

Affective positioning in hyper-mourning: sharers as tellers, co-tellers and witnesses

Korina Giaxoglou^{1*}

¹ *The Open University, UK, School of Languages and Applied Linguistics*

* *Korina.Giaxoglou@open.ac.uk*

Abstract In an age of social and digital media, users' engagements with (social) media related to death, dying and mourning vary widely across different social and cultural contexts and changing platforms. Based on the discussion of selected examples, I illustrate how users' social media engagements related to death, dying and mourning vary, depending on the narrative positions that sharers take up as *tellers*, *co-tellers* or *witnesses* to shared stories. As I will argue, the potential and limits of such engagements can be better understood in the context of three over-arching, dynamic modes of practices of hyper-mourning, namely *entrepreneurial*, *connective* and *activist*. These are associated with distinct types of *affective positions* for sharers, audiences and displays of affect, forming the basis for projecting participants' identity and affective claims. The article shows how the way we die and mourn is extended as much as limited by social and digital media story affordances and norms.

Keywords digital death, online memorialisation, hyper-mourning, small stories, affective positioning.

INTRODUCTION

Users' engagements with media vary widely across different social and cultural contexts and changing platforms. In public discussions, however, the diversity of users' situated practices often gets lost in generalisations that assert either the positive or negative impact of digital technologies on social life. Similar assertions are invoked in the case of public discussions around uses of social and digital media relating to death, dying and mourning. Some see in these new technologies a positive force that can promote the visibility of otherwise 'taboo' topics; others focus on the risks they entail, such as the erosion of privacy, the loss of control over the grieving and memorialisation of loved ones and the inauthentic (over)sharing of emotion.

To move beyond such general assertions, more nuanced understandings of social and digital media user engagements with death and mourning are needed. Such understandings call for updated approaches to narrativity, affect and relationality, as showcased, for example, in research by Stage (2017) on cancer narratives online, which highlights connections between metrics and self-measurement practices and the production, sharing and value of stories. In the broader interdisciplinary field of death online, however, notions of narrative and affect often remain under-theorised.

As this article argues, navigating the diverse and dynamic landscape of digital death can benefit from more systematic examinations of the story form(at)s, norms and associated modes of affective participation emerging in digital and social media. This is illustrated in the following discussion of examples from different contexts: (i) a YouTube cancer vlog, (ii) a Facebook memorial for a young adult created by his friends (iii) reactions to the death of a popular Greek singer on his Facebook official fan page (iv) Twitter reactions to the Manchester Arena attack and (v) Twitter reactions to the death of three-year-old Syrian refugee, Alan Kurdi. By illustrating typical modes of enacting mourning and memorialisation, the present article shows how users draw upon different types of emerging story form(at)s to affirm their affective engagement with disruptive moments or events and to negotiate specific forms of (para)social relationships.

Parasocial relationships encompass forms of presumed intimacy between users and members of their networked interactions (Rojek, 2016). The concept of para-social interaction was initially developed by Horton and Wohl (1956) in the context of the rise of national network television in North America; it captured the phenomenon of audiences' close emotional identification with media figures, such as news readers, anchor men, chat show hosts, weather men, and it arguably altered the balance of emotional attachment with others. As Rojek (2016) notes, in the age of social and digital media the formation of such close emotional relationships has extended to a much wider range of people that users never directly encounter. This extension has called for the broadening of the scale of the concept as well as challenging its common association with negative traits, such as loneliness, emotional instability and lower levels of intelligence (Liebers and Schramm, 2019).

Research in digital contexts has so far contributed to depathologising parasocial phenomena, highlighting their association with effects of mediatisation and socially legitimate ways of relating affectively to strangers in specific contexts (Marwick and boyd, 2011). This is illustrated in emerging RIP-ing practices: as Klastrop (2015) shows, RIP pages drive strangers to post RIP messages, echoing vernacular practices of paying tribute to the dead in public roadside memorials or other kinds of spontaneous shrines and memorials. In both digital and physical public spaces, acts of *parasocial mourning*, i.e. mourning for people one has never directly met or known, are considered to be legitimate - and even socially expected - forms of paying respect to the dead. More recently, Matley's (2020) examination of reactions to the death of singer David Bowie has illustrated the way parasociality on Instagram is transformed into *multisociality* (Hills, 2016), involving not just interactions between the fan and the celebrity, but also among the fan and multiple other fans.

The present article first outlines the key concepts, theoretical principles and heuristics that underlie the approach used in the analysis of examples. The discussion of the examples is organised around a proposed typology of social media mourning that highlights connections of ways of telling with modes of affective engagement. The article contributes to the calibration of notions of narrativity, affect and sociality in social and digital media and engages with discussions about the extent to which such social-media afforded engagements are changing social practices of death and mourning.

SMALL STORIES AND AFFECTIVE POSITIONING

The present approach to social media mourning is shaped by concepts and heuristics developed in the study of small stories and positioning. As a research framework, small stories emerged in an attempt to capture analytically "the messier business of living and telling" (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 154). This type of stories had been neglected in studies of narrative which privileged highly monologic, tellable stories, often elicited in the context of interviews, and hence relatively detached from surrounding talk and activity.

Small stories are understood as situated, social practices embedded in other practices. They have been defined 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, p. 148). As a heuristic for analysis, small stories call attention to a much wide gamut of tellings that show a narrative orientation to the world and are often articulated in a fragmented and open-ended manner with unclear start and endpoints (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012).

The small stories framework fosters a widened understanding of narrativity as sequenced or distributed (especially in online interaction), emergent and dependent on (changing) participant roles, transposed, (re)shaped and recycled across time and space in different contexts. Research in small stories in social and digital environments has shown how small storytelling has become the dominant way of sharing, with tellers privileging the here-and-now in multi-semiotic *breaking news*

stories co-constructed with other tellers and distributed across media platforms and audiences. These features account for their apparent fragmentation. In her research, for example, Page (2018) has shown how small stories online develop as *shared stories*, i.e. as part of larger, public interactions relating to large-scale matters of public concern, prompting different types of participation. According to Georgakopoulou (2017), users' story engagements online indicate a narrative orientation to the world described as acts of *narrative stancetaking*, that is as activities that are offered or taken up as stories and that place participants in positions of *tellers-recipients-(co)tellers*.

Small story analysis is useful for relating story forms and practices to different kinds of positioning made available for tellers and their audience(s), moving beyond the content ('what?') of the stories to the way narrative identities are "invoked and traced both as roles and types of participation and as ways of telling and participation" (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p.152). More recent work has also drawn attention to small storying on social media as acts of *affective positioning*, i.e. tellers' negotiation of their distance from or proximity to the events at the centre of their narrative orientation, the audience(s), and their performances of self and emotion (Giaxoglou, 2021).

In this article, I bring together heuristics of small stories and affective positioning to explore key aspects of storying, participation and multisociality in practices of *hyper-mourning* (Giaxoglou, 2020). The term *hyper-mourning* captures the conditioning of practices of death, mourning and memorialisation by:

- (i) the hyper-connection features of social media and social media logic, namely the digital affordances of *persistence, visibility, spreadability* and *searchability* (boyd, 2010)
- (ii) the frequent evaluations of such practices in media and public discourse as hyperbolic or excessive.

CASES, HEURISTICS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The cases discussed have been drawn from the author's earlier and current research. They have been selected on account of the high levels of visibility and audience reactions that specific types of user engagements have accrued. They are brought together to illustrate the different ways users engage in acts of small storying that position them and others as *tellers, (co)tellers* or *witnesses* at the same time as allowing them to perform and negotiate their own (and others') identities and affective involvement.

The analyses have been conducted in iterative cycles of zooming in and out of collections of posts and reactions to them, considering the social media contexts in which these instances of sharing are produced, and guided by the following questions:

- (i) What events and moments does a sharer select as amenable to storying and sharing in specific social and digital contexts? How does the sharer denote their narrative orientation to these selected events and moments?
- (ii) How does the sharer orient to their audience(s)? To what extent (and how) does the audience react to the sharer's orientations?
- (iii) What kinds of affective and identity claims are indexed in the sharer's posts? How are these claims embedded in platform norms and broader ideologies of sharing?

Based on the examination of new empirical data alongside examples explored more extensively in the author's previous work, this article revises a previously proposed typology of hyper-mourning practices which included the following five types: *participatory, motivational, connective, cosmopolitan* and *rebellious* types (Giaxoglou, 2020). It puts forward, instead, a more economical typology that includes the following main types: *entrepreneurial, connective*, and *activist* presented in the remainder of this article.

ENTREPRENEURIAL HYPER-MOURNING: SHARERS AS TELLERS

Entrepreneurial hyper-mourning encompasses users' social media practices, which are oriented to increasing visibility for users and engaging audiences, often around stories of illness. Stage (2017) has provided detailed analyses of this type of user engagement in the context of what he has termed *entrepreneurial cancer narratives*. He has shown how illness is mobilised for producing various forms of economic and social value, stimulating large-scale affective participation of publics.

This type of narrative orientation has been developing in video blogs (aka vlogs) on platforms like YouTube as well as image-based platforms like Instagram, where self-commodification is promoted as an integral part of self-presentation (Raun et al. 2018). On YouTube, in particular, users are encouraged to channel their creativity into self-branding and entrepreneurship toward audience growth and potentially, earnings (see YouTube Academy). Alongside the broadcasting of everyday experiences, the stories of young adults disrupted by illness have been gaining a following.

An example of this mode of storying is the vlog of Charlotte Eades, a teenager from Brighton, who was diagnosed with a rare form of glioblastoma when she was 16. Charlotte went on to launch her video blog two years after her diagnosis, in June 2014, envisaging this as her platform for inspiring others, before eventually dying from this rare form of cancer. Since then, her vlog has turned into a site of mourning maintained by her mother as well as a platform for promoting a charity created in her name to support research in the rare form of cancer that claimed her life. Charlotte Eades' emotionally powerful vlog exemplifies a mode of storying everyday experience with and despite illness through visual live-storying of regularly broadcasted 'talking-to-you', short videos between three and seven minutes-long, shot in her house - often her bedroom.

On her vlog Charlotte documents her life across three main 'big story' sections that have been identified based on the study of all her posts (Giaxoglou, 2021). These sections cover the consecutive stages of her illness experience, from the initial period after the diagnosis to the growth of her tumour and ultimately, to the final days of her life. Across these different phases, the vlogger selects significant moments, thoughts, feelings and medical updates and cumulatively makes up the story of her everyday life with and despite illness.

Initially, she negotiates and marks her affective distance from the illness by turning her - and her viewers' - attention, for example, to the disruption the illness has brought on her everyday life as a 'normal' teenager, leaving out the details of her illness experience, e.g. her symptoms or medication routines. In other video posts, for instance, in the series of videos where she offers tips for living life with cancer (e.g. selecting a wig, using cosmetics and socialising), she's seen to inject a life-affirming stance on what's happening to her and offer support and inspiration to others going through a similar experience.

A key feature of Charlotte's vlogging practice is the systematic construction of proximity to her viewers through the use of openings (e.g. 'Hi everybody') and closings to each video (e.g. 'thank you for watching') as well as through the staging of authenticity. This staging is evident in her commonly used references to the impromptu nature of her videos as well as in the selection of the intimate space of her bedroom as the space she's talking from, inviting networked viewers to peek into her 'real' life and her unique experience, thoughts and feelings.

Although the vlogger projects an overall emotionally contained persona, her emotional investment in the telling can be observed in some videos in the paralinguistic and embodied cues, including pauses, audible in-breaths at the start of utterances, elongated sounds, head movements and gaze shifts away from the screen. This leaking of affect on screen strengthens the emotional authenticity of the sharing and shows the vlogger's negotiation of her affective positioning in-the-moment, avoiding over-sharing that could potentially distance her viewers. Across her videos, the vlogger takes up positions of a teller advising and supporting her viewers

instead of portraying herself as in need of support. Her affective performance of strength and vulnerability becomes the ground for her construction as an inspirational young adult and social media influencer.

The comments underneath the video largely affirm the positioning the vlogger constructs for herself and her viewers, with members of the audience participating to her story to validate her experience as meaningful, relevant and inspirational for them (e.g. "I've added this video to my favorites, so I can watch it on my bad days", "You are inspiring"). Her videos continue to be viewed and commented on even after her passing (e.g. "You really were wise").

The mode of assuming the position of a *teller*, illustrated in the vlog of Charlotte, points to uses of YouTube video broadcasting by amateur-professional vloggers as an act of self-empowerment and self-care, where illness and emotional vulnerability are staged through affect-laden performances of authenticity used as "vectors for relatability" (Raun et al. 2018, p. 106). Such acts also point to users' orientation to social media as vital media for projecting positive or life-affirming approaches to illness (Stage et al. 2020) that fit in constructions of vloggers' influencer persona.

The mobilisation of audiences' affective engagement around tragic real stories also characterises modes of hyper-mourning where sharers take up the role of co-teller. This mode, described here as *connective*, can be associated with different types of affective positioning, discussed in more detail in the next section.

CONNECTIVE HYPER-MOURNING

In connective hyper-mourning tellers connect with others as *co-tellers* in different ways, either within an existing community of mourners, for example friends and people who had known the deceased or within *ad hoc* communities of mourners, as in the case of celebrity death or reactions to attacks. This section looks at the key aspects of this mode as articulated in these different types of loss.

FACEBOOK MEMORIALS FOR THE LOSS OF A FRIEND: SHARERS AS CO-TELLERS

In the case of online memorials in Facebook groups or pages designed as lasting tribute sites afford mourners the opportunity to be an integral part of memorialisation as co-tellers of the deceased's life. Such practices of hyper-mourning are connected to Facebook's platform's sharing design via *wall events* on the page's timeline. Androutsopoulos (2013) has described wall events as those initiating contributions which can include linguistic, pictorial or multimedia content, such as photos, embedded videos, location tags and prompts alongside the responding contributions by "friends" and/or the initiator in the comment space under a status update (these can also include embedded pictorial, graphic or multimedia content). Wall events are made up of a sequence of posts appearing in reverse temporal order and accumulating below the initiating post. Given that they constitute the main affordance for users' sharing on the platform, they are also useful as units of analysis.

The analysis of wall events in the case of a memorial created by a group of classmates in tribute to a young adult who lost his life in a car accident in 2012 has shown how sharing small stories of mourning and remembrance on the page connects existing communities of mourners. On this Facebook group wall, memorialisation is temporally extended by posting activity organised around important dates, for example, the birthday and anniversary of the friend's death (aka deathversary). Posts are directly addressed to the dead person and include snapshots and updates from the sharer's everyday life in *habitual small stories of remembrance* that contribute to a sense of re-integrating and maintaining the dead as an absent co-present.

By posting, sharers participate as *co-tellers* in the collective weaving of their friend's life story and identity, creating a public record of grief and remembrance that helps them to construct and maintain continuing bonds with their friend. This type of hyper-mourning remediates existing practices of bereavement and remembrance, such as talking to the dead in a graveyard or through prayers, extending the social, temporal and spatial domain of such practices (Brubaker et al. 2013). Digital memorials like these also afford users increased opportunities for hyper-personalizing individual grief through acts of affective positioning that place them in an intimate relationship to the dead as well as to other networked mourners, while also allowing the public inscription of their grieving self over time. Such acts of affective positioning contribute to the crafting of identities of the 'good' friend and dutiful mourner.

Similar positionings of the dutiful mourner are performed in the case of reactions to celebrity death, where such positionings are coupled with positionings as a dedicated fan, merging acts of mourning with broader fandom-based practices, discussed in the next sub-section.

FACEBOOK MEMORIALS FOR THE DEATH OF CELEBRITIES: SHARERS AS CO-TELLERS

Examples of celebrity death in Northern Europe have received extensive scholarly attention, as for example the case of the death of Michael Jackson (1959-2009) (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010), Paul Walker (1973-2013) (Klastrup, 2018) or David Bowie (1947-2016) (Matley, 2020). Less attention has been paid, however, to the way connective modes of hyper-mourning are being locally instantiated alongside fandom-based mourning around the world. The following example of Facebook reactions to the death of Greek singer Pantelis Pantelidis provides a glimpse into the emergence of these practices in South European-Greek contexts, which have been predominantly associated with 'traditional' death and mourning rituals (Danforth and Tsiaras, 1983).

Pantelis Pantelidis (1983-2016) was a self-taught musician who became a popular and media sensation by through his music videos on YouTube. His sudden death in a car accident in Athens on 18 February 2016 at the peak of his popularity turned into a media and social media event with tributes and physical memorials put up at the place of the accident and social media posts pouring in users' profiles as well as his official Facebook page (Facebook *PANTELIS PANTELIDIS - official*).

On Pantelidis' Facebook page the singer's fans posts have been contributing to the singer's memorialisation in ways that extend and affirm his popularity. Similarly to Facebook memorials for the loss of a friend, calendar important dates, such as birthdays or deathversaries, are used as prompts for the fans' posting and engaging on the page. Posts predominantly provide assessments of the singer and his songs or include links to songs and evocative lyrics (e.g. "Where could you be now?"), assuming shared knowledge of his musical production as well as affirming a sense of shared mourning about his loss.

The analysis of the most popular wall events pointed to two main modes of small storytelling on the Page: (i) *acts of narrative stancetaking* organised around the sharer's here-and-now and (ii) *shared stories* around known references, such as song titles and lyrics from Pantelidis' most popular songs.

Acts of narrative stancetaking are illustrated in posts shared on calendar important dates, such as the birthday of the singer, e.g. "Σαν σήμερα γεννήθηκες φίτσο!!! Σε αγαπάμε όλοι και μας λείπεις!!!", trans.: *On this day you were born buddy!!! We all love you and we're missing you!!!*. Through such posts, sharers enter into an imagined dialogue with the dead singer directly addressing him ("on this day you were born buddy!!!"), but also position themselves as members of the broader fan community mourning for the loss of the singer ("we all love you and we're missing you!!!"). Through these acts of narrative stancetaking, the singer's fan negotiate multisocial relations on the page, orienting both to the celebrity figure as a present absent and to members of the networked fans.

Shared stories on this page are typically articulated elliptically through the sharing of song titles or lyrics, allowing members of the group to affirm their commitment to the memorialisation of the singer using the singer's own words and voice (e.g. "Ήταν και εκείνο το χαμόγελο που δεν ξεχνιέται", trans. *And there's that smile of yours that can't be forgotten*). This type of shared stories is a preferred mode of sharing on the page, drawing its symbolic power on the multiple signification of song lyrics as prompts for the continuing celebration of the singer's production, a bonding icon for his fans as well as an affective positioning resource for denoting one's sense of affective proximity to the singer. His song lyrics are, thus, mobilised to tell the story of the singer and at the same time contribute to his public memorialisation. In that sense, the popular songs turn into a polyvalent site of remembrance that affords multisocial interactions among followers on the Page.

Posts shared as acts of narrative stancetaking or shared stories prompt followers' reactions making up memorial wall events. Typically, these reactions are personalised evaluations expressing the sharer's adoration for the singer (e.g. "Ουρανέ μου, αστέρι μ χρυσό; my sky, my golden star"), often accompanied by heart emojis used to accentuate the affective tone of the message. This mode of affective participation which has been found to be typical in social media interactions has been described as *ritual appreciation* (Georgakopoulou, 2016). Through acts of ritual appreciation, sharers signal their alignment to the singer but also to other sharers who have posted similar reactions, thus enacting multisocial relations in the comments space, too.

Hyper-mourning on the Facebook page of Pantelis Pantelidis taking the form of acts of narrative stancetaking and shared stories contributes to the spectacularisation of the singer's death and the spatial and temporal extension of the mourning for him by his fans. The platform's wall event design affords fans with increased opportunities to participate to his memorialisation in ways that increase their own visibility, allowing them to maintain real and imagined bonds with the singer and other fans. These multisocial interactions echo practices of memorialising a friend through the construction of affective positions of proximity to the singer and other fans. These positions form the basis for projecting their identities as dutiful mourners and devoted fans, thus merging practices of personal mourning and memorialisation with fan-based practices.

There is a third type of connective hyper-mourning in which sharers are positioned as witnesses, connecting in an *ad hoc* way to individuals and groups of people they don't necessarily already know. This type is discussed in the next section.

TWITTER REACTIONS TO MEDIATIZED DEATH: SHARERS AS WITNESSES

Connective hyper-mourning in the wake of mass death, attacks and tragedies encompasses cases of sharing immediate, intense emotional reactions to mediatized public death of high symbolic value (Sumiala, 2014). These reactions are often articulated via hashtags, as in the case of reactions attacks at the offices of Charlie Hebdo in January 2015, which led to the emergence of hashtag-slogan "JeSuisCharlie".

Hashtag mourning has become an expected and highly conventionalised reaction to global events and attacks. This practice contributes to the amplification of the affect and visibility of shared stories about a specific event. In this mode of hyper-mourning, death is mediatised at a relative distance from the sharer, with a predominant orientation to the scaling-up of moments of mourning and solidarity through one-off posts that contribute to the shaping of shared stories of public death. The interactivity afforded on Twitter's micro-blogging platform is distributed across different participants and topics, rather than taking the form of direct interaction with the dead or other sharers. This distributed small-storying makes available to users positions of *ambient affiliation* (Zappavigna, 2011) organized around the display of solidarity and shared values and stances.

The example used to illustrate this type is hyper-mourning and memorialisation activity is the case of Twitter posts, one year after the attack at the Manchester arena, at the conclusion of a performance by American star Ariana Grande on May 22, 2017 when 22 people were killed and 59 injured. Memorial tweets posted on this calendar-important date are part of what has been termed *ecstatic sharing*, i.e. sharing in the instantaneous proximity of the here-and-now, in this case the memorial here-and-now (Giaxoglou, 2018). In this mode of sharing, posting a tweet – tribute to the victims of the attack and connecting with other networked users via the use of popular hashtags emerges as a needed response to the event and a responsibility felt by people irrespective of their own geographical proximity to the victims or Manchester. The analysis of this type of memorial activity indicates that the tributes are symmetrical linguistically, stylistically, and narratively featuring formulaic words, expressions and hashtags.

Users engaging with this memorial activity mark the memorial time (#oneyearsincethe attack) along with the hashtag that trended at the time of the actual events (#prayformanchester). Their sharing signals the users' affective proximity to the city of Manchester as a community and the victims, even though at relative distance, as the use of third person plural, 'them' indicates (e.g. today we pray for them #PrayforManchester).

From a narrative point of view, these tweets illustrate the reduction or denarrativization process that shared stories widely circulating in the public realm undergo over time turning into 'reference' stories, which assume not only shared knowledge of the events, but also shared evaluation of the event as a tragic event that should be remembered. By invoking this memorial timespace frame summed up in the hashtag, sharers signal their affective proximity to the victims and/or their families focusing on the sharer's here-and-now (e.g. 'Missing you guys more than you know').

Others, however, invoke the memorial timespace frame to claim their affective proximity to the singer, Ariana Grande, even though she survived the attack, identifying with the traumatic experience she experienced (e.g. "@ArianaGrande **I want to hug you** too sweetie, I want to send **to you** all the love that I have ...love **you** and #prayformanchester).

In addition, there are cases where sharers engage in acts of multisociality, orienting to Ariana Grande (and her fans, called the *Arianators*), the victims, and local communities of grieving. For this kind of sharing, users draw on multimodal resources specific to this event, such as the Ariana-styled ribbon or the iconic bunny ears from the artwork on her album 'Dangerous Woman', which emerged as a memorial bonding icon for her fans.

There are also tributes which focus on what the individual sharer is feeling, thinking and remembering on the memorial day, showing some sharers' predominant orientation to the performance of their affective self. In this type of tributes, sharers use the memorial timespace as a frame for staging their personalized mourning, drawing on mourning-related emotional vocabulary (e.g. **my heart hurts**, **I was broken**, **I'm crying**). These acts of narrative stancetaking index affective positions of empathy with the victims, allowing sharers to project identity claims as entitled participants to this memorialisation event. Related acts of narrative stancetaking are those in which sharers label (and list) particular kinds of emotions and affects (e.g. 'solidarity', 'unity', 'strength') appealing to a collective (local and national) sense of affectivity and belonging (e.g. "As a country we stand **united!** RIP").

Participants to this highly mediatised death event online index (i) their proximity to a specific death event and the dead, even if at a distance, (ii) their proximity to unknown audiences as solidary co-witnesses of a tragedy 'at home' and (iii) their alignment with typical affect-based displays of sadness, shock and outrage. Through these acts of affective positioning users construct their identities as champions of (locally) shared values or as Arianators, i.e. engaged members of Ariana Grande's fangroup.

Sharing formulaic posts and hashtags marks the plurality of virtual bodies in a form of assembly (Butler, 2018). The connection of such sharing, however, to political claims is limited, as users' sharing is predominantly oriented to constructions of an ambient sense of solidarity and community feeling, including Ariana's fan communities. The ways in which memorialisation connects more or less loosely to political claims giving rise to a distinct mode of hyper-mourning is discussed in the next section.

ACTIVIST HYPER-MOURNING: SHARERS AS TELLERS, CO-TELLERS AND WITNESSES

Activist modes of hyper-mourning capitalise on the power of the emotionality of grief including outrage and anger to call and enact change. There are, arguably, two types of this mode, depending on whether users' media practices bring together mourners as part of a *social moment* or a *social movement*. This distinction broadly resonates with Bennett and Segerberg's (2012, p.751) distinction between *connective* and *collective* action. As they note, connective action is based on the formation of action networks organised around personalised communication and driven by technologies of communication and sharing; collective action refers to the kind of action that places greater demands on individuals to share common identifications or political claims and make more difficult choices, often relying on high levels of formal organisations. For the purposes of the present discussion, the focus is on the kind of action logic that drives cases of mobilising mourning as part of wider social issues and the specific kinds of affective positioning that become associated with such action.

The bringing together of mourners as part of a social moment is akin to connective action logic. An example of this is the case of public mourning and outrage in the wake of the death of three-year-old Alan Kurdi on September 2, 2015. The images from the scene of the boy's drowning in Bodrum, shared by Peter Bouckaert from Human Rights Watch on Twitter, quickly became a viral breaking news story connected to hashtags either unique to this event e.g. #kiyiyavuranisanlik (trans. humanity washed ashore), #JeSuisAylan or existing hashtags related to the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015. The image became an emblem of the unacceptable death of refugee children, leading users around the world to reshare the image and comment on it on Twitter and other social media. The analysis of Twitter posts shared on September 3, 2015, suggests that the majority of sharers predominantly oriented to the shareability of the visual story, resharing the image (or a reworked version of it) along with a series of related hashtags, while avoiding explicit displays of affective engagement with the main actors of the story, the boy and his family. Comments focused mainly on the broader issues the image raised about Europe, the world and humanity attributing blame and responsibility generally to society or institutions (Giaxoglou and Spilioti, 2020). The emotional response that such images propagated seemingly prompted a sense of urgent action in the form of a political spectacle intermeshed with audience engagement modes of a 'politics of pity' (Chouliaraki, 2006), rather than a sustained and in-depth engagement with the main actors and the broader issues relating to the displacement of large numbers of people. In this type of news reporting and social media sharing via images and hashtags on Twitter's microblogging platform, viewers are prompted to react quickly to the news of the death of the 'other', focusing on its affective and moral dimensions. By engaging in the acts of sharing afforded by the platform, users claim their proximity to each other in a form of ambient affiliation, while remaining at a distance from the actual event and the dead boy.

This kind of connective-activist action driven by the shareability of one or more images and hashtags is organised around personalised expressions of mourning that signal the sharer's (i) proximity (at a distance) to death of the 'Other' and the dead, (ii) proximity to unknown audiences as compassionate co-witnesses of a tragedy 'away from home' and (iii) the projection of an affectively-

involved person aligned to post-humanitarian sensibilities (Chouliaraki, 2010). Such narrative-affective orientations contribute to the reproduction of ritualistic forms of solidarity and affectivity in the wake of mediated death.

Activist mourning that is organised around or creates *a movement* and that is more akin to the collective action logic is illustrated in movements of *rebellious mourning* (Millstein, 2020). This type of action is illustrated in the case of Black Lives Matter movement and the politicised mourning of individual Blacks as a collective claim to visibility, dignity and citizen rights. This mode of hyper-mourning, which is worth of further empirical investigation, can index affective positions of (i) proximity to death and the dead as *grievable bodies* (Butler, 2015), (ii) proximity to online and offline audiences as *communities* and (iii) proximity to mourning selves as *voiced bodies*, indexing mourners' identity claims as citizens, socially responsible for seeking justice in the name of the dead.

CONCLUSION

This article discussed select examples illustrating a range of practices of hyper-mourning and memorialisation and proposing their classification into three overarching modes, *entrepreneurial*, *connective* and *activist*. The discussion of multiple examples may have limited the amount of analytic detail provided for each one, but it did so in favor of a broader overview of the diversity of users' engagements with death, mourning and memorialisation in social and digital media.

The discussion of these different examples highlighted the differentiation of user engagements, depending on the sharer's specific narrative stancetaking roles as teller, co-teller or witness and the affective positions typically associated with these roles at various degrees of proximity to or distance from key events, audiences and the self. The systematic association of narrative stancetaking roles and affective positions pointed to the high degree of conventionalisation of mourning practices in line with social and digital media logic. This logic includes the injunction to users to take up positions of story-sharer and story-participant, shaped according to the particular affordances of each platform. For example, on video-based platforms, such as YouTube, the affordance of broadcasting life in the moment fosters performances of affective vulnerability and the staging of authenticity with a focus on the self; on Facebook, wall events offer opportunities for the public display of mourning within specific communities and the use of mourning as a bonding resource for members of these communities; on Twitter, the uses of hashtags and images, that have the potential of becoming viral, afford increased opportunities for scaling up loss and connecting users' to issues of wider public concern and visibility. And yet, users' engagements with death, dying and mourning are not only associated with the mediatisation of disruption and crisis as affective spectacles (Klastrup, 2015). They are also associated with the instrumentalization of moments of crisis and disruption in existing practices of sharing and updating the self.

As Raun et al. (2018, p. 106) have noted "social media indeed emphasize and facilitate intimate practices and connections". The performance of affect and multisociality is a key staple of everyday social media communication and sharing. Death, illness and grief are often instrumentalised by sharers as a form of affective capital that can be used to authenticate their online presence and affective positioning reinforcing their status as micro-influencers or their connection to celebrities and influencers.

The types of hyper-mourning discussed here relate to events which are amenable to mediatisation on account of their newsworthiness and affective engagement potential. Across these examples, hyper-mourning emerges as an integral part and extension of popular culture in its interaction with mass and social media. The meanings of these practices are co-articulated by users themselves, the broader networked audiences and the institutional frameworks of the platforms

themselves (see Curtin and Gaither, 2016). Ultimately, they contribute to redrawing registers for personalising and collectivising mourning and memorialisation.

Despite the apparent conventionalisation of these practices, engaging with death and mourning online calls for extensive affective labour on the part of sharers for negotiating intimacy and multisocial relations in ways that are akin to micro-celebrities' self-branding (Raun, 2018). As suggested in the article, dynamic understandings of narrative and investigations of affect as an integral part of small story activity and positioning practices in specific contexts and platforms can contribute to more in-depth understandings of these emerging forms of intimacy and relationality.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Korina Giaxoglou is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics and English Language at The Open University, UK. Her research focuses on the sociolinguistics of narrative, affect, and sharing online. She is the author of the research monograph *A Narrative Approach to Social Media Mourning: Small Stories and Affective Positioning* (Routledge, 2021).

References

- Bennet, L. and A. Segerberg (2021) The logic of connective action. *Information, Communication & Society* 15 (5): 739-768.
- Brubaker, J.R, G. Hayes, P. Dourish (2013) Beyond the Grave: Facebook as a site for the expansion of death and mourning. *The Information Society* 29 (3).
- Butler, J. (2015) *Precariousness and Grievability – When is life grievable?*. London: Verso.
- Butler, J. (2018) *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Chouliaraki, L. (2006) *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. Thousands Oak and New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Chouliaraki, L. (2010) Post-humanitarianism: Humanitarian communication beyond a politics of pity. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13 (2), 107-126.
- Curtin, P. A. and T. Kenn Gaither (2006) *International Public Relations: Negotiating Culture, Identity and Power*. London and New Delhi: SAGE.
- Danforth, L.M. and A. Tsiaras (1983) *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- De Fina, A. and A. Georgakopoulou (2012). *Analyzing narrative. Discourse and sociolinguistic perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Georgakopoulou, A. (2007) *Small Stories, Interaction and Identities*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Georgakopoulou, A. (2017). Narrative/Life of the Moment: From telling a story to taking a narrative stance. In Schiff, B, E. McKim and S. Patron (eds) *Life and Narrative: The risks and responsibilities of storytelling experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Georgakopoulou, A. (2016) From narrating the self to posting self(ies): a small stories approach to selfies. *Open Linguistics* 2: 300-317.
- Giaxoglou, K. (2018) #JeSuisCharlie? Hashtags as narrative resources in contexts of ecstatic sharing. *Discourse, Context, and Media* 22: 13-20.
- Giaxoglou, K. (2020) Mobilising grief and remembrance with and for networked publics: towards a typology of hyper-mourning. *European Journal of Life Writing* 9, 264-284.
- Giaxoglou, K. (2021) *A narrative approach to social media mourning: small stories and affective positioning*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Giaxoglou, K. and T. Spilioti (2020) The shared story of #JeSuisAylan on Twitter: story participation and stancetaking in visual small stories. *Pragmatics* 30 (2): 277-302.
- Hills, M. (2016) From Para-social to Multisocial interaction: Theorizing Material/Digital Fandom and Celebrity. In Marshall, D.P. and S. Redmond (Eds.) *A Companion to Celebrity*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.

- Horton, D. and R. Wohl (1956) Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance. *Psychiatry* 19:3: 215-229.
- Klastrup, L. (2015) "I didn't know her, but...": parasocial mourning of mediated deaths on Facebook RIP pages. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* 21 (1-2): 146, 164.
- Klastrup, L. (2018) Death and communal mass-mourning: Vin Diesel and the Remembrance of Paul Walker. *Social Media + Society* 4 (1), 1-11.
- Liebers, N. and H. Schramm (2019) Parasocial interactions and relationships with media characters – an inventory of 60 years of research. *Communication Research Trends* 38 (2): 1-29.
- Marwick, A. and d. boyd (2011) Celebrity Practice on Twitter. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 17 (2): 138-158.
- Matley, D. (2020) "I can't believe #Ziggy #Stardust died": Stance, fan identities and multimodality in reactions to the death of David Bowie on Instagram. *Pragmatics* 30 (2): 247-276.
- Millstein, C. (ed.) (2020) *Rebellious Mourning: The Collective Work of Grief*. AK Press.
- Page, R. (2018) *Narratives Online: Shared Stories in Social Media*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raun, T. (2018) Capitalizing intimacy: New subcultural forms of micro-celebrity strategies and affective labour on YouTube. *Convergence* 24 (1): 99-113.
- Rojek, C. (2016) *Presumed intimacy: para-social relationships in media, society and celebrity culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Sanderson, J. and P.H. Cheong (2010) Tweeting prayers and communicating grief over Michael Jackson online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30 (5), 328-340.
- Stage, C. (2017) *Networked Cancer. Affect, Narrative and Measurement*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stage, C., K. Hvidtfeldt and L. Klastrup (2020) Vital media: The affective and temporal dynamics of young cancer patients' social media practices. *Social Media + Society* 6 (2), 1-13.
- Sumiala, J. (2014) Mediatization of public death. In Lundby, K. (ed.) *Mediatization of Communication*. Amsterdam: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Zappavigna, M. (2011) Ambient affiliation: a linguistic perspective on Twitter. *New Media & Society* 13 (5): 788-806.