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http://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/haverinen_interviewwalter_than222013pdf**On Death & Media: Interview with Tony Walter, Centre for Death & Society, University of Bath****Anna Haverinen**

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I Question: What is the significance of media and death in contemporary Western society?

Walter: In the small scale pre-industrial village, most relationships were face-to-face, so contact with the dying and news of their death spread by word of mouth. As society became more complex, with for example sailors and merchants dying far from home, not to mention chiefs and leaders not personally known by their subjects, so communication about dying became problematic. It was not until the development of writing and literacy that non-oral media began to play a role – news of a death might then arrive by letter and (from the early nineteenth century) by newspaper. Communication media (photography, telegraph, telephone, radio, television, internet) have expanded rapidly since the middle of the nineteenth century, so the ways in which we can be informed of a death, or communicate with dying or bereaved friends and family, have expanded accordingly. In terms of informing people of a death, the telegraph was perhaps the most revolutionary: news of the death of a seafarer the other side of the world that before might have taken 18 months to travel back to his family could now be communicated in a matter of hours or even minutes.

So the complexity and geographical spread of social relationships makes our communication needs (at death as at any other time of life) more complex, but communication technologies have expanded to meet those needs. At the same time, the medicalization of death and dying, the isolation of dying people within hospitals, and the historically unprecedented fact that most of us grow up through childhood without witnessing the death of a parent or sibling means that death is, in Ariès' term, unfamiliar. So when the end of life approaches, we do not know what to expect – so as well as communication needs, we have information needs. Information technology is therefore increasingly important: first print, and now the internet is the first port of call for dying people and/or their family carers. This is not instead of their calling the doctor, but to help them know what to ask the doctor and to interpret what the doctor has told them.

I have talked here about dying and news of death. What about how we know about, or relate to the dead? In pre-industrial times, stories about the dead were typically circulated orally (the main exceptions being the written accounts of the founders of world religions: Jesus, Mohammed, etc, but even these were passed on orally to illiterate congregations). Now we know about the dead through history books, posters of Che Guevara or Marilyn Monroe, the recorded music of John Lennon or Elvis Presley and the recorded speech of Martin Luther King or Winston Churchill. And we talk to the personally known dead on Facebook.

II Question: Given the amount of media coverage of death, how much is death a private matter as Ariès claimed?

Walter: Humans have always experienced loss intimately and subjectively, but perhaps never more so than in modern urban societies. Instead of the pre-industrial household mourning the death of a child and living within a village in which the family is known by everyone, now we typically mourn the death of an old person – but the mourners have long since grown up and left home and quite possibly left town, so mourners are geographically isolated from each other, surrounded by neighbours or work colleagues who may never have known the deceased. Grief becomes increasingly private. This of course is beginning to change with Facebook, which has the potential to bring together a person's disparate social networks, after death enabling mourners to read each others' posts – for better or for worse. The digital environment also enhances the possibilities of getting close to, and thus mourning, people whom has one not met face-to-face or whom one may only have known through their online identity.

At the same time that death is private and subjective, the news media are full of death. This creates a paradox: death is both intimately private, and all around us in the media – yet these media deaths are usually of those not personally known to us. When the news media cover the death of someone we do know, this can add to the mourner's distress: news media have their own values and conventions as to what makes a good story, and these may well not fit the story of the life/death that the mourner finds most comforting. Nor is the timing of news stories necessarily good for mourners. At their worst, journalists' information-gathering techniques may be intrusive or even illegal, as in 2002 with the hacking by journalists of murdered British teenager Milly Dowler's mobile phone voicemail (though in this case, the subsequent scandal closed the offending newspaper, the News of the World). Rarely does a mourning family find the resources to use and control the media.

III Question: What is the future of death and media?

Walter: Sociologists who predict the future usually get it wrong! But with information and communication technologies developing ever faster, the one thing we can predict is that it will be difficult to keep up. By the time a research study on death and media has been concluded, the media will have changed! Research that aims to make a practical difference, for example developing technology to help housebound or institutionalised old people at the end of their lives keep in touch with family and friends, risks investing in technologies that are almost immediately out of date. When commerce and youth are driving innovation, what hope for academic research or the elderly to keep up?! But it is precisely because media are evolving so fast that it is important that the social meanings, consequences and uses of new communication technologies are researched and documented, and theories of death and dying modified in the light of such research.

With digital communication, it is easier than ever for researchers to capture media text and images; it remains challenging to research their production and reception. Research in death and media continues to inform us about media representations of dying, death and loss, but we still know rather little about the production of representations and their meaning to those who receive them. Here there is scope for creative and innovative methodologies, including, for example, digital anthropology.

IV Question: What thanatological research interests would you recommend for media researchers?

Walter: 'Media' have traditionally meant 'the mass media', and often that has meant television and cinema, with an emphasis on the visual. Perhaps in a visually saturated world, researchers sometimes forget the importance of sound and other senses through which we relate to the dying and the dead. Obviously, new digital media will dominate research in the foreseeable future, not in separation but in conjunction with older media.

When we consider the media through which the living relate to the dead in the twenty first century, we need to think of media in quite diverse ways – obviously the work of spiritualist mediums (either privately or through televised shows), but also history curricula, gravestones, obituaries and eulogies, family genealogy, dark tourism, archaeology, etc, etc. A whole range of institutions and cultural practices can thus be researched as media through which the living relate to the dead. Digital communication technologies now saturate almost all these practices – pointing your phone at the QR code engraved

into a gravestone that brings up the deceased's memorialised Facebook page is but one of the more obvious examples. Linking the perspectives of media studies with these other fields, and also with bereavement research and the burgeoning field of memory studies, offers almost unlimited possibilities.

Walter has developed some of these ideas further in the following articles:

(with Michael Pickering & Jane Littlewood). 'Death in the News: the public invigilation of private emotion'. *Sociology*, (1995) 29(4), 579-596.

'Mediator Deathwork'. *Death Studies*, 2005, 29(5), 383-412.

'Dark Tourism: Mediating Between the Dead and the Living'. In R. Sharpley & P. R. Stone (Eds.), *The Darker Side of Travel: the theory and practice of dark tourism* (pp. 39-55). Bristol: Channel View, 2009.

(with Rachid Hourizi, Wendy Moncur & Stacey Pitsillides). 'Does the internet change how we die and mourn?' *Omega*, 2011-12, 64(4), 275-302.

'Communication media and the dead: from the stone age to Facebook'. *Mortality*, 2014 forthcoming.

Biographical note

Tony Walter is a professor of Death Studies, in Department of Social and Policy Sciences at the University of Bath, England. He was a freelance writer for many years, before becoming Lecturer, then Reader, in Sociology at the University of Reading 1994-2007. In the mid-1980s, he wrote three books on unemployment and social security, but over the past twenty years he has focused on researching, writing and lecturing on death in modern society, e.g. funerals, afterlife beliefs, personal bereavement and public mourning, human remains in museums, new discourses of spirituality, death in the news media and in online social media. Walter has helped to promote the interdisciplinary study of death and society, and collaborated with colleagues in, for example, religious studies, history, archaeology, linguistics, psychology, social work, geography, computer science, medicine, and gerontology.

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Anna Haverinen, University of Turku, is a PhD student of Digital culture studies and is finalizing her PhD about virtual mourning rituals in online environments, such as in social media, shared virtual worlds and online gaming environments. Contact: anna.haverinen@utu.fi.