). In this paper, we detail an attempt to examine how the visual social media app and platform Instagram is used to imagine the relationships with those who have no self-representational agency: babies and the recently deceased. Specifically, the #ultrasound and #funeral hashtags were tracked for three months in 2014. The aim is to utilise this mapping to investigate how relationships appear in visual form, and what these then say about these dynamics are presented visually, and are thus imagined, by Instagram users.

Building on Instagram mapping methods we have detailed in depth elsewhere (xxxx), using the Instagram API we tracked media in which the media item's caption included specific hashtags (whilst initially returned by the Instagram API, we disregarded media with the hashtag when the tag was not added by the initial poster, but rather by a subsequent commenter). While all Instagram metadata and media captured and analysed was completely public in a technical sense, the public/private distinction at the level of code is insufficient; rather, following Markham and Buchanan (2012) we were mindful of not amplifying media content that may not have been shared with this intention, and have chosen not to include example images in this published form.

Imagining Birth: #ultrasound

To investigate the way babies were imagined and visualised on social media prior to birth, we tracked the #ultrasound hashtag for three months in 2014, finding 11320 media items shared publicly on Instagram, constituted by 10890 images and 430 videos (see Table 1). Heeding boyd and Crawford's (2012) advice, to balance the quantitative numbers with qualitative insight we examined in details the media from the first Monday of each month; in this paper we focus on the first Monday in March, on which Instagram users publicly shared 289 images and 7 video files. (Notably, while the #sonogram hashtag is also used

on Instagram, there is a much smaller uptake and it was not included in this initial tracking.)

Table 1. #ultrasound tagged media on Instagram, 2014			
	Images	Videos	Overall Media
March	3468	151	3619
April	3847	128	3975
May	3575	151	3726
3-Month Totals:	**10890**	**430**	**11320**

Of the 289 images, 17 were non-foetal ultrasounds; 6 spam images showing no discernible relevance; and 3 advertising clothes or maternity materials. A further 32 image depicted the social experience of an ultrasound (eg travelling to the ultrasound, or a nervous selfie beforehand). Another 32 images were multi-frame collages or professional looking staged images featuring the ultrasound photos, explicitly situating the image in the family unit somehow, including a couple holding one end each on an iPhone displaying the ultrasound, and a 9-panel image showing the story of how the couple came to meet and become parents.

Importantly, in the two weeks between capturing the metadata, and returning to analyse the media itself, 15 images had been deleted or made private, possibly indicating the Instagram user rethinking sharing the ultrasound image publicly. At the opposite end of the privacy scale, 72 images showed textual information from the ultrasound screen which was personally identifiable (eg mother's name, location, expected date of delivery) which may have future privacy implications for both the family and the resulting child later in life.

#ultrasound Instagram media thus do important work in situating the unborn as part of various family structures, but also provoke some important questions about the privacy of others (even loved others) when sharing online.

Imagining Death: #funeral

Initially we tracked the two Instagram hashtags #RIP and #funeral for March, April and May of 2014, but soon dropped the #RIP tag as the volume of uses was far higher than expected (c. 15000 media daily) and was beyond the capacity of our relatively limited tracking setup. Instead, we focused exclusively on the #funeral tag, and over the three months tracked 16,497 media items publicly shared on Instagram, with 4% (634) being videos and the remainder images (see Table 2).

Table 2. #funeral tagged media on Instagram, 2014			
	Images	Videos	Overall Media
March	5375	214	5589
April	5429	220	5649
May	5059	200	5259

3-Month Totals:	15863	634	16497

As with #ultrasound, we did a qualitative analysis of the first Monday of each month, with the results here focusing exclusively on the first Monday in March 2014, on which users publicly shared 398 images and 9 videos with the #funeral hashtag in their caption. Flower arrangements, wreathes and typical funeral icons constituted a significant proportion of the Instagram funeral media, consistent with more mainstream funeral visualisation. While smaller in number, there were still a range of humorous images, both motivational (eg 'a funeral for my fat') emphasising funeral as a farewell rather than death, and death-related memes (eg 'at my funeral, it would be funny if…'). There were several funeral images of pets (mostly goldfish, all of which were being flushed down a toilet). Just over a third of the images were selfies (self-portrait photos either of an individual or group taken with a mobile device), and it is these images which were most provocative.

Of the funeral selfies, many were posed with the expected sad or forlorn face with the person typically clad in black, presumably immediately before or after a funeral. However, more than half featured individuals or groups clearly dressed for a funeral, but smiling. At first glance this appears incongruent with the setting, but we suggest three possible reasons: (1) the norms of selfies are about dialoguing with your imagined audience, not just capturing the physical setting, and smiling may convey that the selfie-taker is okay themselves despite the sombre setting; (2) many funerals are intended as a celebration of the deceased's life as much as mourning, and a more upbeat selfie is consistent with that motivation (as is reinforced by a range of the image captions); (3) funerals are, at times, a moment of reconnection with expanded family and friends and especially the group selfies may be celebrating that reunion. Further contextual analysis will be needed to delve deeper into these possibilities, but it is clear that #funeral is a multivalent hashtag and is utilised to convey a variety of meanings, consistent with related research (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015).

Conclusion

Mapping #ultrasound and #funeral tagged media on Instagram opens one avenue for understanding the way birth and death are imagined and engaged with visually on social media. The sharing of ultrasound images begins an individual's social media footprint before they are born, and does important affective work situating them within a family group. The management and sharing of ultrasound photos similarly leads to important privacy considerations not just for the Instagram users, but also the unborn being visualised in this way. At the other end, #funeral images, and especially funeral selfies, show a wide range of responses to death and loss, yet these images show that funerals are not just spaces of loss and mourning, but at times also of celebration and positive memorialisation. In both cases, visual social media offers an avenue for engaging with the way birth and death are imagined, highlighting relationships and affective connections.

References

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