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# Mediatization of Emotion on Social Media: Forms and Norms in Digital Mourning Practices

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## Abstract

This article provides the theoretical background for this Special Issue which explores the mediatization of emotion on social media as attested in different digital mourning practices. The overview discusses the affective and emotional turn alongside the mediatic turn in relation to key trends and foci in the study of affect/emotion. Our discussion points to a shift in conceptualizations of affect/emotion from mediated to mediatized practice, embedded in other social practices and subject to media and social media logics, affordances, and frames, which are worthy of empirical investigation. The article also presents key insights offered in the four articles of this Special Issue and foregrounds current and future directions in the study of mediatization, emotional sharing, and digital mourning practices.

## Keywords

affect, digital mourning, emotion, mediatization, sharing

## From Mediated to Mediatized Emotion

Emotion and affect have been receiving increased scholarly attention since the “affective turn” (Clough, 2008; Clough & Halley 2007) and “the emotional turn” (Lemmings & Brooks, 2014) across fields in the humanities and the social sciences, leading to numerous calls for the empirical study of emotion. As Campbell, Smith, and Wetherell (2017) acknowledge, empirically grounded research is needed to clarify the complex, situated, and social workings of affect/emotion and move beyond its conceptualization as pre-cognitive and pre-discursive (cf. Massumi, 2002).

In this diversified body of research, the terms *emotion* and *affect* are often used interchangeably with emotion serving as a superordinate category or hypernym (Wilce, 2009, p. 22). The histories of use of the two terms, however, are rather divergent, revealing important questions about the relation between biology and culture, body and mind, embodiment and society. For Ekman (1999), for instance, emotions are viewed as a basic set of universals evolved and adapted in dealing with fundamental life tasks that can be used as a framework to organize affective phenomena. For Massumi (2002), on the contrary, emotion is the site of cultural signification, while affect refers to embodied intensity cut off from language or reflective consciousness. For linguistic anthropologists (Irvine, 1990; Kulick & Schieffelin, 2004), binary distinctions between

biography and biology are contested and both emotion and affect are seen to be closely interconnected with social life, agency, and embodiment, situated in a mediating position between language and power.

The recognition of the mediating role of emotion has led to the critical study of emotion as creating subject alignments in a dialectic relationship to collective bodies (Ahmed, 2004) and the examination of emotion as stance shaped by and shaping the interactional context—be it everyday or institutional (Peräkylä & Sorjonen, 2012). In addition, interest in the social nature of emotion has extended into the exploration of its emergent formation in relation to mass media (Döveling, von Scheve, & Konijn, 2011), and recently also social media (Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013; Giaxoglou, Döveling, & Pitsillides, 2017; Döveling, 2017). In these explorations, the notion of *mediatization* is often used as a sensitizing concept to account for the complex intersections of media, individual, and social life at

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multiple levels (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Deacon & Stanyer, 2014; Strömback 2008), reflecting the impact of the so-called “mediatic turn” (Lundby, 2009). Central to this turn is an attempt to move beyond “cause” and “effect” relationships between media and social practices and tap into the potential for the development of nonlinear circuits of meaning that are having a cumulative impact on social life (Livingstone, 2009).

Mediatization has been described as “a meta-process on a par with other transformative social change processes such as globalization and individualization,” referring more specifically to “a social change process in which media have become increasingly influential in and deeply integrated into different spheres of society” (Esser & Strömback, 2014, p. 4). Many studies addressing the impact of *mediatization* focus on its relationship to dimensions of modernity (Hjarvard, 2016; also see Kaun & Fast, 2013 for an overview) foregrounding the pervasiveness of “media logics” in different expert domains, for instance, politics (Esser & Strömback, 2014) or education (Rawolle & Lingard, 2014), at the same time as trying to probe into what media logics involve.

One key aspect of mediatization is that the media increasingly permeate all aspects of private, social, political, cultural, and economic life, from the micro (individual) to the meso (organizational) and the macro (societal) level (Schulz, 2004), whereby internalized media logics drive chains of actions and reactions in both institutional and everyday communication. Yet, the study of mediatization seems to focus predominantly on media logics (Altheide & Snow 1992), leaving aside the consideration of the affordances, frames, and “logics” relating to *social mediatization*, that is, processes of mediatization taking place on and via social media (Georgakopoulou & Giaxoglou, 2017). In addition, there has been little systematic attention to dimensions of the *mediatization of emotion and affect* in relation to its implications on the individual, groups, and the social body (Döveling & Harju forthcoming).

The study of the mediatization of emotion and affect online entails attention to digital practices and the formation of affective publics, that is, networked publics which “are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 311). So far, studies examining the formation of networked or affective publics have tended to focus on cases of politics, activism, or crisis communication (see Weller, Bruns, Burgess, Mahrt, & Puschmann, 2014). This Special Issue draws attention to *digital practices of mourning* as affect-laden practices where emotion gains center stage in displays and flows of varied intentionality and intensity and is subject to a range of situated and emergent norms that are worthy of further empirical investigation.

This Special Issue sets out to address the aforementioned gaps in the study of emotion and mediatization by drawing attention to the ways in which social media affect forms and norms of emotional communication and affective flows online.

## Norms of Mediatizing Emotion in Digital Mourning Practices

The collection of articles opens with Anna Wagner’s examination of the norms guiding users in engaging with digital mourning practices or reacting to them. Her article, entitled “Don’t click ‘Like’ when somebody has died: The role of norms for mourning practices in social media,” synthesizes insights from a select set of empirical studies of digital mourning. Acknowledging that “social media platforms do not constitute isolated new mourning spaces disconnected from other social spaces,” the author identifies the following three types of norms of mediatizing emotion in the case of digital mourning:

1. The first type involves norms relating to the appropriateness of using social media for engaging in mourning practices. These norms are found to be linked not only to the specific purposes motivating engagement with digital mourning but also to the affective intensity with which such practices are invested. For example, using the sharing affordances of social media to distribute information related to the passing of an individual or posting conventional expressions of mourning as memorialization is found to be more acceptable than the display of deeply personal grief.
2. The second type refers to norms guiding the selection of the content and form of emotional displays online, including considerations about “appropriate” types of sharing (e.g., pictures, text-based tributes, and condolences) or the “appropriate” amount of emotional sharing and “adequate” display of grief, often depending on the position of the mourner in emergent hierarchies of legitimate mourners.
3. The last set of norms relates to what can be considered “appropriate” reactions toward mourning-related content or interactions with users engaging in mourning. Such norms tend to be guided by the principle of non-interfering in other people’s mourning and, where possible, participating in collective remembering. Such general principles, however, are often found to conflict with everyday practical concerns and dilemmas of users, including, for instance, whether to “like” or “not to like” a post announcing someone’s death, whether to block or unfriend someone who is seen to over-share their emotion, or whether to avoid posting mourning-related content altogether.

The normative frames identified by Anna Wagner help address the question of “*why* people (re)act the way they do, and what guides their mourning practices” in addition to how people engage in such practices. Wagner calls for the need to further investigate the role and nature of norms as a way of “understanding the very nature of mourning as a deeply human phenomenon in mediatized societies.”

## Forms of Mediatizing Emotion in Digital Mourning Practices

*Lisbeth Klastrup* focuses on a specific type of mourning activity related to celebrity death. In her article “Death and communal mass-mourning: Vin Diesel and the remembrance of Paul Walker on his Facebook Page,” the author discusses an interesting case of how a modern-day celebrity, Vin Diesel, engages with fan audiences through the process of public mourning for the death of his celebrity friend, Paul Walker. The study sheds light on a key aspect of the mediatization of emotion online, namely, the interface between personal affectivity and the commodification of emotion in the form of sharing backstage moments with large fandom audiences. Furthermore, the author points out a key point of differentiation in the way affective fandom publics are formed through the affordances of Facebook, when compared, for instance, to Twitter. She observes that

while the foregrounding of the #hashtag on Twitter and Instagram encourages a *horizontal and topical engagement* with and around the star profile, Facebook and its comment system encourages a *vertical appraisal* of the star as well as *the broadcasting of one’s fandom*, through the act of sharing the star’s posts or photos with one’s own network.

The study identifies the need to further study celebrity mourning processes on social media over extended periods of time to gain a better understanding of practices of mediatizing emotion relating to high-profile celebrity death as well as practices of self-mediatization which prove to be key in celebrity branding and the construction of fandom publics.

*Tamara Kneese*’s study also considers aspects of the commodification of emotion drawing attention to the case of crowdfunded funeral campaigns. In her article, entitled “Mourning the Commons: Circulating affect in crowdfunded funeral campaigns,” the author extends the scope of the studies of digital mourning to the study of the reconfiguration of structural inequalities in types of sharing affect which are intertwined with sharing-for-profit practices. Her article looks at how affect forms not only the key type of sharing content but also the driver of strategic circulation integral to the success of a crowdfunding campaign. Based on the content analysis of online campaigns and qualitative interviews with campaign supporters and initiators, the author notes how circulating itself comes to constitute a display of solidarity producing “intimate publics” while downplaying the neoliberal logics of volunteerism and the for-profit design of third-party platforms. At a broader level, her article draws attention to the way inequalities in life get reconfigured in the treatment of the dead in the context of “mortuary politics” and shows how precarity in life often translates into precarity after death.

## Mediatized Emotion as Digital Affect Cultures

The Special Issue concludes with *Katrin Döveling, Anu Harju, and Denise Sommers* article entitled “From mediatized

emotion to digital affect cultures: New technologies and global flows of emotion.” In their article, the authors propose an overarching framework for approaching mediatized emotion as *digital affect cultures*. Based on the examination of existing empirical research on digital memorial culture, their proposed notion of “digital affect cultures” encompasses different types of digital memorial activity revolving around locally situated and globally emergent levels (personal, group, mass). These are in turn linked to interrelated micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis, which are determined in terms of affective intensity levels and attachment. The authors foreground that “the emotional flows in any given affect culture are not one-directional but enmeshed with offline practices” and suggest that the formation of *digital affect cultures* relies on three elements, namely, *discourse, belonging, and alignment*: Digital affect cultures are discursively constructed in and through emotional interaction chains; participation in such chains creates subject positions whereby emotion constitutes a relational resource for alignment/disalignment which has the potential of producing forms of mediatized emotional resonance. The proposed framework is illustrated in the case of global reactions to terror attacks and in the case of reactions to celebrity death. The authors call for longitudinal studies of how events and topics are framed by emotional scenarios and presuppositions that discursively (dis)align people, taking account of both emotion and culture in the study of networked subjectivities and communication.

## Conclusion

The included perspectives and findings offer insights from a range of digital mourning contexts, attesting to the increased mediatization of death online, in particular public death (Walter, 2008). Collectively, the articles provide a much-needed empirical insight into the diverse—and quickly changing—forms and norms of emotional sharing related to death and mourning on and via social media. There is still a need for further empirical studies that clarify how affect/emotion is mobilized in different digital practices for the formation of affective publics and affective landscapes and how these practices cut across the offline and online realms. There is also scope for developing the conceptualization of the constituents of social media “logics” in relation to media “logics,” taking a critical angle on digital sharing practices.

Overall, this Special Issue contributes to the study of mediatization, emotion, and digital mourning. It offers a starting point for further systematic explorations of the extent to which social media can be said to extend, merge, or even contest not just communication about public death (Sumiala, 2014) but forms of affect flows and emotional communication more broadly.

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