

#Funeral and Instagram: death, social media, and platform vernacular

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This paper presents findings from a study of Instagram use and funerary practices that analysed photographs shared on public profiles tagged with ‘#funeral’. We found that the majority of images uploaded with the hashtag #funeral often communicated a person’s emotional circumstances and affective context, and allowed them to reposition their funeral experience amongst wider networks of acquaintances, friends, and family. We argue that photo-sharing through Instagram echoes broader shifts in commemorative and memorialization practices, moving away from formal and institutionalized rituals to informal and personalized, vernacular practices. Finally, we consider how Instagram’s ‘platform vernacular’ unfolds in relation to traditions and contexts of death, mourning, and memorialization. This research contributes to a broader understanding of how platform vernaculars are shaped through the logics of architecture and use. This research also directly contributes to the understanding of death and digital media by examining how social media is being mobilized in relation to death, the differences that different media platforms make, and the ways social media are increasingly entwined with the places, events, and rituals of mourning.

Keywords: Instagram; platform vernacular; hashtag; funeral; photo-sharing; selfie

Introduction

There is a growing body of research examining the ways death is addressed in online environments. Following the emergence of online memorials or ‘virtual cemeteries’ (Roberts, 2004) in the 1990s, and the more recent popularity of memorialized profiles on social media platforms, scholars from a range of disciplines have become increasingly interested in the digital mediation of death, commemoration, and memorialization. This work has examined how grief and social support take shape in online networks (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Moss, 2004; Williams & Merten, 2009); and how the dead persist and continue to participate as social actors through the platforms and protocols of social networking sites (SNS) (Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Stokes, 2012). In response to the growing number of dead users who persist in online environments and the affective and instrumental issues created by this proliferation, platforms like Facebook and Google have responded with policies for how the accounts of dead people should be managed and how their online presences should be handled (Gibbs, Bellamy, Arnold, Nansen, & Kohn, 2013).

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To date, with a few notable exceptions (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011), little attention has been paid to how media platforms intersect with physical environments, such as cemeteries, crematoriums or funerals, and the traditional mourning practices that occur there. This has created an opportunity for research to investigate how digital platforms mediate a variety of cultural practices associated with death, mourning, and commemoration. When scholars have focused on the meaning and practices of memorialization they have tended to focus on particular SNS, especially Myspace and Facebook, while other popular platforms have been largely neglected, implicitly eliding differences between platforms, and the socio-cultural implications of those differences. Consequently, in this paper we continue our own studies of emerging practices associated with death and digital media (Gibbs et al., 2013; Kohn, Gibbs, Arnold, & Nansen, 2012; Mori, Gibbs, Arnold, Nansen, & Kohn, 2012) through an exploration of the use of Instagram, the mobile, social networking platform for sharing photographs and videos. In particular, motivated by the media furore that surrounded the ‘selfies at funerals’ Tumblr blog (Fiefer, 2013) and the images of President Obama posing for a selfie with the Prime Ministers of Denmark and the UK at the memorial service for Nelson Mandela in late 2013 (Gibbs, Carter, Nansen, & Kohn, 2014), we decided to examine how photographs tagged with ‘#funeral’ mediate funerary events, and explore the implications of this vernacular mode of visual communication for the historical, cultural, and material forms that take shape around death and commemoration.

We begin this paper by briefly reviewing current scholarship on social media and the dead. We then offer our term ‘platform vernacular’ as a way of understanding how communication practices emerge within particular SNS to congeal as genres, before considering how Instagram’s vernacular unfolds in the production and circulation of photography labelled with #funeral. We outline our findings and assess how various aspects of memorialization are mediated or redefined through the use of Instagram. We conclude by considering the intersection of digital culture with traditional memorializing practices, which we discuss in relation to social presence, memorial photography, and technological augmentation.

The dead on social media

The study of online memorialization has largely revolved around the psychology and sociology of grief and support. Early literature focused heavily on users of Web 1.0 memorial sites, analysing the posted content and online grieving processes (Moss, 2004; Roberts, 2004). In these studies the internet was framed as a new medium for mourners to come together in an informal setting to express and share their grief. Roberts (2004), for example, examined descriptions of web memorials, guestbook entries, and surveyed web memorial authors, finding that web 1.0 platforms not only served to create communities of the bereaved in ‘cyberspace’ who shared their grief across geographic distances, but also afforded opportunities for the bereaved to maintain or continue bonds with the dead. These ‘virtual cemeteries’ built on stand-alone websites had ‘clear parallels with the role of the physical cemetery, which relocates the deceased to a place which is accessible but separate from the spaces usually occupied by the living’ (Hutchings, 2012, p. 51). Web 2.0 social media platforms have different affordances, enabling existing user profiles to be reworked to form memorials, and to gather existing ‘intimate publics’ (Berlant, 2008) as mourners around them. This appropriation of living profiles for memorialization ‘integrates their mourning practices directly into their ongoing social relationships’ (Hutchings, 2012, p. 51). As Walter et al. (2011) point out, death is a social event and the use of a social media platform to mark this event is to be expected.

While the dying are typically removed from daily life and placed in hospitals and hospices, the dead are removed to funeral parlours and cemeteries, and institutional commemoration occurs in demarcated places and at times structured for that purpose (places of worship, cemeteries,

funerals, and so on), social media memorializations, like roadside memorials, repositions the dead back within the flow of everyday life. People continuing to visit and post on the profile pages of the deceased, and so maintain an attachment with the deceased by integrating the dead into their ongoing social relationships (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Williams & Merten, 2009). Noteworthy here is the challenge posed to the sequestration of death (Walter et al., 2011) in time and in place, and the positioning of death as the end of personhood. As Veale (2004) has shown, the personhood of the dead online do not remain static, but continue to evolve through the participatory construction of memories, bereavement, and remembrance, which Veale describes as a ‘collective memorial landscape’. Memorial pages persist and scale through articulated networks in ways that allow for distributed and collective representations of the dead to be constructed, necessitating curation (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). The implications of these emergent, articulated representations include a social life that persists beyond biological life, a construction of collective or intersubjective memory (alongside subjective memory), and the establishment of the grounds for potential conflict over these constructions.

Instagram and platform vernacular

Many of the practices outlined in the previous section are vernacular in form, and depend in important ways on the social media platform being used. We argue that each social media platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics, which can be considered as constituting a ‘platform vernacular’, or a popular (as in ‘of the people’) genre of communication. These genres of communication emerge from the affordances of particular social media platforms and the ways they are appropriated and performed in practice. The affordances that are built into the hardware and software of social media platforms delimit particular modes of expression or action (Gillespie, 2010; Montfort & Bogost, 2009), and as a result prioritize particular forms of social participation.

However, the vernacular of a platform is also shaped by the mediated practices and communicative habits of users. The Twitter hashtag stands as a paradigmatic example of a form of expression that was established ‘through widespread community use and adaptation’ rather than being ‘designed-in’ (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). Platform vernaculars are shared (but not static) conventions and grammars of communication, which emerge from the ongoing interactions between platforms and users. While platform vernaculars are particular to social media platforms, it is also important to acknowledge that they can share many elements, and the vocabulary and grammars of vernaculars migrate between social media platforms as new practices and features from one platform are appropriated for use on others.

The affordances and performances that constitute a vernacular are not necessarily specific to a platform, as can be clearly seen through the use of hashtags across a wide variety of online platforms. However, every platform has a vernacular *specific to it* that has developed over time, through design, appropriation, and use. Studying a platform vernacular shifts focus from the extraordinary or spectacular use of media platforms to the significance of ‘mundane and intensely social practices’ (Edensor, Leslie, Millington, & Rantisi, 2009, p. 10). Such an approach focuses on how ‘ordinary’ and everyday forms of communication operate within the constraints and allowances of the platform architecture, but in turn creatively repurpose those allowances and limitations for particular modes of expression and interaction. Efforts to account for such creative engagements and appropriations of media have also been established through the concept of ‘vernacular creativity’ (Burgess, 2006). This concept focuses on forms of ‘cultural participation and self-representation’ (Burgess, 2006, p. 204), in order to account for the ‘specific dignity of everyday lives, expressed using vernacular communicative means’ (Burgess, 2006, p. 206). The term ‘platform vernacular’ extends this work by allowing us to consider these forms of creativity, while

also accounting for the specificities of the platform, its material architecture, and the collective cultural practices that operate on and through it.

By attending to the various material and structural affordances of platforms, ‘platform vernacular’ offers a useful new perspective on communication conventions. Platform vernacular draws attention to how particular genres and stylistic conventions emerge *within* social networks and how – through the context and process of reading – registers of meaning and affect are produced. This approach allows us to examine the specificities of social media platforms (such as Instagram); attend to the particular forms of participation that occur on them; situate these communicative acts in relation to other scholarship on cultural production such as ‘vernacular creativity’ (Burgess, 2006); and to consider these forms of expression and memorialization as they relate to social media’s increasingly ‘visual turn’.

Instagram, a portmanteau of *Instamatic* and *telegram*, is a popular social networking service developed for smart phones and other mobile devices that allows users to share photographs and short videos (for written clarity we will use the term photograph or image to refer to both). It allows users to take square-shaped photographs similar in format to Kodak Instamatic photographs, rather than the more typical 3:4 aspect ratio of most smartphone images. It also allows users to apply a variety of photographic filters that alter the shading, temperature, feel, and presentation of the images. Users can also add a short description to their photographs and then post them online. These descriptions often take the form of hashtags, which allow users to insert their photo into a wider ‘hashtag conversation’ (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). Finally, photographs from Instagram can be shared across other social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Flickr. Central to the platform vernacular of Instagram are these affordances for photo-sharing, tagging images, and applying photographic filters.

Another important property of the materiality of Instagram is that it is overwhelmingly deployed on mobile devices. This property is obvious and easily overlooked, but nonetheless it is critical to the vernacular by enabling Instagram to be embedded within everyday practices. The ‘mediatization’ (Krotz, 2009) that Instagram affords is interleaved with the materialized practices associated with everyday embodied life. The online and the offline, the digital and the embodied, are able to be hybridized in performative assemblages like funerals. Platform vernacular allows us to approach #funeral photographs on Instagram as an everyday form of media practice, while also considering historical media precedents, situating their material production, and assessing how #funeral operates within contemporary aesthetics, sociality, and rituals of death.

Instagram and #funerals

In order to explore these vernacular practices in relation to the Instagram platform and the embodied event and traditional locations of funerals, we collected and analysed material associated with the hashtag ‘funeral’. We manually downloaded all public images and associated user data, text, and comments with the funeral hashtag (#funeral) posted to Instagram over two 24 hour periods on 9 and 15 February 2014, which resulted in a data set of 525 images. We repeated this process approximately 6 months later over another 24-hour period on 31 July in order to validate the first wave of data collection. With a similar set of themes emerging from this data set of 247 images, we decided to extend our analysis and investigate areas we had not yet covered in our data collection, such as the use of filters and geo-tagging. We conducted a third wave of data collection on 5 and 10 August, this time using Instagram’s API to collect additional meta-data including the filters used and any geo-tags associated with the collected images. This resulted in a third data set of 558 images. Due to its prominence on Instagram, in the final wave of data collection we also downloaded 739 images and related data associated with the hashtag ‘#RIP’, in order to get a comparative sense of the different kinds of images tagged by a different but ostensibly related

Table 1. #Funeral, categorization of three waves of data collection (1330 images).

People and mourning	Event and materiality	Cultural production
Selfies, individual photos (303)	Funeral event or service(88); Public funeral service(33)	Popular culture references (110)
Selfies, multiple people(71)	Landscapes(36); Religious sites and buildings (15)	Memes(154)
Groups, families, togetherness (111)	Gravestones, urns(21)	Animal deaths(32)
Deceased body(3)	Flowers(61); Other funeral-related materials (43)	Inanimate object deaths(6)
Old photos(20)	Funeral business and work(32) Funeral service cards and text(24) Music and performance(24)	Artwork(5) Montage(67) Irrelevant(71)

hashtag. Examining #RIP allowed us to compare #funeral with a hashtag also commonly associated with mourning and commemoration.

Using #funeral as the focus for our investigation largely limited our data set and our findings to the Anglophone world. There is scope for further research around the use of digital technologies in mourning practices particular to other nations, cultures, language, and religious groups through the investigation of pertinent hashtags. We did not collect photographs from private accounts for both ethical and practical reasons. We recognize that this places some limits on the generalizability of our findings.

Analysis proceeded through a process of open and axial coding to generate codes and categories using a constructivist grounded-theory methodology (Charmaz, 2000). We then sorted these images into categories based on the different social practices represented that emerged through inductive analysis (Table 1). Each photograph was placed in a single category. While most images clearly fell into a single category, there were instances of images that could be categorized in multiple ways. For example, an image of a group of people attending a funeral with flowers and a coffin behind might fit any one of four categories. In such instances we categorized the photograph based on the central foreground or focal point of the image. We discarded 71 photographs that were too vague or indistinct to categorize. Below we describe the findings of this analysis, which are grouped into three broad themes: people, materials, and culture. We then summarize our findings around the use of filters, location data, and the images tagged with #RIP.

People and mourning

Our analysis identified a diverse range of commemorative, mourning, and cultural practices occurring around the funeral hashtag on Instagram. The most prominent type of photograph labelled #funeral was ‘individual selfies’: a self-portrait, usually taken in a mirror or with the camera held at arm’s length. There were also many photographs of individuals with the subject occupying the centre foreground and largely filling the frame, but were evidently taken by somebody else. These images were often uploaded by the photographic subject themselves, not the photographer, as indicated in the comments on the photograph. From an examination of the images and associated text, hashtags, and comments, we decided that this latter group of images was substantively similar to those categorized as individual selfies, in that they shared many of the vernacular practices associated with the selfie.

Many of the #funeral photographs we categorized as selfies were associated with hash-tags such as '#likeforlike', '#sexy', '#fashion', or '#follow me' and seemed to be more about the subject's self-presentation and self-promotion than an acknowledgment of the solemnity and gravitas of funeral rites. In these images and their associated text there did not appear to be any acknowledgment of the importance of the occasion, and comments instead typically focused on the appearance of the user. However, the majority of these photographs were not taken at the actual funeral but were often taken in the bedroom, bathroom, or car. Indeed, this form on self-presentation arguably emerged from the intersection of Instagram with long-standing traditions in Western cultures requiring funeral-goers to 'dress up' in formal attire and look good for the ceremony. In contrast, a noteworthy number of selfies were more reflective. Hashtags such as '#sadday', '#nothappy', '#notsmiling', or '#sad' acknowledged the solemnity of the occasion. The text accompanying the Instagram image was also often used to reflect on or engage with the funeral. Particular selfie takers hoped that 'relatives were talking to God right now' or said that they were 'not ready to go to this funeral', and comments on these selfies often reflected the sombre tone. The discursive field of multiple hashtags, accompanying captions and comments from other people, indicates an expansive practice of communication that exceeded simple self-representation, revealing efforts to also express emotion, solidarity, or connection with others.

Another common photographic theme was the expression of family or togetherness through the sharing of photographs featuring groups of people (often family members) gathered together. There were also a number of group shots taken by one of the subjects in the photograph. These could also have been coded as selfies in that they were taken by a subject in the image, but thematically they had more in common with family or group photographs. Nearly all of both types of group shot appear to have been taken at wakes or other gatherings that followed the funeral or memorial service. The prevalence of family or group shots underlines the importance of the funeral as a social occasion. It is perhaps one of the few times when extended families and friends gather together in one place. These photographs, along with the associated comments and hashtags, appeared to be efforts to communicate and share feelings of intimacy, togetherness, family, friendship, and attachment. They often featured smiling faces, a shift away from an affect of loss or mourning. These photographs celebrated the deceased's intimate and social connections and the community drawn together by the event of their passing. Only a handful of photographs, taken at funerals with open caskets, showed an image of the deceased. However, this is unsurprising given contemporary practices of sequestration of death (Mellor & Shilling, 1993), and the decline in public viewing of the deceased (Walter, 2005).

The materiality of death

Photographs taken of the service and the interring were common, but these rarely captured individuals mourning. Instead there was a strong focus on the event and its rituals, often taken from a distance, with people present but no longer the focal point of the image. Some of these photographs highlighted the temporal unfolding of the process of the funeral, and featured images of the coffin, grave, hearses, or vehicles in the funeral procession. Another set of images highlighted the funeral as a ritualized event, by capturing the material elements of the funeral, included images of funeral service cards, clothes, or food. Frequent among these were images of funeral flowers, elaborate and colourful bouquets that typically occupied the entire frame. Only a few of these images were overtly religious.

There were very few images of headstones, urns, or plaques. We speculate that this is because of the character of the funeral hashtag. Events and activities tagged with #funeral were typically

associated with the funeral event itself, before the ashes had been received or the headstone erected.

In an interesting example of remediation, a further set of images featured screenshots of related posts or funeral announcements containing information about the time and location of the funeral. There were also images of old photographs featuring the deceased. There was also an emergent commercial element to some of these material engagements with death. A few images promoted a commercial florist and a funeral worker used #funeral to show off her new business card.

In addition to focusing on the event and the materiality of the funeral, there were also a number of photographs of landscapes as well as images of locations, places, or buildings. These images appeared to be efforts to capture and communicate the mood and sentiment of the event in a way that is more abstract than literal, often focusing on elements of the natural environment such as the sky, trees, the graveyard, or on elaborate aspects of the built environment, such as a church's architectural detail. Instrumental uses of Instagram were also represented in this category, for example posting screenshots of weather forecasts on the day of the funeral.

Memes, popular culture, and #funeral

While many of the #funeral photographs were dedicated to the funerals of family or friends, our analysis also revealed a range of other uses for the hashtag. These engagements included images highlighting the 'death' of inanimate objects, especially digital devices such as mobile phones and laptops. In addition, there were photographs commemorating the death of a pet or other animal, typically featuring burial in the earth, or in the case of pet goldfish, being flushed down the toilet. These #funeral images use the platform to express attachment to these non-humans with a mixture of sentiment, both heartfelt and ironic. They illustrate the way formal, sacred, and institutionalized rituals commingle with individualized profane, subjective, and sometimes improvised events in the platform vernacular. This use of the funeral hashtag highlights the possibilities enabled by the platform mechanics and by users' own creative engagements.

The interrelation of media forms and the flow of content across these forms were further accentuated by the prominence of memes and popular culture references that carried the funeral hashtag. Apart from individual selfies, these two categories were the most prominent. Some memes such as images with captions like 'I wear black when I exercise, it's like a funeral for my fat', were metaphorically related to funerals and commemoration. However, other memes directly engaged with wider cultures and the way these intersect with the cultural particularities of funerals. One meme stated '“I'm sorry” and “my bad” mean exactly the same thing ... unless you're at a funeral'. Another stated, 'At my funeral, when they're lowering me into the ground, I demand they play ... “Drop it like it's hot”'. Popular culture images often centred on specific references, such as Arcade Fire's *Funeral* album, in the context of people attending a live performance by the band. The album was given this title because members of the band had lost family members around the time it was recorded, and the funeral hashtag referentially connected the band's live performance to the album and then back to the funerals of their family members. Other photos directly referenced funerals (or discussions around death) on television shows (e.g. *Adventure Time*) or in books. Users also referenced particular songs they would like to be played at their funeral, and discussing various forms of speculative memorialization.

Other interesting forms of cultural production in the use of #funeral involved sharing photographic montages, which form an interesting vernacular response to grief and mourning. Montages are not native to the Instagram platform. However, users can turn to a range of editing applications to create them and then upload the completed product to Instagram. Although these processes are not technically complex, the deployment of montages allowed users to

engage in a variety of creative comparisons. Examples included the linking of the self to the deceased through the juxtaposing of a selfie with an old photo of a dead relative, linking the site of the grave to balloons released during the funeral, or providing a comprehensive set of photographs that construct a non-linear narrative of the funeral itself. These montages showed how users were able to work around the limitations of the platform and push the platform's boundaries in order to sustain specific forms of vernacular practice.

Filters, geo-tagging, and #RIP

Our final wave of data collection revealed some interesting patterns in regards to the use of Instagram's filters and locative data. While a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, we report our findings here to outline potential future research trajectories. It is notable that considering the growing significance of locative media within discourses about social media (Wilken & Goggin, 2014), only a small subset of users (6.95%) added location data when posting photographs with the funeral hashtag. This raises questions about the specific places and events where locative technologies are deployed and the extent of their prominence in vernacular practices (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2014). The platform's affordances appear to be selectively deployed, the context of use thereby shaping the platform vernacular, although it is unclear from our data why this is the case.

Filtering was also surprisingly underutilized in the photographs in our data set. While filters and Instagram seem to be inextricably linked in public discourse around the application (Hochman & Manovich, 2013), only 33% of photographs used filters, with Amaro, X-Pro II, and Valencia being the most popular. This proportion is substantially lower than the 68–81% of filtered photographs reported by Hochman and Manovich (2013). This also highlights the importance of use and context in regards to a platform's vernacular, and the extent to which users prioritize some affordances (selfies) over others (filtering and geo-tagging).

Our third wave of data collection also provided an insight into the differences between the use of #funeral and #RIP. The RIP hashtag presented a much different picture of commemoration to #funeral. Photos of dead celebrities and old photographs of deceased friends and family were prominent, marking #RIP as a space for performing commemoration and memorial work. This stood in dramatic contrast to #funeral, which was centred on and around the funeral event, moments of self-reflection, and pictures of family togetherness. Future work could consider and compare these different temporalities of death and how various hashtags are mobilized around them.

Discussion: Instagram practices around death, mourning, and commemoration

Instagram differs from other digital platforms that have previously been the focus of research on social media and death. The platform is oriented around photo and video-sharing rather than purely textual comments, and while some features such as tagging, liking, and commenting are common, other available features such as applying image filters are apparently less so. In turn, the ways in which the platform is put to use differ substantially from other social media. Other SNS, such as Facebook, have profiles and walls belonging to the deceased, which provide a locus for 'networked publics' (Varnelis, 2008) to converge and interact. These profiles can also be memorialized after death, helping to create a shared and sacred place for mourning and commemoration. In contrast, Instagram has no convergent or shared spaces dedicated to the deceased where the bereaved can congregate. Instagram users are restricted to posting materials to their own profile; a space others cannot directly post to, although their followers can like and comment on shared photographs. Connections to other, collectively defined networks of users are made through #hashtags and @user labelling conventions. In this way, the places for

mourning on Instagram are found in conversations defined by consensus around hashtags such as ‘#fuckcancer’, rather than around a profile of the deceased, and as a result they are more decentred and far more rhizomatic than the mourning conversations found on other social media. The platform vernacular of Instagram is emergent in its network links (or edges), whereas the platform vernacular of Facebook is emergent in its network nodes.

The implications of this platform architecture for emerging cultural practices of mourning and commemoration can be found in the ways different users engage with #funeral. Of particular note are the diverse and sometimes competing content connected to the hashtag, and in turn, how #funeral and hashtags more generally are understood in mediating interaction. The meaning of ‘funeral’ as a particular lived experience, as a culturally determined ritual, and as a meme, is actively shaped, asserted, and contested each time the #funeral tag is applied to an image. In the following discussion we address some of the more prominent themes that emerged from our analysis of the platform vernacular around #funeral: sociality; memory and memorialization; death and technology.

Sociality: communicative presencing, and networked publics

The most frequent category of #funeral photographs was the selfie. We are aware of recent controversy and media attention surrounding ‘selfies at funerals’ (Fiefer, 2013) and, more generally, their exemplification of supposedly narcissistic and insincere youthful practices (Gibbs et al., 2014). Many of the photographs we categorized as selfies were associated with self-referencing and self-promoting hash-tags, and seemed to be concerned with the presentation of the self rather than acknowledging the gravitas of the funeral. But other photographs were often captioned with comments about trying to maintain a brave face, or composure, often for the benefit of others, which suggests an awareness of the profound emotional charge of funerals and a tension between inner affect and external presentation. Family photographs and group shots also seemed to be efforts to express togetherness, and were typically accompanied by respectful hash-tags that did not have an expectation of strangers searching and liking personal photographs (as ‘#sexy’ or ‘#likeforlike’ might). Rather, the associated comments and the compositions of these photographs typically highlighted shared mourning and sadness, or the reunion of extended family, or the gathering of friends. These images of gathered groups taken at funerals also regularly featured smiling faces, and appeared to reflect the wider cultural shift from funeral rituals that mourn the dead, to rituals that celebrate the life of the deceased and the social networks drawn together by the funeral.

We therefore suggest that not all selfies and happy group shots can be interpreted as merely being concerned with the profane presentation of self. Many appear to be an attempt to share the experience of grief, placing emphasis on the significance of the context in which the image was taken through the message in the accompanying text, rather than the significance of the people in the photograph. For these people, we suggest that the use of #funeral is drawing on, and constrained by, the architecture and rhetorical style of Instagram use: a smart-phone platform that allows users to instigate a conversation with their social network by sharing photographs. This use of Instagram demonstrates a tension between the mundane ubiquity and profane casualness of a photo-sharing vernacular that is normatively self-centred, and expectations about personal conduct in a ritual with a focus on the deceased, and vestiges of formality that remain strong, despite the ritual’s increasing deinstitutionalization.

In the context of this tension, we argue that the funeral hashtag is not self-centring, but is a form of ‘presencing’ (Richardson & Wilken, 2012), which allow users to draw on recognized tropes in order to reposition their funeral experience among their wider network of friends, and concomitantly, to reposition their wider network in relation to the funeral. Following Van

Dijck (2008), we argue that the act of sharing photographs associated with funerals through Instagram largely serves a communicative function. We contend that the central aim of sharing these images is to signify presence, and to communicate an important context and affective situation to a wider social network. Contemporary funerals are social experiences for those who are present, and it is unsurprising that mourners are also seeking a sense of proximity, connection, and co-presence with friends, family, and acquaintances that may not be present. These photographs are, in many ways, intended to be an ephemeral and creative forms of live communication that are part of the ongoing streams of social intercourse for the people involved. These images are not so much presentations of self, but can be understood as part of an ongoing networked conversation extending the subjectivity of the social ritual from those present to those not present, through the particular vernacular of the Instagram platform. Photo-sharing through Instagram can be seen as part of a broader shift in commemorative and memorialization practices away from formal and institutionalized rituals that are sequestered from daily life and mundane practices, to practices that are more informal and personalized, and deploy routine vernacular rituals, such as re-presencing the funeral via Instagram.

Memory and memorialization: death photography and photographs as memory

The association between photography and the dead is as old as photography itself. In the late nineteenth century, following the invention of the daguerreotype, post-mortem photography was a not uncommon practice in which the recently deceased were arranged in ‘still life-like presence’ and ‘displayed within spaces occupied by the living’ (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, pp. 145–146). This practice allowed people to ‘memorialize persons at the final stage of life’ (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 144); photographs of the dead were displayed prominently in the parlour, making the images ‘visible to both family members and visitors to private houses’ (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 146). However, for reasons Hallam and Hockey (2001) explore, these practices slowly changed and by the mid-twentieth century the dead body was largely hidden, both literally and in photographs, and images of the living person became the locus of attention in the material production of family memory.

The photo-sharing practices we have identified suggest a continuing and changing relationship between death and photography. The prevalence of individual portraits, group images, and images of funeral rituals and funeral materials indicates a shift in the vernacular uses of photography associated with death. No longer do we simply remember the deceased in death or in life; instead we also visually communicate the presence of the situated self in relation to the funeral to a wider social network. Group photographs and photographs of the material culture of funerals record and situate the event for a remote audience, and situate the remote audience at the event. The camera-phone enables a form of intimate co-presence amongst friends and the particular affordances of the Instagram platform makes this form of presencing increasingly networked and visible. Through this platform vernacular, one can readily position oneself in a context that is subjectively and socially significant, and mobilize that presence and that significance across time and space through social media networks.

Instagram and similar photo-sharing social media platforms thus form part of more general changes in the visual tradition associated with photography and the dead. The networked publics of social media are a much wider and more easily accessible audience than was available to mourners during much of the twentieth century. The activity associated with #funeral continues historic shifts in the wider photographic traditions associated with death. It also contributes to the reversal of the trend towards privacy of mourning and sequestration of the dead more generally. Indeed, the wide public display of these photographs – either to a particular networked public using a private account or to the public at large using a public Instagram account – suggests

that these practices are once again prioritizing public and semi-public displays of mourning rites that were largely kept private and unseen in the latter half of the last century. These photo-sharing practices hark back to an earlier time when mourning was a public and communal affair.

The platform vernacular of Instagram has only recently become possible through the spread of networked cameras that assemble wireless internet connections, mobile and camera-phone hardware, and image-sharing software platforms. The networked camera allows a platform vernacular of instantaneous recording and sharing. This immediacy and the reach of networked presencing perform a communicative function that diverges from the historical use of memorial photography for remembrance or reflection. Yet, rather than erasing photography's commemorative function, photo-sharing continues to play a role in memory and memorializing. The evocative photographs on the family mantelpiece are now the evocative photographs on the family networks. Capturing the event, and the self at the event, brings the event to the presence of others, and preserves the funeral as an episode within an individual's various shared media streams.

For example, Instagram photography is immediate, routine, deskilled and casual, in contrast to earlier photographic platforms that required more deliberate and formal image construction. But perhaps the most significant shift relates to the network affordance of the Instagram platform. The role of the photograph as a prosthetic devices mediating memory within personal, family, or private contexts reaches out to situations that are increasingly public and collective. This 'distributed storage' of photographs renders private images as public property: 'personal "live" pictures sent around through the internet may remain there for life, turning up in unforeseen contexts, reframed and repurposed' (Van Dijck, 2008, pp. 14–15). In this sense, Instagram is more selfless than self-centred, in that an Instagram image is taken on behalf of others, in order to be distributed to others, whereas a conventional photograph is not necessarily distributed, and may exist by the photographer, for the photographer.

Death and technology: augmented funerals and informal mourning

The use of Instagram in and around funerals can also be linked to socioeconomic and cultural changes that have seen many activities moving from the domestic economy to the market economy. In the market economy, firms within the funeral industry are 'enthusiastically embracing the technologies and financial instruments that make possible everything from niche marketing and branding to pre-payment and credit financing' (Sanders, 2009, p. 452), including service offerings such as 'internet memorials, scrapbooks, DVD tributes, bracelet charms, T-shirts, plaques, and eating and writing utensils' (Sanders, 2009, p. 456). However, the ongoing extension of technologies and products into the realm of death, from daguerreotypes to DVD tributes, is not simply an effect of commercial initiatives. The increasing use of digital media within funerals is driven by consumers as well as industry, with families of the deceased and the deceased themselves planning funerals around the deployment of various media and related technological forms (Garces-Foley & Holcomb, 2005).

Contemporary funerals in the Anglophone world regularly feature PowerPoint photo presentations; some funeral directors and crematoriums now offer video streaming for friends and family who cannot attend in person; graves can be linked to memorial websites through quick response codes inscribed on the gravestones themselves (Nansen, Arnold, Gibbs, & Kohn, 2014). It has also become common practice to play popular music at funerals, in contrast to sacred music, and funerals often include other informal, idiosyncratic, and personalized rituals, such as placing personally significant artefacts on the coffin. Many of the practices identified through an examination of #funeral echo and augment these contemporary funeral practices, rather than being at odds with them. Photo-sharing on Instagram is an informal, personal, idiosyncratic, and highly social practice that is readily appropriated as funerals shift from institutionalized

and formal rituals to vernacular events, with individuals and their families increasingly engaging in forms of informal and personalized memorialization.

In the context of the widespread deployment of media at funerals, and the move to informality and personalization, it is completely understandable, if not mundane and banal, that a funeral attendee would seek to engage with a funeral through their Instagram account. Indeed, Instagram's scope for a wide range of memorial responses, from creative forms of photography to quick group shots – each of which can be immediately distributed – highlights the way the platform provides a wide range of important affordances for funeral-goers.

Conclusion

Photographs shared through platforms such as Instagram, Flickr, and SnapChat have become an important online 'social currency' (Rainie, Brenner, & Purchell, 2012) and photo-sharing practices are becoming increasingly common (Duggan, 2013). In this paper, we have explored photo-sharing associated with funerals through an examination of the use of #funeral on Instagram and considered the implications of these practices. We found that Instagram is used while in the moment, to mark the funeral event, location, and experience, and as such its use acts as a form of presencing, communicating a person's emotional circumstances and affective context. Photographs are also used to record and share important material elements, rituals, and the gathering together of friends and family at the funeral. We have argued that the central aim of sharing funeral images is to signify and communicate presence, and thus share an important event and affective experience to a wider social network. Contemporary funerals are social experiences, and mourners are sharing photographs to create a sense of proximity, connection, and co-presence with friends, family, and acquaintances that may not be present.

Future research needs to look beyond Facebook and attend to the variety of social media and other technologies being mobilized in practices associated with death, grieving, and commemoration. Future research might also make further use of platform APIs in order to explore similar hashtags and the relationships between them, as well as the role and function, if any, of locative technologies and image filtering in these practices. There is also a need to attend to the ways in which various social media platforms interact within the complexity of contemporary media ecologies, and how these cross-platform practices intersect with, support, and appropriate traditional commemorative and funerary practices.

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