

Joint event organized by the
Media Study Group and
Social Aspects of Death, Dying and
Bereavement (DDB) Study Group

'Death and the Media' PROGRAMME

Monday 15th November 2010, 10.30am – 4.30pm
BSA London Meeting Room, Imperial Wharf

Venue details can be found at: <http://www.britsoc.co.uk/events/meetingroom.htm>

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 10.00 – 10.30 | Tea and coffee |
| 10.30 – 10.40 | Welcome and introductions |
| 10.40 – 11.10 | 'A matter of life and death: the re-presentation of a musician's suicide through the lens of the obituary'
<i>Paula Hearsom, University of Brighton</i> |
| 11.10 – 11.40 | '"Not just documented, but sold": Jade and death on the TV (radio, magazines, news, and the web'
<i>Daniel Ashton and Rebecca Feasey, Bath Spa University</i> |
| 11.40 – 12.10 | 'News media and audiences framing a celebrity suicide in Flanders: a search for the moral high ground?'
<i>Hilde Van den Bulck and Nathalie Claessens, University of Antwerp</i> |
| 12.10 – 13.00 | Lunch (provided) |
| 13.00 – 13.30 | 'An exploration of media reporting of victims of murder and manslaughter in Northern Ireland'
<i>Ruth McAlister and Claire Meehan, University of Ulster</i> |
| 13.30 – 14.00 | 'Behind closed doors: the perpetuation of myth after death in disaster'
<i>Lucy Easthope, University of Bath</i> |
| 14.00 – 14.30 | 'Martyrdom in the Blogosphere: conjoining offline rituals with virtual commemorations'
<i>Yasmin Ibrahim, University of London</i> |
| 14.30 – 15.00 | Tea and coffee |
| 15.00 – 15.30 | 'Sharing Death: online performances of grief'
<i>Dorthe Refslund Christensen, Aarhus University</i> |
| 15.30 – 16.00 | 'Media technologies and the lie of remembrance'
<i>Brian Crosbie, University of Sheffield</i> |
| 16.00 – 16.30 | Discussion and rounding up of the day (followed by an informal get together) |



Symposium fees: Early Bird Registration for the symposium closes on **Friday 22nd October 2010**.

Fees are £20 for Postgraduates, £25 BSA members, £35 for non-members.

Registrations after 23rd October incur a £5 late booking fee.

Places are limited, so sign up early!

To register [Click Here](#) and / or visit the event site for further symposium details: http://www.britsoc.co.uk/specialisms/DDB.htm#_activity

For more details about the study groups please visit:
<http://www.britsoc.co.uk/specialisms/Media.htm> and/or
<http://www.britsoc.co.uk/specialisms/DDB.htm>

Please direct any administrative enquiries to the BSA office at events@britsoc.org.uk and any academic enquires to k.v.woodthorpe@bath.ac.uk.

We look forward to seeing you in November,

The Convenors

Media Study Group: Julian Matthews (University of Leicester)

and

DDB Study Group: Kate Woodthorpe (University of Bath)



ABSTRACTS

10.40 – 11.10

A matter of life and death: the re-presentation of a musician's suicide through the lens of the obituary

Paula Hearsom, University of Brighton

When life takes a popular musician, that's not news, but when a popular musician takes their own life that is. Whilst popular music's relationship with the subject of death has been extensively intertwined, the desire and increasing curiosity for an insight into this final rite of passage is relatively recent. This paper will explore the extent to which journalistic coverage through music obituary writing both reflects and shapes the reality of a life lived and also sheds light on a society's views of death both culturally and historically.

For non-musical celebrities, suicide would be a shocking end, but for popular musicians, it's the ultimate rite of passage to the 'Forever 27 club'. By uncovering dominant discourses in the popular music press's coverage of suicide, the research will illustrate emergent ideologies of celebrity culture and thirst for 'reality' platforms, as well as attempt to understand the wider construction of cultural meanings and preoccupations with death in modern society.

Using critical discourse analysis to determine categorisation in the coverage of 'unexpected' deaths of musicians, the lens of Foucault's panoptical vision will be applied to demonstrate the emerging audiences who request and consume this output.

The paper will also include interviews with editors, writers and sub-editors (those 'gatekeepers' in charge of commissioning the stories, constructing the narrative and writing those attention-grabbing headlines) as well as with music obituary writers. Through an analysis of contemporary obituaries, the highly constructed text will demonstrate how a life is renegotiated in the re-presentation of a particular type of death. One that not only reflects, shapes and views the musician's life, but also, how that in turn, is a reflection of society.

11.10 – 11.40

Not just documented, but sold: Jade and death on the TV (radio, magazines, news, and web)

Daniel Ashton and Rebecca Feasey, Bath Spa University

The news coverage of Jade Goody's battle with cancer during 2009 was seen as providing valuable visibility of the disease and prompting members of the public to evaluate their own health and seek relevant testing. Set against other accounts of



celebrity illness, such as Magic Johnson and AIDS, this paper stresses the specificity of celebrity and that understanding the advocacy and awareness potential can be significantly nuanced through understanding 'news on disease' as being as much about 'news on the celebrity'.

Drawing on focus group research with female magazine readers, this paper explores the complexities and tensions in how the 'public' can engage with media coverage. This paper will stress the importance of examining existing and emerging understandings of Jade as a celebrity. In this respect, the coverage that Jade brings to cancer as a disease cannot be widely assumed and the extant approaches to her and the cultural politics of celebrity should not be understated (Couldry and Markham, 2007 on political engagement).

Participants negotiated the advocacy and awareness elements of Jade's death with skepticism towards the Public Relations aspects of Jade's coverage, the revenue-generating activities of documenting the illness, and their own personal experiences of cancer and death. In this respect participants commented on her death "was sold" and that this was "not how cancer looks". The importance of celebrity and its promotional drive were emphasized in the responses that held coverage to be primarily of Jade as a celebrity compared to the understated disease and unseen death.

11.40 – 12.10

News Media and Audiences Framing a Celebrity Suicide in Flanders: A Search for the Moral High Ground?

Hilde Van den Bulck and Nathalie Claessens, University of Antwerp

In Flanders, the suicide of gay celebrity Yasmine provoked strong reactions from both media and public. This paper analyses the press coverage of and audience responses to this death in order to examine the complex relation between the media, the celebrity and the public in dealing with death. Theoretically, this analysis is grounded in insights from celebrity studies about the way celebrities and their actions can initiate moral discussions including about death and suicide, and in insights into parasocial interaction and how this can influence the way in which people deal with (media coverage of) a celebrity (death). Analytically, this paper works within a framing paradigm.

Qualitative framing analysis of a three month sample of news coverage in daily and weekly papers and the online (on the paper's website) and offline (in the paper) audience reactions to these articles, reveals two main frames (Sainthood – Victim of Abuse) that were used to discuss the suicide and its aftermath. Analysis shows differences between popular and quality press coverage as well as an evolution



in frames over time from melodramatic to critical. These results are partly mirrored in online audience responses. Interestingly, following the celebrity death, moral and ethical issues such as suicide were discussed by media and audiences, with audience members adopting more polarized views than media. Notably, audience members use the media to personally address the (dead) celebrity, expressing their parasocial relationship with the celebrity. Lastly, our results suggest that audiences do not simply adopt media frames but that media frames interact with their personal experiences and ideas, thus forming audience frames.

13.00 – 13.30

An Exploration of Media Reporting of Victims of Murder and Manslaughter in Northern Ireland

Ruth McAlister and Claire Meehan, University of Ulster

Wherever a victim exists a crime has been perpetrated and crime stories are the biggest sellers across the media. If it 'bleeds it leads' is often an accurate description of the way in which news is deemed as newsworthy. The idea of the victim is compelling and television ratings and newspaper sales often rely upon the regularly gruesome descriptions of victims of crimes. Much journalistic practice is routine, with stories sought and reported in accordance with pre-constructed news templates, only the names, dates or locations change. The resultant outcome of such reporting is that journalists all too often produce easy explanations or simplistic ironies too quickly to summarise violent acts. This research focuses specifically on the media reporting of victims of murder and manslaughter in Northern Ireland. By undertaking in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with bereaved family members and by analysing stories printed in the local press, the preliminary findings from this research identify that the media will over sensationalise details of the victim's death, they frequently print inaccurate information and some journalists will employ unethical techniques to gain the 'scoop'. In all cases analysed respondents report that the style of media reporting has heightened the pain and suffering of family. The researchers propose that journalists should adopt a more 'humane' style of reporting that requires a new set of assumptions about the family who suffer the trauma, and new thinking about how to apply these ideas to the staple work of journalism.

13.30 – 14.00

Behind Closed Doors: The perpetuation of myth after death in disaster

Lucy Easthope, University of Bath

"The care with which our dead are treated is a mark of how civilised a society we are. Much goes on for understandable reasons behind closed doors. For this reason there is a special responsibility placed on those entrusted with this work and the authorities who supervise it to ensure that bodies of the dead are treated with the utmost care and respect. This is what bereaved and loved ones



are entitled to expect and what society at large demands” Clarke, Lord Justice (2001) Public Inquiry into the Identification of Victims following Major Transport Accidents. HMSO. Norwich.

Despite a plethora of documentaries and dramas (CSI, Waking the Dead, Silent Witness et al) on related subject matter and a wealth of resources on the internet the vast majority continue to be misinformed about the realities of death in disaster. Media coverage frequently focuses on heroes, villains and agency incompetence.

Sites are quickly shrouded and emergency mortuaries are heavily secured. As Lord Clarke highlights above it is indeed understandable that much goes on ‘behind closed doors’ but this has meant that families of those who have died may be left impotent and powerless with little or no ability to influence the specialist and potentially arbitrary arrangements that are enacted in the UK and abroad. Those closed doors extend far beyond the initial response to the inquest and inquiry processes and further more the preparation for the next disaster. This means that the arrangements remain sequestered away and in the hands of a small number of specialists which makes governance and accountability problematic. Additionally this means that inaccurate and damaging myths about these sudden and violent deaths proliferate.

Time-critical decisions such as the family’s right to view their loved one or receive their personal effects remain unaired in the public domain and in this short presentation I will argue that the media must contemplate a role beyond post disaster sensationalism and instead embrace a full exploration of these issues which are potentially as vital to a community as any other public information message.

14.00 – 14.30

Martyrdom in the Blogosphere: Conjoining offline rituals with virtual commemorations

Yasmin Ibrahim, Queen Mary, University of London

Death, grieving and commemoration in the virtual spaces of the internet can take various manifestations. This paper argues that socio-cultural practices and rituals in the offline spaces can conjoin with the virtual environments of the internet to create hybrid forms of grieving, memorials and commemoration. By analysing the case study of Neda Sultan in Iran and the symbolic significance of Martyrdom in Iranian society, religion and political history, this paper argues that the internet becomes a site of double articulation where the act of dying is both contemporaneous and historical when captured, disseminated and consumed non-stop on the Internet. This temporal dislocation of the internet provides a means to make death and martyrdom accessible at all times while drawing on its historical and cultural relevance in Iran to mobilise communal agency and to enact new forms of memorials which can be embedded in young peoples’ everyday lives.



15.00 – 15.30

Sharing Death. Online performances of grief

Dorthe Refslund Christensen, Aarhus University

More and more sites turn up on the Internet that facilitates the process of mourning for people who have lost loved ones. In this paper I analyze one of these groups, the Danish mourning site, www.Mindet.dk (*Mindet* means Memory). On this site participants perform their grief by designing memory sites for their loved one(s) displaying photographs, poetry, stories and expressions of grief and longing, lighting candles for other people's loved ones, sharing their personal experiences in different chatrooms constructing communities of grief.

Web 2.0 marks a social turn in digitally mediated culture, turning the media user into co-producer/participant. This accentuates the impact of media on today's cultural practices (community building, constructing identities): the creation of editable profiles, becoming visible to others etc. Thus Web 2.0 become emblematic of how society and our life practices are submitted to mediatization.

This is particularly interesting in regard to sites such as Mindet.dk since this site on the one hand constructs strong social codings like spatial and attitudinal demarcations inherent in all ritual and sacralising practice that points to how the internet and the growing number of social media are perfectly fit to the creation of communities of intimacy. On the other hand the site displays a variety of both on- and offline sociocultural matrices for the performances of grief involved like children's offline burialsites, little girls' poetrybooks, datingsites which points to the complex sociocultural web of ideas and practices cited in the ritualizations.

15.30 – 16.00

Media Technologies and the Lie of Remembrance

Brian Crosbie, University of Sheffield

This paper builds on a previous study on memorial media technology [MMT] and remembrance. In that work I addressed the implications of new MMT in shaping post-death identity. This technology, I suggested, marks a significant point in the sovereignty of modern consumer identities: identity it seems should not be lost even on death. Revisiting the MMT and death identity nexus this paper considers some implications for the state of bereavement. Using Ricoeur's writing on the 'idem' and 'ipse' features of identity, and Freud's work on bereavement and melancholy, I speculate that contrary to the possibility of end-less remembrance, MMT (web-based or otherwise) betrays our experiences of the living identities of others. And that the technological offer of constant remembrance hinders the existential need to 'move on'.



The paper ends by suggesting that people do come to recognise the lie of MMT as keeping the memory of the deceased 'alive'. For in death, the loss of ipse (constancy of identity), and the betrayed promise of the future projects of idem (the changing of identity), results in the bereaved eventually turning away from fetishised remembrance of the deceased to reconciliation.

These ideas are demonstrated in the presentation through cinema's handling of this deeply emotional recognition to 'moving on'. In the film 'Truly, Madly, Deeply' the character Nina is confronted by the ghostly embodiment of her diseased lover, who compels her to live life not among the dead, but with the promise of a future with a new lover.

