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Narrative practices of death, dying and mourning

Continuities and shifts in an age of social media

Abstract: Der Tod gilt in modernen Gesellschaften oft als Tabuthema. Dieser Beitrag stellt die weit verbreitete These in Frage, dass ‚der Tod ein Tabu ist' und bietet stattdessen einen kontextualisierten Ansatz für Praktiken des Todes, des Sterbens und der Trauer in digitalen Kontexten. Er lenkt die Aufmerksamkeit darauf, (1) wie, wann und warum Tod, Sterben und Trauer als Narrative erzählbar und teilbar werden und (2) wie diese narrativen Praktiken mit Merkmalen der sozialen Mediatisierung wie Reflexivität, Affekt und Partizipation verwoben sind. Die Auseinandersetzung mit Tod, Sterben und Trauer in den sozialen Medien wird als narrative – und genauer gesagt – als Small Story-Praktik analysiert. Sie werden in Bezug auf Praktiken der affektiven Positionierung untersucht, die die Art und Weise indizieren, wie sich die Teilenden zu den Toten, zum vernetzten Publikum, zum eigenen Selbst sowie zu breiteren Diskursen über Leben und Tod verhalten. Dieser Ansatz wird anhand einer Beispielanalyse veranschaulicht, die typische Verwendungen von Mischungen aus informellen und formellen Sprachstilen, intime und distanzierte affektive Positionierungen, persönliche und politische Performances in den Vordergrund stellt, die sowohl Kontinuitäten als auch Verschiebungen in der soziokulturellen Auseinandersetzung mit Tod, Sterben und Trauer im Zeitalter der sozialen Medien aufzeigen.

Death in modern societies is often thought to be a taboo topic. This chapter challenges the popular thesis that 'death is taboo'. It provides, instead, a contextualized and nuanced approach to practices of death, dying and mourning in digital contexts. It draws attention to (1) how, when, and why death, dying and mourning become tellable and shareable as narrative and (2) how these narrative practices are intertwined with features of social mediatization, such as reflexivity, affect, and participation. Engagements with death, dying and mourning on social media mourning are analysed as *narrative* – and more specifically – as *small story* practices. They are examined in relation to practices of *affective positioning*, which index the way sharers relate to the dead, to networked audiences, to the sharers' self as well as to broader discourses about life and death. This approach is illustrated in a sample analysis, which foregrounds typical uses of blends of vernacular and formal language styles, intimate and distant affective positionings, personal and political performances that indicate both continuities and shifts in

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sociocultural engagements with death, dying and mourning in an age of social media.

Keywords: death online, small stories, affective positioning, social mediatization

1 Introduction

1.1 Is death taboo?

In modern societies death is often thought to be a 'taboo[1]' topic, "hidden from view"[2] and avoided in everyday and public conversations. This idea of 'hidden death' or its 'denial' in modern society (see Becker 1973) is grounded in contrastive comparisons of 'modern' death to 'pre-modern' death, such as 'the cult of death' in Victorian times in the case of England. Such comparisons were conducted in the wider context of critical explorations of late modernity characterised by the loosening of social bonds and the rise of radical individualism (see Giddens 1990). One of the consensus insights emerging from these explorations is that in the contemporary world death is a highly privatised matter which no longer disrupts communal words, but rather individual ones (see Walter, Hourizi & Pitsillides 2012: 289). This low visibility of modern death is evident in the decrease of the public space for death purposes, the shrinkage of the scope of the sacred in the experience of death in favour of the mediatization of death and a fundamental shift in the corporeal boundaries, symbolic and actual. In summary, modern death has become 'taboo', as it's been *de-ritualized*, *institutionalized*, and *hidden* (see De Vries and Roberts 2004: 1).

1 The word 'taboo' originates in the Tongan word 'tabu' and it means 'set apart, forbidden'. Among Tongans, a Polynesian group in the Pacific archipelago, the term was associated with people's cautiousness in a world of gods, who were thought to be the source of life, but also of destructive powers. The word was brought over to Europe by explorers in the 18th century where it was adapted. In English its dictionary meaning, according to Oxford Reference online, is the following: "a social or religious custom of prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing".

2 The popular idea of 'death as taboo' is illustrated in the public engagement website section Breaking the Taboo, where the following text is displayed: "Death is often hidden from view and only rarely discussed. Being open about death can calm your fears. It can help you value your life more and to think about the care you would like to receive when you are dying" (Art of Dying Well Website, https://www.artofdyingwell.org/talking-about-death/talking-death/breaking-the-taboo/ (accessed 2024-08-30), The Centre for the Art of Dying at St. Mary's University, London, UK).

The 'death-as-taboo' thesis has proved very popular. This is evident in its frequent use in campaigns and public conversations related to death, dying, and bereavement in the context of efforts to support people in times of grief and encourage death planning as part of living and dying well. The appeal of this thesis lies in the contrastive angle it's grounded in, which serves as a discourse frame for promoting self-reflection and openness about death, instead of avoidance behaviours and the fear and isolation associated with them. As Jupp & Walter (1999: 56) put it, the 'death-as-taboo' thesis has become "a popular journalistic cliché". Challenges to this thesis have been recurrently issued particularly by death sociologist, Tony Walter, who put forward proposals for modifications (see Walter 1991), before denying it altogether, proclaiming that "death is not taboo in contemporary Britain" (Walter 2014: n.p.). Despite Walter's and others' systematic critiques (see Giaxoglou 2021: 25–30), the 'death-as-taboo' thesis remains widespread to this day having, in fact, resurged in the context of the increased digitization of death.

This chapter will discuss narrative practices of death, dying, and mourning[3] in digital contexts proposing and illustrating a sociolinguistic approach that moves discussions beyond the arguably essentialist and reductionist 'death-is-taboo' thesis. In contemporary sociolinguistics language is understood as *a multi-semiotic system of communicative modes and resources* and as *social practice*, both structured and agent-based, while narrative is understood as social practice embedded in other social practices. A sociolinguistic approach, then, complicates the notion of 'taboo' topics and 'taboo language' by foregrounding the dependence of uses of language and narrative on context, norms, and people's expectations around *reportability* and *tellability*. The reportability of topics is contextually variable. The situated character of a story's reportability lies in their tellability, i. e. the features that make a story worth telling and listening to. Tellability is not inherent to a subject matter, but it is negotiated *in situ* between the interlocutors, present or absent. In other words, tellability is a situated, interactional accomplishment (see Ochs & Capps 2001), which has limits and thresholds (see Norrick 2005).

William Labov, well-known for his influential sociolinguistic study of oral narratives of personal experience, has challenged the essentialist idea that death topics

3 The use of the term 'mourning' here doesn't have a grounding in psychological or medical understandings of the term, but rather its use is aligned to the sociological understanding of grief as a social emotion (see Jakoby 2012). In this chapter it will often be used interchangeably with the term 'grief'.

It's worth noting that distinctions between mourning and grieving/grief locate their difference in distinctions between the public as an area of self- or socially mediated control vs. the private or individual realm as the site of emotionality, although this distinction is a differentiation that is socially and linguistically constructed and one that is certainly not universal.

are inherently taboo, given that he includes topics around *death and the danger of death*, along with *sex and relations between the sexes* and *moral indignation*, among the "three universal centers of interest" that "[…] drive the flow of speech in every language and every culture, but surface in a wide variety of forms, depending on what is appropriate in local social norms" (Labov 2013: 4). The way in which these reportable topics will be transformed into conversation material and stories ultimately depends on whose death is concerned, who's talking, to whom, when, and why. For example, in the case of personal loss the transformation of the reportable event of death into a story can be further complicated by trauma, gaps in memory or inability or unwillingness to verbalise the experience. These are cases that point to the limits of tellability and offer a window to liminal states of feeling and storying as much as they reveal social and cultural norms of emotion.

When it comes to taboo language, Jonathan Culpeper, well-known for his pragmatic study of im/politeness, has pointed to its close connection with impoliteness and emotion: "[…] language is taboo when it conflicts with what people expect in a particular context, or what they desire or think should be the case" (Culpeper 2018: 29–30). In other words, death cannot be considered as inherently taboo in language and narrative practices. Instead, it has to be recognised that the place of death in the social life of communities and individuals is shaped by as much as it shapes local social contexts and wider frameworks of sociability, interaction, and relationality. What is often considered to be 'taboo' about death may be some types and particular aspects of death or some of the ways in which it can be broached and handled in a specific context in line (or not) with widely shared norms, even though these are not always explicit.

The sociolinguistic approach to death, dying, and mourning proposed in this chapter takes the above considerations about context into account and promotes a view of death *as tellable, narratable, and visible in social life under specific conditions of tellership and participation, which are constantly under negotiation both in real life (IRL) and the digital world.* In digital environments, where stories are co-constructed and shared, conditions of tellability become enmeshed with conditions of *shareability*, which include a shared story's visibility and value potential (see Giaxoglou 2021). Shareability refers both to the design of the story for sharing and its potential for dissemination through retellings and reworkings, raising differential 'telling rights' (see Shuman 2005). In the case of sharing death in digital environments, then, the question is not about whether death continues to be taboo or not, but rather about: *When is death tellable, shareable or visible? Why? Under what conditions? by and for whom*? *How do death-related practices in context relate to platform affordances, norms of sharing and ideologies of emotion?* This chapter is going to touch on these questions seeking to trace continuities and shifts in narrative practices of death, dying, and mourning in digital environments.

Before moving on, the next section will discuss some recent shifts in death-related practices alongside continuities in approaches to death, dying, and mourning that came to the fore during the pandemic. The aim of this discussion is to contextualize the study of death in digital contexts and clarify the way 'change' in social practices can be approached.

1.2 Death during the pandemic

At the start of the 2000s when the academic study of death online was still developing, the phenomena scholars were dealing with seemed rather marginal, often receiving bad press in the media. This situation largely changed during the global outbreak of coronavirus declared by the World Health Organization as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, leading to a series of lockdown measures worldwide. During that challenging period, deaths from the virus reported daily in the form of counts – and often accompanied by stories of illness, dying, and mourning – brought death to the centre stage of public attention.

As the worry and fear about the prospect of contracting the virus and possibly dying spread, death came to obtain an intense sense of proximity in people's everyday life, increasing the awareness of one's own and other people's mortality. At the same time, the disruption to the conduct of death-related ceremonies under the strain of social distancing measures issued by public health organisations led funeral directors and churches alongside bereaved families to the use of technologies for dealing with loss and grief, such as online wakes and funerals broadcast via the Zoom video conferencing platform. Such technologies, also known as *thanatechologies* (see Sofka 1997) or *digital innovation services* (see Nansen et al. 2017), were nothing new at the time. Until that point, however, they had been restricted to facilitating relatives and friends of the deceased to take part in death-related ceremonies from any geographical location. The accelerated use of thanatechnologies during the pandemic turned them from an optional, supplementary service to the only option available to anyone outside the immediate circle of the bereaved for taking part to mourning *alone, together* (see Turkle 2013).

The participation afforded by such technologies, however, left many bereaved struggling with what they saw as an inability to properly mark the death of their loved ones. As Sonja Mackenzie (2020: n.p.), writing for the New York Times about her pain at the loss of her father from the coronavirus, observed: *"Our rituals of grief are no more. These are now mediated through distance and must emerge in new forms as we feel the cut-me-to-the-core pain of grief in isolation, as we see masked coffin-bearers revealed over video livestream funerals".*

Unable to console the dying and be consoled by the physical presence of others in the context of the funeral, many COVID-19 bereaved families felt robbed of the indispensable affective closeness to their loved ones in dying, death and mourning. For this reason, they continued to plan for 'proper' ceremonies once participants would be allowed to be physically present. By planning physical ceremonies mourners were asserting the continued importance of physical and affective proximity to other people when faced with grief.

So, while the turn to thanatechnologies during the coronavirus was accepted on pragmatic terms, it wasn't – and still isn't – straightforwardly connected with major changes in the way people approach existing death-related practices and their meaning. As I will argue in this chapter, changes in practices of death, dying, and mourning are an ongoing and gradual process and thus, need to be considered alongside continuities. To do this, empirical approaches are needed, which draw attention to the contexts of these practices and the norms and ideologies associated with them.

The chapter is organised as follows: the first part discusses briefly key findings in the interdisciplinary field of death online. The second part presents and illustrates a sociolinguistic approach to narrative practices of death, dying and mourning in digital contexts, which draws attention to (1) how, when, and why death, dying and mourning become tellable and shareable as narratives and (2) how these narrative practices are intertwined with features of social mediatization, such as reflexivity, affect, and participation. The chapter concludes with some remarks on key continuities and shifts in sociocultural engagements with death, dying and mourning in a digital era and suggestions for further research in this area.

2 The interdisciplinary field of death online studies

The main focus of studies in the interdisciplinary field of death online has been on how (social) media have been reconfiguring rituals of contemporary life and death (see Christensen & Gotved 2014; Giaxoglou, Döveling & Pitsillides 2017; Giaxoglou & Döveling 2018). Specifically, such studies have been looking at how death is *mediated* (i. e. how it's present in the media), how it's being *remediated* (i. e. how its articulation in prior media forms is refashioned, blurring the boundaries of media) (see Christensen & Sandvik 2014), and how it's *mediatized* (i. e. transformed through media logic) (see Sumiala 2021) and *social-mediatized* (i. e. transformed through social media logics) (see Giaxoglou 2021). Attention has also been drawn to the ambivalences and tensions arising in social media vernacular prac-

tices, as in the case of phenomena of trolling the profile or memorial pages of deceased people (see Phillips & Milner 2017; Bachmann-Stein & Stein in this volume). More recently, issues related to immortalization and imaginaries of the afterlife in the wider context of Artificial Intelligence (AI) innovations have been opening up new lines of research and debate (see Bassett 2015, Savin-Baden 2022) – although these remain out of the scope of the present chapter.

In the growing body of research on death online, social media are often branded as opening up new spaces for death-related practices and affording a range of story formats, audiences, and purposes. Practices of death, dying, and mourning online are said to extend the tellability of death by turning death events into occasions for sharing and updating the self in the here-and-now in line with social media logic. Such extensions of death's tellability are credited with bringing death to the public domain (see Walter, Hourizi & Pitsillides 2012), creating emotional communities online (see Julliard & Georges 2018) and increasing the visibility of death (see Sumiala 2021). Some scholars have linked this intensified publicization with changing mentalities around death leading to the designation of the contemporary age in Western societies as *the age of spectacular death* (see Jacobsen 2016).

An example of spectacular death sharing practices in digital environments is the case of *funeral selfies*, i. e. pictures of usually one smiling person taken next to a corpse (for a collection of examples of funeral selfies, see Hamblin 2013). In their study of Instagram posts featuring the hashtag #funeral, Thimm & Nehls (2017) found that selfies represented the most frequent type of image shared. Many people were initially horrified at this practice which they saw as disrespectful, a reaction that could be taken to evidence the idea that death or images of oneself near a dead person are not accepted and that death is taboo. Looking more closely, however, both at the practices in question and the reactions these tend to trigger, it becomes apparent that funeral selfies was at the time an apparent cultural trend that circulated on social media, primarily driven by social media logic among young people, rather than by changing death-ritual norms. That logic incited users to share and update the self in their here-and-now, however trivial, intimate, or weird that may seem to other people. According to Gibbs et al. (2015) the practice of sharing selfies particularly popular on Instagram profiles affirmed a wider turn to the visual. Such visual practices can be understood as a subtle form of *presencing*, which forms an integral part of the "vernacular (and ongoing) tradition of online memorialization" (Meese et al. 2015: 1828), and facilitates a personal, affective response in the context of attempts to capture "the flamboyant and internationally gazed-upon memorial event" (Meese et al. 2015: 1827). The above accounts might explain why, apparently 1/5 of millennials approve of the practice of taking and sharing selfies during funerals and as many as

1/3 of mourners in the UK reported having snapped a selfie at a funeral (see Fussell 2016). Reactions to such practices seem to object to the focus on the self and reinforce widely circulating adult perceptions of young people's social media sharing activity as another instance of young people's 'narcissism' and disregard for appropriateness.

The example of funeral selfies indicates the importance of contextualizing death-related practices in terms of social media affordances, logic and trends, before rushing into over-generalizations about their meaning. It further shows the importance of avoiding treating social media as an undifferentiated context, branded as either 'good' or 'bad', and instead looking for the nuance and complexity of practices in these environments.

So far, in the interdisciplinary field of death online systematic attention to narrative practices relating to the performance of mourning has been limited, despite the centrality of narrative in meaning-making, identity construction and affective performances. One of the reasons for this gap could be the focus on media perspectives and the use of ethnographic methods that often use stories as a resource for research, rather than as an object of analysis *per se*.

The narrative approach to the study of death, dying and mourning in digital environments that is presented in the remainder of this chapter is, therefore, motivated by this pervasive under-theorization of narrative in the study of death-related practices. In addition, and as already mentioned, a narrative approach can help to move beyond journalistic clichés about death as taboo that mask the conditions and contexts under which death and mourning become tellable and shareable stories.

3 A narrative approach to death, dying, and mourning in social media environments

The understanding of narrative in this chapter draws on small story and digital storytelling research from which understandings of stories as *situated, social practices* embedded in other practices have emerged. Stories online have been described as *multi-authored, multi-semiotic*, often *fragmented*, and *distributed* across media platforms and audiences (see Page 2012; 2013) that call for different types of *participation* (see De Fina 2016).

Sharing stories online involves the emplotment of the ongoing, mundane present as *breaking news stories or life-writing of the moment* (see Georgakopoulou 2017), often disseminated widely as *shared stories* part of larger, public interactions relating to large scale matters of public concern (see Page 2018) and

shaped by metrics (see Georgakopoulou, Iversen & Stage 2020). This life-sharing in the moment also extends to the sharing of disruptive events, such as death, also known as *death-writing and sharing of the moment*.

Social media mourning can be productively approached as *small stories* (see Giaxoglou 2021: 208–212), i. e. as "discourse engagements that engender specific social moments which show a narrative orientation and integrally connect with what gets done on particular occasions and in particular settings" (Georgakopoulou 2007: 148). In this small stories approach the focus is not so much on the structure of stories, but rather on the way stories are used by tellers, co-tellers and recipients/witnesses as a meaning-making resource and an affective positioning resource, i. e. a resource for negotiating particular affective positions and identities at different levels. Attention is called to ways of telling, sites, and tellers as well as to aspects of the story's audience design, curation (for sharing) and audience reception.

The small story approach to social media mourning has come out of the empirical study of such practices. The analysis of such practices is conducted across three levels[4]:

1. *Sharing as selecting:* at this level attention is paid to the particular types of death picked out as worthy for sharing in the first place and to the particular kinds of moments of mourning judged as appropriate and relevant to audiences;
2. *Sharing as (small) storying:* the focus of analysis at this level is on how selected events and moments are configured as stories, often over multiple turns or aggregating posts. The analyst pays attention to the types of small stories examining their temporality;
3. *Sharing as positioning*: at this level the way shared moments are negotiated with networked audiences is examined with a focus on the different types of identity[5] and *affective positioning* that they help construct for tellers and their audiences.

Affective positioning is a notion introduced by Giaxoglou (2021) to draw attention to the role of language, relationality, and identities in affective practices viewed as context-based, interactional, narrative, and social phenomena. The notion refers to the kinds of negotiations of proximity to or distance from the event of death, the dead, other mourners and the grieving self that make up one's affective

4 These levels of analysis were adapted from the empirical framework for sharing practices proposed by Androutsopoulos (2014) including the following interrelated practices of sharing: designing, styling, and negotiating.

5 For further details on narrative identity positioning, see Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008.

disposition to loss and life and death, more broadly. Acts of affective positioning form the ground for the construction, negotiation and performance of identities. The application of this small story and affective positioning analytic framework to the study of death-related practices has led to a provisional classification of narrative-based mourning activity that facilitates navigation in this largely heterogeneous digital thanato- and mourning-scapes (see Giaxoglou 2021).

1. *Breaking news stories of death or mourning*: announcements of death or mourning in the sharer's here-and-now;
2. *Shared R.I.P. stories*: R.I.P. posts and hashtags in personal profiles or memorial groups associated with connective action;
3. *Visual small stories of death and mourning*: images of death (e.g. from funeral selfies to memorial or emblematic images of mourning) and video-logging of dying and grief
4. *Habitual stories of remembrance*: sharing moments of the here-and-now addressed to the deceased (one-sided dialogues) as a way of re-integrating them to the everyday, which is similar to interacting with the dead at the gravesite or physical memorials, e.g. street memorials.

These different story types are shaped by platform affordances and social media logic and drivers, including (a) the injunction to share life in the here-and-now, (b) the driver to connect with others, and (c) affordances for visual sharing and participation as well as remediations of existing practices of interaction with the dead. In addition, these story types clarify how modes of life writing in the moment extend to the sharing of events, moments, and emotion relating to death or *death-writing of the moment*, which encompasses practices with different scope and purposes, summarised below (see Giaxoglou 2020):

1. *Participatory:* death-writing practices primarily aimed at creating and maintaining communities of bereaved, e.g. R.I.P. Facebook groups prompting public tributes;
2. *Connective:* practices primarily aimed at banding and bonding loosely connected groups around shared values and action, e.g. hashtag mourning connecting large groups of people otherwise unconnected around acts of public mourning and solidarity;
3. *Motivational:* individual story-sharing designed to inspire others, raise awareness of a particular type illness and promote related charities, e.g. illness vlogs;
4. *Cosmopolitan:* practices primarily aimed at banding and bonding affective publics around moments of distant mourning for the 'Other's' death, e.g. visual small stories drawing attention to death outside audiences' 'home' at a distance, such as those circulated in the case of the death of Alan Kurdi;

5. *Rebellious:* mourning connected to off-line movements around grievable lives and related social demands (e.g. Black Lives Matter globally and every time there's another death of a black citizen by police).

The next section will illustrate this approach in the case of a digital story of grief aiming to show in the space of this chapter how a narrative and affective positioning analytic framework can complicate and advance our understanding of these practices.

4 A typical digital story of grief

The digital story of grief that will be used as an example in this section was created for the purposes of the Open Learn interactive experience[6] "*What kind of sharer are you? How is social media changing the way we share grief?*" (OpenLearn 2020). The story is a fabricated example created by synthesizing posts encountered in the context of the author/researcher's research on social media mourning across different platforms to create a composite post. The composite story was designed to illustrate typical ways of sharing grief online, drawing on commonly shared types of small stories, the linguistic style these are expressed in and the purposes these are used for (see Section 3). The story fabricated by the author/researcher was shared with and reworked in video mode by the actress who was recruited to bring the story to life for the OpenLearn interactive experience, who also created the accompanying image (see Fig. 1).

Using a fabricated example in this discussion is motivated by the need to address the ethical limitations of using authentic data to study and showcase aspects of mourning. It also facilitates the practice of illustration, given that a fabricated example brings together different points observed in a range of different cases in a single case. Last, but not least, it also helps to draw and maintain attention to aspects of these practices, mitigating the researcher's and the readers' emotional involvement with such sensitive topics.

The background story created for the purposes of the interactive is the story of Helena, a professional musician in her early 30s, who lost her father to cancer.

6 The interactive experience was sponsored by the Open University's Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies (WELS) supported by WELS Open Media Fellow, Dr Mathijs Lucassen, and designed using the authoring software Elucidat (http://www.elucidat.com; accessed 2024-08-30).

Helena shared the news of his passing with her followers on an image- and video-based social media platform (see Fig. 1).

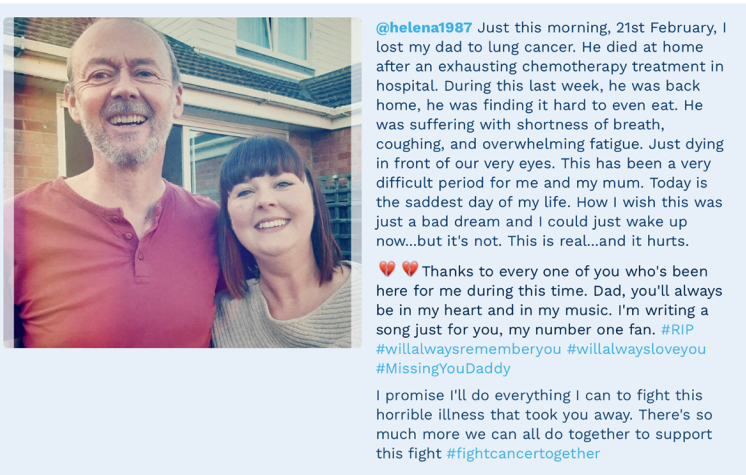

Fig. 1: Helena's multimodal post on social media following the death of her father, created for the purposes of the Open Learn interactive experience '*What kind of sharer are you? How is social media changing the way we share grief*' (OpenLearn 2020).

The post's text is featured on the platform alongside a joyful image of Helena next to her dad. The post addressed to different parts of Helena's audience covers a wide range of angles to the loss as well emotions. It includes, for example, reference to the last days of her dad's suffering; mentions how challenging that period was for her and her mum; expresses how she's feeling about this loss in her own here-and-now; acknowledges everyone's support; commits herself to remembering her dad through her music; and at the same time, commits herself to the fight against cancer issuing a call for wider support to that cause. The linguistic style of the post features a mix of formal and informal language, including for example broken heart emojis and hashtags. Still, her language is carefully constructed, suggesting that a considerable level of design has gone into writing this post before sharing it with everyone, as is common in this kind of posts.

Analysing this post as a small story shared online draws our attention to Helena's different, though interrelated practices of *selecting, small storying and positioning,* summarized below:

Selecting: The aspect of death selected for sharing here is not simply the announcement of death, which tends to be the most conventional and most accepted form of sharing death online. Rather what's selected for sharing is Helena's reflec-

tion on the pain of dying and grieving that is explicitly presented as 'real'. The staging of this emotional moment as an *authentic affective experience* constitutes a key resource for audience engagement. In that respect, Helena's selection of what to say in her post attests to careful content management and audience orientation. The sharer selects to publicly disclose intimate details of her father's dying (e.g. '*just dying in front of our eyes*'), foregrounding the suffering of a terminal illness, like cancer, and the challenges that this entails not only for the sufferer but also for those caring for them. She's also referring to the 'realness' of the pain of her loss and notes how much 'it hurts'. This emotional experience is then used as a frame for announcing she's working on a new song that her dad would love and for committing herself to remembering her dad and fighting for cancer in his name.

(Small) Storying: Helena's story is a *breaking news story* announcing the passing of her dad's loss and the grief she's experiencing. It also combines features of other types of small stories. For example, it brings in elements of a *visual small story* by accompanying the post with a photograph of a joyful moment of her and her dad; it also brings in elements of *habitual storying* in the second paragraph of the post where the sharer commits herself to a song and tributes which promise future posts on anniversaries or other calendar-important dates and special life events; finally, Helena strives to turn her personal story into a shared story of connective action in the last part of her post by mobilizing her followers' support and action in the fight against cancer. This example, then, shows how different types of stories can be combined in a single post indicating a mode of *polystorying* (see Georgakopoulou & Giaxoglou 2019) that allows the sharer to record different aspects of her experience as well as orient to different parts of her audience. This mode of sharing is open to contributions by the audience, inviting the ongoing co-construction of grief and remembrance.

Positioning: Helena uses these small stories to position herself affectively in proximity to her dad before and after his death through explicit mentions to him, songwriting tributes, direct addresses to the deceased (e.g. 'writing this song just for you', 'that took you away')'. She's also positioning herself in proximity to her followers as supporters and fans, by directly mentioning and addressing them (e.g. 'thanks to everyone of you'). These positions help her to construct her identity as (a) a beloved, caring, and loving daughter; (b) a dutiful mourner committed to the remembrance of her dad; (c) an appreciative sharer ready to acknowledge and thank her followers for their support; and (d) an inspirational persona, i. e. someone who grows from their own experience and inspires others to take action. In summary, Helena positions herself as an *authentic* and *relatable* sharer with whom others would want to connect.

Audience reactions to grief posts can be varied. In fact, not everyone would and does react to posts about grief. However, sample audience reactions, like the ones in the fabricated example of Helena's post (see Fig. 2), show how the poly-storying of death and grief continues in the comments space.

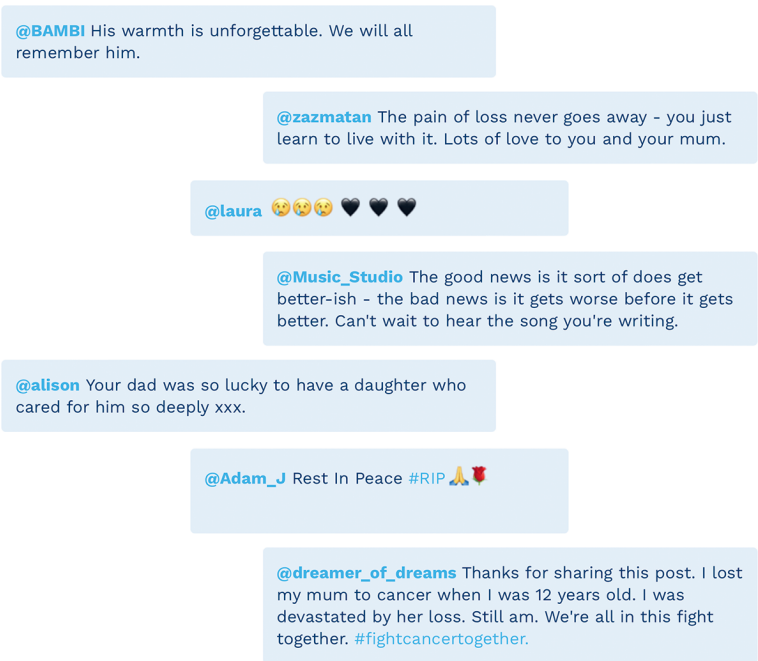

Fig. 2: Individual users' comment reactions to Helena's post, created for the purposes of the Open Learn interactive experience '*What kind of sharer are you*? *How is social media changing the way we share grief*' (OpenLearn 2020).

Commenters to grief posts online tend to pick up on different aspects of the post, depending on how they want to present themselves and make themselves relevant. Some, for example, relate to the memory of the deceased and signal their participation to the mourning for their death (e.g. '*His warmth is unforgettable. We will all remember him*'); others contribute a conventional expression of condolences, e.g. a R.I.P. post ('*Rest in Peace #RIP*'); others share a secondary story, i. e. a story relating a similar experience (e.g. '[...] '*I lost my mum to cancer when I was 12 years old. I was devasted by her loss. Still am.* [...]'), offer advice about how to cope with the loss (e.g. '*The pain of loss never goes away – you just learn to live with it* [...]') or affirm Helena's self-presentation as a 'good' daughter (e.g. '*Your dad was so lucky to have a daughter who cared for him so deeply xxx*').

Approaching this post as a small story shared online has drawn our attention to the typical sharer's different, though interrelated practices of selecting, small storying and positioning.

Even if it's not common to see such a range of topics in a single real post, including for example the death announcement, the expression of thanks for the support received, the commitment to memorial and charity action, references to dying, caring, and feelings of grief, it's common to see these topics in the sharing trajectories of users as part of the drive to carefully and consistently design their *'authentic' selves* across time.

This example offered a sample of an experienced social media user's narrative practices of crafting posts as small stories and using them as a resource for projecting their own affective positions as well as creating affective positions for others. The fact that affect is at the heart of sharing online and garner high levels of engagement can explain why users are willing to share such personal moments and feelings more or less consciously as an integral part of their everyday practices of sharing and updating the self. In summary, then, this fabricated example shows how, when, and why death, dying and mourning become tellable and shareable as narratives and how these narrative practices are intertwined with features of social mediatization, such as reflexivity, affect and participation in digital cultures.

The fabricated example was useful insofar as it illustrated the narrative and affective positioning approach presented in this chapter. The next section will extend and enrich this illustration by discussing a real-life case of sharing dying, death, and mourning on the social media platform of Instagram.

4.1 A real example: The case of @bowelbabe

Dame Deborah James's story of bowel cancer, also known on Instagram as @bowelbabe, offers a compelling real-life example of life and death vlogging that further exemplifies the way digital illness narratives serve as resources for rendering difficult topics tellable and for crafting relatable and authentic online personas.

Dame Deborah James shared her struggle with terminal bowel cancer with which she diagnosed in 2016 via the *You, Me and the Big C* podcast launched in 2018 as well as via her Instagram profile and other social media accounts. At the time of writing, her Instagram profile has accumulated 1,683 posts and 1 M followers since Feb. 19, 2016. Deborah James eventually died on June 28th 2022, triggering an outpouring of media coverage and public grief. Her candid account of her bowel cancer story brought attention to the signs and symptoms of this type of cancer and raised important amounts of funds for bowel cancer charities, including a charity created by Dame James herself. Her podcasts became known for

their frankness, honesty, and humour about her illness that she termed 'the glam cancer'.

The combination of different platforms and modes for sharing her story allowed Dame Deborah James to combine candidness about some of the harrowing aspects of her illness – which she recorded in voice notes taken while undergoing treatment and featured in the podcast's episodes – with an emphasis on celebrating her life despite her illness. On her Instagram account[7], Dame Deborah James is seen to routinely select joyful moments of life, even in hospital settings, and to broadcast messages that seek to raise awareness of bowel cancer, projecting her identity as a lively person, a mother, wife, and friend. In terms of her story sharing, she draws on Instagram's platform vernaculars to populate her feed with image-based posts shared as breaking news stories from her life and illness. Sharing these stories allows her to position herself as a glamorous and inspirational person, rather than as a patient, and to craft a relatable and authentic persona as the ground for building up her social media influencer identity.

Her visually impactful small stories are based on the mobilization of illness, dying and ultimately her death for authenticating her public persona and negotiating her affective positioning at different levels: bowelbabe is seen to construct some distance from her dying so as to affirm her proximity to life and the living, while negotiating and maintaining relationships of proximity with her viewers, engaging them affectively and inciting them to support charity action. Viewers' affective engagement is evident in their reports of scrolling back to the start of her feed to track her journey. Their engagement attests to the cumulative power of her small stories coming to form the 'big story' and legacy of her journey and campaigning activity.

While her story has certainly brought to the fore the good, the bad, and the ugly of life with cancer, which often remain invisible in the wider public contexts in the UK, it has to be recognized that her story still sits well with popular templates of illness, particularly cancer. Such templates are organized around metaphors of the illness as 'a fight' one is expected to face with bravery and determination – and in the case of Dame Deborah James, with a smile and a keen eye for glamour at all times. While the visibility of stories like hers creates opportunities to talk publicly about the signs, symptoms, and available treatments for specific illness, such visibility is conditional upon the fit of such stories (and their tellers) with wider social expectations and social media directives for performing vital,

7 Bowelbabe's Instagram account is publicly available here: https://www.instagram.com/bowelbabe/?hl=en (accessed 2024-08-30). The decision has been taken not to include any images from her account in this chapter, even though the account is public, because the account belongs to a deceased person who cannot provide their informed consent for such use.

i. e. positive, life-affirming and optimistic approaches to illness, avoiding negative or pessimistic accounts (see also Stage & Hougaard 2018).

The next and final section concludes this chapter with some remarks about key continuities and shifts in narrative practices of death, dying, and mourning.

5 Concluding remarks: Continuities and shifts

This section summarizes some of the key and recurrent findings in the interdisciplinary field of death online as well as insights around such practices that have been presented in this chapter, pointing to key continuities and shifts in death-related practices in the wider digital thanato-landscape (see also Walter, Hourizi & Pitsillides 2012; Giaxoglou 2021: 33–34).

The key continuities that have been foregrounded in the literature include the following:

1. Death-related practices in digital environments aren't entirely new practices, but rather draw on elements of existing vernaculars relating to death and memorialization; they facilitate forms of personalized and direct communication with the dead, fostering continuing bonds and parasocial relationships with them, as shown in the examples discussed;
2. They continue to constitute material practices, which are closely connected to offline practices; for example, hierarchies of mourning continue to exist and be important as evident in the offence people often experience when these are violated; also ritualistic elements (non-institutional ritualizations and repetitions) continue to characterize death-related practices even if at a small scale (see Christensen & Gotved 2014);
3. They are shaped in relation to other digital practices, including language choices, identity construction and affect performances and they involve extensive story co-construction alongside careful audience design and identity management, as shown in both the fabricated example and the example of Dame Deborah James's Instagram cancer vlogging.

Alongside these continuities, the shifts noted in the literature include the following:

1. Social media sites are recognized as important affective platforms for communication about illness, death and mourning (see Stage & Hougaard 2018), which have extended the domains of death, dying, and mourning (see Brubaker, Hayes & Dourish 2013), resulting in the blurring of private and public realms, the amplification of audiences, increased opportunities for sharing

stories of illness, death and grief, and also for the return of a sense of community;
2. The use of social media for sharing death, dying, and mourning has resulted to the informalization of the language repertoires drawn upon in death-related practices, in line with digital language practices and younger people's registers who are now claiming a more visible part in public rituals and platform vernaculars.
3. In parallel, globalization trends are attested in such practices. These are mostly evident in the case of celebrity or media death where 'new' standard norms for witnessing and taking part to mass media spectacles of mourning and affect have emerged. Despite such globalization trends norms of death-related expressions have been diversifying, as mourners are having to navigate different contexts and diverse audiences, known and unknown, adding to their labour of mourning psychologically, socially and practically. For example, sharers have to be in control of their presence across different sites, cope with more – and in some cases, unexpected – reactions from known and unknown people, deal with the creation and maintenance of online memorials in addition to physical ones, and in some cases, manage existing social media profiles of deceased relatives.

The points noted above findings remain provisional as the role of social media technologies in everyday life changes and as new technologies are developed. It's important to note that 'change', in this context, refer(s) to *small- to large-scale interventions of varied and multi-level implications to existing ways of doing things, ways of communicating, and ways of feeling.* And in that respect, continued empirical research in social practices is needed to monitor such interventions and point to any shifts these are connected to.

To conclude, one of the key points worth emphasizing is that the pervasiveness of technology in everyday life and indeed the acceleration of its uses for death-related purposes certainly doesn't entail their automatic acceptance by people or call for their celebration uncritically echoing techno-positivist discourses. Rather it entails the need for empirical accounts of the dynamic nature of narrative practices, i. e. stories in context, and their associated practices of affective positioning to the dead, mourners and the grieving self, as discussed in this chapter. When approaching such phenomena, it's important to be aware of the diverse phenomena and types of loss involved, for example mourning for the loss of a family member, a friend, a celebrity or public figure, or for victims of mass shootings, attacks or other crises. In addition, it is important to move beyond the predominant focus on grief either as an individualized psychological experience or as a homogenous collective experience. As argued in this chapter, public debates

around death, dying, and mourning can move beyond questions of what is 'taboo' and what isn't, what is 'good' and what is 'bad' for the bereaved to questions about when death, dying and mourning are talked about, shared and how, what opportunities and limitations or risks digital environments afford for mourning at different levels. Even though there are no clear-cut answers to these questions, opening spaces for critical reflection and public conversations on the affordances or promises, limitations and risks of uses of thanatechnologies in users' lives as well as in their future imaginaries can advance understandings of death, dying, and mourning in a digital era and ultimately, empower users to adapt thanatechnologies to their own needs and purposes.

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