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Death in digital spaces: social practices and narratives

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Abstract

Purpose: In post-modern society, Internet and social media mediate between daily life processes such as death, establishing new forms of social interaction among social actors and creating new norms. The creation of digital cemeteries and the usage of the services they offer by Internet users, the conversion of a deceased person's Facebook profile into a profile "Remembering" or the replacement of a user's profile photo by a black background in cases of grieving, demonstrate emphatically the new dimensions that the event of death takes on Internet and social media, leading to the building of a public experience, despite the fact that in Western societies death is considered to be a private affair.

Methods: This paper based on an in-depth review of the literature deals with death as an event mediated by new technologies, since Internet and social media have given the opportunity for new narratives about the experience of death and have contributed to the emergence of new social practices.

Conclusions: Users' interaction in digital environments, on the account of death, generates new broader social relationships, while the operating terms of digital media enable the emergence of new death-related practices that probably substitute traditional rituals, having though the same purpose. At the same time, the continuing presence of the deceased in the digital world ensures a form of "immortality" for him/her, even if not preselected, while at the same time it seems to contribute to the maintenance of a relationship between the living and the deceased.

Keywords:
Death, Internet, Social Media, Facebook, mediation, digital immortality.

1. Introduction

Death is the common "denominator" for humanity and the fear of mortality dominates throughout life (Todd, 2011). This explains Kübler-Ross' argument (1969) that our society is constantly seeking ways to avoid death and is committed to this effort through medical science and technology. Obviously, this does not mean that the main concern of medical science is to find a solution for human immortality, since it scopes to human care. However, the combination of medicine and (bio)technology has produced methods for life lengthening, addressing thus somehow the distress of the coming death.

Although perceptions regarding death as an event and grief as a situation following loss have changed over the centuries, structured at last on a bipolar basis (private-public, religious-secular), the new technologies and especially Internet and its applications such as social media seem to have broken the boundaries between the world of the living and that of the dead, creating new interactions between the social subjects and the "digital image" of those once existed, altering also the traditional rituals of death and the grief practices and finally promising a form of digital immortality.

This paper, based on an in-depth review of the international literature, refers to the narrative about death as mediated by Internet and social media. Section 2 explores the change in perceptions and practices regarding death over the centuries, showing that death was sometimes considered a natural occurrence in life, while other times a taboo, sometimes was addressed as a private and other times as a public event. Section 3 discusses the ways that death takes its place on Internet and social media in the context of virtual cemeteries at first and later in the frame of Facebook's dead profiles example. In this context, the conjunction of the two worlds, that of the alive and that of the deceased, seems to be an inevitable outcome of the integration of private with public, digital with real. The fourth section focuses on the transformation of the traditional rituals following death in the digital space, the emergence of new behaviours and practices, and the narrative about death and dead. The last section raises a number of concerns regarding digitally mediated death and the way that our digital presence will probably determine our digital immortality.

2. Death as a social event

The perceptions regarding death and the practices that follow death have been determined by many factors over time, such as the social and cultural environment and the religious beliefs. This explains the fact that between West and East, post-modern society and the past, Christianity and other religions, differences are recorded regarding the concept of death and the rituals associated with it, but also with reference to the relation between death and life.

In most cultures, as Baudrillard (2008) claims, death begins before death and life lasts after life, making it impossible to distinguish between them. For example, until 13th century, death was considered an inherent part of life and grief a superior form of sadness, necessary to be expressed. Later and until the end of the 18th century, the siting of the cemeteries next to the church, in the centre of the city, emphasized both the sanctity of death and its involvement with life. On the contrary, from the 19th century and on, the removal of cemeteries away from inhabited areas made clear the distinction between the world of the living and that of the dead (Howarth, 2000), constituting at the same time a response to the risk of infection by the dead due to of the "miasma" of the graves (Foucault, 2012; Bourke, 2011). In the middle of the same century, death was transformed into a private and medical event, as diseases and consequently care places (hospitals) increased (Murray, Toth & Clinkinbeard, 2005; Hanusch, 2010; Kern, Forma & Gil-Egui, 2013), while the burial fears of the previous century were blunted due to the improved appearance of the cemeteries (Bourke, 2011), without, however, them losing their sanctity.

During 20th century, death became invisible (Murray et al., 2005), "an incomprehensible physical process", a taboo of the modern world (Gorer, 2008: 77) having its origins in the previous perception of "miasma" (Terzakis, 2003). It should be noted that the term taboo doesn't mean something forbidden by the law, but by the customary traditions of the society. Thus, traditional rituals such as attendance of the funeral, the memorial service, the visit to the cemetery, as well as the expression of grief in specific dress code declined. At the same time, cemeteries lost their sanctity and were considered, as Foucault argues (2012), the "other city", a dark home that every family was connected with. Despite the establishment of the death

taboo, death narratives - especially regarding the violent expression of death- found their way into everyday life through literature, cinema and the media (Gibson, 2007).

With the emergence of late modernity, the binary perceptions of death (private-public, good-evil, nature-society etc.) were ruined. The idea of postmodern death is based on the assumption that life and death can be clearly distinguished from one another, but the boundaries that had been previously posed defining death as a social construction proved to be vague.

It seems, therefore, that although the perceptions of the deeply religious societies gave their place to more secularized ones over time, this does not imply that faith in post-mortem life has been definitively lost (Kern et al., 2013). Simultaneously, new technologies urged us to confront novel and important issues regarding death and the way it is experienced (Odom, Harper, Sellen, Kirk & Banks, 2010).

3. Digitally mediated death

The hope that the social prejudices regarding death would start to fade came with the advent of Web 2.0. (Sofka, Cuppit & Gilbert, 2012). Some scholars argue that the presence of websites related to death and grief points out the removal of the death taboo (Kern et al., 2013), while others say that the communities that emerged in cyberspace do not prove the removal of the taboo, but a shift from the culture of silence to the culture of secrecy (Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2015).

One of the first indications of moving away from the death taboo is the development of Internet activities that transform death to a commercial and profit act. Similar activities of death commercialization are already known from the end of the Late Middle Ages with the professional grievers (Aries, 1974). In modern era, funeral agencies, in the context of a necessary policy for their commercial survival, create websites, in order to attract customers-mourners (Graikousi, 2019). The services and products they promote -usually flowers, but also gifts dedicated to a dead's memory- (Graikousi, 2019) constitute a mixture of tradition and innovation in the death industry (Nansen, Kohn, Arnold, van Ryn & Gibbs, 2017). The design and the cost of these products make the marketing strategy of the funeral agencies clear, since, as Aries points out "to sell death, it must become more enjoyable" (Aries, 1988: 56). The promotion of products and services is obviously covered by a veil of care for the relatives of the deceased, as these online stores provide products specially designed for every age and activity (e.g., basketball designed for the dead's ash) (Graikousi, 2019).

The high number of visitors[1] in such websites indicates that the incorporation of death into digital reality, which obviously results to the profitability of the respective death related businesses, cannot be denied (Graikousi, 2019). Although funeral agencies' sites are one of the examples of this incorporation, it is not the most known nor the most interesting.

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[1] https://www.alexa.com/topsites/category/Top/Society/Death/Death_Care/Funeral_Homes_Software (accessed 3/6/2019).

3.1 Virtual Cemeteries

Even though shortly before 2000, no one could imagine a cemetery in a place other than the one traditionally located, it was just six years after the creation of the World Wide Web (1989) that the first digital cemetery called World Wide Cemetary (1995) appeared on Internet, being up to date in the 5th place between digital cemeteries worldwide[2] regarding the number of visitors (Graikousi, 2019).

Although World Wide Cemetary primarily provides the opportunity to send a text accompanied by a photograph of the dead, it also gives the opportunity to offer digital flowers and keep a visitors' e-book for each grave. His creator, Mike Kibbee, created the website once he was informed that he was suffering from a disease that eventually led him to death, having previously designed his own burial monument (Graikousi, 2019). As a precursor of Facebook's "Legacy Contact", as Graikousi notes (2019), Kibbee urged Gerald Hannon to "upload" his virtual monument immediately after his death (WWC, 2018).

Similar functions are found in the *Virtual Memorial Garden*, a website devoted to the memory of the creator's father, created in 1996, aiming to "keep his memory alive as much as possible", as the creator mentions (VMG, 1996). The shades of green and the intense presence of nature on the Virtual Memorial Garden website point to the 19th century cemeteries appearance (Graikousi, 2019) being free from the fear of disease transmission and having been transformed into impressive gardens where visitors could enjoy their walk as if cemeteries were a recreation place rather than burial (Bourke, 2011).

These digital cemeteries can be considered as a place for the dead's relatives and familiars to honor him/her and to share stories about him/her, substituting thus deceased actual absence. Providing support to grievers is not the primary goal of these web cemeteries. Instead, their primary function is to host dead people who can be visited from anywhere in the world (Graikousi, 2019).

The "Legacy.com" is an example of the first digital cemeteries descendants. The website creation highlights not only the need to "communicate" with the dead, but also the need for a growing interaction with death itself. Specifically, since 1998, the site has been collaborating with 1,500 newspapers and 3,500 funeral agencies in Europe, America and Australia. As the creators of the site state[3] and statistics[4] confirm, the Legacy.com is at the top of global obituaries with 40 million unique visitors per month. The company maintains perhaps the largest database of digital monuments, while providing a wide range of photographic and biographical content of died celebrities and helpful content for grievers to address their loss (Graikousi, 2019).

It seems, therefore, that as digital cemeteries are increasingly integrated into everyday digital life, the social presence of the deceased –which in the natural environment is represented by the burial monument (Ricoeur, 2004)- turns into hybrid on Internet. Simultaneously, for the first time a transformation of the traditional rituals of death is observed within the frame of digital cemeteries. Natural rituals such as visiting the cemetery, banging the bell, offering flowers to the grave seem to be replaced by digital rituals of the same purpose (Graikousi, 2019). Although there are similarities between the digital and natural cemeteries regarding the

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[2] https://www.alexa.com/topsites/category/Shopping/Death_Care/Online_Memorials (accessed 3/6/2019).
[3] https://www.legacy.com/about/about-us (accessed 3/6/2019).
[4] https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/legacy.com (accessed 3/6/2019).

feelings described by deceased relatives and familiars or the thoughts shared and the photographs of the dead (Moss, 2004), there are four points that underline the differences between them: time flexibility regarding when the death 'monument' will be deposited, accessibility to anyone wishing to visit the monument (in a natural funeral access might be denied), ability to visit at any time and from any geographic location and, finally, text or photo sharing regarding the dead that can be used to revive a dialogue with him/her or other mourners (Roberts & Vidal, 2000).

Death's mediation by computer expanded death's presence in the daily life of the living and tends to expand it further, since a domain with the .memorial end is now available. Memorial webpages, forums on the online funeral guest books, blogs, and dead' profiles on social media can be considered digital cemeteries (Graikousi, 2019). As a matter of fact, the characteristics of the latter category seem to attract more and more the interest of the scientific community.

3.2 Dead Community on Facebook

Nowadays about 2 billion Internet users use social media and this number is expected to grow even more with the increase in smartphones' usage (Statista, 2018a). Facebook was found at the top of social media very quickly, with 2.2 billion active users per month (Statista, 2018b).

As the number of Facebook users is growing, the platform in 2009 enabled the creation of memorial pages, giving thus the prospect of a new place where people can keep and share their memories for someone who has died (Patton, MacBeth, Schoenebeck, Shear & McKeown, 2018; Chan 2009). At the same time, Facebook stopped proposing a dead user to "people you may know," a function based on an algorithm for adding a new friend. So, since no user can connect with someone after his/her death, the social circle of the dead closes, but he/she remains a visible node in the social network (Graikousi, 2019).

Facebook also adopted a new "memoir" policy; a user's profile does not need to be deleted after his/her death, but it is kept intact, allowing other users to interact with him/her as they would do if the user was alive. Simultaneously, Facebook allows users to submit a "special request" for the profile of the deceased user (Facebook, 2018a). The content of the request is not specified in the help center of Facebook or in the terms of use, so it may be assumed that the platform allows connection with the dead as a "friend" in the case that the alive user was not previously connected with him/her (Graikousi, 2019).

Facebook's policy on deceased profiles management has changed significantly over time, not only because of the platform modernization but also because of dealing with specific incidents (Chan, 2009). In this context, a few years ago, in 2015, Facebook introduced another function. It is the "legacy contact" who can manage the profile of the deceased being converted to a "memory" profile (Facebook, 2015). We can thus assume that Facebook seems to provoke users to think of their death and, if they wish, to symbolically designate a person as a manager of their digital heritage[5] (Graikousi, 2019). Taking under consideration that grief is "the agony and at the same time the hope of the deceased to be cried (...) so as not to sink into the darkness of oblivion" (Plexidas, 2015: 31), Facebook seems to fully serve this

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[5] Facebook recommends: "*We urge you to definitely designate an account manager in case of death so that your account can be managed once converted into "memory". Learn more about account managers in case of death and what they can do*". https://www.facebook.com/help/1506822589577997 (accessed 4/6/2019).

necessity through the operation of a "heir" promising to keep the memory of the dead user alive.

It was just in 2017 when Facebook modified the function of memorial pages and urged users to convert the dead user profile to a "memorial account". In this way, the daed's profile remains intact and the phrase "in his/her memory" appears above the name of the deceased (Facebook, 2017).

Moreover, though less often, the creation of "pages" and "group" dedicated to the memory of the deceased is observed on Facebook, giving users the opportunity to join the community at the touch of a button - "Like" in the first case and "Join" in second-. This allows users to participate in a web community that will mourn, memorize and share narratives about the dead (Frost, 2014).

There are, consequently, two different types of pages for people who have died; the pages dedicated to a dead's memory that can be joined by anyone as long as he/she becomes a member and the profiles of the deceased members of the Facebook community. It should be noted that not all profiles of dead users are signed by the phrase 'remembering'. This happens only in the case when, after a user's death, a member of his/her family declares the death on the platform. Otherwise, the profile remains static since its last use and the users aware of the person's death are limited to his/her familiars (Graikousi, 2019).

Virtual cemeteries websites posed for the first time the issue of post-mortem presence. However, they stayed out of the everyday life of Internet users who did not want to be involved with a visit to the cemetery (Graikousi, 2019). Facebook has not only ignored this choice but has created a post-mortem digital community (Graikousi, 2019) that is expected to grow by 2098 to a number surpassing that of alive users (Brown, 2016). Surveys in fact reveal that about 10,000 Facebook users die monthly (Hiscock, 2014).

In this frame, it can be argued that the way Facebook functions imposing the presence of digital zoombies has led to the final removal of the death taboo. At the same time this function eliminates the division between the worlds of the dead and alive, seeming thus to promote and serve the established and universal need for youth and immortality (Graikousi, 2019). One could even argue that somehow dead are imposed where they are not desirable, and their presence is neither welcoming nor relieving (Howarth, 2000). Within this digital context, dead are more and more active in material culture and interrelate with the living in a complex and compelling way (Gere, 2016). This feature will continue to exist and as Mike Kibbee has designed not only a digital cemetery but also his own grave, it will not surprise us if, in the future, as Koktan points out (2017), the user is invited to design his/her personal memory page in social media, as if it was a digital testament to his/her family. Nevertheless, a user has already the opportunity to design his own funeral, as offered by the services of numerous funeral agencies (Graikousi, 2019).

It seems, consequently, that despite the fact that Facebook was created as a place for alive meeting and socializing, it also evolves as a place of memory and grief, becoming the largest digital cemetery ever existed. In contrast to the previous century, when cemeteries were removed from inhabited areas, the dead now "circulate" among the living and the conjunction of the two worlds seems to be an inevitable outcome of a unification process between the private and the public, the digital and the real (Graikousi, 2019).

4. Digital practises and death narratives

Digital technologies opened a new path for the maintenance of the bond with the deceased, the accomplishment of digital immortality through the preservation of digital footprint, the emergence of new rituals and the creation of new content (Odom et al., 2010).

Death rituals have traditionally been part of a separation process from life (Gere, 2016) and are found in all cultures. Nevertheless, their dynamic may be limited as death rituals are planned by the dead relatives who experience the loss of a loved person (Worden, 2009). In Western societies, the usual ceremonial process involves the funeral, the burial, and the gathering of relatives and friends in the dead's home. During the funeral, a photograph accompanies the coffin and afterwards is placed on the grave, while the attendees closely associated with the deceased -some of whom are informed about the death by a news announcement- share stories and memories about the dead, providing psychological support to his/her relatives (Koktan, 2017).

With the advent of new technologies, these behaviors, although still strongly rooted in western perception and practice, may move on Internet (Castro & González, 2012). The "friends" of the deceased use to engage in ritual behaviors similar to those that would occur in the natural funeral and in a visit to the cemetery (Kern et al., 2013). Thus, one might argue that the comment posting instead of a crown deposit, the expression of sadness using emoticons, the visit of a profile instead of a cemetery constitute substitutes of the traditional rituals. Changing a profile photo with a black background is an expression of emotion that could refer to the established dress code during grief. Even the information for one's death posted to the profile of a relative -although not a ceremonial process, but an informative act- suggests a transformation in the former way of information (Graikousi, 2019). The difference between traditional and digital rituals is that the latter are public, virtual, "eternal" and direct (Kern et al., 2013) and allow the participation of a larger number of people, many of whom do not know each other or even the deceased. Beyond recognizing the contribution of digital technologies to the concepts of "digital life" and "digital death," we should acknowledge that the new forms of technology have created a form of Do-It-YourSelf (DIY) that drives users to act (Gibson, 2007).

In the real world, the rituals of death, beyond their symbolic character based on religious beliefs, constitute dramatic narratives aiming at finalizing death, while, at the same time, they are helpful to the expression of grief (Graikousi, 2019). In digital spaces, on the other hand, the potential of new technologies makes death finalizing doubtful. However, in this case too, narratives for both the deceased and for the relationship with death itself are also supported. For example, the traditional obituary in a newspaper was replaced, on Facebook, by the posts of relatives, friends, even strangers who refer to the dead (Sofka, 2009).

Photographs also contribute to a narrative about the dead, and as posts they can also shape the way the identity of the deceased is represented (Graikousi, 2019). Within this context, mourners employ to a dialogue through which the deceased never really dies but he/she is rather kept constantly in a digital state of dialogue (Kern et al., 2013). It is not only the other users that speak, but also the deceased himself/herself through the digital traces (photos, videos, posts, and all kinds of interactions) that can stay in cyberspace for an indefinite period of time (Frost, 2014).

This digital immortality or "hybrid mortality", as Moreman & Lewis refer to it (2014: 2), raises important questions about the will of the deceased if he/she was alive, as well as moral issues about the practices that characterize the inner nature of new technologies (Graikousi, 2019).

5. Conclusion

Digital technologies and mostly Internet constitute the zenith of a series of developments in human history, having altered daily reality by encouraging new forms of communication and shaping new social norms and behavior patterns in a space-less and time-less environment. In this environment, new conditions are created for the narration of death.

Although the way in which the world of the dead is intertwined with that of the living is an issue that escorts the history of human society, the advent of Web 2.0 and the evolution of applications such as social media seem to have a profound effect on the way we face death, firstly in the frame of virtual cemeteries and later in the context of Facebook community with reference to the profiles of the deceased. Thus, technology complicates our experience with death as it associates with death unexpectedly (Massimi & Charise, 2009; Massimi, Odom, Banks & Kirk, 2011). At the same time, it appears that using technology the private event of death returns to the public sphere, that of cyberspace. In this frame, "Homo Cyberneticus" emerges as a meta-subject with information features that allow him/her to live forever, solving thus the problem of biological structure and physical perishability and eventually addressing humanity's long-standing demand for immortality (Plexidas, 2018). In fact, the dead are in a virtual whirlpool and exist (Rossetto, Lannutti & Strauman, 2015) for as long as their digital footprints and memories exist on the Internet (Chan, 2009).

At the same time, the digital presence of the dead and the removal of the death taboo mark new ways for managing the relationship between dead and alive, as well as new ways for death and grief expression. The former forbidden grief, restricted to the deceased relatives, has transformed into open expression and now includes all those who wish to engage in an interaction with both other grievers and the dead. Facebook's role at this point is decisive (Graikousi, 2019).

This paper is based on a review of the international literature on the subject of death in the digital environment. Taking into account the increasing number of users who die leaving their digital identity as a legacy, it is clear that the scientific community faces many and multiple issues that should be investigated; do we finally get acquainted with the concept of death as we interact with a profile of a deceased in digital environments or do we conceive this interaction only as another digital norm -as other norms- imposed by Facebook? to what extent does our narration about the dead changes or transforms the identity that he/she had created in the platform, or to what extent can this narrative affect the privacy of the deceased, even if he/she is not legally recognized as a person? will the evolution of technology and the new norms of the digital environment lead us to plan processes that will follow our death, for example our digital burial monument? to what extent does "digital immortality" allow us to get out of grief at some point? is this "digital immortality" the real response to that we are constantly, from the day of our birth probably, seeking for? what will digital technologies bring next? Quo Vadis?

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