Editorial

Introducing the Special Issue Digital Death: Transforming Rituals, History, and the Afterlife

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The aim of this Special Issue is to provide a platform for discussing the state of the art in the field of digital death and its future avenues. Initiated by the CHANCE-funded research project Digital Death: Transforming Rituals, History and Afterlife (DiDe), this Special Issue comprises six articles and an afterword representing a range of perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds in the field of digital death, from history to philosophy, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and media and communication studies. The included articles explore the interrelations of death and the digital in research contexts, including the study of grief and mourning rituals, digital immortality, and the afterlife, and discuss the present-day understandings of the meaning and place of death in society. Furthermore, each contribution reflects the challenges of studying digital death as an interdisciplinary research field. In this introduction, we briefly outline the concept of digital death, discuss its main trends, and elaborate on future research directions. We conclude by introducing the individual authors and their contributions.

What is digital death?

> *If death is part of life and life has become digital, it is inevitable that death has also become digital, combining the private with the public, the individual with the collective, and the real with the virtual* (Sisto 2020, p. 7).

Every research field needs a clearly defined subject of study. Accordingly, one way to characterise 'digital death' is to describe it as more than just death performed in a digital context; it is a *practice* articulated and performed in interaction with a digitally saturated communication network and culture, and as such, it becomes a concern for the dying, the departed and those in grief, mourning, and living with and without the dead. Such a formulation is grounded in a broader view of the inescapable digitalization of contemporary society (Lagerkvist 2022). Thus, the *study* of digital death addresses the cultural and social transformations of death and dying in societies characterised by a highly digital contemporary life.

We argue that the digital saturation of society impacts all areas of death: those about to die, those in grief and mourning, and those that remain active in digital form despite being physically deceased. In addition to individual-level transformations, digital death also affects professionals and institutions, from hospitals to funerary homes and religious orders working with death and the dead. Digital death transforms the ideas, beliefs, and conceptions of death in society, and it shapes and alters the relationships between the living and the dead (Bassett 2022) and the way death is discussed and managed. Moreover, we maintain that the values and morals associated with death are undergoing a change, and institutional structures that control death in society are also being reconfigured (Jacobsen 2021; Sumiala 2021; Walter 2020).

Research contexts of digital death

No study field is created in a vacuum. Hence, it is critical to discuss the different disciplines that have contributed to its development. As a multifaceted research field, the study of digital death has multiple points of reference drawn from diverse disciplinary traditions. Scholars researching this topic also cross disciplinary boundaries and draw inspiration from a range of sources. For example, scholars studying media and communication may seek conceptual inspiration from philosophy and its theories of death; anthropology in its understanding of ritual, which can be reworked in digital contexts; and sociology and the tools it provides to elaborate upon ideas of relationality between the living and the dead.

Consequently, digital death can be characterised as a hybrid field. It takes inspiration from different disciplinary sources and traditions to create something new. That said, without trying to be exhaustive (which falls beyond the scope of this introduction), we wish to present some disciplinary traits that we consider particularly influential in developing the field of digital death. These traits stem from philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and media and communication studies.

First, there is a rich tradition of theorising death as a philosophical concern. Many modern-age philosophers and theorists, including Simmel ([1918] 2015), Elias (1985), Baudrillard (1993) and Bauman (1992), have used death and immortality as a strand in their writing (see also research by Cave 2013; Kearl and Jacobsen 2014; Scheffler 2013). In recent years, new philosophical work has been conducted on ontologies of death as digitally dispersed phenomena. The work of Davide Sisto (2020) on memory, Stokes (2021) on digital souls, Oliver Krüger (2021) on virtual immortality, and Amanda Lagerkvist (2022) on existential media and the limit situation are notable examples of recent studies that have shaped the scholarly framework of philosophy.

In line with philosophy, the history of death has provided important analytical tools to conceptualise death as a historically grounded and conditioned phenomenon that is bound to change in the course of time and history. The classical studies of Philippe Ariès (1974, 1977) on the history of modern (Western) death are often mentioned in this context. Though it has been critiqued for its tendency to overgeneralise and universalise historical developments on death (see, e.g., Jacobsen 2021), Ariès's work has provided a source of inspiration for generations of scholars studying death and working to understand it as a historically changing conception in society (see the work of Sumiala and Jacobsen in this volume for examples).

If philosophical works have contributed to developing the theory of digital death and research on the history of death has added value to the field's sensitivity towards the idea of digital death as historically grounded and changing, the focal point in the sociology of death is to study digital death in modern (and late modern) society (see Walter 1994, 2020). Much ink has been devoted to debating modern (Western) societies as 'death-denying' (see Becker 1973) cultures in which death is a 'taboo' (Jacobsen 2021). According to this theory, death is forced into hiding from the way of modern life. In recent years, scholars studying the sociology of death have acknowledged such trends as the *spectacularisation of death* (Jacobsen 2021), particularly in the late modern period, as well as its de-institutionalisation and vernacularisation (Walter 2020). Many of these developments, sociological scholarship maintains, have evolved in line with the digitalisation of society and, consequently, its death practices (Bassett 2022; Recuber 2023).

One disciplinary field that has profoundly influenced research on digital death is anthropology. While sociologists of death have mainly focused on studying modern Western societies and their relationship to death, anthropologists have looked at death practices from a wider perspective, often beyond 'the West' (Robben 2006). To take some examples of the lasting impact of the anthropology of death in the context of the study of mortuary rituals, the works of Robert Hertz ([1909] 1960), Arnold Van Gennep ([1909] 1960), and Victor Turner (1969) continue to influence the field of digital death, particularly in the context of digital ritualisation around grief and mourning (see also Christensen,

forthcoming a; Davies 2017, 2000; Engelke 2019; Sumiala 2013, 2021). Much of this research considers the dynamics between online and offline mourning (Christensen, forthcoming b) as well as new creative and mundane ways of using and adapting digital media tools to share feelings and experiences related to loss and maintain contact with other mourners via diverse digital platforms (Hård af Segerstad 2021).

In relation to the individual perspective, mourning and grief are prominent research areas in the psychology of death, where much focus is placed on people's personal experiences when facing death and related coping in the process of loss (Kasket 2019; O'Connor and Kasket 2022). One highly influential theory in the field is 'continuing bonds', which was first launched by (Klass et al. 1996). In this theory, special emphasis is given to the ways in which people who have lost a close person maintain rather than cut ties or let go of the dead as an outcome of a 'healthy' grieving process (Walter 2015). While highly influential, the theory of continuous bonds has also faced criticism (see, e.g., O'Connor in this volume) due to its normative take on processing grief and mourning.

Death and dying are also matters of communication. Scholars of this field have expressed particular interest in understanding the processes of mediation as a communicative matter in the context of death. While, previously, a large body of work focused on the mass mediation of death in newspapers and on TV (see, e.g., Hanusch 2010; Morse 2018; Seaton 2005; Zelizer 2010) curated by journalists and following some news criteria, since 2000, the study of death in diverse digital media contexts has grown more prominent (see, e.g., Pitsillides et al. 2012). Much of this research is conducted in diverse social media contexts (Moreman and Lewis 2014; Nansen et al. 2014), and researchers have emphasised social media as a platform for vernacular, networked, and fragmented mourning practices (Giaxoglou 2020; Gibbs et al. 2015; Gibson 2016).

Another research theme concerns post-mortal digital communication and the associated relationships created and maintained between the living and the digitally resurrected (see, e.g., Bassett 2022; Besser et al. 2023; Harju and Huhtamäki 2021; Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie 2020) in different digital frameworks. Questions such as what happens to our digital remains have increasing relevance for scholars of media and communication studies, as well as those interested in the commodification of digital death (Hurtado Hurtado 2023; Kneese 2023). Furthermore, new scholarly liaisons have been developed between scholars of digital media, communication and law to study the afterlife of digital remains in legal contexts (see, e.g., Harbinja et al. 2023; Öhman 2024; Morse and Birnhack 2022).

From current trends to future challenges

While broad in its outline, such a generous profile of the field makes it apparent that the different disciplinary traditions and their intersections also guide current approaches. In this introduction, we argue that two research strands—digital and/or online mourning and digital afterlife/immortality—have particular significance in the newest research literature and, consequently, have an impact on the current understanding of the meaning and related workings of digital death in present-day society.

The first strand elaborates on digital and/or online mourning. As discussed, much of the literature has emphasised the emergence of digitalised rituals and related mourning and grief practices conducted in diverse online settings (Christensen and Sandvik 2013, 2016; Gibbs et al. 2015; Moreman and Lewis 2014). Researchers are explicit that the ritualisation of death in digital contexts has become a more personalised and heterogeneous practice, although community elements often remain present in these contexts. Such developments have also encouraged scholars to re-think ritual theory in the context of (digital) death (Sumiala 2021, 2024) as well as theories of grief and mourning (Christensen, forthcoming b; Kasket 2019; O'Connor and Kasket 2022). However, we argue that it is crucial to acknowledge that digitally embedded death rituals do not necessarily call for new versions of ritual theory, since these rituals are often neither new nor do they require new conceptions. They are simply rituals in new sociocultural settings or in settings that

we, as scholars of digital death, need to be more aware of. Nevertheless, studying these (old) rituals in new settings may provide novel theoretical insights into the field of ritual study (see, for instance, Christensen, forthcoming a).

The second strand of research that has attracted special attention in the field relates to post-mortal communication, 'afterlife' and 'immortality'. While ideas related to relationships between the living and the dead have been extensively theorised within the scholarship of the anthropology of death (Engelke 2019; Metcalf and Huntington 1997; Robben 2006; Davies 2000), in recent years, scholars have placed increasing emphasis on trying to grasp and conceptualise developments in emerging frameworks of thanatechnology (Sofka 2020), and in particular, innovations driven by generative artificial intelligence (AI). These studies have provided new avenues for considering how the relationships between the living and the dead can be maintained in posthumous contexts and how new AI-driven digital technologies such as ChatGPT and related deathbots, griefbots, avatars and holograms enable new ways to continue communicative and social bonds (Recuber 2023) with what Debra Bassett (2022) has famously called 'digital zombies'—physically dead, virtually alive and socially active digital clones. In addition, there is a growing scholarly interest in analysing the meaning, work, and implications of thanatechnologies that allow mind uploads and the creation of digital twins (see, e.g., Evers and Salles 2021) and their afterlives in digital contexts.

Given this framework, a culturally nuanced and context-sensitive take on AI and related digital frameworks must prevail. Any functional approach should include looking well beyond AI and other digital technologies as 'mere' technologies in a narrow sense and broadening the scope of intellectual imagination to consider AI and digital more profoundly as a condition and a circumstance of life. It also implies that we must study if and how the new technologies at hand are actually used by individuals in the practices they employ when engaging with their dead. That is, we must look beyond the level of technological affordances and study empirically how, when, and by whom they are used to communicate with the dead (Recuber 2023).

Furthermore, we argue that such research on the AI dead should be brought into a more open dialogue with the rich research tradition of anthropological and philosophical studies of death and their ways of conceptualising the afterlife, immortality, and relationships between the living and the dead. This orientation would provide analytical tools to resist certain presentists and techno-solutionists' tendencies in the field (see, e.g., Kneese 2023). Additionally, it might remind us to avoid the pitfall of universalism that still seems to run through parts of our research field, as discussed by O'Connor in this volume. Providing contextualisation for the analyses we produce is crucial; while digital technologies are global in their dissemination, their actual usages are embedded in socioculturally specific lives, traditions and practices and should be approached as plural and manifold per se, and, moreover, as transcending media and materiality.

As a third challenge in this research strand, we wish to address the question of the materiality of digital technologies, their life span, their death, and how such platformed temporality (Kneese 2023) conditions our conceptions of digital death, afterlife, and immortality. Here, we must also acknowledge the (un)sustainability of digital technologies, which produce e-waste and consume massive amounts of energy, and the associated ethical and political concerns (Recuber 2023).

The texts in this Special Issue: A brief introduction

The first article by Anu Harju, titled Theorising Digital Afterlife as Techno-Affective Assemblage: On Relationality, Materiality, and the Affective Potential of Data, approaches digital death through the lens of the digital afterlife, but instead of looking at individual loss, the author places special emphasis on the afterlife of data as a posthumanist project. The author asks what happens to our data after we die, how our data are utilised for commercial profit-making purposes, and in which kinds of death-related practices our posthumous data operate. The article offers an understanding of the digital afterlife as a

techno-affective assemblage and argues for the necessity of examining technological and social factors as mutually constitutive.

Mórna O'Connor, in her text *Grief Universalism: A Perennial Problem Pattern Returning in Digital Grief Studies*? turns scholarly focus to digital grief studies as a subfield of digital death studies. This work centres on theory, research, and design practices around grief in today's digitally saturated contexts. The author's central claim is that a classic grand pattern in scholarly treatments of grief, *grief universalism*, with a long, problematic history in grief and bereavement studies, is reappearing in digital grief studies. Through hypothetical and fictional examples, she demonstrates how this universalism appears in practice to clarify what the discipline can gain by using the knowledge generated by one hundred years of scholarship in grief and bereavement studies when we move forward in scholarship on digital grief.

In the third article, Johanna Sumiala and Michael Hviid Jacobsen's *Digital Death and Spectacular Death*, digital death is approached from a sociological perspective, and the article maps certain key trends and transformations in the social scientific study of death and dying. Drawing inspiration from death historian Philippe Ariès and his historical stages of death in human history, Sumiala and Hviid Jacobsen establish digital death as a recent development in the history of death. They discuss the visibility of death in modern society within the framework of *spectacular death* and analyse its four dimensions: mediatisation, commercialisation, re-ritualisation, and the revolution in end-of-life care. Finally, the article reflects on future developments in the field, including the emergence and study of AI in a digitalised death culture.

Adela Toplean's article, Socio-Phenomenological Reflections on What Digital Death Brings and Denies in Terms of Relational Experiences to Orthodox Romanians, analyses the differences between online and offline death-related experiences in contemporary Romania. Drawing inspiration from Alfred Schütz's phenomenology of social relations, Toplean reflects on what kind of social relations digital death allows and does not allow for Romanian internet users and how those users negotiate their relationship with digital death. Her ethnography, conducted in different Romanian online and offline contexts, suggests that digital technologies modulate the 'hows' but not so much the 'whats' of death as digital means for Romanian users and their cultural understanding of death and mourning.

Katarzyna Nowaczyk-Basińska and Paula Kiel's article, *Exploring the Immortological Imagination: Advocating for a Sociology of Immortality*, contributes to the recently emerging scholarship in digital death studies on a sociology of immortality. Drawing inspiration from C. Wright Mills's sociological imagination and building upon significant research in the field of immortality, the authors offer the *immortological imagination* as an analytical and conceptual tool for further developing a sociological analysis of immortality within the study of digital death. The authors complement their conceptual analysis of the immortological imagination with empirical examples from popular culture.

In the sixth and final full article by Doron Altaratz and Tal Morse (2023), *Digital Séance: Fabricated Encounters with the Dead*, the authors turn to the theme of the digital afterlife and discuss the advancements of virtual reality (VR), deepfake, and AI technologies as emerging visual thanatechnologies. In particular, the authors investigate how such technologies can be re-integrated into practices of mourning and remembrance and how they may serve the individual needs and interests of the bereaved and the community. Two case studies are given special emphasis in the empirical analysis: the USA-based Shoah Foundation's *Dimensions in Testimony* and the South Korean TV production *Meeting You*.

The afterword by Douglas Davies seeks both to sketch the 'state of the art' and to indicate some 'future avenues' for research in digital death. While proposing consideration in ongoing research in the field, Davies also addresses new conceptual ways of approaching digital death, notably notions of 'play' and 'personhood'. Brief references to allure and fear will also be included in his reflection.

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