



Mediated Death

Johanna Sumiala

Polity Press, Cambridge, 2022, 224 pp.

ISBN 978-1-5095-4453-0

Por: Bruno Frutuoso Costa¹

Recibido: 30-08-2023 – Aceptado: 15-01-2024
<https://doi.org/10.26441/RC23.1-2024-3311>

Social platforms have increased the daily public visibility of death, mourning, and the digital presence of the dead, and the domestication of these technologies has led to the emergence of new mourning practices (Pasquali et al., 2022). In this hypermediated and hybrid context of the shared world (Deuze, 2014), death is not only institutionalised but also frequently mediated and negotiated in journalism, entertainment, social networks and media, and streaming services. This is the starting point of the work *Mediated Death* by Johanna Sumiala, presented in the first chapter.

Chapter two offers a brief history of the mediation of death as spectacle (public and exceptional) in the news media and discusses its meanings in public executions and other high-profile fatalities, such as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Johanna Sumiala argues that both entertainment and moral meaning constitute the social order of life and death. This discussion unfolds with the development of new media, focusing on the symbolic presence of death in hybrid media (social networks and social media), new agents (Internet users), and new mourning rituals and practices around death.

Chapter three is the last theoretical chapter and establishes the book's conceptual framework based on media and communication studies, sociology, and anthropology. Public death is approached as an event that generates rituals. For it to become a mediated event, Sumiala considers it to require an "unusual" nature and an ability to "interrupt the daily flow of news" (p. 43). The associate professor of media and communication studies at the University of Helsinki explores the mortality dilemma based on theorising about rites of passage (van Gennep, 1909), life crisis rituals (Turner, 1969), and media ritual events (Dayan & Katz, 1992).

Chapters four and five are empirical studies of how Internet users manage mourning rituals on the social platforms Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube in the aftermath of death events. The inclusion of civilian deaths, violent deaths, and deaths of public figures that have received global public attention makes the book topical, although sometimes difficult to follow. Some analyses are brief and come from other studies already published by the author.

¹ Bruno Frutuoso Costa is a PhD student in Communication Sciences and a postgraduate student in Data Analysis in Social Sciences at the University Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE-IUL). His main areas of research include journalism, media, and gender studies, focusing on topics such as public space and news production, participation and the media, digital platforms and sociability, gender-based violence and hate speech, as well as the mediation of death and mourning rituals. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3023-8960>, bruno_frutuoso_costa@hotmail.com

The events analysed include the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the Manchester Arena, the deaths of David Bowie and Margaret Thatcher, and other events covering the topics of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement. These allow us to understand that Internet users are combining the old rituals of traditional media with new, more personalised practices adapted to social platforms and their personal uses. The sharing of news pieces, photos, memes, hashtags, videos, and others conveys demands or mourning. In the hybrid media landscape, social platforms have become fundamental for more actors to participate in the deliberation of society's values in the way they circulate and constitute social life. As a mediated phenomenon, death appears more public, visible, and ambivalent.

In the sixth chapter, Sumiala discusses public ritualization and suggests that some deaths are more pleasant than others. Two of the examples provided are the murders of George Floyd and a child in Helsinki. Users connect or not with the deaths and focus on victims or perpetrators according to the victim's status ("public, visible, and claimable") and the cause of death ("degree of exceptionality") (p. 137). That said, ritualization depends on the moral and political demands that each death makes.

Chapter seven summarises the main arguments and contributions of the book and concludes by offering guidelines for future studies of the hypermediation of death. Mediated publics today have both the possibility and the obligation to witness the suffering and death of unknown victims and to respond to such tragedies (ritual). Especially visible in the question of victimisation, hybrid media give multiplicity and contestation to rites of passage. Users define who is seen as a victim and become agents capable of reinforcing moral positions or contesting the hegemonic position of events. Sumiala concludes by warning that this state of profound mediation has transformed the politics of death and can contribute to its instrumentalization and trivialization in contemporary society (p. 167).

Mediated Death is necessary reading for scholars interested in understanding how the various historical, social, and cultural transformations in the mediation of death can shape mourning, collective identity, and power dynamics in society. Considering the growing need for societies to deal with the problems of death and dying (Kübler-Ross, 1996/1969), the study pays little attention to natural death and the digital practices of end-of-life or terminally ill patients. Nevertheless, the case studies analysed show that the multifaceted nature of mediated death needs to be explored qualitatively as publics engage with, interpret, and respond to this new mediated politics of death.

References

Dayan, D., & Katz, E. (1992). *Media events: The live broadcasting of history*. Harvard University Press.

Deuze, M. (2014). Media life and the mediatization of the lifeworld. In A. Hepp & F. Krotz (Eds.), *Mediatized worlds: Culture and society in a media age* (pp. 207-220). Palgrave Macmillan.

Kübler-Ross, E. (1996). *Sobre a morte e o morrer: O que os doentes terminais têm para ensinar a médicos, enfermeiras, religiosos, e aos seus próprios parentes* [About death and dying: What the terminally ill must teach doctors, nurses, religious leaders, and their own relatives] (P. Menezes, Trans.). Martins Fontes. (Work published for the first time in 1969).

Pasquali, F., Bartoletti, R., & Giannini, L. (2022). "You're just playing the victim": Online grieving and the non-use of social media in Italy. *Social Media + Society*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221138757>

Sumiala, J. (2022). *Mediated Death*. Polity Press.

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine Publishing.

van Gennep, A. (1909). *Les Rites de passage*. A. et J. Picard.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia) under the project Aversion2agony: A cross-national comparative analysis of journalistic mediation of euthanasia in Portugal and the United Kingdom (Reference 2023.04877.BD).



UNIVERSIDAD
DE PIURA

E-ISSN: 2227-1465

Revista de Comunicación

Investigación en Comunicación para generar Comunidad

vol. 23, N°1, 2024

marzo-agosto

UNIVERSIDAD DE PIURA, PERÚ

FACULTAD DE COMUNICACIÓN