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Introduction: Media and Death**Johanna Sumiala**

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Many scholars today agree that modern society has recognised the return of death to the public sphere. The role of mass media, journalism, entertainment media and the so-called social media has been crucial in this movement (see e.g. Hanusch 2010; Seaton 2005; Walter 2011, 1999; Zelizer 2010). The media broadcast news, crime stories, action and horror movies, and disseminate computer games, reality TV and YouTube videos, all of which depict death from various perspectives. We argue that the media affect our understanding of death, shape how we perceive and manage death, both individually and collectively, affect the formation of social relations established and maintained around death, influence the construction of individual and collective identities in the face of death, and affect how organisations and institutions dealing with death function on private, public, political and economic levels (cf. Krotz 2009, 24).

A short history of the media and death helps to contextualise this contemporary development of the mediatization of death. Ariès (1974) observes that, beginning in the late nineteenth century, people began to have less personal, first-hand experience with death, as death was transferred from private homes to nursing homes. At the same time, there was a surge in the emergence of mass media (first print media and then electronic media), with the result that people began to be exposed to death to a greater and greater extent through and via the media.

Vicky Goldberg (1998) has compared the disappearance of physical death from the public sphere at the same time as its entry into the realm of the private (e.g. nursing homes) to the vivid appearance of death in the media; she argues that as fewer people have actual experiences with death, they look for new ways to manage their fears and thoughts related to dying. The illustration of death has gained new significance as it has become more distant from people's real-life worlds (Goldberg 1998, 29).

The arrival of mass-produced newspapers, called the penny press in the United States, provided readers with an increasing number of images and stories about death and destruction (Stephens 2007; Thompson 2004). Hanusch (2010) explains this historical development as a result of technological advances in printing, the arrival of machine-manufactured paper and the invention of the steam engine, all of which allowed newspapers to be produced much more cheaply and with much better quality. Moreover, literacy rates improved in the general public. These factors enabled newspapers to develop rapidly from providing (mostly political) information to the privileged few to reaching mass audiences. (Hanusch 2010, 25.)

In addition to the development of the penny press, the rise of illustrated magazines and later photojournalism in Europe and the United States played a key role in making death visible to the public eye. In her study of the French news weekly *L'Illustration*, Christina Staudt (2001) points out that images of death were very common in publications of the nineteenth century. Obituaries, typically those of famous people, often had an explicit emphasis on the actual death, and it was

common practice to publish close-up photographs of the deceased on the deathbed. Images of death were also used to endorse certain political goals, such as patriotism and the idea of the Republic. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards in the Anglo-American world, weeklies such as Harper's Weekly and the Illustrated London News reported extensively on deaths resulting from murders and other violent crimes. However, scholars like Goldberg (1998) note that by the end of the century those gory images seemed to disappear almost entirely. One explanation is that the penny press (i.e. the cheap tabloids in the United States) began covering death in increasingly graphic detail, thus wresting the market from the weeklies (Hanusch 2010, 28).

Another key aspect in the rise of representations of death in the news media was the development of photography and photojournalism as a profession. After the American Civil War (1861–1865), photographs of death appeared in newspapers and weeklies with some regularity (Hanusch 2010, 31). Their significance has been explained by the so-called reality affect, the idea that the camera does not lie. Photographs claim to depict reality as it truly is; hence, their power as the vivid visual evidence of reality (see e.g. Zelizer 1995, 2010). According to Zelizer (1995, 136), photojournalism has claimed to legitimise its position by offering 'a visual expansion' of journalistic practice, thus enforcing journalistic authority over 'telling the truth' about the world. However, as also pointed out by Zelizer (1995, 2010), Sontag (2003) and others, photos in newspapers are always framed in certain ways and typically supported by the written word.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the emergence of television and live images has only intensified the vivid representation of death accessible to large audiences in the news media. In the words of Hanusch (2010):

...indeed, we can all easily recall seminal events in terms of the photographs which went around the world, from Capa's image of the Falling Soldier, the photos of the corpses in the Nazi concentration camps, Eddie Adams' iconic image of General Loan's execution of a Vietcong suspect, to footage of the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the subsequent shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald. (Hanusch 2010, 32)

Another landmark in the recent history of the visual representation of death in the news is 9/11 and the numerous studies related to it (see e.g. Altheide 2003; Liebes and Blondheim 2005; Kitch 2003). To continue the list of seminal events marking the history of present-day visual representations of death in the news, the images and videos of the hanging of Saddam Hussein in 2006 and the deceased Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 have become displays of death with enormous, and controversial, iconic value (Sumiala 2012).

The management of death has also changed in the 'entertaining' or 'fictitious' media, such as cinema and television shows. Based on his work on American television programmes, Charlton McIlwain argues that death has been given more discursive space both on magazine (talk) shows and television dramas as well as in the fan communities and web discussion pages of these shows, such as *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) or *Crossing over with John Edward* (1999–2004). The increasingly open relationship with death and mourning on television has reframed the 'privacy of death' as 'death as a public spectacle' (McIlwain 2005).

Indeed, fantasised images can address death differently, even more freely, than news or factual programmes. In such imagining death has become increasingly spectacular. As Vivian Sobchack observes, since the birth of cinematic expression, death has been part of film narration. From the beginning death has been meaningful, but since the 1960s death events have become more graphic and detailed. The violent approach has given death an anaesthetised form, and through these constructed and artificial images, death has become a spectacle and performance, both at the level of visual expression and the level of storytelling. (Sobchack 2000). These fantasised images do not reflect deaths in real life, but through their repetitious nature in fictional audiovisual media, including games, these spectacular and detailed deaths have become naturalised, and the media audiences have become accustomed to encountering death through these mediated images.

The latest developments in media history, including the twentieth-century globalisation of communication through digitalisation and the internet, and the emergence of social media in the twenty-first century, have contributed to the public display of death in the media in several ways. We now live in a world in which anyone with an internet connection can publish news about death, and consequently, the traditional mainstream mass media outlets are no longer the only actors to make death public. As a result, Hanusch (2010) notes that:

...old barriers to publishing graphic imagery are being eroded by a medium that allows users, on the one hand, to publish all kinds of photos without the media's usual checks and balances. On the other hand, audiences are empowered to make a conscious decision about whether they want to see a certain image, and should therefore have less reason to complain.

(Hanusch 2010, 145)

Hence, many agree that now as never before in human history we are saturated with news and images of death and horror, with images and news travelling rapidly from one media and context to another – locally, nationally and globally (Sumiala 2012). In the lexicon of Walter and his colleagues (1995, 582, cited in Hanusch 2010, 19), ‘a smaller proportion of the population of contemporary Western societies dies in any one day than in any society at any time in the history of humankind, yet through the news media death is now extremely visible’.

The idea to publish this special issue on Media and Death originated in a one-day workshop organized by a group of Finnish and international scholars specialized in the study of media and death. The workshop was held on June 6th, 2013 at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in collaboration with Human Mortality project. In analysing media and death and the related mediatized practices of death in different media contexts several questions were raised by the participants during that day. Whose death matters in today's public culture? To whom does it matter? Under what conditions does death matter? What is at the centre of the contemporary ritualisation of public death? From what source do these mediatized practices of death draw their power?

This special issue takes up the challenge of examining the contemporary interplay between media and death from a variety of angles. Amanda Lagerkvist's article on new digital memory culture opens the volume. She discusses how new digital practices and online spaces not only create alternative commemorative communities of grief and remembrance, but also, by constructing a digital afterlife, renew our existential understandings of death and life. New digital forms can give social existence new possibilities.

Mareike Meis also discusses digital and social media, but she approaches the topic from the political perspective. She studies videos of Iranian and Syrian protest movements distributed through the social media, particularly YouTube. She argues that deaths of civilians captured on video and distributed through unofficial channels (outside the mainstream media) are intended to stir emotional reactions in the international audience. Through these reactions, political participation can be created, or at least, the movements and their goals acquire international visibility.

Whereas Meis discusses the political uses of (emotional) civilian deaths, Outi Hakola focuses on the emotional aspects of ordinary death on Finnish television. She discusses the reality-based television series *My Last Words* (2013), which narrates the real-life stories of the dying. Before the episodes were broadcast, the series concept generated public concern about mediatized voyeurism, but after the broadcast the audiences agreed that the programmes were actually tactful and emotionally touching. In her article, Hakola analyses the narrative strategies used in the series to create socially acceptable images of mediated death for television audiences.

In the fourth article in this volume, Tina Weber continues the discussion of televised images of death. Television audiences constantly see various corpses on different television shows, not only in the news. Thus, Weber argues that it is important to study the representations of corpses in these shows. She concentrates on contemporary American television shows and analyses how dead bodies are utilised, pointing out that most television programmes seem to portray the dead as sleeping beauties rather than grotesque corpses.

Last, but certainly not least, we have included an interview by Anna Haverinen with Professor Tony Walter from the University of Bath, in the United Kingdom. Professor Walter is one of the most prominent figures in the field of the sociology of death. In this interview he discusses the occurrence of mediated communication about the dead in the history of modern society.

By exploring and analysing the topic of media and death from different theoretical perspectives and empirical angles, the authors in this special issue attempt to arrive at an understanding of the complex interplay between media and death. Furthermore, we would like to argue that these articles contribute to an awareness of the practices of the good life proffered by today's public culture of mediatized death. Consequently, they help us to comprehend the notions of social community and human relations which such a culture supports and in which it invites us to participate.

1. This short historical overview of the mediatization of death draws partly on Sumiala, Johanna. 2014. Mediatization of Death. In Knut Lundby (ed.), *The handbook of mediatization of communication* vol. 21. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. (forthcoming).

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