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THE EMERGING PRACTICES OF THE COLLECTIVE AFTERLIFE: MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF WEBSITES FOR POST-MORTEM DIGITAL INTERACTION

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Introduction

This paper offers to deploy Scheffler's notion of the collective afterlife in order to conceptualize and explore newly emerging websites enabling the planning and preparing of post-mortem online interactions. This paper presents an analytical framework for conducting multimodal analysis of websites as units of analysis adapted from Pauwels's six-step framework for multimodal analysis. The framework is exemplified through the analysis of 6 websites dedicated to enabling post-mortem digital interaction. Specifically, this paper explores the cultural specificities of such practices and the ways in which they are constructed.

Death online research and post-mortem digital interaction

In the past 5 years research on death and digital media has significantly evolved. Along with on going developments and emergence of death-related practices using digital media so have scholars increasingly addressed the questions, meanings and implications that such practices raise. This body of research stems from a variety of perspectives and disciplines and addresses a wide range of issues such as the legal implications of death in a digital age, changes in practices of mourning and grieving, online businesses offering funerary services, and the online realization of the psychological model of continuing bonds (Doka, 2012; Gotved, 2014; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2012) to name a few. In spite of this broad scope of research, there is very little attention (if any at all) paid to the emerging practice of planning one's own online activities and interactions post-mortem. This project offers to contribute to the understanding of this emerging practice.

The phenomenon at issue is defined as platforms dedicated for planning post mortem online activity and presence. These are websites that are designed explicitly to encourage users to think about and imagine the world once they are gone, and enable to create ways for them to be active online in that world. For instance, the website *DeadSocial.org* enables users to create messages that will be posted on Facebook in the future according to the timing indicated by the users. Thus, a user could create

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birthday wishes that will be posted on Facebook in many years to come, enabling her to be part of the online communicative event of birthdays of loved ones long after her death.

These websites do not deal directly with death in the sense of an actual recent death (unlike platforms related to memorialization or support for grieving for instance), but rather with death as a concept and with accepting one's mortality. In order to conceptualize these practices I would like to offer Scheffler's notion of the *Collective afterlife* (2014).

The afterlife conjecture

In his book *Death and the Afterlife*, Samuel Scheffler (2014) presents an unusual understanding of the afterlife. Scheffler discusses the notion of afterlife not in terms of the survival of the soul after one's death, but in terms of the continued lives of human beings and the existence of humanity after one's life ends. This is what Scheffler regards as *the collective afterlife*. His main argument, or what he calls the afterlife conjecture, contends that this belief in the prosperity of human kind is essential for individuals to live a value-laden life and perceive of things as mattering. By presenting two thought experiments, Scheffler argues that individuals ultimately care more about the survival of humanity (and depend on it for constructing and understanding value) than they do about that of people they know or even about their own.

The assurance entailed in the notion of a collective afterlife, enables individuals to deal with their own mortality by personalizing the future of which they will not be a part. That is, believing that humanity will remain long after one will cease to exist, enables individuals to imagine the future without them (and even without their loved ones) thus finding comfort to the fact of their mortality. To a great extent, the websites described above can be understood as enabling users to prepare and think about their collective afterlife. Although Scheffler's thesis has some significant flaws, it nonetheless provides a useful framework for conceptualizing the above-described websites from a perspective that is outside the scope of dying or mourning. One of the main weaknesses in Scheffler's thesis is that it's extremely universalistic. It lacks any consideration of additional social, psychological or other factors in the approach of individuals to the fact of their mortality and the potential role of this notion of collective afterlife. This paper will address the cultural specificity related to the practice of planning for the collective afterlife.

Multimodal analysis of a collective afterlife

This project, therefore, uses Scheffler's notion of the collective afterlife in order to conceptualize and explore websites designed for post-mortem digital presence and interaction.

The corpus of this paper is comprised of 32 websites dedicated to post-mortem digital interaction. Search was conducted using three search engines: *Google*, *Bing* and *Yahoo! Search*. The exclusion criteria was comprised of two conditions: (1) messages created by users are sent at some point in the future after they die, and (2) the websites

explicitly encourage users to think about these future messages in the context of the world they'd leave behind them once they die.¹

First, a functional typology is presented based on two categories: (1) the variety of forms of presence enabled by the website (range functions offered to users) and (2) the degree of presence attributed (based on criteria of modes of representation and time-scope of service). Three main prototypes are discussed: websites focusing on social and emotional closure; websites focusing on administrative online and offline closure; and websites focusing on social presence and participation.

Secondly, Pauwels's (2012) multimodal framework for analysis of websites as cultural expression was adapted for in-depth as well as comparative analysis of 6 websites (2 of each prototype). This framework is comprised of six stages, moving from descriptive quantitative assessment to in-depth analysis of each website, by exploring the different modes being used (intra-modal) as well as the relationships between modes (cross-modal).

Specifically, this paper looks into the cultural specificities in which individuals are invited to imagine and personalize their futures after their own death. The incorporation of varying temporalities into communicative events is also explored in characterizing how these practices are constructed on the websites at issue.

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¹ Thus for, instance, general apps such as “vuture” that enables users to send future messages in general contexts, were excluded.