

Johanna Sumiala, **Mediated Death**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2022, 224 pp., \$56.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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Death organizes and reorganizes social life, and today, more than ever before, death is mediated. This is the premise that underlies Johanna Sumiala's **Mediated Death**, an exploration of contemporary social engagements with death and their social and political significance. Throughout history, social attitudes toward death have fluctuated. Some argue that we now entering a postmortal era (Jacobsen, 2017) in which death is not necessarily an endpoint, and at least symbolically, posthumous interactions and engagements between the living and the dead are possible. Emerging media of communication are central to this shift. Whoever wishes to better understand society should look into death rituals, and whoever wishes to better understand death rituals should reflect on their mediatization. This is the task that *Mediated Death* has undertaken, and, indeed, it is valuable reading for the social sciences.



The mediation of death has moved from one social institution to another, and representations of death have surfaced, disappeared, and resurfaced in the course of history. In this trajectory, communication media have played a pivotal role (Walter, 2015). As more aspects of social life become mediated, so does death. *Mediated Death*, thus, explores how death appears and is negotiated in the contemporary mediated (Western) world, and how changes to communication media have changed the power dynamics around death and its rituals. The book draws on rituals as a central theoretical framework, namely life-crisis rituals, to reflect on how death is presented and represented, and how these practices shape mourning and foster political consciousness. The book's main argument is that at this point in Western society, we witness an expansion of death-related representations and practices, such as mourning practices and public presentations of death. This increased visibility and abundance of practices result in contestation around death rituals as a driving and moralizing force within society. The rise of the hybrid media landscape allows more, sometimes new, actors to partake in deliberation about the core values of society and how they are passed from one generation to another, to entertain the possibilities of an afterlife and (symbolic) immortality. Since the fear of death, as some scholars have argued (e.g., Becker, 1973), is fundamental to constituting identity and shaping social life, the possibilities proposed by digital technologies mark the shift to mediated death as a decisive moment for society.

Chapter 2 deals with death as a spectacle and discusses the meanings of public representation of death—as a moral lesson and a moral solicitation or as entertainment. In these occasions, violent, “bad” death serves as a warning and as a punishment for social and moral transgressions. At the other end of the spectrum, the chapter points to the social function of obituaries as a testimony for life-well-lived. From both sides, these

representations of death are designed to delineate the boundaries of what is perceived and enforced as the social order. They set the bar for what constitutes good life, and they mark transgressive behavior as such. The chapter concludes by discussing death in hybrid media. It explores the symbolic presence of death in social networks, its new agents—Internet users—and new rituals and practices that developed around death in a media-saturated environment. Reminders of death merge in everyday life by multiple actors. The next chapters elaborate on these changes and their meanings. The chapter further outlines the pluralization of death agents following the rise of new media—from journalists to laypeople as Internet users.

Chapter 3 discusses death as an event, and moreover, as a ritual-generating event. The chapter lays the central theoretical framework of the book—the functions of rituals—and the roles of the actors involved in performing and orchestrating them. The book harnesses Turner's (1969) and van Gennep's (1960) seminal works in theorizing rites of passage and life-crisis rituals, and their adaptation by Dayan and Katz (1992) in media and communication studies. The first three theoretical chapters establish the centrality of death to social life and the function of the mediatization of death-related rituals.

The following chapters are empirical. The author introduces illuminating case studies, like online responses to the terrorist attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* offices, in which Internet users generated mediated mourning rituals that were orchestrated later by mass media, and affordances like hashtags summoned online publics to grieve together. These analyzed case studies capture the multifaceted nature of mediated death. Chapter 4 expands on the hybridization of media rituals in light of new media. Today, the prerogative to perform death-related media rituals is no longer exclusive to traditional mass media, and social networks (SNS) become pivotal to generating and performing such rituals. Through several intriguing cases, the chapter discusses Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook as the space and the infrastructure for summoning networked publics in the aftermath of mass violent death events, the demise of public figures, or the departure of laypeople. The chapter points out the various affordances and media logic of these platforms and how users employ these for expressing solidarity, mourning, and remembrance.

The reality in which more actors can participate in mediated death rituals has resulted in pluralism as well as contestation, about the politics of death, as demonstrated in chapter 5. This multiplicity and contestation project on the question of victimhood and who is perceived as a victim or an ideal victim. In hybrid media, audiences are no longer passive recipients of messages propagated by hegemonic mass media. Rather, they become content and ritual generators. Via SNS, users as publics can act and respond to events taking place and become involved moral agents. Here, too, Sumiala selects and analyzes fascinating case studies that showcase the possibilities to reinforce alternative moral stances or resist and contest the hegemonic stance. The chapter addresses not only the content of these alternative rituals but also the technological infrastructure that facilitates them.

While chapter 5 analyzes death rituals performed in the aftermath of death in real-time, chapter 6 focuses on rituals of memorialization and commemoration. These are not only immediate responses to recent death but also the reintroduction of death in everyday practices. Furthermore, the chapter deals with the moral and political solicitation death make. It points to the moral and political stances publics are encouraged to adopt vis-à-vis the perpetrators and victims of murders, which are the extreme manifestation of vicious, unjustified

death. This chapter, too, points to transgressive performances that challenge normative and common stances on loss, grief, and mourning.

Chapter 7 concludes and recaps the book's main contributions and arguments. This chapter further provides an outlook for the future of mediated death, as digital technologies allow new engagements with the dead and, arguably, a constant presence of the dead in digital society. Thus far, death rituals as rites of passage have celebrated the departure of the dead, and the reintegration of society without those who perished. However, new digital afterlife technologies (Bassett, 2022), arguably, change the nature of these rituals, as the dead are "transmitted" into the digital realm, making the associated rite of passage not a farewell but a ritual of transformation. This discussion ends the book with some thought-provoking ideas about the potential consequences of the mundane, digital interaction with death and its representation in the near future.

The book focuses mainly on the mediation of exceptional death. It pays little attention to the good and "natural" death or, to the public, online antemortem discourse of those facing impending death. Yet, through compelling case studies and by outlining a well-grounded theory, *Mediated Death* captures the current state of death as an organizing factor of social life and establishes the centrality of hybrid media in mediating death and using it to cultivate collective identity and community ties, advocating for moral engagement and political action. As major recent death events, like the war in Ukraine and the Queen's funeral in the United Kingdom reminded us, the study of death through the prism of the media is a telling outlook, and as such, the book offers helpful foundations for the study of power dynamics within society. *Mediated Death* is a remarkable contribution not only to media and communication studies but also to sociology, anthropology, and death studies.

References

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