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Editorial – the digitalisation of death culture(s)

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A memorial blog, memorial YouTube video, memorial event in World of Warcraft, headstone erected in a virtual world such as Second Life, memorialised profile page in Facebook, a virtual candle flickering on a two-dimensional webpage... All these examples are currently flourishing online and creating a technologically *mediatised* death culture, which is now transforming the practices and rituals of death rituals on a global level. (Haverinen 2014b; on mediatised rituals see also Sumiala 2014.)

In this spring issue of *Thanatos*, we portray a wide collection of on-going research from across the globe. Digital technologies – or as in this case mostly internet applications – are being appropriated in various ways to mourn and honor the memory of loved ones and in coping with the difficult emotions caused by loss and bereavement. The current internet¹, the Web 2.0, can be described as *social* since the most popular websites currently used focus in the self-produced content of individuals who share pictures, moments, memories and stories of their everyday lives. Experiences related to death – both as a social and cultural moment – are also produced in various ways, such as in the abovementioned memorial websites, memorial videos, memorialised profile pages and shrines in virtual worlds. In this context, the social internet provides solace and comfort despite geographical or time distances, as well as a private space to explore social and cultural taboos, such as abortion or suicide.

Memorials (online) symbolise all places of memory and remembrance (Haverinen 2014b; Tilley 1994). Although many online spaces are initially created for socialising, distribution of knowledge and even play and fun, many service providers have acknowledged the fact that their users are dying, and their intimates want to either access, download or memorialise the content left behind. For example, Facebook, the most popular social networking website, created the *memorialization request*² in 2009 when one of the developers had to face the death of a Facebook friend. In gaming communities and virtual worlds the developers have either created specific areas for memorialisations (such as Linden Memorial Park in Second Life), or build in-game tombs and memorials for significant gamers by request (such as the

¹ See more Suominen et al. 2013.

² See <https://www.facebook.com/help/contact/?id=305593649477238>.

memorials in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game World of Warcraft). (Haverinen 2014a; Gibbs et al. 2012.)

These memorials (or often even tombs) resemble the spontaneous memorials of the offline world, which are often erected to traffic accident victims, and also the public memorials in graveyards such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which do not contain the physical body of the deceased, but an *idea* of that person. They are *cenotaphs*, mental tombs and symbols of an individual being remembered and their community. Memorials polarise a sense of community through the rituals practiced on the memorials. (Azaryahu 1996; Doss 2006; Santino 2006; Davies 2011; Sumiala 2013; Haverinen 2011; 2014b, 202.)

In the previous issue of *Thanatos* Sumiala and Hakola (2013) already stated, that the development of death culture (the industrialisation, urbanisation and individualisation) has changed the way people mourn and honor dramatically, but currently, we are on the brink of a new change, where the privatised death has become increasingly more public. The media and the internet have been playing their own part in this change, where the private everyday is being published and produced publicly in various ways, and from which social media applications are flourishing.

When we posted the call for abstracts before Christmas 2013, I did not expect we would receive such a large amount of submissions from across the globe, but fortunately I was pleasantly surprised. During spring 2014 the first Death Online conference was also arranged – which I could unfortunately not attend, but enviously followed the fantastic tweets of different talented researchers – and the conference was a success. The conference proved, along with the popularity of this theme issue, that there is a demand for *online thanatology*, a field of different disciplines researching death cultures in online environments. Now that demand is being answered. Networking and sharing ideas about on-going projects and preliminary results are creating a solid groundwork for this research area, which has been widely contributed by anthropology, linguistics, sociology, digital culture research, computer sciences and many more.

This issue brings together scholars from sociology, anthropology, communication sciences, digital culture, design and psychology in a collection of three articles, three research reports and five research reviews (along with two book reviews), which illuminate fascinating thematics on mourning online.

The first article from the United Kingdom in this theme issue is about Facebook memorial websites and entextualised moments of mourning by communication and linguistics researcher Korina Giaxoglou. The article suggests, that participatory mourning on Facebook is based on the material shared on the memorial and blends in the formal/informal forms of communication practices. The second article from Australia is by anthropologist Anthony Heathcote who discusses how aborted fetuses in Vietnam are being remembered by their mothers in memorial websites, since the society and Vietnamese culture stigmatises abortion, pre-marital sex (often the reason for abortion) and does not acknowledge aborted fetuses as part of the ancestral worship embedded in the Vietnamese death culture. The third article by Astrid Waagstein from Denmark provides insights from the field of digital design and rhetorics with a focus on death aware respondents and their sentiments towards the importance and preservation of digital legacy. The study shows that people are seldom aware about the content they can leave behind after death, but that the content should be accessible by their intimates, albeit often denied by the service providers of different web sites.

The research reports collected for this theme issue provide insight and preliminary results from on-going research projects, Cultural scientist Laure M.C. Faro explores how an online digital monument for the Jewish Community in the Netherlands produces commemoration and concepts of memorial space and design. French communication researcher

Fanny Georges explores in her study how the identity of the producer of a memorial Facebook page is semiotically embedded in the memorial page posts. Independent researcher Vered (Rose) Shavit and technology scientist Roey Tzezana conducted a survey research in Israel examining the gap between current legislation and web site service providers policies considering the ownership of digital materials, which after the death of an individual can not be accessed by their intimates. The research shows similar results as the previously introduced research from Denmark by Waagstein and shows the acute importance of changing policies and legislation considering digital ownership and legacies.

In the research reviews we begin with an important outlook on the current research in the field of online thanatology, provided by cyber-sociologist Stine Gotved from Denmark. From there we continue to the more philosophical review by designer Selina Ellis Gray, who discusses the unspoken and little researched matter of digital content that remains in the Web creating social presences – often unwanted or even painful – of the dead. Gray discusses the recent literature considering digital legacy and raises the question of the materiality of digital networks.

Social anthropologist Laura Huttunen has studied (offline) memorial events from Bosnia-Hertzevovina, which are being produced in the form of YouTube videos with various political agendas, and provides tentative keys for reading their political, social and cultural dimensions as forms of (digital) remembrance. Communication researcher Kaylee Kruzan provides a psychological insight to existential fear and terror management theory, and how these approaches could be applied to online technology research. Furthermore, communication researchers Ishani Mukherjee and Maggie Griffith Williams discuss *perimortem* (at or near time of death) and *postmortem* (after the death of a loved one) memory sharing in transitional social networks. By reviewing recent literature they claim that social networking sites, such as Facebook, can reinforce the digital enactment of what people do when they mourn online and aid the mourners to cope with the transitional phase of *perimortem* and *postmortem* issues.

The two book reviews in this theme issue do not concern internet or other digital environments, but review current literature from Finland, where historian Ilona Pajari reviews Bo Lönnqvist's book about Swedish-Finnish death culture, and I, Anna Haverinen, a Finnish publication about the life and work of historian and thanatologist Philippe Ariès and how different political and scientific agendas can even change the results of translated researches, because etymologies and semantics of different terms are different.

All memorial spaces are highly contextual and digital versions of offline places are as much contextual as their online counterparts. Christopher Tilley (1994) has argued, that all spaces are always mediating human experience. Websites and virtual environments contain rich contextualities that are both visual imagery as well as practices of language. Online researchers must be aware of these contextualities, when researching different environments, since they seldom are bound and closed environments, but a part of a complex hypertext fabric of sharing, linking, producing and creating content. The authors of this theme issue raise important questions of digital legacy, identity practices and bereavement care in online environments, as well *how* to research the social and cultural experience of mourning online. Digital technology is now embedded in the daily lives of over 2 billion people³, and the development of new technology applications does not seem to decelerate. It will affect not only death, bereavement and dying, but also social and cultural constructions of identity, community, love, family, friendship and values (see more Wesch 2008).

³ See eg. infographics from <http://www.thecultureist.com/2013/05/09/how-many-people-use-the-internet-more-than-2-billion-infographic/> [accessed 17.6.2014]

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