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# Mourning Practices on the Internet

**Abstract:** The article presents the results of our URPP subproject “Mourning Practices on the Internet”, in which four linguists collaborated. Following our disciplinary background, the aim of the project was to explore how feelings of grief after a tragic event are expressed on the internet, what linguistic and visual means of expression are used, and how this form of online mourning is reported in the media (i.e. in newspapers). A particular focus was placed on the question of religious references found in the data we examined. Such references are expected in the context of death and mourning; the project investigated how these references are explicitly established. While other studies are predominantly in English, our research centers on German-language data. The article presents selected results from our qualitative and quantitative analyses and highlights how closely offline and online mourning practices are intertwined in our digitally permeated world.

Im Beitrag werden die Ergebnisse unseres UFSP-Teilprojekts „Trauerpraktiken im Internet“ vorgestellt, an dem vier Linguistinnen und Linguisten mitgewirkt haben. Unserem fachlichen Hintergrund folgend war es Ziel des Projekts, herauszuarbeiten, wie im Internet Trauergefühle nach einem tragischen Ereignis zum Ausdruck gebracht werden, welche sprachlichen und bildlichen Ausdrucksmittel verwendet werden und wie über diese Art der Online-Trauerbekundung in den Medien (z. B. in Zeitungen) berichtet wird. Ein besonderes Augenmerk lag dabei auf der Frage, welche religiösen Bezüge sich in den von uns untersuchten Daten finden. Dass es im Kontext von Tod und Trauer solche Bezüge geben wird, ist zu vermuten; im Projekt wurde untersucht, wie diese Bezüge explizit hergestellt werden. Der Beitrag präsentiert ausgewählte Ergebnisse unserer qualitativen und quantitativen Analysen und macht deutlich, wie eng in unserer digital durchdrungenen Welt Offline- und Online-Trauerpraktiken verwoben sind.

## 1 Introduction

We live in a digital world, in a culture of digitality (Stalder [2016] 2024). This manifests itself in many facets – not least in our approach to death. The grief over the loss of a loved one can be publicly shared on social networks (Giaxoglou 2021); virtual grave sites can be established (Geser 1998; see also Offerhaus 2016), and

people share their experience of caring for their dying child online (Marx and Tienken 2023). After a death in the family, friends and acquaintances, and often even strangers, express their condolences on online memorial pages, light virtual candles, or write personal messages in a digital condolence book. Even when we are offline, our world is permeated by digital elements. Taking pictures at a funeral, sending condolence letters by mail, the publication of obituaries in newspapers<sup>1</sup> – none of this would be possible without the use of digital technologies. Stalder ([2016] 2024, 20) rightly points out that digitality no longer applies only to “specific, isolated areas”, but is omnipresent in our society, even beyond digital media.<sup>2</sup> It is important to emphasize this. Even though our URPP project focuses on online mourning practices, they must be viewed in the context of traditional offline mourning practices (e.g., visiting the grave, attending a funeral service, sending condolence letters). While these practices occur offline, they are also part of our increasingly digital world. Moreover, they often serve as templates for how mourning offerings are designed on the internet (e.g., online memorial pages). The same is true for the many religious references found on these sites. Heidi Campbell (2012, 81) aptly notes: “In many respects, offline religion serves as a source book for religious practice online.”

From a linguistic perspective, the question arises as to the relationship between the many facets of mourning and the verbal and non-verbal means of expression (e.g., emojis, photos, ASCII art) available to people on the internet. How is mourning expressed online, and what linguistic tools are used? What connections to (offline) religion are made, and how does the relationship between public and private change when one’s feelings are made public in this way? These and other questions (see below) guided the URPP project “Mourning Practices on the Internet”, whose central results are presented here. Our project did not, however, merely focus on how people express their grief and sympathy online; the reporting on this kind of public mourning was also a key area of interest. So far, only a few studies have been conducted in this regard, primarily within the field of journalism (e.g., Stage and Hougaard 2018).

In the following sections, we will present some of the central findings of the project, but first a preliminary remark is necessary: In contrast to most other sub-projects within the URPP *Digital Religion(s)*, the religious dimension played a secondary role in our project. Although religious interpretive frameworks are often associated with death and mourning, the expressions of grief themselves do

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1 See Meier-Vieracker 2025. This paper examines over 55,000 obituaries and death notices that appeared in a regional daily newspaper.

2 Cf. Stalder [2016] 2024, 20: “This hybridization and solidification, the presence of the digital beyond digital media, gives the culture of digitality its dominance” [our translation].

not reveal whether they are driven by religious motivations. This even applies to phrases such as “Rest in Peace” or “You are now in heaven with God”, which may be interpreted as mere figures of speech (Dürscheid and Wüthrich 2025).<sup>3</sup> In exclamations such as *for God’s sake*, *oh my God*, *thank God*, or *God almighty*, it is immediately apparent that these expressions are idiomatic; there usually is no religious reference intended by the speakers or, to put it more cautiously, the original religious context recedes completely into the background in everyday communication. Even when the context seems to suggest religious content, one should not jump to conclusions. In order to learn about the actual intended use of expressions, interviews would need to be conducted with the individuals who employ them (e.g., when writing a condolence letter or in an obituary). This could shed light on their attitudes and clarify whether references to God, heaven, paradise, eternal life, and other Christian-religiously connoted concepts are genuinely intended as such. However, concerns regarding privacy protection and ethics often arise in this context. Furthermore, surveys like these are also problematic for reasons of decency and respect.

Section 2 provides detailed information on the methodological approach taken in the project and the composition of our data set. This consists of two large text corpora, the so-called *Gedenkseiten-Korpus* (memorial pages corpus) and the Twitter corpus, which were compiled with the criterion that the content should, as far as possible, involve mourning communication. A third, smaller corpus consists of newspaper reports covering online mourning practices. Section 3 presents selected findings: Firstly, it demonstrates which forms of expression are used when mourning children who died shortly before or after birth (3.1). The chapter then addresses the question of which religious (or, more cautiously phrased, religion-adjacent) language patterns can be found in our data (3.2). In doing so, we build on work from the field of religious linguistics (Lasch and Liebert 2017).<sup>4</sup> In the third part of this section, the results of a qualitative study on the media discourse surrounding mourning practices are reported, and recurring patterns of expression in these texts are identified (3.3).

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<sup>3</sup> The paper by Dürscheid and Wüthrich (2025) was developed in close collaboration with the URPP project “Eschatological Contents of Digital Memorial and Mourning Practices”. The productivity of this collaboration is also reflected in the joint development and sharing of a database, in a co-organised international conference and the resulting publication of an edited volume (Frick, Gröbel, and Siever 2025). The exchange of ideas (concerning specific terms for example) also proved to be highly beneficial for both sub-projects.

<sup>4</sup> This discipline, which stands at the intersection of language, culture, and religion, has gained increasing importance in German studies in recent years. It should also be noted that the authors of the present contribution have a background in German studies.

We conclude this introduction by summarizing the project’s objectives: 1) to examine how online mourning (especially in response to death) can be characterized; 2) to investigate whether new forms of condolence communities are emerging on memorial sites and in social networks; 3) to ask to what extent religious aspects are involved in these digital mourning practices; and 4) to analyse the public discourse on digital mourning. It is also important to note that the analyses in the URPP *Digital Religion(s)*, including our sub-project, primarily focus on German-language data. This distinguishes our research from other studies in the context of death and mourning, which is predominantly concerned with English-language data. We will return to this point in the final section of our paper.

## 2 Theoretical Basis and Methodology

Theoretically, our project draws on different linguistic subdisciplines: In addition to the religious linguistics (Lasch and Liebert 2017) already mentioned in the introduction, important theoretical points of reference include media and cultural linguistic works (e.g., Tienken 2015; Marx and Tienken 2023; Giaxoglou 2021). Methodologically, we are guided by corpus pragmatic approaches (e.g., Bubenhofer 2009) and discourse linguistic analyses (e.g., Spitzmüller and Warnke 2011). As our project is part of the URPP, we also worked closely with neighbouring disciplines, above all theology (see footnote 3) but also religious studies (e.g., Campbell 2012; Hutchings 2019) and sociology (e.g., Jakoby 2014). In the following, we explain our methodology and present the three corpora we have compiled.

A total of 25,346 profiles were scraped from the website [www.gedenkseiten.de](http://www.gedenkseiten.de) from 17 March 2021 to 26 May 2024. For each profile, the link to the profile, details about the deceased person (name, place of birth, birth and death dates), the name of the individual who created the page, the profile text, the images, as well as memorial candle texts, were collected. Memorial candle texts are brief messages authored by visitors to express their condolences, grief or memories of the deceased. As can be seen from Table 1, the texts of the obituaries are considerably longer than the candle texts.

**Table 1:** Average length of the different text types on memorial pages in our corpus.

Text Type	Ø Characters	Ø Tokens
Obituaries	883.5	143.54
Candle Texts	478.07	55.89

The corpus comprises a total of 2,168,102 candle texts; the average number of candles per profile is 85.54, with a median of only 13. This can be attributed to the fact that, for example, one profile contained 39,169 candle texts at the time of the crawl, while some other profiles had no candle texts at all.

As for the Twitter data, the time of data collection was from 15 October 2021 to 7 June 2023. We conducted both event-based and hashtag-based (or topic-based) crawls. In terms of events, incidents such as terror attacks were included (e.g. the attack on the Berlin Christmas market in 2016). We also searched for memorial days such as the Eternity Sunday and the Worldwide Candle Lighting Day (a day of remembrance for children who have died); looking for both hashtags (e.g. #RIP) as well as specific topics (e.g. “Sternenkinder”, angel babies, cf. section 3.1) in the process. A disadvantage of this method is the high potential for so called “false positives”.<sup>5</sup> It should also be pointed out that only tweets from 22 March 2006 (the launch of Twitter) to the date of each specific query were collected. This led to a corpus containing 24,032,617 tweets. However, as multiple crawls were performed with different queries, some tweets appeared twice within our corpus and had to be removed. Thus, we finally obtained 22,917,053 unique tweets (with 433,097,386 tokens). In addition, metadata such as author ID, tweet ID, date and time of the tweet, hashtags used, and the number of likes, replies and retweets were also collected.

The third corpus consists of articles from Swiss newspapers dealing with mourning practices on the internet. The data was collected using the *Swissdox@LiRI* database.<sup>6</sup> Initially, a broad keyword search was carried out, including articles published between 14 July 1996 and 15 July 2023 that contained the term “Trauer” [grief] as well as one of the following terms: “online”, “digital”, “Internet”, “Facebook”, “Instagram”, or “Twitter”. The query yielded a total of 3,280 articles, many of which were not relevant to the research topic. For this reason, the corpus was reduced using a semi-automatic review method. First, duplicates were removed, and then only articles in which the terms ‘Trauer’ and the internet-related target words appeared in close proximity were retained. These articles were then qualitatively assessed to determine whether they directly ad-

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5 For example, someone might “mourn” their smartphone using the hashtag #RIP: “Wie befürchtet: Smartphone im Arsch. Startet jetzt nur noch mit Error . . . #RIP” (“As feared: Smartphone fucked up beyond all repair. Now it just starts with a bug . . .”).

6 <https://www.liri.uzh.ch/en/services/swissdox>. Due to commercial restrictions, the raw data cannot be shared. The original query (YAML format) used to retrieve the data is available at <https://gitlab.uzh.ch/sandro.wick/mourning-practices-on-the-internet/-/blob/8dba5bfdc116a2b229c41ca4fcb1fe88ce189a7c/files/query.yaml> [Accessed 19 September 2024].

dressed practices relevant to the research question.<sup>7</sup> During this process it became evident that the creation of a discourse-specific sub-corpus, contrasting to the thematically non-specific overarching corpus, was crucial. Thus, the result of this process was not merely the curation of the media corpus, but also of a sub-corpus, as described in Table 2 below:

**Table 2:** Media corpus and thematic sub-corpus.

Corpus	Media Corpus	Thematic Sub-Corpus
Size (Articles)	462	139
Theme	Non-specific	Death & mourning online
Criterion	Online mourning is mentioned	Thematically

In the following section, we will give exemplary insights into the studies that we have conducted using the described corpora.

### 3 Main Findings

#### 3.1 Digital Mourning Practices in the Context of Angel Babies

Children who die shortly before, during, or shortly after birth, have been referred to as “Sternenkinder” (angel babies) in German-speaking countries for the past 30 years. Tienken (2015, 135) identified an instance of this term on a memorial website dating back to 1991. The German-language Wikipedia article was created in 2008. Notably, there is no equivalent Wikipedia article for “angel baby” in English. Tienken (2015, 135) pointed out that the term “Sternenkind” had not yet become a widely recognised term among the general population at that point in time, particularly not among those who have not been directly or indirectly affected by the loss or stillbirth of a child. Our analysis of Twitter data shows that the expression has considerably spread in recent years: from one tweet contain-

<sup>7</sup> While the manual approach reduced false positives in the corpus, classification could have been further refined through inter-annotator agreement. However, given our qualitative focus in the third corpus, the additional effort seemed disproportionate to the benefit.

ing this word in 2008 to 1927 tweets in 2021. Unlike other social media platforms, Twitter is used by a relatively small proportion of the population.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it cannot be claimed that language use on Twitter is representative of the population as a whole. However, the increased usage of the term “Sternenkind” on Twitter suggests that its relative frequency has increased, as the number of tweets featuring the term has risen while the user base remains constant.

A look into the *DWDS* newspaper corpus<sup>9</sup> reveals that the expression has also proliferated considerably in newspapers over the past three decades. From 17 occurrences per 1 million tokens in 1993, its frequency has increased 65-fold to 1,110 instances by 2023 with the most significant growth occurring in the past 10 years. It remains unclear, however, whether the term first spread in general language use and is now reflected both on Twitter and in newspapers, or whether it primarily disseminated through the internet and was later picked up by newspapers. In any case, it must be acknowledged that the emergence of the term “Sternenkind” signifies a profound change in how grief about deceased children is expressed, shifting parents from passive sufferers to active mourners. By referring to a lost child as a “Sternenkind” rather than “miscarriage” the language use reaffirms the parent-child bond, repositioning parents as “angels’ parents”. This linguistic shift reflects broader changes in mourning culture and attitudes toward pregnancy loss. Moreover, digital grief communication plays a crucial role in destigmatizing these topics and raising societal awareness.

Our analysis of the use of the string “Sternenkinder” (case-insensitive) is based on a sub-corpus from our Twitter data and initially comprised 32,741 tweets (for more detailed information about the corpus see Siever 2024, 77–80). However, as pointed out in section 2, this dataset included numerous false positives. Consequently, after a manual review, the corpus used for the analysis was reduced to 8,351 tweets. Giaxoglou (2021, 33) emphasizes that the “language used in digital mourning features digital writing features, such as emoji and hashtags, and also draws on platform-specific vernaculars, for example images in photo-sharing websites.” However, as our analysis reveals, the usage of emojis and hashtags is not very frequent in our data; only 35% of all tweets use hashtags, with 65% of the former containing just one. Emojis are even less common, ap-

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8 Between 2011 and 2021, about 1% and 2% of the German population used Twitter on a daily basis according to the *ARD/ZDF* online studies. In the *ARD/ZDF* online studies, internet usage and user behavior in Germany have been examined since 1997. The results are published in the journal *Media Perspektiven* and are available online: <https://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de/>.

9 *DWDS* (<https://www.dwds.de>) stands for *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (Digital Dictionary of the German Language). The newspaper corpus is part of this important online dictionary for the German language, which is based on large text corpora.





interpreted as religious symbols, but the intention of the users is not known, so it is difficult to categorise them as religious or non-religious.

### 3.2 Religious Language Patterns

As already mentioned in the introduction, religiously coined references and patterns of interpretation are very common when it comes to death and mourning – both in (historically grown) offline practices as well as in online practices (that are based on them). Since death-related mourning is a particularly distressing situation, coping-strategies in the form of comforting and familiar practices are needed: “One such way, especially prominent in the face of disorientation and apparent meaningless [sic] generated by death, is through the meaning-making provided by religion” (Brennan 2008, 336). Religion offers people “ready-made ‘scripts’” (Brennan 2008, 337) in the face of death – and the speechlessness that is often invoked with it – that serve as orientation, support, and perhaps even actual verbal guidance. In this sense, these scripts are part of a patterned religious language use, understood here with Lasch and Liebert (2015, 477) or Liebert (2018, 406) as a functional variety – which means that, on the one hand, their use fulfils certain functions (such as those mentioned above), and on the other hand, that a detailed theoretical understanding of the underlying concept of religion is not only not possible (in our case because we did not interview individuals, see introduction), but also not necessary. Rather, we can assume with Neubert (2016, 16) that the attribution of one’s own or other positions or language uses as ‘religious’ is always linked to certain evaluations, values, and discursive practices. In summary, the following can be stated in the context of digital mourning practices: The use of religious terminology, symbolism or religiously patterned language is not a reliable indicator of actual individual (and not institution-related) religiosity (see above); rather, it is a form of positioning, e.g., vis-à-vis the patterns of interpretation and the accompanying ‘scripts’ for death-related mourning provided by religion (e.g., as helpful or useless, as consoling or upsetting).<sup>10</sup>

With this in mind, we would like to point to three important findings from our project with respect to religious language patterns in online mourning practices: a) religiously coined formulaic (in the sense of typical language patterns) expressions are employed as discourse inscribing means; they are used for indexing one’s participation in a discourse; b) the existence of multimodal religious refer-

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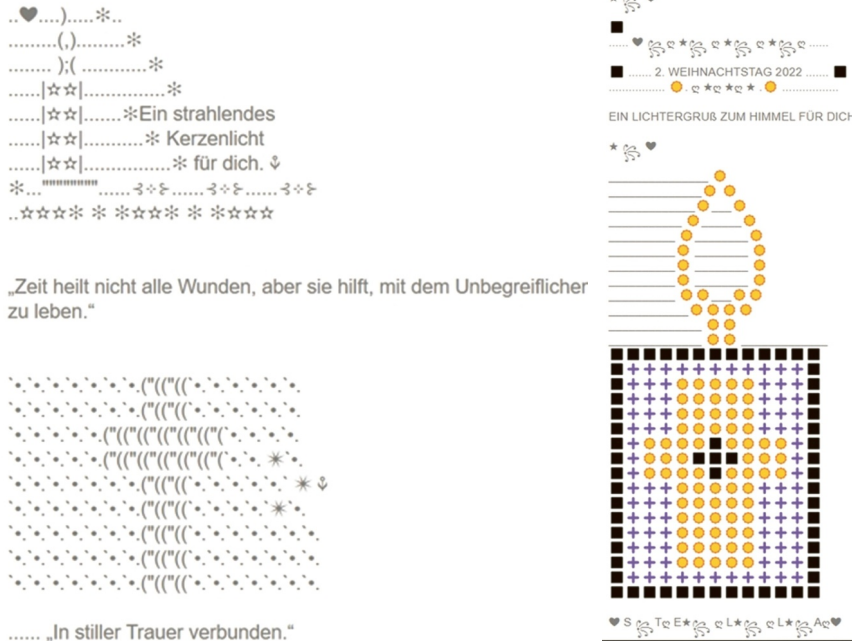
<sup>10</sup> This raises the question of who these ‘providers’ actually are. Are digital media formats possibly taking on the role of religious providers with their offerings?

ences on memorial pages as artistic consolation devices in the sense of a form of community-special art that is intended to have a comforting effect, and c) the establishment and maintenance of a vertical communication axis with the deceased which is reminiscent of practices of prayer with respect to the use of deictics. In the following, we will describe these three main findings in more detail with some examples from our data basis as described in section 2.

a) Hashtags – starting with *#jesuischarlie* after the terror attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices in 2015 – have developed as an important resource in the wake of “disruptive news events” (Giaxoglou and Johansson 2020, 170). These hashtags (see also section 3.1) are often religiously coined, as for example the widespread invitation to pray *#prayforX* (whereby the X is usually filled with different toponyms) or the likewise widespread acronym *#RIP*. As Brennan (2008, 337) shows with reference to the latter, the religious meaning of these formulaic phrases has often been “attenuated or lost”; this also applies to references to “God” or “heaven” etc. (Dürscheid and Wüthrich 2025). In social media contexts this is especially true, instead these pattern-like solidified strings have become a means of expressing solidarity by inscribing oneself into the discourse revolving around the respective disruptive event (e.g., terror attacks, amok runs, airplane crashes but also the death of public figures) – in the sense of: I acknowledge that something bad has happened, I express my sympathies and as a result I am part of a community that shares similar feelings about the event in question which can have a comforting effect. In other words, and to put it more broadly: Digital technologies in general and hashtags in particular offer new possibilities for a sense of belonging and community-building (Lagerkvist 2017, 107); this, of course, is also true in the case of the “Sternenkinder” (see above). The prevalence of this function is also shown by the fact that these hashtags are used when the linking function of the hashtag is not effective at all, e.g., on images. The hashtag is thus part of the formulaic, religiously coined string and functions as an indicator for “Diskursfähigkeit und Agendawürdigkeit” (discourse and agenda worthiness, Marx 2019, 251).

b) On memorial pages, we strikingly often find ASCII designs (Frick 2023), which are otherwise more or less extinct in social media. Generating, (more often) copying and sharing these elaborate structures, which are composed of numerous individual punctuation marks and other special characters thereby creating iconic imagery, has become an almost platform-specific multimodal practice on the memorial pages. By using these designs, users identify themselves as platform- and community-competent: they show that they know the common practices, (can) carry them out themselves and thus align themselves with their usage in

general and their (comforting) functions in specific. As the examples below (see Figure 1) demonstrate, these designs often take on religious forms or are based on religious symbols and objects indexed as religious: candles, crosses, doves, angels etc.



**Figure 1:** Artistic ASCII designs in candle texts on memorial pages (left one created on 22 May 2023, right one created on 26 December 2022).

This reference to religiously associated symbols is in line with the theoretical considerations above: it draws on (in a Christian-Western culture) well-known scripts that invite people to identify with them or position themselves in relation to them (which they also do by using them, for example). However, the reference remains so abstract that it has no binding character whatsoever: It does not call for or demand a specific form of religiosity, but simply represents an offer of consolation through the potential religious interpretation frame (Hilpert 2017, 133; on the top of consolation in (social media) mourning see Klug 2023).

c) Another reference to religious practices can be found in the deictic organization of the memorial candle texts (see also Giaxoglou 2021). We find that a) users very often address the deceased with the use of the deictic pronoun *du* (you) in

order to maintain (or rather: imitate) communication with them. This shows that the memorial pages represent a forum for communication with the dead and, in this function, serve to maintain the social relationship with them potentially indefinitely in the sense of the “continuing bonds” model (Jakoby and Reiser 2014, 82). However, authors of these texts not only verbally imagine a communicative channel with the deceased, but also arrange it spatially by deictically opening up a vertical communication axis in which they localize and position themselves *hier unten* (down here) and the deceased *da/dort oben* (up there) (Bodenmann et al. 2023). Two examples from our memorial page corpus (see section 2) will illustrate this:

- (1) Ich hoffe Du bist dort oben im warmen und trockenem.  
*I hope you are warm and dry up there.*
- (2) Ein Engel sein für einen Tag, und dich noch einmal wiedersehen . . . um dir zu sagen, wie sehr du uns hier unten fehlst . . .  
*To be an angel for a day, and to see you again . . . to tell you how much we miss you down here . . .*

This – inevitably monologic – vertical communicative axis (Lasch and Liebert 2015, 483) is not reminiscent of the religious practice of prayer and worship by accident. This may also explain the use of star emojis or images and the metaphor of “Sternenkind” in general.

These three exemplary insights in our findings show that religiously coined references and religious patterns of language use play a central role in online mourning practices – even if this is potentially a less concrete, partly faded and certainly also strongly (Christian-Western) culturally influenced type of religiosity.

### 3.3 Digital Mourning as Represented in Swiss Newspapers

As Frick (2022, 212) observes, due to their emergent nature, mourning practices in the context of digitalisation have become the subject of journalistic reflection. This section builds on Frick’s observation and presents selected findings from a corpus-based study that draws on the media corpus (see above). It focuses on two key areas: firstly, the different representations of digital mourning practices depending on the actors involved; and secondly, the extent to which a trend towards the integration of digital elements in mourning practices can be traced in public perception through the analysis of the media discourse.

Different forms of mourning practices on the internet can be reconstructed from the media corpus as they are represented through journalistic coverage. It is important to note, however, that our focus was not on the mourning practices themselves but rather on their portrayal and reflection in the media. Thus, we present a collection of practices that are discussed and negotiated within newspaper articles, considering not only communication that directly discusses mourning practices online but also, following Schütte (2021, 242–243), identifies mortality-related themes in seemingly unrelated contexts. The analysis is based on an actor-centred approach to the data (Spitzmüller and Warnke 2011, 174–177). In our context, this means that newspaper articles use different forms of representation of online mourning practices depending on the *animator* (following Goffman 1981, 226; i.e. the actor who performs the utterance – in our context the mourner). These variations are shaped by the *author* (i.e. the journalist), who presents mourning practices in a specific way based on the identity and role of the mourner (and the deceased). Examples (3)–(5) provide prototypical formulations that demonstrate how the journalistic representation of mourning practices varies depending on the mourner and the deceased. The examples are then briefly commented on.

- (3) Die sozialen Netzwerke wurden von Gedenkmeldungen und -fotos geradezu überflutet: «Wir werden dich niemals vergessen», «Ein Grosser stirbt nie», «Er war ein Komik-Genie», schrieben die User, Kurzangebundene begnügten sich mit «RIP» (Rest in Peace).

*Social networks were virtually flooded with tributes and memorial photos: “We will never forget you,” “A great one never dies,” “He was a comic genius,” users wrote, while those at a loss for words settled for “RIP” (Rest in Peace). Trauer ist ansteckend, nzz.ch, 14.08.2014.*

- (4) Selbst Präsident Obama stimmte in den Chor der digitalen Trauergemeinde ein: «The movies won’t be the same without Roger», meldete er über Twitter. *Even President Obama joined the chorus of the digital mourning community: “The movies won’t be the same without Roger,” he posted on Twitter.* Die letzte Instanz, Tages-Anzeiger, 06.04.2013.

- (5) Auf ihrem Facebook-Profil strahlt Lena weiterhin. Herz-Emojis hauchen ihrem toten Profil Leben ein. Für Hinterbliebene ist es nicht immer einfach, dass Verstorbene nach dem Tod noch präsent sind. Auch Anna irritiert anfangs, dass ihre Freundin Lena virtuell weiterlebt. «Ich war lange nicht wirklich traurig, weil sie auf Facebook noch da war», erinnert sie sich. *On her Facebook profile Lena continues to shine. Heart emojis breathe life into her dead profile. For the bereaved, it is not always easy that the deceased are*

*still present after death. Anna also found it unsettling at first that her friend Lena continued to live on virtually. “I wasn’t really sad for a long time because she was still there on Facebook,” she recalls.*

Digitaler Nachlass – Statt Blumen gibt’s für Tote Herz-Emojis, srf.ch, 14.06.2017.

(3) is part of an article reporting on social media reactions to the death of a public figure. Notably, there is no lead-in or direct reference to the *animator* of the direct quotes. Instead, the example presents a general collection of memorial messages. This contrasts with (4). Although the article is also about the death of a public figure, the condolence message is attributed to the *animator* combined with a lead-in. This is common in cases where the article describes one celebrity mourning another. The coverage of unknown people mourning others who are also not in the public eye occupies a distinctive position in our media corpus. An example of this is given in (5). The digital mourning message itself is no longer quoted in this article. The focus shifts from quoting digital expressions of grief to statements that reflect the individual’s personal grief and mourning practices on the internet. As such, articles like this one constitute a unique category in their own right.

In a second step, we have extracted a thematic sub-corpus. It differed from the broader media corpus, which includes articles that may only make passing reference to mourning practices while addressing other topics. Table 3 provides examples of titles specifically addressing digital mourning practices (from the sub-corpus) alongside titles of broader articles (from the main corpus).

**Table 3:** Examples for titles of articles about mourning practices on the internet and other topics.

Sub-Corpus: Articles about mourning practices on the internet		
<i>An eternal life on the World Wide Web</i>	Ein ewiges Leben im World Wide Web	Tages-Anzeiger 10.12.1999, ID 15457296
<i>Ancestor worship is maintained on the internet</i>	Ahnenkult wird im Internet gepflegt	Zürcher Unterländer 17.09.2013, ID 1518529
Main Corpus (without Sub-Corpus): Articles about other topics		
<i>Queen Elizabeth II has died</i>	Königin Elizabeth II. ist tot	Der Landbote 09.09.2022, ID 47504155
<i>Robin Williams suffered from Parkinson’s</i>	Robin Williams litt an Parkinson	tagesanzeiger.ch, 15.08.2014, ID 211130

We examined the data in more detail to identify potential trends in the publication of newspaper articles focusing exclusively on online mourning practices

compared to those on other topics in our media corpus. In Figure 2 (see below), we plotted the yearly publication frequencies of both categories for comparison.

The frequency analysis of the two types of articles in the corpus, as shown in Figure 2, reveals a shift towards articles that primarily cover other topics but still refer to mourning practices on the internet. This may indicate a trend towards the normalisation of digital aspects within these practices: whereas in the late 1990s and early 2000s coverage tended to focus on the impact of digitalisation on mourning and its wider social implications, a growing tendency towards a more integrated coverage of the phenomenon has become observable over the past few years. Mourning practices have increasingly absorbed digital components, to the point where it can be assumed that, in the public discourse, digital mourning practices become a natural extension of traditional mourning rituals. As a result, these digital aspects are no longer at the centre of journalistic attention to the topics but are mentioned in passing, reflecting their seamless integration into the current public perception of contemporary mourning practices.

## 4 Conclusion and Future Research

At the beginning of this paper we pointed out that most of the work dealing with the topic of digital religion is focused on the English-speaking world, whereas our project centres on the German-speaking area. While it is a positive step to shift the focus to another language, comparative studies between different cultures and languages are still lacking. Tim Hutchings highlights this in his article “Angels and Digital Afterlife”. In a call to action, he writes: “First, we urgently need a much wider range of cross-cultural studies of death and grief online (as of other forms of religious/non-religious existential experience), to balance the current wealth of case studies from the English-speaking (particularly North American) world” (Hutchings 2019, 4). Indeed, it is not enough to conduct individual studies in different linguistic and cultural areas; the data must also be analysed comparatively. From a linguistic perspective, it would therefore be desirable, in a next step, to explore whether similarities in the use of linguistic and visual means can be identified in online expressions of grief across cultural boundaries. Future studies could also examine the extent to which digital platforms contribute to the creation of global mourning communities.

We now come to the conclusion – and simultaneously back to the introduction of this paper, where it was explained that our daily lives are permeated by digital technology. Following Amanda Lagerkvist, we can even go as far as to say that digital media are not only tools of everyday life but have profound effects on

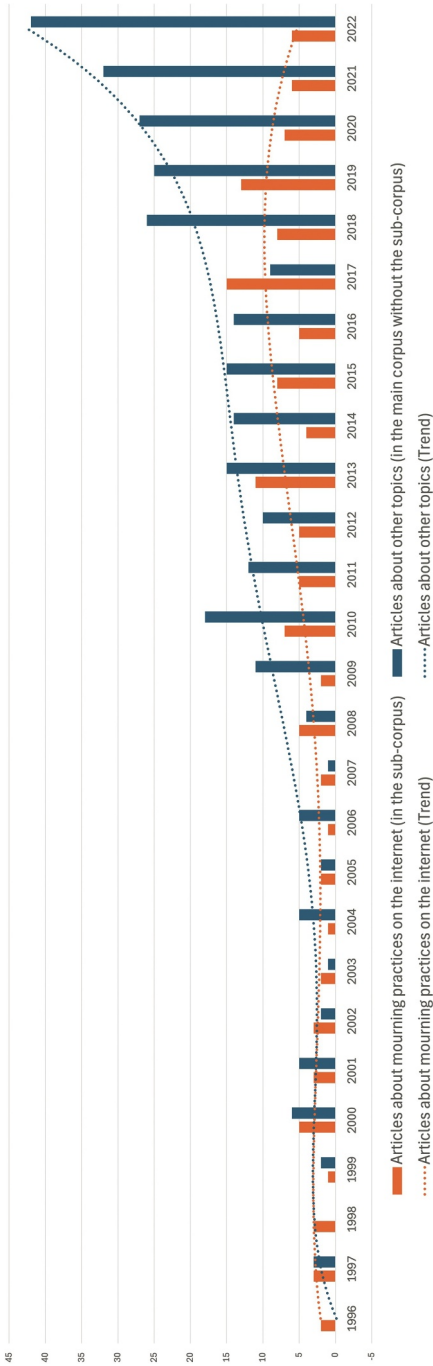


Figure 2: Number of articles about mourning practices on the internet and articles about other topics.



our existence, they are “life-defining” (Lagerkvist 2017, 99).<sup>11</sup> Recent works have referred to this omnipresence of the digital as “postdigital” – analogous to other word formations of this kind, such as “postmigrant”. Stalder ([2016] 2024, 20) does not use the term postdigital himself; he points out that it can be misunderstood: “[T]he prefix ‘post’ is often read to imply that something is over or that one at least understands it and can move on to newer things” [our translation]. In contrast, one could argue that the prefix *post-* aims to capture how our society is currently transforming. What follows the digital is now another, a second stage of digitality.<sup>12</sup> This stage arises from our “digital thrownness” (Lagerkvist 2017) and shapes our view of the world – and, consequently, our understanding of death and dying. Will this, in the long term, lead to a new understanding of immortality? This possibility is suggested by Savin-Baden (2023). In her essay titled “Postdigital Afterlife” she concludes: “The digital world opens up an unimaginably diverse range of opportunities for one individual’s identity to perpetuate after the death of their real human being” (Savin-Baden 2023, 3). In the vast field of digital (or postdigital) religion, many new questions are emerging that still need to be addressed.

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<sup>11</sup> As Lagerkvist (2017, 97) notes, this applies at least to the networked populations of the Global North. She aptly states: “Hence, we seem to be, to speak in Heideggerian terms, *thrown* into our digital human existence.”

<sup>12</sup> For this reason, it no longer makes sense to speak of “digitalization”. The process is already completed.

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