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Ritual in a Digital Society



EDITED BY

MARTIN HOONDERT & SUZANNE VAN DER BEEK

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Introduction

*Martin Hoondert & Suzanne van der Beek*¹

Every evening Martin's eldest son concludes the day with Snapchat, sending his friends pictures of himself or other short messages. For him, this is important and he really hates it when his parents ask him to stop snapchatting and to go to bed. In his experience, this Snapchat community is a valid and valued extension to his offline experiences of community in e.g. the classroom. It is not about content – there are hardly any relevant messages; it is not primarily a process of communication, but a way of being in the world with friends. For him, this Snapchat community is as real as being together in the same classroom. Concluding the evening with sending and receiving snippets and pictures confirms the friendship. That experience is important, especially at his age of 15 years at which identity and friendship are keywords in a process of growing and maturing (Buckingham, 2008).

Living in a digital age

This example illustrates the central position that digital activities have taken in our day-to-day lives. Within a relatively short period of time, our processes of cultural production, distribution, and reception have been (re)shaped by digitalization. This new infrastructure has profoundly changed the modes of interaction in societies worldwide, creating an altogether new and continually changing panorama of cultural processes. A large part of our day-to-day activities involves a combination of offline and online actions. Everyday life therefore takes place at the offline-online nexus. This intermingling of offline and online activities and ways of being in the world has become so normal that it seems

¹ We thank our colleagues Odile Heynders and Jan Blommaert for their comments on an earlier version of this Introduction.

unnecessary to state that we live in a digital age. Of course we do! The certainty with which we feel this notion to be true, might indicate that in fact we have already entered a ‘postdigital age’, to use Miriam Rasch’s vocabulary. ‘Post-digital’ does not mean that we are *beyond* the digital era, but that the digital is so obvious that we can not separate it from the non-digital. Rasch writes:

Everything is online, online is everything. In just a few decades, all aspects of life have been transformed by the internet, from education to work, from friendship and love to suffering and death. A boundary between a real and a virtual world has long since ceased to exist: life has been mediated through and through. (Rasch, 2017, back cover; translated from Dutch)

Rasch’s notion of the postdigital resonates with our observations about the advanced integration of online dimensions in most of our interactions with the world. Based on lived experience, it has indeed become hard to think of notions like offline and online as if we could separate them from one another. However, from an academic perspective it remains productive to hold on to these concepts, because they allow us to critically evaluate the ways in which offline and online processes and practices are intertwined. Therefore, we will not use Rasch’s concept of the ‘postdigital’. Rather, we prefer to speak of a culture at the ‘offline-online nexus’. When we discuss the broader context in which these interactions take place, we will be using the terms ‘digital culture’. This terminology is applied in order to critically discuss the cultural practices that are a result of a lived reality in which offline and online dimensions are felt to work together seamlessly.

Digital rituals

The shift in cultural practices towards a blending of offline and online dimensions, also affects rituals. For clarity’s sake, we use the term ‘digital ritual’ to refer to ritual practices that take place anywhere at the offline-online nexus. We use the term ‘online ritual’ in examples where the online dimension of the ritual is key. We begin by exploring the former, which makes use of different combinations of offline and online environments and affordances. We illustrate this by a short exploration of different types of digital rituals. We might start with the tutorials that abound on the internet. These can be found on specialized websites or through platforms such as YouTube. These so-called ‘How to...’ clips and websites provide information on the proper ways to perform a certain

ritual, usually a traditional religious ritual. Just one example of this is the website Muslim Funeral Services that gives detailed instructions about the ‘Ghusl procedure’: the washing and shrouding of a deceased Muslim. In these online tutorials, offline and online dimensions are directly linked, for they provide online information and guidelines to assist people performing an offline ritual in a proper manner. Other websites with a similar function do not provide canonical information, but rather provide ideas and suggestions to design a new ritual. For example, ritual coaches or counsellors may set up websites to attract clients and to help them design their own ritual, e.g. for a wedding or the welcoming of a newborn. An example is the website of ritual counsellor Annegien Ochtman-de Boer. Her website is an accompaniment to her book *Nieuwe rituelen (New Rituals)* (2015) and provides inspiration on how to design a divorce ritual, a funeral, or a wedding. The connection between online and offline dimensions remains the same here: information is shared online to guide the execution of a (mostly) offline ritual.

In other cases, we find a reversal of this situation: the offline ritual here precedes the online information. Digital recordings of rituals, once offline performed, are shared on photo- and video-sharing platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. One might think of the widely spread accounts of the marriage of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, that took place on May 19, 2018.² These digital rituals make use of the archival function of the internet to make available to a large public those rituals that are performed offline through online representation. As in any representation there is an added layer of creative agency and curation in this, a series of choices to be made in terms of selection and editing that allow the person or institution who posts these recordings to an online environment, to present the ritual within the desired frame.

In yet another combination of offline and online affordances, we find that the online account does not precede the offline ritual or the other way around. Rather, the two occur simultaneously. Take for example the official website of the grotto in Lourdes,³ in which a permanent webcam is fixed to present the current situation in the French shrine to anyone with access to the internet. What is more, the website provides an agenda which the digital visitor can consult to know when a certain ritual will be performed at the shrine. This suggests that the visitor might tune in at the moment a certain mass will be celebrated in order to participate via this webcam through livestreaming. This particular offline-

² E.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMDtOgjQtX0> (accessed September 11, 2019)

³ Retrieved from <https://www.lourdes-france.org/en/>

online nexus can also be found in livestreaming websites and apps like Skype and WhatsApp that facilitate distant friends and family to join in e.g. a funeral in real time. Again, this possibility suggests that one might partake in an offline ritual through online affordances. Here we come to an interesting situation, because it shows how the offline and online dimensions become integrated in a ritual practice. Whereas in earlier examples we might argue that the online affordance plays second fiddle to the offline enactment of the ritual, we start to find here rituals in which the one does not take precedent over the other. We find both an offline and an online ritual at the same time: there is a funeral taking place within an offline context that people participate in, while simultaneously the distant son participates to the funeral of his father through livestreaming on his computer or smartphone.

Lastly, we refer to rituals in which the actual performance largely takes place online. In this category, websites and social media applications function as ritual sites themselves, becoming vehicles for participating in online rituals. Some examples are: praying in an online church like the Church of Fools (later St Pixels),⁴ performing a wedding in Second Life (Heidbrink, Miczek, & Radde-Antweiler, 2011),⁵ or commemorating a beloved deceased at the World Wide Cemetery.⁶ In these examples, online affordances are used not to instruct or record offline rituals, but in order to provide an alternative to offline rituals. There is no offline activity to which these rituals refer, although of course there is still a reliance on offline actions (someone sits behind a computer, someone clicks a mouse, et cetera).

Here we might come back to our earlier note on terminology. Let's take the example of the rituals performed at the shrine in Lourdes, which is extended online through the use of a webcam. We can discuss this practice in different ways. We might argue that there is only one ritual that takes place, in which people participate through different means, either by participation in the direct offline context at Lourdes, or by participation at home in the mediated online context at Lourdes-france.org. We could refer to this fusion of offline and online participation as an example of the ways in which distinctions between those dimensions have disappeared. However, research indicates that these different ways of participating are not directly comparable (Ana & Sonia, 2017; Machackova & Serek, 2017). Participation through a website does not have the

⁴ Retrieved July 25, 2019, from <http://www.stpixels.com/>

⁵ Retrieved July 25, 2019, from <https://secondlife.com/destinations/romance/wedding>

⁶ Retrieved July 25, 2019, from <https://cemetery.org/>

same meaning or impact as participation through offline means. This is not to argue that one experience is more valuable than the other, but to argue that the specific mix of offline and online features of a ritual impacts the experience of that ritual.

While writing about their research on internet rituals, Marga Altena, Catrien Notermans, and Thomas Widlok state: ‘Despite the alleged modernity of the medium, the Internet, including its rituals, draws on existing traditions and cultural conventions’ (Altena, Notermans, & Widlok, 2011, p. 134) This is undoubtedly true. Rituals that emerge on the internet make use of the ritual repertoire that has been developed in offline contexts over the last centuries: websites offer the opportunity to ‘light a candle’ online, or allow one to ‘e-mail a prayer’ – activities that are clearly inspired by offline rituals. However, the internet has also led to new, sometimes unexpected rituals. These activities do not necessarily fit the often-used definition of ritual as being a traditional and institutionalized performance (which will be discussed in the next section of this Introduction), but they do fit the notion of a ritual as a meaning-making practice, rule-guided, more or less formalized and stylized. We started this Introduction with an example taken from the everyday life of Martin’s son. It is tempting to compare this kind of activity with existing, offline rituals such as saying a prayer before going to bed or meditating on what you did that day. But that would be to miss the core of this ritualized behavior, which is both serious (maintaining friendship) and playful (sending silly pictures), and which differs from any other ‘end of the day’ practice by its rapidity in the back and forth of the messages and the massive amount of contacts and pictures involved.

The risk of comparing (new) digital rituals with (old) offline rituals is to maintain the dichotomy of offline and online culture while at the same time to remain blind to the characteristics and dynamics of rituals in the digital age. As said, we try to avoid these risks by taking the intermingling of offline and online culture seriously, or, to state it more precisely: to acknowledge that life takes place at the offline-online nexus. We see digital rituals not primarily as a variation on offline rituals, but first as rituals that are shaped within a digital context that is always a mixture of offline and online dimensions. Culture, and more specific: ritual, at the offline-online nexus evokes new questions, because it contains new rules, new possibilities, and new limitations. This context is not characterized by taking place online, but rather by interactions between offline and online activities, offline practices and online presentation, offline longing and online fulfilment. In digital culture and digital rituals, offline and online are

always linked, and it is the different ways in which these connections occur that we are interested in in this volume.

The chapters in this book explore digital rituals through a range of different case studies. The remainder of this Introduction explores rituals at the offline-online nexus from a theoretical perspective. First, we elaborate on the concept of ritual. We use the definition of ritual as phrased by our colleague Paul Post, but reconsider the elements of his definition from the perspective of offline-online dynamics: How to conceptualize ritual at the offline-online nexus; what are the pitfalls in exploring and analyzing digital practices *as ritual*? What concepts are useful in the study of rituals at the offline-online nexus? Do we need to re-define and re-invent concepts like authenticity, community, transformation, and liminality in this context? Second, we explore the so-called ritual fields within a digital context. With 'ritual fields' we refer to the classic categorization of rituals in more or less coherent domains, such as: religious rituals, commemorative rituals, leisure culture rituals, art rituals, and life-cycle rituals.

Defining ritual

Ritual is a broad concept; scholars from disciplines such as religious studies, anthropology, liturgical studies, and theatre and performance studies have all studied rituals from their perspectives. Together they form the field of ritual studies which has developed over the past forty years. Rituals can be found wherever people are. In everyday language, the term ritual can have a negative connotation when it is used to describe repetitive and useless acts. However, ritual studies, taken as an academic perspective, looks at ritual as a cultural phenomenon and focusses on the structures, meanings, and functions of civil and religious, collective and individual rituals. It is the latter approach that we will follow.

Defining rituals might imply that there are clear-cut boundaries to the notion of a ritual. In reality, these boundaries can differ depending on the context that is being studied (Grimes, 2014, p. 196). However, there are common criteria, characteristics, or qualities that can be ascribed to rituals, to work towards a so-called polythetic definition of ritual. This approach to defining ritual is derived from Snoek (2006). A polythetic definition works with a set of characteristics that may be applied but do not necessarily have to be applied, as opposed to a monothetic definition that uses exclusive criteria which all have to be applied in all cases. A broad and polythetic definition that would suit the context of rituals

and the spiritual dimension of care, is a definition that Paul Post developed based on Ronald Grimes's work:

Ritual is a more or less repeatable sequence of action units which take on a symbolic dimension through formalization, stylization, and their situation in place and time. On the one hand, individuals and groups express their ideas and ideals, their mentalities and identities through these rituals, on the other hand the ritual actions shape, foster, and transform these ideas, mentalities and identities. (Post, 2015)

Characteristics that can be derived from this definition are repetition, enactment, symbolism, formalization, and stylization. The second part of the definition focusses on possible functions of rituals such as the expressive, social, and ethical functions that rituals can have. Despite the suggestive use of words like 'definition' and 'characteristics', this phrasing does not allow for a straightforward identification of a ritual. Grimes (1990) states that when an act becomes dense with ritual characteristics one can speak of ritualization or even a ritual. Whether or not an act is acknowledged as a ritual is not a matter of definition but is rather a cultural issue.

Tradition, body, and community

In the more commonly used definition of rituals, there are certain characteristics that more or less concern *form* or manifestation, including the notions of tradition, body, and community. The central role these characteristics hold in our understanding of rituals might hinder the development of ritual studies in the context of the digital society, because many digital rituals consist of actions that scholars might not recognize as *ritual* practices. Are we participating in a funeral when we watch it on our smartphone? If not, then why not? In the following, we will discuss the position of tradition, body, and community within digital rituals.

In many approaches to ritual, tradition is key. Altena notes: 'For some, rituals are old, traditional, and constant, while the Internet is contemporary and dynamic' (Altena et al., 2011, p. 133). Ronald Grimes, in his book *Reading, Writing, and Ritualizing* (1993), proposes to renew our view of rituals. He asks some critical questions regarding the study of rituals, the first of which reads (Grimes, 1993, pp. 5–22): Is ritual necessarily traditional? People who engage in ritual practices often deny the inevitability of rituals. What is more, some ritual studies scholars make tradition part of the definition of ritual, defining ritual as the enactment of tradition. Grimes cites Stanley Tambiah's definition

of ritual as ‘a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication [...] content and arrangement are characterized in varying degrees by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition)’ (Grimes, 1993, p. 8). The notion of ‘tradition’, although not explicitly mentioned, is clearly implied in terms as ‘culturally constructed’ and ‘conventionality’. Grimes does not argue that ritual cannot be traditional, but stresses that it is also invented, new, and creative. This also counts for digital rituals: some are traditional and very much linked to older, strictly offline practices; others are new, resulting from (sometimes unexpected) affordances of technology or evolving from new cultural practices into ritual or ritual-like behavior.

A second formal characteristic of the definition of ritual which might hinder studying digital practices *as ritual* is the body. Altena explains that the ‘isolated user of the Internet, cut off from direct interaction with fellow humans, is far removed from the smells, sounds, and sights of rituals experienced in socially shared, bodily experience’ (Altena et al., 2011, p. 133). Catrien Notermans, who studied the website of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, argues against the possibility of replacing the physical pilgrimage to Lourdes by an online pilgrimage, mentioning the body as the main point of difference:

Traveling in organized pilgrimage groups, people can listen to each other’s stories of pain and suffering and offer each other a shoulder to cry on. This performance of pain and mourning is essential to the healing process during pilgrimage. The meaningful sequence of ritual activities that brings about emotional healing during the pilgrimage process, as well as sensory experiences such as smelling incense, witnessing each other’s physical suffering, experiencing bodily exhaustion, hearing pilgrims’ stories and the familiar chants in church, and touching or embracing the grotto all contribute to the profound physical and emotional experience of an actual pilgrimage to Lourdes that virtual pilgrimage cannot offer. (Altena et al., 2011, p. 147)

In a certain sense it is true that some digital rituals are disembodied, or more precisely: less embodied. But it is better to say that the body is involved in other ways than in offline rituals. By focusing too much on what is visible on the screen, we overlook that digital rituals take place at the offline-online *nexus*. The phenomenal rise of the selfie (see Snapchat, Instagram, Tinder) shows how the body is represented in an online environment. Martin’s eldest son, sending snapchat messages at the end of each day, is very aware of his body when he

takes pictures of his body from the waist up with specific facial expressions. On a more physical level we see participants in a predominantly online pilgrimage to Lourdes sing along in front of their screens, mumble prayers, or complete a physical walk before entering the online representation of the grotto (Post & Van der Beek, 2016, p. 48).

A third formal characteristic of the definition of ritual which might hinder studying online practices *as ritual* is community. Altena e.a. (2011) refer to the 'isolated user of the Internet', but with the current possibilities of social media there are serious reasons to presume that the so-called 'isolated user' is embedded in a (worldwide) community of people. One is never alone or isolated on the internet. Our colleague Jan Blommaert wrote a fascinating chapter about a so-called 'lone wolf': Elliot Rodger, the 22-year-old man who shot six people and took his life in a campus shooting in Santa Barbara, California, in May 2014. Rodger left a long memoir documenting in detail the journey he made from childhood to his 'Day of Retribution'. An analysis of this text shows that Rodger was not someone who communicated easily in offline contexts, but that he lived an intense online life in which games, movies, and misogynist platforms known as the 'Manosphere' figured prominently. It was in this online world that the women who rejected him became enemies and criminals, as did the men who were more successful in dating these women. Rodger, in other words, constructed a logic of action in the online world, leading to what he saw as justified revenge and punishment in the offline world. After the killings, he himself, in turn, became an online icon in the Manosphere, a template to be followed. Blommaert's analysis shows the complex interactions between online and offline spheres of knowledge and action, in new types of knowledge-focused communities (Blommaert, 2019). Rodger's online practices are not to be considered rituals, but Blommaert's analysis can be fruitful for ritual studies scholars. First, he makes clear that online social interaction has to be taken seriously. Rodger was acting on his own when he shot his victims and was as such a lone wolf; but he was embedded in a community in which – and that is the second point we learn from Blommaert's analysis – his identity was formed. Here, Blommaert follows Blumer: '[...] social interaction is a process that *forms* human conduct instead of being merely a means or a setting for the expression or release of human conduct' (Blumer, 1969, p. 8). Taking part in an online ritual is a form of social interaction, it acts upon the participants, enriches their knowledge, and forms their identity. They become part of a community of those who have learned the rules; learning – by just partaking in an online ritual or by first following a tutorial – leads to socialization and a sense of belonging. Once

again, Martin's son, snapchatting at the end of the day, is a good example. Partaking in this daily practice provides him with the opportunity to understand himself within that digital community and develop self-awareness.

In using Blommaert's analysis of the Rodger case, we have shifted from characteristics to functions of ritual. We consider rituals first and foremost as performative practices. Here, we follow, among others, Catherine Bell:

[...] the study of ritual as practice has meant a basic shift from looking at activity as the expression of cultural patterns to looking at it as that which makes and harbours such patterns. In this view, ritual is more complex than the mere communication of meanings and values; it is a set of activities that construct particular types of meanings and values in specific ways. (Bell, 1997, p. 82)

In the field of digital rituals, concepts and definitions from ritual theory have been continually turned over and undermined by the ways in which people perform ritual activities in a digital culture. Therefore, it will be more productive to focus on practices that we find in these cultures and study the functions they carry. This does not mean that we are not interested in developing a theoretical understanding of these practices, but rather that we are primarily interested in understanding these practices as they happen before we either welcome them into, or ban them from the field or ritual studies. Here, we follow Durkheim's epistemology, as outlined by among others Anne Rawls (1996): fundamental categories, like 'ritual', follow from the study of concrete empirical details of enacted practices. So, we need to investigate and re-investigate practices each time anew, checking traditional and existing features, characteristics and functions against new and evolving ones.

Liminality and transformation

Certain traditional characteristics of rituals seem to obstruct the development of a theoretical understanding of online practices *as rituals*, such as the notions of tradition, body, and community. In the previous section we have discussed these characteristics and showed how they might also be understood to enrich and challenge the study of digital rituals, taking the specifics of online interactions seriously. There are other, equally well-regarded conceptions of rituals that support this. These theories do not focus on rituals as formalized and traditional but rather look at the transformative qualities of rituals. This notion of transformation can play out both within the ritual repertoire, meaning that rituals change and develop over time, and in the effect rituals have on the people,

objects, and context that play a role in the ritual. The latter notion is most famously captured by the notion of ‘liminality’, as proposed by Victor and Edith Turner (cf. Turner, 1967, pp. 93–111; 1969; 1974). It refers to an experience of ‘in between-ness’ while transitioning from one situation into the next. This category, of being ‘betwixt and between’, defies recognized hierarchies and structures. Attributes of people in a liminal state ‘are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space’ (Turner, 1969, p. 95).

The notion of liminality was one of the first concepts from ritual studies to be mobilized in order to understand online experiences. In studies with suggestive titles like *Cybergrace* (Cobb, 1998), scholars would attempt to grasp the presumed liminal experience of entering ‘cyberspace’. These studies are interested in conceptualizing the internet as a place for ‘virtual experiences’ in the line of Turner’s theory of liminality. For example, Rob Shields, in his book *The Virtual*, sees in the internet a continuation of a long tradition of virtual environments:

Retrospectively, it is clear that there has been a history and succession of ‘virtual worlds’ which anticipate the information and communication technologies to make present what is both absent and imaginary. [...] Virtual space is not only betwixt and between geographical places in a non-place space of telemediated data networks, but participants take on ‘usernames’ or identities, and many surreptitiously engage in activities they might not otherwise consider.’ (Shields, 2003, pp. 11–13)

The usefulness of this model became increasingly questionable when the interaction with online environments became less of an exception and more of an integrated part of day-to-day life. Today, it is hard to imagine that we might experience opening the internet browser on our laptops as an act of defiance to social structures or as a step away from our stable identities and into an unimaginable web of possible manifestations. However, the notion of liminality is still relevant to our understanding of digital rituals today, precisely because it forces us to look out for notions of change and transition.

This dynamic outlook, that occupies such a central role in the theory of liminality, does not only apply to ritual participants, but also to the ritual practices themselves. Rituals, especially when understood as cultural practices, have always changed and developed over time. When societies develop and cultural

values change, ritual desires develop accordingly, and ritual practices are reshaped to fulfill a different function. These shifts can range from impressively large to changes so subtle that they are hardly noticeable. One might think of the need for new rituals when divorces became more common, or of the new types of rituals that evolve when funerals are being held outside a religious setting. As commonsensical as this sounds, however, transformation of rituals can raise complicated questions, such as: what elements of a ritual can be changed, before the ritual starts to lose its essence? Does a ritual have an unquavering essence, or does it consist of a configuration of characteristics that can slowly be transformed into something completely different from what it started out as? In her important volume *Ritual* (1997), Catherine Bell describes this process in the context of liturgical changes considered by the Catholic Church in the 1960s:

It was clear that ritual changed over time; therefore, some parts of the liturgy were historically ‘accidental,’ that is, more a matter of circumstance than revelation. It also seemed clear that rites needed to change to some extent in order to remain relevant to changing communities. To sanction such changes, however, it was necessary to know what parts of Christian liturgy were ‘accidental,’ human, and fallible—and therefore legitimately alterable—and what parts were divine, revelatory, and therefore beyond human tampering. (Bell, 1997, p. 361)

We can easily translate this conversation to discussions on the (im)possibility of rituals in an online environment, including emerging everyday rituals like ending the day with snapchatting. Take for example the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. The contemporary manifestation of this ritual is hard to grasp as it is understood as a free and highly personalized experience. For some it is a journey of social encounters, for others one of individual silence; for some it is a journey towards God, for others a secular journey towards better self-awareness; et cetera. While some voice resistance to this hermeneutically open manifestation of the pilgrimage, most pilgrims chose to celebrate rather than criticize it. However, when researchers started to explore the notion of a ‘cyberpilgrimage’ (cf. Campbell, 2001; Helland, 2002; Hill-Smith, 2011; MacWilliams, 2002), the resistance was great. Both pilgrims and academics would argue that such a thing was a *contradictio in terminis*. The difficulty in the ensuing discussions, was that there is no real consensus about what defines a ‘pilgrimage’. The transformation that was occurring in this field therefore inspired not merely reflections on the phenomenon that was developing, but also

very fundamental discussions on the nature of pilgrimage and whether this ritual had any building blocks on which it relied for its ritual identity. These discussions pop up everywhere we find processes of ritual transformation and can help us to understand these practices more deeply.

Within ritual studies, much attention has been paid to the notion of tradition, as we discussed in the previous section. At the same time, we realize that there is not one ritual that has not changed and developed over time and through space. Much like the online world, rituals are in constant flux and new rituals emerge due to the affordances of technology. This should be understood in two directions: rituals themselves are subject to change, and rituals are activities that can change their participants and the environments in which they are enacted. Moving forward from that realization, the two fields of ritual studies and digital culture are well-suited to each other. What is more, the understanding of rituals through the lens of digital culture, or within the context of digital culture, can help us to be mindful of the constant transformations that take place both in ritual participants, and in ritual repertoires and rituals practices.

Rituals fields and the offline-online nexus

In this book and in our research, we use the broad and polythetic definition of ritual as outlined by Paul Post. In the everyday use of the word ‘ritual’ many associate ritual with religion, tradition, and prescribed behavior. Using Post’s definition, we go beyond this narrow view of ritual and use this concept for both civic, secular, and religious rituals. Moreover, rituals can be institutionalized by governments (e.g. Remembrance Day), universities (e.g. the ceremony at promotions), or law courts (e.g. the robes of the judges), or individual patterns of behavior in relation to social interaction and self-presentation. With the broad and open approach, we go along with the development of ritual studies in the Netherlands in which Paul Post plays a decisive role. In the Netherlands in the 1960s-1990s, the study of ritual coincided with liturgical studies. Halfway the 1990s Paul Post started to plea for a more open approach of liturgical studies. He coined the somewhat tautological term ‘ritual-liturgical’ to put liturgy in the broader context of rituality, declaring every liturgical study to be a ritual study (Post, 1995; 1997; 2002a; 2002b). As of 2010, Post presented the so-called ‘ritual fields’ as a heuristic tool; each field is characterized by its own identity in ritualized cultural practices (Post, 2010a; 2010b; 2011). Actually, Post’s presentation of the ritual fields gives a systematic overview of where to find and study rituals, including the main theoretical frameworks appropriate to the

identity of the ritual repertoires. In the following, we will continue this line of thought. We present five ritual fields – religion, commemoration, leisure culture, art, and life-cycle rituals – and link these to the dynamics of the offline-online nexus. The examples of digital rituals are far from complete, but show how relatively traditional, or better: classic ritual fields now occur at the offline-online nexus. It is important to note that the fields are not closed units; the boundaries are fluid and many ritual-like cultural practices can be categorized in more than one field. The presentation of the five ritual fields gives us, on the one hand, the opportunity to link ritual studies to digital culture studies; on the other hand, it gives rise to theoretical reflections that have not been addressed so far.

Religion

Considering our earlier remark about the limitation of ‘ritual’ to ‘religious ritual’, it might be unwise to start with religion as the first ritual field. However, we cannot ignore the fact that religion is an important context in which rituals occur. Religious places such as churches and mosques are material manifestations of religious ritual repertoires; funerals and marriages (still) frequently take place within the framework of institutional religions. The digitalization of religions, including their rituals, has been studied by among others Heidi Campbell. In 2013, she edited the book *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Campbell, 2013) in which one chapter is devoted to ritual. In this chapter, written by Christopher Helland, one of the key words is ‘authority’. ‘Religious authority plays a key role in determining the rules and regulations associated with people’s interaction with the sacred. Religious authority often dictates the symbols that will represent the sacred, how they will be used, who can use them’ (Helland, 2013, p. 31). In a digital society, Helland argues, the role of traditional authority erodes. While the internet is by no means an environment that is free from regulating principles and institutions, it can have a democratizing effect on different cultural areas. Regarding online rituals, people are free to experiment, to develop their own ritual repertoire and to participate at any moment that suits them. Another key word in Helland’s chapter is ‘authenticity’. Often, discussions in the field of online religious rituals concern authenticity of the ritual experience and the legitimacy of the ritual performance. Often too, an offline ritual is presented as norm to judge participation in similar online rituals. Paul Post and Suzanne van der Beek write in their book *Doing Ritual Criticism in a Network Society*: ‘[The] old dichotomy between modern technology and religion is never far away [...]. Many empha-

size that much of cyberspace [*sic*] ritual is a “recreation” of offline ritual, and that therefore something essential is “missing” (Post & Van der Beek, 2016, p. 78).

Different studies have gone beyond the mechanism of recreation or transfer of rituals to show the links between offline and online environments. Research by our colleague Jan Blommaert explored his own place of residence: Oud-Berchem, near Antwerp in Belgium (Blommaert & Maly, 2019). Many migrants are settled there, making it a superdiverse area. It counts a large number of small evangelical churches catering for specific diaspora audiences from Africa. Posters at the church venues show information regarding the weekly organization of services in the church along with references to websites. One such poster refers to Bethel TV, a globally active religious enterprise based in California. Its YouTube channel has almost 150,000 subscribers. Starting at a small local church in Oud-Berchem, we enter a global network of people who have 24/7 access to the services of Bethel TV and draw spiritual satisfaction from it.

In this book, the chapters by Wahyu Ilaihi and Suzanne van der Beek similarly illustrate the ways in which offline and online environments interact in ritual practices. Ilaihi’s chapter in this book concerns *pesantren*, a form of traditional Islamic education in Indonesia with a strong local character. When the wave of internet technology came to the *pesantren*, many *pesantren* teachers transitioned their teaching methods from offline to online. It changed *pesantren*, both in style and character, including a change in the cultural exclusivity of *pesantren* to an inclusive global culture. The online *pesantren* are increasing rapidly, mostly because Indonesia is not only home to the largest number of internet users and Muslim populations, but also because it is supported by the communal nature of Indonesian culture. The link between social relations and support in the online environment of *pesantren* has led to the emergence of the new patterns and forms of social support in religious education.

Van der Beek’s chapter in this book concerns the Camino, the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, and more specifically: the practice of post-Camino storytelling. For many pilgrims, the Camino is a transformative ritual. Through post-Camino storytelling in digital settings, pilgrims find strategies to incorporate their ‘Camino identity’ in their every-day lives and to operationalize lessons learnt during the pilgrimage.

Commemoration

The second ritual field concerns forms of dealing with the past. In Western culture, we see an abundance of commemorations and other memory practices (Erll, 2011; Erll & Nünning, 2010; Perry, 1999; Winter, 2010), ranging from monuments, memory sites, and war cemeteries, to museums, documentaries, books, and films. Memories, i.e. ‘those images and narratives of the past which circulate in a given social context’ (Erll, 2011, p. 141), are transmedial: they are not tied to one specific medium. Contents of cultural memories can be remediated in an online environment. One thing that distinguishes internet-based forms of memory is their relatively democratic character. In many cases, online memory practices are a collaborative enterprise, initiated, organized, and updated ‘from below’. In those cases, there is no direct or clearly visible authority deciding on what is ‘relevant’ and what ‘marginal’. As Ekatarina Haskins writes in her article on public memory in a digital age: ‘The boundaries between the official and the vernacular, the public and the private, the permanent and the evanescent will cease to matter, for all stories and images will be equally fit to represent and comment on the past’ (Haskins, 2007, p. 405). This is convincingly illustrated by Mike de Kreek in his chapter in this book, in which he describes and analyzes two local memory websites, offering residents a space where they collect and share vernacular memories about particular places or experiences in their neighborhood.

Another example of an online memory practice is The Polynational War Memorial, an online global war memorial to commemorate all who died in wars since 1945, initiated and run by artist Jon Brunberg.⁷ At the moment of writing this Introduction, the online memorial collection contains 108 records, covering 59 wars, which in total displays the names of 578,713 people (combatants and civilians) that were killed in wars since 1945. On the one hand this collection functions as an archive, on the other hand visiting this website and reading (part of) the names of war victims is an act of paying respect. If the visitor is willing to contemplate the names, the website becomes a sacred place. The impact of the website might be transformative, feeding a sense of (political) responsibility and empathy. The boundaries between archive and sacred place seem to be fluid, the visitor finds his position somewhere on the continuum between these two ends.

In many cases offline and online memorials coexist. In the United States, for example, American soldiers who died in the Vietnam War (1955-1975) are

⁷ Retrieved August 28, 2019, from <https://www.war-memorial.net>

commemorated at places like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., but also at an online memorial: The Virtual Wall.⁸ In some cases the online memorial functions as a substitute for a physical place to commemorate. This is the case for Jewish people who died in the concentration camps, for whom there are no personalized graves to go to for commemoration. The digital Jewish Monument may be considered as a substitute to a physical grave, a personalized place to visit for commemorative practices (Faro, 2014, pp. 128–136).⁹ Sarah Griffith's chapter in this book discusses an online monument for the gay victims of the 9/11 attacks, a minority group with little presence in official narratives and commemorations.

Leisure culture

The third ritual field, the field of leisure culture, extends from sports to travelling, festivals, visiting amusement parks, and wandering around nature. Sports and tourism can be categorized as subfields of leisure culture. Many people spend hours of their free time online by checking favorite websites and social media. The daily routine of doing this might be called a 'ritual', as Karl Spracklen does in his book on digital leisure (Spracklen, 2015), relating this routine to identity-making. Others spend time on online gaming and get involved in the rituals that are deliberately programmed by game developers. An example is the mandatory baptism at the start of the shooter video game *Bioshock Infinite* (released in 2013). At the start of the game, the gamer's avatar is guided through a kind of Christian baptismal ritual. The ritual is mandatory for the player in order to proceed with the game (Bosman, 2017). Other types of ritual action in role-playing games, in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting, are beyond the intention on the part of game developers. In her chapter in this book, Karin Wenz gives remarkable examples of death rituals that take place in the context of online games (see also: Bosman, 2016).

An important role of rituals is creating social cohesion, group solidarity, and a sense of togetherness (Durkheim, 1971 [1912]). Leisure culture activities like festivals, pop concerts, and sports competition can be studied as rituals resulting in communities of interests. In many cases, these communities take shape at the offline-online nexus. Ilja Simons performed ethnographic research regarding

⁸ Retrieved August 28, 2019, from <https://www.virtualwall.org>

⁹ Retrieved August 28, 2019, from <https://www.joodsmonument.nl>

three annual festivals in the Netherlands, using Randall Collins theoretical framework of interaction ritual chains (Simons, 2019).

This theory explains how the shared event experience, in the form of interaction rituals, is linked to interactions before and after the event in a chain of rituals. Through these ritual practices, community is performed, making the event a central node in a more complex structure of offline and online interaction. (Simons, 2019, p. 146)

Collins, in his book on interaction ritual chains (2004), states that the emotional energy obtained from a communal ritual, like a festival, stimulates participants to seek similar experiences, which leads to the creation of interaction ritual chains. The chain of rituals can move outside the original event context to an online environment. Simons shows that the events she studied where the participants were bodily present, are preceded and followed up by online practices. These include interactions between event attendees who have met during an event and who prolong their friendship online, and the photographs of the event that are shared on the Facebook page of the event. In many cases, these practices take place outside the control of the event organizers. Through offline and online practices during and around the event, hybrid communities are shaped, performed, and maintained. A hybrid community is defined by Simons as ‘a diverse and dynamic community around shared meanings and symbols consisting of a complementary structure of event practices and online practices’ (Simons, 2019, p. 149). The online practices differ in level of agency: some contributions are creative, leading to new content that represents and/or produces a sense of community, other, such as liking and sharing messages on social media, contribute to the online presence and viral transmission of the hybrid community (Varis & Blommaert, 2018). Both types of activity are important to form and inform the community and to create the experience of being part of it.

Art

The fourth ritual field concerns the participation in all kinds of art and artistic practices and performances. This field includes the etiquette when visiting a classical concert, the respectful silence in the museum, and the seemingly violent behavior in the mosh pit at a rock concert. The fluid boundaries with the field of leisure culture are clear. These ritual-like practices turn time and space into moments and places ‘set apart’; they introduce an attribution of meaning that expresses ideas and ideals that go beyond the mere experience of attending

a concert or being in a museum and mold the identity of the concert hall and the museum as a special place in society. Next to these practices in the field of art, we see the same kind of hybrid communities as in leisure culture, e.g. fan communities of celebrities like pop artists or writers (Heynders, 2016; Hou, 2018). Digital culture has highly influenced the art world. Due to online presence, artists are now able to reach audiences from all over the world. And they can find sources of inspiration from all kinds of cultures, available through the internet. Producing and selling art is easier due to digital DIY tools (Gronlund, 2017). As Kris Rutten writes: ‘Digital technologies have opened up the disciplinary boundaries of art and its focus has increasingly shifted towards process, participation, interaction and dialogue’ (Rutten, 2018, p. 2).

An example of a new digital ritual in relation to art, is the selfie in front of an artwork. Selfies, digital self-portraits, have become ingrained in museum visitors’ practices. Through the selfie the visitor becomes part of the art and s/he can immediately share her/his interaction with the art by uploading the selfie in social media (Giannini & Bowen, 2019). Some museums are even designed as ‘instagrammable’ places to facilitate visitors to make remarkable, original and beautiful selfies.¹⁰ Uploading the selfie is performance of identity and of embodiment. To understand this type of identity work related to the museum as a culturally acknowledged meaningful place, we can confine ourselves to quoting Mead: ‘we see ourselves through the way in which others see and define us’ (Mead, quoted in Blommaert, Lu, & Li, 2019, p. 3). These kinds of practices might seem further removed from rituals than others described in this Introduction. However, there are several reasons to call the identity work by making selfies a ‘ritual’. First, the selfie – making, uploading and sharing it – is a performative practice, i.e. it acts upon the self by just showing the self to the other. There is no need to interpret the image, just showing and seeing is enough to start the identity work as a process of interactional co-construction (Blommaert et al., 2019, p. 3). So, the selfie as a ritual does not express, but rather performs identity. Second, and here we follow performance studies scholar Richard Schechner, the selfie as a practice is ‘twice-behaved behavior’, it has become a culturally accepted way of self-presentation which is both playful and serious (Schechner, 2002, pp. 28–30). However, and this makes it a ritual according to Schechner, the ‘serious’ is dominant. The selfie in the museum has been carefully designed precisely because the persons involved want to show them-

¹⁰ Retrieved August 30, 2019, from <https://www.marresmit.nl/uncategorized/instagrammable-art/>

selves and as such want to give shape to their identity in an act of social interaction.

Live-cycle rituals

The last ritual field concerns life-cycle rituals. Paul Post does not mention this field in the several overviews of ritual fields he has published. However, since churches in western societies have lost their monopoly on birth, relation, and death rituals, we see new rituals emerge and new sources of ritual creativity. Ritual counsellors are active on the internet in marketing their services and many ‘How to...’ websites give advice to people regarding DIY rituals. Nowadays, it is quite easy to buy a coffin online for a funeral, or funny attributes for a wedding.

Life-cycle rituals like weddings, funerals, and festivities around new-born babies, have changed due to processes of digitalization. This goes beyond the aforementioned increase in possibilities for designing your own rituals and finding information. People use online sources to find texts and symbols to enrich a ritual passage which takes place in their families or group of friends. Pictures and videos are immediately uploaded and shared on social media and sometimes rituals are shared through live streaming. Janieke Bruin, in her chapter in this book, shows how algorithmic culture has changed the selection and use of music during funerals. Nicolas Matthee explores the reality of online bereavement and in which manner ritual and ritualized behavior can be observed and studied in this context.

An extreme, rather counter-intuitive example, is the funeral selfie.¹¹ Increasingly, pictures have started to appear on social media of people posing with their dead relatives and friends. This example shows how worlds which are not quite compatible interact through digital media. The funeral is traditionally constructed as private or by invitation only. By posting a funeral selfie, the (in general young or young adult) mourner invites his or her social network to glimpse the ritual. We might call this an example of ‘context collapse’, a clash between the solemn ritual environment of the funeral and the online social networks (Kaul & Skinner, 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Some people reject the funeral selfie as unworthy behavior, claiming that they are disrespectful and

¹¹ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/11/obama-funeral-selfie-tumblr-mandela-teens> (accessed September 3, 2019)

narcissistic.¹² Funeral directors warn mourners to stop taking selfies and call it a tasteless trend.¹³ Jason Feifer wrote a comment worth reading at the website of *The Guardian* as a response to the critique on the funeral selfie:

Many people interpreted funeral selfies as further evidence of millennials' self-centeredness. I didn't. Had my parents' or grandparents' generation grown up with the kind of social media tools that today's teens have, they'd have done equally embarrassing things for all the world to see. This isn't the nature of kids today; it's just the nature of kids. And anyway, when a teen tweets out a funeral selfie, their friends don't castigate them. They understand that their friend, in their own way, is expressing an emotion they may not have words for. It's a visual language that older people – even those like me, in their 30s – simply don't speak.¹⁴

Although we are not sure that the distinction between kids and older people is useful and tenable, we agree with Feifer that we have to reconsider the conceptual framework we use to analyze and interpret the phenomenon of the funeral selfies. It is a new code, a new language, linked to emotion in a context of social interaction. As such, it is a symbol, layered and open for interpretation, immediately understood for those who share the same symbolic language.

Next to the 'traditional' life-cycle rituals that increasingly combine offline and online dimensions, there are new, not-yet explored possibilities of ritualizing everyday online practices, such as the use of Snapchat by Martin's son. Alexandra Samuel wrote an article in the online *JSTOR Daily*, titled: 'Inventing rituals for the digital world'.¹⁵ In this article she explores how to ritualize digital turning points:

¹² E.g. <https://www.businessinsider.com/are-funeral-selfies-bad-2016-5?international=true&r=US&IR=T> (accessed September 3, 2019)

¹³ See: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4207946/Funeral-directors-tell-mourners-stop-taking-selfies.html> (accessed September 3, 2019)

¹⁴ Jason Feifer, Obama's funeral selfie is a fitting end to my Tumblr – Selfies at Funerals, *The Guardian*, December 11, 2013. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/11/obama-funeral-selfie-tumblr-mandela-teens> (accessed September 3, 2019)

¹⁵ See: <https://daily-jstor-org.tilburguniversity.idm.oclc.org/inventing-rituals-for-the-digital-world/> (accessed September 3, 2019)

[...] the kind of digital turning points I get excited about—my daughter’s first tweet, the demise of a favourite social network—is a relatively new kind of life experience. As such, our online milestones are not yet surrounded with the traditions or rituals that mark significant offline turning points.

Samuel proposes rituals for entering a new digital social network (signing up for Instagram, joining a new professional group on LinkedIn), reconciliation rituals in case of online conflicts (e.g. by collaborating on a blog post or setting up a Google hangout). Samuel’s conclusion opens a field of ritual creativity and research:

Once we recognize the value that ritual can bring to our online lives, we can see all sorts of occasions that might deserve some form of personal or social ceremony. From our first moments with a new device or network, to our very last moments on the Internet (which may now take place after we have drawn our last breath), the digital world is both medium and witness to many of the most important moments of our lives.

Dedicated to...

In the previous sections of this Introduction, we have referred several times to the scholarly oeuvre by our colleague Paul Post. This book is dedicated to him at the occasion of his retirement. In his active life as a professor of ritual studies at Tilburg University, Paul Post has initiated many research projects related to changing ritual dynamics. His impressive list of publications shows articles and book chapters regarding changing ritual repertoires and reflections on cases in relation to particular places, communities, and events like disasters and forced migration that are in need of rituals. One of the last fields Paul started to explore was that of ‘rituals online’ or ‘digital rituals’. This field, which has only really started to emerge in recent years, still offers many opportunities for exploration. In this Introduction and the following chapters, we will take up some of the first impetuses Paul has given on these topics.

We are not the first to write about online or digital rituals. Important names in this field include Stephen O’Leary (1996), Nick Couldry (2003), Heidi Campbell (2013), and Teresa Berger (Berger, Bem, & Böntert, 2012). Yet, we have chosen not to invite these established colleagues, but rather to invite fairly young researchers in the field of ritual studies, memory studies, and culture studies. During his professional career, Paul Post has always stimulated and

supported young researchers. He supervised an impressive number of PhD candidates and encouraged his younger colleagues to take part in the research projects and the research networks he was engaged in. In line with this approach we have invited early career researchers to present their work regarding ritual practices in the digital society.

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Studying ritual in contexts of online grief and bereavement: Methodological considerations

Nicolas Matthee

Introduction

This chapter explores the reality of online bereavement and in which manner ritual and ritualized behavior can be observed and studied in this context. Specific attention is granted to some of the most important theoretical concepts that allow the study and understanding of ritual in a digital context. In addition to these concepts, methodological considerations are discussed to explore the use of technology such as Facebook in studying ritual.

Jiang and Brubaker (2018, p. 81) are of the opinion that ‘death is becoming a common part of our online social lives’. One could argue that the use of the word ‘becoming’ underestimates the extent of the intertwined nature of our corporeal and online interactions, personas, and lives. A simple search for the #rip tag on Instagram yields 23 million results. The same search via Facebook delivers a never-ending stream of results consisting of photos, text, and other media. ‘Becoming’ most certainly underestimates the depth of online bereavement already in existence.

Within the context of the network society, human expression is observed in both the spaces of online and offline reality. Although online spaces of expression are the more recent counterparts to what Post (2015a) refers to as the ‘lived reality’, these spaces are spaces of human expression and by extension ritual and ritualized behavior. Therefore, an important introductory note is that bereavement and grief, and the expression thereof in online spaces are not simply reproductions of what happens in offline spaces. While certain elements observed in the ritual context of online bereavement can certainly be traced to its empirical roots in the offline reality, the online context contributes unique and original ritual expressions. In engaging this position, Post and Van der Beek use

the concept of interference. When one assumes a position as offered with interference, cyberspace (the online), and corporeal (the offline) space are profoundly interrelated. Post and Van der Beek (2016, p. 86) offers the following insight: ‘Virtuality to a large extent exists by virtue of that open, interactive relationship, which is not necessarily competitive or exclusive.’

It is necessary to discuss two important concepts that allow us to theorize on rituals in a digital society and specifically the ritualized behavior observed in digital spaces such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat: thanatechnology and post-mortal society.

Thanatechnology

Thanatechnology is an important concept when studying death and bereavement in digital spaces, as technology is the lens used to study the phenomena. While thanatechnology is not a new term, it is constantly supplemented to broaden its scope as technology changes and evolves. The term was originally developed in the work of Sofka (1997, p. 553–574), who stated that thanatechnology is:

technological resources such as videos, computer-assisted instruction programs and interactive videodiscs that can be used to gain information about topics in thanatology.

From the language used it is evident that this definition was conceived in a different technological paradigm than the current one. Technology such as videodiscs (CDs and DVDs) has largely become irrelevant as this technology has been replaced by streaming in most cases.¹

The problem of definitions in the field of technology is that they do not stay relevant for even a moderate amount of time, as is evident from the definition by Sofka (1997) quoted above. Sofka, Cupit, and Gilbert (2012) expand on the original definition by including all forms of communication technology that can be included in death education, grief counselling, and thanatological research.

In the context of this chapter, social networks such as Facebook and Instagram are understood as thanatechnologies as they enable the study of grief and serve as a space for the expression of grief where bereaved communities can connect.

¹ Streaming refers to the process of playing back or viewing media online without necessarily downloading the files.

Post-mortal society

The concept of a post-mortal society is important in this context as this phenomenon fundamentally changes the expression of death and grief. The concept of a post-mortal society also challenges the normative frameworks in terms of dealing with these experiences and therefore challenges our understanding of ritual in the context of death and bereavement.

Sofka, Gibson, and Silberman (2017) identify a few of the key issues informing the discussion around a person's digital afterlife and the post-mortal society, stating that technology is advancing rapidly and humans are creating digital content at an unprecedented pace. When we die, the digital content we have created becomes our digital legacy. This digital legacy will only increase in importance as the information age flourishes, as the digital content created by people provides a rich reflection of the actual people who created the content. This position then presents two possibilities for studying death and bereavement in a post-mortal society:

- 1 The death of a living being and how it affects the digital world. This is especially evident in the context of social media. When a person dies, the nature and character of their online presence changes from a vibrant/living space to a space of grief, bereavement, and remembrance. In some cases, these profiles change again to become spaces of hope and healing. In this way the death of a person (or animal)² profoundly affects the digital world.
- 2 The death of a digital object and how it affects a living being. A good example of this would be the death of a guild member in a game such as World of Warcraft. There was such a case³ not too long ago where a wheelchair bound person died and much to his family and friends' surprise his funeral was attended by many strangers who knew him only as Ibelin, the name of his character in the game. One of the attending strangers mentioned that candles were being lit for him all across Europe. In this case, the death of a digital object/character affected living beings to respond in grief.

² See the Instagram profile of Cairo the Sphynx cat for a good example of the nature of the space changed in the case of the death of an animal. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/cairosphynx/>

³ The original article is in Norwegian (retrieved from https://www.nrk.no/dokumentar/xl/forst-da-mats-var-dod_-forsto-foreldrene-verdien-av-gamingen-hans-1.14197198), but was translated on Reddit by user nihwtf (retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/akbdug/only_when_mats_was_dead_did_the_parents/)

These possibilities are not mutually exclusive and as technological advances integrate with social structures, the likelihood of these two options working in unison become even more prevalent.

Sofka et al. (2017) use the work of Basset (2015) to elaborate on the concept of ‘digital immortality’ or a post-mortal society. The first aspect identified relates to two sets of data. The first is the category of digital data; this type of data relates to what is referred to as the ‘digital legacy’ (Sofka et al., 2017, p. 175) and includes data such as passwords, account information, and digital assets. The second set of data is referred to as the ‘digital selves’ and this data includes personal messages, blogs, and photos. This set of data is also referred to as ‘digital memories’ (Sofka et al., 2017, p. 175). In studying death and bereavement, these are valuable concepts as both the digital legacy and the digital selves are prominent in the ritual space being studied. The reality of these concepts can also be seen in the policies of digital service providers such as Facebook.⁴

Basset (2015) takes this concept further and discusses the issue of intentional versus accidental digital legacy and selves. It has recently become more important to give some thought to our digital legacies and what should be done with this data after we die. Sofka et al. (2017) make an important observation in saying that accidental immortality has the ability to transition into the intentional realm. They share an interesting example of the story⁵ of a son who finds his deceased father’s ghost driver⁶ in a racing game. The son then does not try and beat the father’s ghost lap so that he may preserve the father’s high score.

Sofka et al. (2017) refer to the work of Lisa Hensley as part of the Bereavement in Online Communities Project,⁷ and critically note that virtual world

⁴ For more information on the policies of Facebook, visit <https://www.facebook.com/help/1506822589577997>

⁵ Originally told in Trevor Owens (2014).

⁶ A ghost driver is a representation of the record holder’s car while you race in real time. The aim is to learn from the better driver and eventually improve on the record by mimicking and beating the ghost driver.

⁷ The Bereavement in Online Communities project is discussed by Hensley (2012, pp. 123–125) as being created to initiate the ‘process of understanding the complex dynamics involved in online relationships and the resulting grief and possible disenfranchisement that occur when these relationships end in death’. The initial phase of the project was concluded by 2012 and is what Sofka, Gibson, and Silberman refer to. During this phase, participants were recruited by using a Facebook page and also via the forums of some popular online games such as World of Warcraft and they used the PsychData software to participate in a survey. This survey required participants to engage on the following topics: frequency of contact with

participants (participants through online spaces) experience a complex relationship with online representations of individuals and that rituals occur online to mourn the real-life deaths of online participants.

Sofka et al. (2017) provide a hierarchy of the roles of digital and social media in coping with loss and achieving digital immortality:

- 1 Digital survivor advocacy;
- 2 Preserving digital legacy/Ongoing memorialization;
- 3 Maintaining continuing bonds with the deceased;
- 4 Initial online memorialization;
- 5 Coordination of events and tangible support;
- 6 Creating communities of bereavement for emotional support;
- 7 Sharing the news/Providing and seeking information.

This hierarchy is an important companion to understanding ritualized behavior in the context of online grief. The seven steps identified are confirmed in previous research by the author and are observable in many instances on especially platforms like Facebook. These steps are useful in identifying where and how ritual takes place.

With some basic concepts established, we know ritual takes place in online contexts of grief and bereavement, and that these rituals and ritualized behavior are observable. In the next section, the methodology of studying these instances is explored.

Network ethnography: studying ritual in contexts of online grief and bereavement

Digital spaces are already prominent spaces of human expression. The lived reality of billions of people now includes digital spaces such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and many others. As the technologies that support these spaces develop, it allows for a greater repertoire of possible interactions and this extends to all areas of life. This is evident in the work of Berger (2018), Post and Faro (2017), Post and Van der Beek (2016), and Post (2015a; 2015b), among others. As indicated in these studies, ritual and ritualized behavior are also finding expression in digital spaces. Studying ritual in a digital context

the deceased, notification of death and access to information, degree of overlap between online and offline social networks, grief reactions, and online versus offline bereavement.

poses some methodological challenges to traditional ethnographic methods and in this section, methodology is explored, specifically as it pertains to the ethnographic study of online bereavement.

In response to the challenges of ethnographic study in digital spaces, Kozinets developed what is known as netnography. As Kozinets (2015, p. 1) note, netnography ‘is the name given to a specific set of related ethnographic, data analysis, ethical, and representational practices, conducted using the social and cultural data that people share freely through the internet’. With the rapid development of internet and thanatechnologies such as Facebook and Instagram, this definition of Kozinets warrants some further thought especially within the domain of research ethics. This is discussed in detail in the section regarding ethical ethnography.

Netnography is a useful construct in exploring how bereavement is studied in online spaces, but some further philosophical and methodological underpinnings need further elaboration.

Digital field sites as nodes

Thanatechnology provides a complex context for the researcher to study. To aid in the positioning of ethnography in the network society, the work of Howard (2002) and Barnard, Cilliers, and Wepener (2014) is discussed.

Howard (2002, p. 561) suggests the concept of ‘network ethnography’. This type of ethnography does not exclude methods such as active or passive observation, immersion, and interviews. The first important conceptual advance is the definition of field sites.⁸ In a traditional ethnographic study, certain territories or sites are identified for study. In network ethnography, the researcher has to identify a perceived community and then select important nodes in the social network as field sites. This is especially helpful since the study of death and bereavement in online spaces does not provide the researcher with the luxury of a physical site/space to study. These networks revolve around important nodes in the social network. In many instances, the central node or field site is the Facebook page of the deceased, but as empirical data show (Matthee, 2018, pp. 147–151) this is not always the case. As Howard (2002) notes, the fact that the node in some cases differs from the position of the node in other cases does not dilute the data, for the object of the research – the social interaction between community members and their continued bonds with the deceased – remains constant.

⁸ Referred to as ‘casus’ in the work of Post and Faro (2017, p. 29).

The second important conceptual advance lies in the analysis of the network in question. When the node or field site has been identified, the network associated with that node is analyzed; this, in turn, helps the researcher identify the most appropriate participants to help with the interpretation of the phenomenon. A simple but functional example would be contacts/friends⁹ congratulating the deceased on their birthday, completely oblivious to the fact that this person has indeed died. Interviewing or having this person as a research participant would yield little in the way of usable empirical data. Therefore, within network ethnography, networks can be analyzed to provide the researcher with the appropriate research participants or direct the researcher to observe in the appropriate position of the network.

The third aspect Howard (2002) discusses is the support in terms of sampling with the use of network ethnography. With the use of network ethnography and adhering to the node identification as discussed, large populations (as is common in online social networks) can be dissected and in this manner, specific nodes or cases are easier to identify. Howard (2002) says that network ethnography empowers the qualitative researcher, who is then able to define the universe of cases themselves. This is especially valuable when studying online spaces, for the number of possible cases is massive and identifying cases can seem an insurmountable obstacle for the researcher. Although it must be said, in more recent times networks such as Facebook have made it decidedly easier to identify nodes in the network with their algorithms.

To conclude the discussion on Howard's contribution and his criticism of ethnography in a network society, it is evident that Howard contributed to the early criticism of the method and succeeded in proposing a theory for enhancing the method. With his thoughts on network ethnography, Howard aided in the conceptual development and migration of the method of ethnography specifically for the network society. As early criticism, Howard's suggestions are notably open and flexible, a characteristic of early methodological evolution. We now turn to the work of Barnard et al. (2014) to further explore and illuminate the place of ethnography in studying the network society.

Plotting the nodes

Howard's (2002) early thought on doing ethnography in the network society and especially in online contexts, yielded some interesting similarities when com-

⁹ 'Friends' in this sense, interpreted in the way Facebook attributes this status to those who connect with you in this space.

pared to the work of Barnard et al. (2014). Howard's idea of nodes in the network can certainly be interpreted as similar to the idea explored in the work of Barnard et al. (2014, pp. 49–64)¹⁰ with reference to the dots on a blank page.

It is necessary to note that the dots as they are used in the work of Barnard, Cilliers, and Wepener are used to discuss the instances of liturgical ritual that have been studied. Barnard et al. (2014, p. 50) refer to their method of empirical qualitative research as follows: 'Let us first describe our dot-splashing process, in other words, the basic research design that we use in our research on liturgical studies, and then return to the character of the dots.' They make the point that their methodology is primarily ethnography and describe the various approaches used in ethnographic studies.

The researchers then discuss the character of these dots. Without going into too much detail, the character of the dots refers to the different levels of the interpretation of a liturgical ritual. This means that the dots can, at their most basic level, be interpreted as instances of liturgical ritual awaiting different levels of interpretation. This implies that they are very similar to the nodes in the network as understood by Howard (2002). These nodes are identified by the researcher, either in accordance with the researcher's own criteria or with the help of an algorithm as is popular in online contexts. These nodes then await interpretation by the researcher, but in many cases, they already contain one level of interpretation by the participant, as is evident in contexts such as Facebook.

If we then equate the dots and the nodes with each other, the only differentiating factor is the canvas (or lack thereof). Therefore, both the dots and nodes refer to instances of observable ritual phenomena such as the ritual dance in the liturgy of an African Initiated Church or the lighting of a digital candle on Facebook in remembrance of the dead. But the canvas or ontological nature of these rituals are different. Although Howard does not pay much attention to this factor, we see a prominent emphasis in the work of Barnard, Cilliers, and Wepener. The blank sheet (canvas) as understood by Barnard et al. (2014, pp. 59–60) refers to the ritual as it is ontologically understood. Thus, we have two perspectives, that of the nodes as part of the greater network canvas, and that of the dots on the blank sheet. In this chapter, a synergy of the two perspectives is proposed.

¹⁰ The original idea stems from the work of Barnard, Klomp, Sonnenberg, Belderbos, and Van Andel (2009).

Toward a network ethnography

At this point we find the nodes concept (Howard, 2002) integrated into the blank sheet concept (Barnard et al., 2014). This synergy serves several purposes:

- 1 This synergy isolates the nodes from the greater network in order to study them in a qualitative manner. When the nodes are still integrated into the greater network, they fluctuate frequently and may completely change character, which will make the process of interpretation more complex. In the words¹¹ of Barnard et al. (2014, pp. 54–55): ‘The process of adding the dots [nodes] to the blank sheet is pushed on by a process that can be verified and expressed in rational and discursive language.’
- 2 This synergy aids in the identification of ritual markers. Within a network such as Facebook, it is difficult to speak of ‘splashing dots’ on the blank sheet. The central nodes or field sites are dependent on and constructed by their relation to the other nodes in the network. Therefore, the metaphor of ‘splashing’ will not be illuminating. Barnard et al. (2014, pp. 54–55) mention that the character of the dots does not only include splashing, but they are also laid out like graphics that can be imitated. This is much closer to the idea of nodes as they are understood in this chapter.
- 3 Continuing with the movement in the work of Barnard et al. (2014), the idea of splashes turning into laid-out graphics takes the concept into the realm of art and artistic procedure. Howard’s (2002) contribution on network ethnography and nodes is valuable but does not allow space for the artistic and abstract nature of ritual studies. Therefore, nodes are presented as part of a blank sheet or canvas to emphasize the artistic nature of the nodes in expressing the ritual being studied through ethnography. Networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and even World of Warcraft (Matthee, 2015) rely heavily on expression through image and sound and therefore a methodology that does not create space for artistic interpretation will not suffice, as is the case in Howard’s original discussion.
- 4 In this synergy the ontological character of the rite is respected. This is extremely important for studying ritual through ethnographic methods, especially in the network culture. The blank sheet is in a certain sense the ultimate mystery, which once unraveled may show us the ‘true’ nature of the phenomena we observe. Of course, speaking of unravelling is merely theoretical, for we are forever burdened by our own interpretations and those of others;

¹¹ The phrase in square brackets was added by the author of this chapter.

therefore, we can never truly grasp the objectivity that eludes us. This highlights the paradoxical issue of studying ritual in the network culture, as Barnard et al. (2014, p. 59) explain:

In other words, the blank sheet is the rite as it is ontologically understood. In this sense, it is something in itself, although we have no other access to the liturgical ritual, to the blank sheet than by way of the dots that we ourselves splash onto the sheet.

By laying out the nodes on the blank sheet, we sculpt a gateway into the nature of ritual in an online context, which is illuminated by the nodes, and through our interpretations and those of others, we can glimpse something of the nature of human interaction and ritual taking place in this complex space.

In exploring the methodological character of studying ritual in online contexts of grief and bereavement, it becomes evident that the rituals taking place in these spaces are ethically challenging to study.

Ritual studies, ethical ethnography, and Facebook

Ethnography that includes bereaved participants is already a sensitive area of inquiry, and with the migration of the bereaved participants' expressions into online spaces, it becomes even more complex. Therefore, it is important that some time is allocated to the discussion of the ethical implications of studying bereaved communities and individuals in cyberspace.

The study of grief in an online context has only increased in popularity in recent years.¹² With academic reflection becoming more popular in this particular context, so ethical responsibility increases.

To assist in theorizing ethical ethnographic research and methodology in an online context the work of Carmack and DeGroot (2014) is used, although the work of others such as Eynon, Schroeder, and Fry (2009), Lange (2007), Musambira, Hastings, and Hoover (2007), and Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides (2012) also inform the discussion. Carmack and DeGroot (2014, p. 317) propose certain categories that need to be taken into account in an ethical study of death in cyberspace and two of these categories are discussed as they are persistently found across most online spaces.

¹² Some academic work dealing with the issues includes Carmack and DeGroot (2014), Giaxoglou (2014), Hedtke and Winslade (2017), Krysinska and Andriessen (2010), Moreman and Lewis (2014), Sofka et al. (2012), and Van Ommen (2016).

Privacy and anonymity

Issues of privacy and anonymity constitute a large part of the core discussion around the ethical study of death and grief in an online context. It is evident that researchers and users/architects of digital spaces such as Facebook themselves do not have a proper grasp on the concept of privacy online.

An example of the issues of privacy would be the recent epidemic of fake news that plagues social network feeds all around the world. Holt (2007), Khaldarova and Pantti (2016), Kucharski (2016), Marchi (2012), and Williamson (2016), and all deal with the subject of fake news from different perspectives, with the common denominator being that an online public space or a networked public space (Ballantyne, Lowe, & Beddoe, 2017) is a difficult space in which to apply the traditional concept of privacy. There have been little, although valuable, academic reflection on this dilemma; we see a strong reaction from the public and internet journalists to the issue of privacy in cyberspace.

Within the context of online grief and related ritual practices, the object of inquiry is Facebook for the most part, but also other online platforms such as Instagram and various online cemeteries. The nature (public, private, or controlled) of these spaces is a contentious issue in current technological and social discourse. It can, however, be concluded that these spaces are for the time being treated as public spaces or public networked spaces (Ballantyne et al., 2017), and even the closed or private group settings that Facebook implements only serve as a method of control and does not ensure exclusivity.

Therefore, no concrete boundaries are established to delineate the public space from the private space. Facebook published what they call ‘community standards’ to establish some form of boundary, but even here no mention is made of public versus private space; it is explicitly stated, however, that a person’s personal information may not be published without their consent. Personal information as understood within this context includes information such as a person’s name, telephone number, and email address.

Therefore, people that use Facebook and other social media to post personal thoughts and communications such as old love letters, poems et cetera, are provided with the opportunity to become fully aware of the fact that when they are posting their thoughts, photos, emotions, and whatever else they decide to post, they are posting this information to a space where the public can access it whether directly or indirectly. Burkell, Fortier, Yeung, Wong, and Simpson (2014), in their article ‘Facebook: public space, or private space’, draw a preliminary conclusion in stating that: ‘we concede (as these data suggest we must)

that online social networks are indeed viewed and treated by participants as “public” spaces.’

The author takes the following stance in his own research relating to ritual and online bereavement:

Even though this information (regarding the participants) can be used and accessed publicly, no names (or rather pseudonyms) are mentioned in this research. No photos of people will be shared in this research. No reference will be made whereby a person can be identified through a statement. This decision is made in order to be respectful toward bereaved communities as well as the expressions that people articulate without considering the public nature of their digital utterances.

Researcher lurking

Proceeding from the idea of online space as primarily a public space, for the time being, this brings us to the ethicality of lurking in these spaces. Carmack and DeGroot (2014, p. 321) choose to use the word ‘lurking’, which is difficult to interpret positively. This might indicate their stance on the topic, but in this chapter, the term ‘observation’ is preferred. Observation represents the intention of the researcher, i.e. not to lurk (hidden and potentially threatening) but rather to observe as objectively as possible. The aim of observation is to learn about the way in which people express themselves online and to use this knowledge to make a positive contribution to the relevant theoretical frameworks that inform the praxis in question.

Ethically speaking, the domain of the researcher as an invisible observer in an online space, is an area about which little research is available to guide observers. Carmack and DeGroot (2014) elaborate on two points that are important to this discussion.

Firstly, in the context of death and grief in an online context, the researcher generally tries to avoid further traumatizing or disrupting the bereaved communities. One of the possibilities of researcher observation is that information can be accessed publicly (therefore legally in most cases), without the researcher actually interacting or disrupting communication within the bereaved community.

A second possibility or possibly a risk is what Carmack and DeGroot (2014, p. 321) refer to as ‘emotional rubbernecking’. This term refers to people (researchers included) embracing the availability of grief online as a form of entertainment. This form of entertainment is perhaps best illustrated by the popular

‘I just came here to read comments’ meme¹³ where a character is busy eating popcorn while watching a movie, the movie in this case is the comments on the specific post. Therefore, indicating that the unfolding of the narrative in the comments, as is popular on Facebook, provides a gossip-like interplay between the public and private lives of those involved. As with the first option, if the public information is simply consumed without any interaction, the bereaved community is not disrupted, but in many cases, people feel the need to comment on certain posts or other interactions, and then involve themselves in ways that are generally unfavorable to the community.

As is evident, this issue of ethics in an online context is a difficult area to address. In recent times a variety of social networking sites have granted their communities the opportunity to have a private profile (the level of privacy differs depending on the options chosen) which are only accessible to certain people. To an extent, this blocks researchers and other people from lurking (or observing), even though there are many people who still share access to their profiles publicly.

Within the context of network ethnography and ritual studies, participant observation is one of the primary methods of ethnographic enquiry into the ritual taking place, and therefore enters the realm of ‘researcher lurking’ when applied to an online context. To avoid the participant observation (as done in gathering the empirical results) turning into ‘researcher lurking’, the following considerations can serve as guidelines:

- 1 The owner of the page is notified that it is being observed for research purposes via a personal message on the relevant platform and in cases where the original owner is also the deceased the relative/connection managing the page is notified. As these pages are public spaces, no notification is necessary, but to study these spaces ethically the choice can be made to initiate contact with the relevant party(ies).
- 2 To respect the sanctity and ritual nature of these spaces, the decision can be taken that the researcher may not participate in the discussions and comments on the page. This choice helps to avoid the risk of re-traumatizing participants on the page.

Even with proper preparation and theorizing on the ethicality of this type of research, many grey areas remain. As studies on online grief are in many ways

¹³ Retrieved from <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/766053-popcorn-gifs>

explorative in nature, extreme caution should be exercised in doing the research, ideally informed by the most recent research on the ethicality of the issues at hand. Calvey (2018, p. 479) deals with this issue by labelling it as ‘covert research’ and more specifically ‘cyber-ethnography’. From a different perspective, they are of opinion that:

- 1 The research domain (cyberspace) is public, therefore ‘researcher lurking’ is not invasive or intrusive.
- 2 The research does not harm the participants in any way because of the distance and remoteness between the researcher and the researched.

Calvey (2018) holds that these two points are generally acceptable, but the whole issue becomes more complex when sensitive topics are studied, and therefore observation methods must adhere to a much more restricted and bounded investigation. Even though the ethnography as described in this chapter is limited to be as ethical as possible, the aim of the research is to contribute to the theoretical frameworks that support the current praxis of mourning and other ritualized behavior in cyberspace. Therefore, the research should at no point intend to disrupt or harm participants.

Conclusion

Online grief and bereavement, and the rituals taking place in these contexts are complex and multi-layered. The fact that lived reality now include both offline and online spaces, challenges traditional notions regarding how ritual is studied and observed resulting in the need for new methods. Although both offline and online contexts are spaces of human expression, the nature of the spaces differ and therefore require tailored methodologies to study them.

This chapter explored network ethnography as a possibility of understanding and doing ethnographic research in contexts of online bereavement. Accompanied by concepts such as thanatechnology and the post-mortal society, steps were taken toward establishing a framework to help identify and map where and how ritual takes place. Finally, some time was spent in exploring the emerging ethical challenges as they become relevant in the context of online bereavement. There are many areas of online bereavement and the rituals that take place in this context that challenge traditional and normative categories regarding ritual studies. Some of these challenges include:

- the boundaries of space and time in a digital context;
- spatial proximity in the ritual space;
- traditional notions of embodiment;
- public versus private space; and
- the authenticity of virtual worlds.

This chapter emphasized the importance of exploring the context of digital ritual and specifically how it is performed and studied as part of online bereavement and the related expressions. As Post (2015a, p. 11) note, ‘cyberitual has taken its inevitable place in ritual studies, although it remains under construction.’

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Spontaneous morality development in online affinity spaces for neighborhood commemoration

Mike de Kreek

In our network culture totally different and new spaces have developed. In cyberspace there are new forms of location-based communities. No communities based on membership, ideology or doctrine, but open spaces where people find each other in a shared interest: fluid communities, in jargon called ‘affinity spaces’. Places where people are close to each other because of affinity. (translated from Post, 2018, p. 6)

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss a study of local memory websites from the perspective of affinity spaces for new commemoration rituals in which moralities are shared. Local memory websites offer residents a space where they collect and share memories about particular places or experiences in their neighborhood. These digital memories consist of combinations of audio recordings, videos, pictures, and text. Both professionals and researchers have noted the potential of such websites to foster the wellbeing of a neighborhood and its individual residents. In their studies, they mention a range of social effects that ultimately could build a stronger community (Burgess, 2006; Garde-Hansen, Hoskins, & Reading, 2009; Klæbe, Adkins, Foth, & Hearn, 2009; Stillman & Johanson, 2007). A pre-study led me to the questions how organizational characteristics are connected to online dynamics, and what kind of framework could be used to describe the social effects these connections produce. Looking for answers, I conducted a thorough double case study of two local memory websites in Amsterdam: the Memory of East, and the Memory of West (De Kreek, 2016). The social effects were described in terms of empowerment on individual, group, and community level. Both websites’ dynamics were shown to foster

empowerment on collective levels, the levels I was most interested in. Moreover, I showed how these findings in terms of social effects were embedded in the development of contextual and organizational aspects in both cases. By reinterpreting part of these findings, I explore arguments that local memory websites are non-institutional affinity spaces that facilitate commemoration rituals in which shared moralities develop.

Commemoration and morality: From myth through religion to institution?

Contemporary places of commemoration should be open for a plurality of appropriations, where the current diversity of people can find the space for the performance of their memorial rituals (Post, 2018). Furthermore, the ritual itself should offer space for various adaptations. The ritual then becomes an open hermeneutic space where many can enter based on their own preferences, although it still offers soft boundaries to move within (Post, 2018). In the digital age '[n]etwork media can turn individuals separated in time and space into a community through shared interests' (Post & Van der Beek, 2016, p. 82). Here Post talks about fluid communities where people find each other based on shared interest and relates them to 'affinity spaces' (Post, 2018). An affinity space is 'a place or set of places where people can affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class, culture, ethnicity, or gender. They have an affinity for a common interest or endeavor [...]' (Gee, 2004, p. 67). Gee emphasizes that 'what people have an affinity with (or for) in an affinity space is not first and foremost the other people using the space' (p. 77).

Commemorating rituals are related to the development of shared moralities. Misztal (2003), in her reading of Durkheim, describes how Durkheim arrives at an institutional solution for the problems modern societies face with shared moralities. In early societies, social cohesion was generated by a shared morality that developed as an effect of collective rituals and symbols that commemorated and celebrated a mythical origin. Most of these morality rituals were permeated by spirituality or religion and expressed rules or laws. During rituals group solidarity and moral consensus were formed and reformed among participants, especially if they consisted of bodily practices and were able to touch the participants' emotions. The historical continuation of such a collective memory required a community that was delimited by space and time.

The cohesive national morality in modern societies is under pressure by various developments (Misztal, 2003). First, secularization diminishes the role religions used to have in rituals that generated morality. Second, the state's ability to impose a unifying national collective memory decreases by contemporary division of labor which, instead, creates a plurality of specialized morality spaces. Third, we witness the emergence of, on the one hand, community-based small memories searching for identity, and on the other hand global memories facilitated by the social media of the digital age. According to Misztal, Durkheim 'sees intermediary institutions, located between the individual and the state, as capable to act as an effective buffer against political domination and social fragmentation' (2003, p. 130). This way, Durkheim claims that people engage in a civic morality based on the conviction that they are interdependent and have an affection for the collective. Misztal states that by envisioning the emergence of institutions as the structures to arrive at new morality, Durkheim privileges institutions like the law.

The above leads to the question whether local memory websites can be considered as non-institutional affinity spaces for commemoration rituals in favor of morality development. And, if they can, how they relate to social facts that tend to persist and do not renew themselves. Before I reinterpret the findings of the conducted study along these lines, a thorough description will follow of the cases, the applied methodology, and the findings themselves.

The cases: Two local memory websites and their background

The two cases under study were the websites and communities called the Memory of East and the Memory of West, referring to particular neighborhoods in Amsterdam. The Memory of East was initiated by the Amsterdam Museum in 2003, and the district council of Amsterdam West followed this example in 2004 with the Memory of West.

In 2001 the Amsterdam Museum started with preparations for a neighborhood exhibition, called 'East, an Amsterdam Neighbourhood' (Ernst, 2006). The East area had a highly diverse population demonstrating various lifestyles and social backgrounds. The Amsterdam Museum was less known in this neighborhood, which is why it also wanted to promote itself among the inhabitants. In collaboration with a social welfare institute, an outreach project for the neighborhood was set up in 2003. Part of the project towards the exhibition consisted of collecting and sharing local memories on a website called the Memory of East. The aims with this activities consisted of 'improving social

cohesion and accessibility, increasing skills and helping people to become better acquainted with art and culture, as well as the history of Amsterdam' (Ernst, 2006, p. 110). The exhibition finished in 2004, but, to the present day, the participants are still actively collecting memories and commenting on them online.

Inspired by the Memory of East, the Memory of West was initiated in 2004 by the local government of a city district in 'New West' who partnered with a local community center. In 2000, some of the district's areas with high concentrations of a few ethno-cultural groups were identified for urban renewal. The aim of urban renewal programs was to foster greater socio-economic diversity and resilience. These redevelopment projects were set up in order to produce social cohesion by differentiation of: 'a larger variety of apartments and environments as well as inhabitants' (translated from Hellinga, 2005, p. 86). In this context, the Memory of West aimed at 'increasing social cohesion in Amsterdam West, preventing social isolation among the inhabitants, improving the memory skills of the elderly and creating more tolerance among young and old by means of knowledge and understanding about each other and each other's past' (translated from Bekker & Van Helbergen, 2010, p. 1). The website is still active today, both in terms of new stories and comments on them in the comment fields.

Below, I describe the most characteristic contextual and organizational aspects of both cases. The focus on precisely these aspects was based on a field study of eighty local memory websites (De Kreek & Van Zoonen, 2013a).

The Memory of West: Context and organization

Context – Amsterdam New West predominantly came into being in the 25 years following the war. People who moved there considered themselves as pioneers. Gentrification-driven city renewal started to play a role in the nineties. Restructuring certain neighborhoods supposedly would dissolve the concentrations of ethnic groups and would increase the market value. These developments received a growing amount of criticism and stimulated the sentiment of being pioneers and newcomers in New West. The participants in the Memory of West wanted to collect stories that celebrated this pioneering character by expressing the incentives and experiences of the diversity of these adventurers.

Partners – Since 2006, the core team of the Memory of West consisted of a tight group of cultural entrepreneurs, volunteering professionals, and active residents. These entrepreneurs have been able to set up subsidized collaborations with other organizations creating win-win situations in which mutual aims would overlap or complement each other. Consequently, the memory

collecting activities were strongly embedded in the partners' regular core business, which created sustainable collaboration.

Aims – The aims of the Memory of West are elaborated from abstract to concrete. On an abstract level it aims for social cohesion, social participation and belonging. It also elaborates on these aims, such as stimulating contact across ages and backgrounds, sharing stories and emotions related to the neighborhood, and improving knowledge about the socio-cultural history. On the concrete level of participation of vulnerable citizens, the Memory of West mentions improving self-esteem of youngsters, women, and seniors. A second noteworthy aim is that in relation to social cohesion, it wants to improve tolerance. Tolerance, according to the website, is the growth of reciprocal knowledge and understanding which is attributed to the sharing of memories.

Categories – The Memory of West has a category 'News' on the website, but also 'Stories about the present'. Most contributions in these categories, like the name indicates, account for issues, experiences and events that are embedded in the present or the recent past. With 'Stories about the present', the Memory of West initiated projects with groups of participants ranging from the youth to the elderly. Individual writers also contributed to this category on their own behalf. This results in a combination of content about the more distant past (around 2000 items) and the recent past (around 1000 items).

Success – In the projects of the Memory of West, digital memories about various other locations in New West were collected and intentionally produced by different participants. Success was experienced in terms of variation in the memories and diversity among the commemorators.

The Memory of East: Context and organization

Context – The main parts of Amsterdam East were developed in the sixty years before the Second World War. Once gentrification processes started in the seventies, many residents rejected the city renewal and the government facilitating it. A wish to preserve developed and was also present among the participants of the Memory of East. Collecting stories and pictures gave them a chance to focus on preserving the past, before it got lost.

Partners – Between 2003 and 2010, workshops were provided for target groups of other organizations, without collaborating fundamentally at an organizational level. In 2010, a transfer of responsibility to the residents occurred which led to disappointment for some participants who left. From that moment, only residents who strongly identified with the more distant past of Amsterdam East and had time to invest made up the team that collected memories. They

kept organizing small-scale workshops, but were not able to build up significant collaborations.

Aims – On an abstract level, also the Memory of East aims for social cohesion, social participation, and belonging in the neighborhood. It stimulates contact across ages and backgrounds by sharing stories and emotions related to the neighborhood. The nurturing of knowledge about the socio-cultural history also plays a role. On an individual level, the Memory of East limits the concrete aims to improvement of computer skills.

Categories – The Memory of East used to have a category ‘News’, but it was used only occasionally for announcements. Moreover, spreading announcements was not regarded as a core activity, which is why it ended up in disuse. Consequently, the Memory of East predominantly invited people to contribute memories about the distant past, which tended to attract people over the age of sixty who liked to share their childhood memories.

Success – After 2010, a new core group developed the idea that success, in terms of high numbers of published stories and visitors, would convince the Amsterdam Museum to continue financing the web hosting. Quantitative success was feasible, because there were some specialists in a limited set of topics. In addition, spreading new memories through Twitter and Facebook reached a rather steady group of visitors and elicited comments. The limited set of topics fitted the sentiment of preserving the distant past since they covered, among others, the Jewish past, former neighborhood shops, and former soccer clubs.

Empowerment meets narrative in online dynamics

In order to identify a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the social effects of both websites, I conducted a systematic review of the existing literature about local memory websites, from which I developed an analytical model which identifies empowerment on individual, group, and community levels (see p. 51). This model aligns directly with empowerment theory: ‘a multilevel construct applicable to individual citizens as well as to organizations and neighbourhoods’ (Rappaport, 1987, p. 121). Potentially, local memory websites thus offer: ‘a mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs’ (Rappaport, 1987, p. 122).

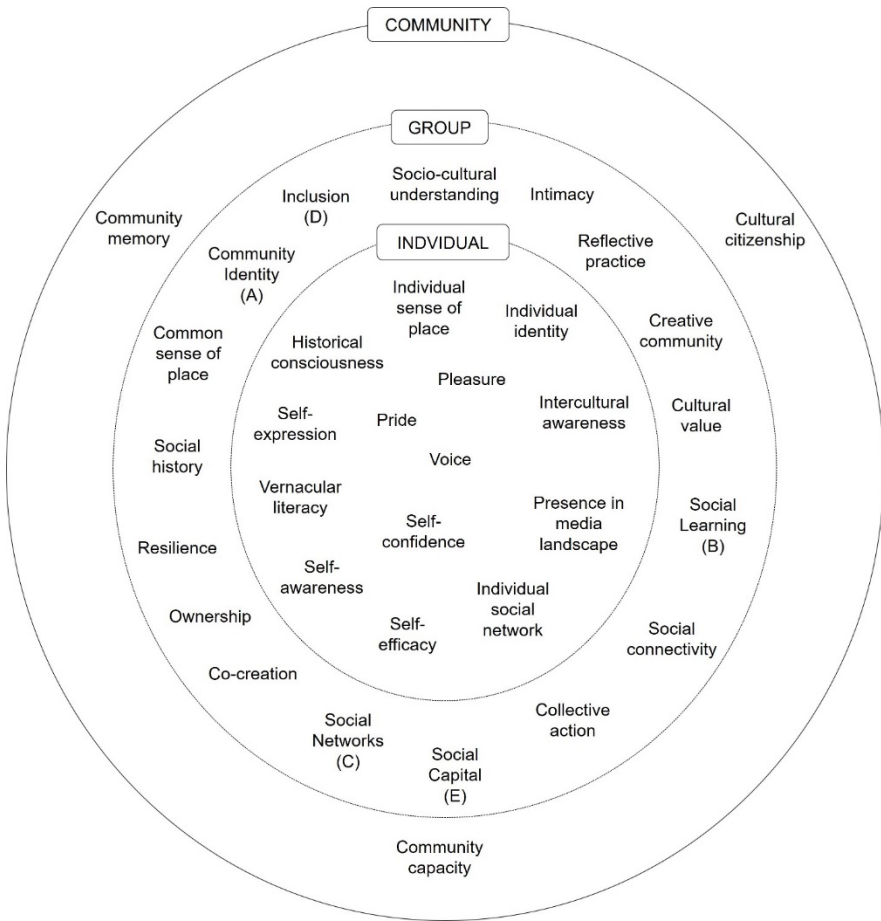


Figure 1: Analytical model for the social effects of a local memory website (De Kreek & Van Zoonen, 2013b)

Existing research has identified how individuals can be empowered through their participation in local memory websites, i.e. through experiencing pleasure, acquiring self-confidence or digital skills (Burgess, 2006). Much less is clear, however, about how local memory websites empower specific participating groups, and the wider community in which they operate.

I used the analytical model to focus the research question on the influence of organizational characteristics of online local memory websites on the empowerment of participating groups and the wider local community. However, I still needed an approach to connect the online dynamics of the websites to collective empowerment. I tackled this by using a combination of two narrative approaches

to study the websites. The first approach consists of Rappaport's 'empowerment meets narrative' model (1995, p. 795) according to which personal stories and collective narratives are important resources for empowerment. He argues, among other things, that inclusion in a collective identity is determined by 'what is allowed to be remembered' (Rappaport, 1998, p. 229). People who can relate to a collective narrative, experience inclusion in the collective identity, and those who do not have a connection, feel excluded from it. In addition, Rappaport states that the mutual influence between personal, group, and community narratives parallels the interdependencies across similar levels of empowerment (Rappaport, 1995; 2011).

The second approach was taken from Boje's work on organizational storytelling which provides a narrative method to identify collective aspects in large collections of stories (Boje, 2001; 2008). According to this approach, personal stories are not only part of someone's personal discourse, but also part of a 'complex system of a collectively construed [discourse] of organizational "reality"' (Luhman & Boje, 2001, p. 163). This 'reality' as such can unintentionally or intentionally exclude or include people or groups, as with Rappaport's claims about collective narratives. Changes in organizational context and hegemony of individual or group discourses can force one 'reality' into a next one. Assuming that organizational storytelling has similar dynamics as neighborhood storytelling, the narrative methods applied in the former are applicable in the latter. Consequently, I have adopted 'story network analysis' as formulated by Boje (2001) to analyze the features of the online memories. This involved scraping the websites for the public features of the memories and complementing this with non-public elements from copies of both databases. The resulting data, covering more than ten years of activity, was subject to an exploratory data analysis (Tukey, 1977), for which the analytical model arrived at in Figure 1, provides the sensitizing concepts, i.e. 'directions along which to look' (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). The next section shows the results of the exploratory data analysis of both websites in terms of collective empowerment and its relation with online dynamics and the organizational forces behind these dynamics.

Collective empowerment expressed in online dynamics

In order to arrive at meaningful elements in the online dynamics and useful concepts, I iteratively explored possible relations between patterns in the data and concepts from the analytical model in Figure 1. This resulted in three crucial indicators and a focus on three concepts that are described below.

I identified three composite indicators of collective empowerment: online diversity, online activity, and online participation. The developments of these indicators for each case are depicted in Figure 2, which gives a heuristic summary of the findings.

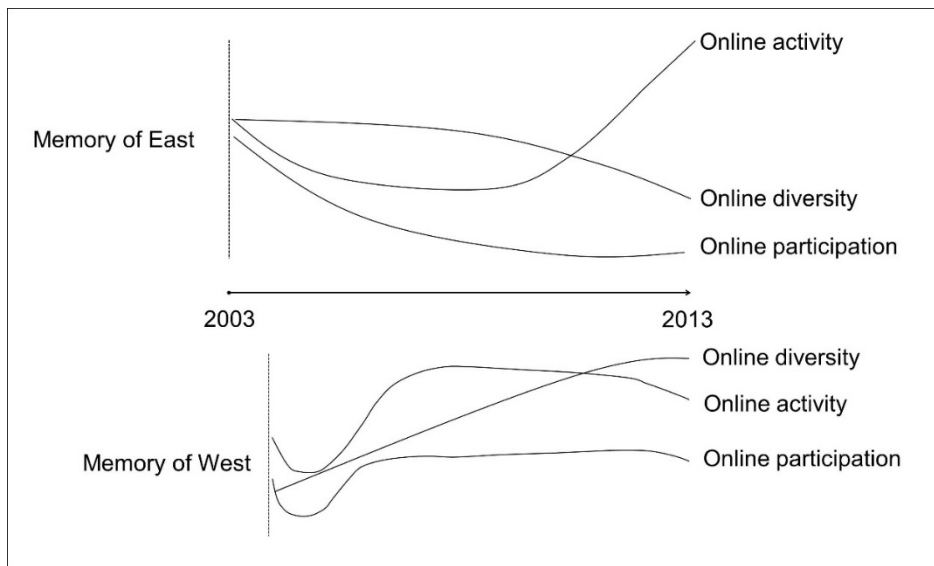


Figure 2: Heuristics of the development of three indicators in the online dynamics

Over time, the online diversity in the Memory of West increases in terms of the keywords (topics, locations, and periods), whereas this decreases in the Memory of East. On both websites, the online activity (number of stories and comments) and participation (number of different participants) fluctuates, but in the Memory of West these indicators develop more parallel than in the Memory of East. This implies that the ratio between the numbers of contributions and participants who deliver them, remains stable. However, in the Memory of East, the online activity is relatively high and steeply growing compared to the number of persons participating online, especially during the last five years. This means that the number of contributions per participant increases. For the Memory of West, both participation and online activity in 2013, drop to a level lower than the previous five years.

The exploratory data analysis also related the described indicators in Figure 2 to three concepts on the level of group empowerment in Figure 1: forming collective identities (A), social learning (B), and social networking (C). I assume

that being part of a collective identity (A) is constrained by what that collective defines as worthwhile to remember (Rappaport, 1998). This implies that online diversity in terms of remembered topics and periods is directly related to the variation of identities different people can identify with. Consequently, focusing on its increasing online diversity, the Memory of West can be seen to be empowering in terms of available collective identities for its highly diverse population to connect with. Vice versa, the Memory of East disempowers certain groups, because the decrease in online diversity lowers the set of available collective identities for these groups to relate to.

If '[v]irtually all human knowledge is based on stories constructed around past experiences' (Schank & Abelson, 1995, p. 1), then the online activities of remembering constitute an important social learning process (B). This means that online activities, especially online comments on stories, reflect the degree to which participants exchange and discuss facts, experiences and beliefs, and learn from this. Although the total of online memories is nearly similar between the two cases, the activity in comments in the Memory of East (about 20,000) is much higher than in the Memory of West (about 9000). This indicates that empowerment in terms of social learning is more fruitful on the website of East than on the one in West.

Gilchrist claims that a 'strong and sustainable communit[y]' (2009, p. 12) consists of a delicate balance between three types of social capital: 1) strong, bonding ties between, for example, family members and friends; 2) weak, bridging ties between, for example, neighbors and colleagues; and 3) linking ties through people who make connections between weak and strong networks, and organizations. In our study, I assume that online participation of many different residents, rather than a few, offers better preconditions for such a balance. The preconditions for network variation in the Memory of East lowered following the decrease in online participation. The Memory of West has been more stable, both in online participation and, thus, in the social networking preconditions, although the online activity is decreasing. Consequently, looking solely at the developments of online participation, the heuristics imply that the social networking configuration is more empowering in the Memory of West than in the Memory of East.

A closer look at the interdependencies between the three discussed group concepts of collective empowerment sheds light on two more: inclusion and social capital (D and E in Figure 1). The predominantly strong ties between a few participants, in the Memory of East, combined with its high level of social learning and dominant collective identities, imply stronger social capital than

the Memory of West represents. This manifestation of social capital, in terms of strong ties between its members, seems to be embedded in a self-affirming process, because the developments in the three other concepts have a grip on each other. That is, a small, dense network with a strong collective identity and satisfying interactions between participants presumably has no immediate, intrinsic reason to change. On the other hand, the multiple collective identities in the Memory of West, carried by large, light networks with low levels of social learning, result in a more inclusive website than the Memory of East. The developments causing this inclusivity also keep each other in balance. That is, the multiple collective identities and light networks fuel each other's characteristics through incidental online activity in which new memories are added and new people briefly meet each other in comments.

Summarizing, the Memory of West has an intermediate online reputation consisting of an inclusive variation of collective identities representing sparsely knit networks, which have a number of scattered online social learning places. This corresponds with the argument that '[c]ommunity-level empowerment outcomes [...] include evidence of pluralism, and existence of organisational coalitions, and accessible community resources' (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 570). The Memory of East has a strong online reputation in terms of an exclusive collective identity representing a few tightly knit groups of participants each having their own active social learning environment. This matches with collective empowerment comprising the 'capability to reward (or punish) causal agents, influence public debate and policy, and shape community ideology and consciousness' (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 57). With its stronger social capital, the Memory of East is more likely to resist official memory institutions and local politics than the Memory of West. On the other hand, with its more inclusive character, the Memory of West is more representative for the broad cultural backgrounds of its inhabitants than the Memory of East.

Online affinity space: Commemoration and morality

Now I return to the question whether local memory websites can be considered as non-institutional affinity spaces for commemoration rituals in favor of morality development.

Local memory websites as affinity spaces

Gee defines affinity spaces with a set of features that all apply to the local memory websites (Gee, 2004, pp. 77–79). He regards an affinity space as an offline

or online place – or a mixture – where people interact with others based on common interests, activities and motives, not class, gender, and so on (2004). He emphasizes that participants in the first place do not use the space because they are connected to each other personally, although personal connections might arise. In general, this description also applies to the discussed local memory websites in this chapter. Participants contribute their memories to the websites, because they want to tell their stories to its visitors and be part of the collection of memories of their neighborhoods. Of course people meet others online – formerly known or unknown – but that is not the first and foremost reason to participate. This way they bring together people that despite differences in background share their collective enthusiasm for their neighborhood.

At a more detailed level, Gee describes an affinity space as a generator of content, content organization, and interaction organization. Various portals offer access to enter the space. For the Memory of East, an example of a mostly virtual, or online, affinity space, the generator is the collection – and collecting – of memories about the district and its neighborhoods. This content is organized among other things with keywords, dates, navigation paths, and various page lay outs. Portals to enter the content consist mainly of the Memory of East Facebook website,¹ the Hart of Amsterdam community for Amsterdam Museum volunteers,² Google searches, and personal bookmarks of certain starting points on the website. The website and its users do not segregate newcomers from long-time users and light users from heavy users. Each participant ‘can get different things out of the space – based on their own choices, purposes, and identities – and still mingle with others as they wish, learning from them when and where they choose’ (Gee, 2004, p. 77). Based on the interaction on the website by all its users both the content and interaction organization is transformed continually.

An important subset of features that Gee describes covers different aspects of knowledge that play a role in the affinity space. In terms of contributing memories, both intensive and extensive knowledge is appreciated. Some participants specialize in certain themes (e.g. soccer or the Jewish past) and others collect memories about very diverse topics. In terms of interaction in the comments, both factual and more deliberative knowledge is shared as I will illustrate below.

¹ Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/322869044520093/>

² Retrieved from <https://hart.amsterdam/>

Sharing and collecting local memories as commemoration rituals

Post considers a literal and figurative meaning of space as two crucial elements of a general framework for a ‘good ritual’ (Post, 2018). The physical space of a place of commemoration should be open for a plurality of appropriations, where people can feel welcome for the performance of their ritual. In a more figurative meaning, the ritual itself should offer space for various adaptations by which it becomes an open hermeneutic space where many can enter based on their own preferences. The local memory websites obviously offer the first kind of literal space although they have no roof, but consist of online spaces contained in interactive websites. The figurative, hermeneutic space is facilitated by the content organization of the online memories and photos accompanying them. The set of keywords consists on the one side of neighborhood names, square names, building names and street names, and on the other side themes, emotions, and periods. The only – quite softly applied – limitation on the stories that describe the memories are their length: maximum 350 words. This way the content organization of the website aligns as a hermeneutic space with what can be remembered of the neighborhoods in the city district of Amsterdam East.

Although the local memories comply with the ideas of space, the question arises whether the personal memories, or clusters of them, can be regarded as commemoration rituals. One of the earlier described organizational dimensions illustrated that the Memory of East is characterized by a preserving sentiment and the Memory of West by a pioneering sentiment. This was claimed to be related to, respectively, remembering the distant past or the recent past. Implicitly, the collections of memories of both local memory websites, ‘celebrate’ these sentiments by generating memories that fit in their already existing character. The part ‘the Memory of’ in their names aligns with their missions like the one in Amsterdam East:

The website fosters feelings of belonging and offers locals a place where they can present their memories and share their emotions. Together they make the story of Amsterdam East. (translated from Volunteers, 2013)

Through sets of personal memories events, experiences, and places in Amsterdam East are given a public platform. In many of the comments, I meet people – quite many that moved to other parts of the Netherlands or emigrated to other countries – that are very emotional and happy about the events, places, and people they recognize from the past. They often return to the comments related to a story to interact with others about some of its aspects and to supplement it

with information they have. These processes happen on very different scales; they cluster around one unique memory of someone living on a certain address or they cover a large set of related personal memories about the Jewish past in Amsterdam East. I would like to frame these processes from visitors as a spontaneous commemoration process, as opposed to a scripted one (Hoskins, 2015). A ‘process’, because it is hard to pinpoint where the ritual begins and where it ends, but it seems to me that the participants are honoring ‘their East’, small or big. Some even say the Memory of East contains ‘the real East’ as opposed to the Amsterdam East put forward, accompanied by scripted events, by the Memory institutions. The described interactions also have an important role in terms of morality development as I will cover in the next section.

Spontaneous morality development in online interaction

At the time of the study, the Memory of East contained 20,000 comments on the whole of the memories. Zooming in on this online activity, I follow the distinction Schank and Abelson (1995) make in terms of what kinds of knowledge people transfer by sharing memories. They distinguish facts, experiences and beliefs in the social learning process of remembering. In order to identify illustrations of these three, I explore the comments on some memories.

The comments present on the Memory of East often add pieces of factual knowledge to a memory or to other comments on it. Many of these are about individuals and locations as I can see in many of the 118 comments on the memory ‘Simply happy in the Pekelharingstraat’ (Kunnen, 2003).

I lived on Robert Kochplantsoen 26 from 1957. I attended to Clara Feyschool on the Linnaeushof. In 1979 we moved to the Ritzema Bosstraat. Most of the names here are familiar to me, but I am from 1956. Joke and Koos Bos lived above us. I was even married to Paul Stift. (Commenter a)

This was the first comment by commenter a, contributed after 89 earlier ones from other commenters. Other comments added experiential knowledge about places, periods, and events. Here is part of the third comment from the same person (a) on the same memory:

Last week I parked my car on the Robert Kochplantsoen to go to the dentist, Verburg, on the Middenweg. Too bad it looks so neglected there. [...] I also paid a visit to Mrs Terpstra at no. 14, Corries mother. Her living room is so small! [...] And the delicious slices of sausage at the butcher! (Commenter a)

The third kind of comments is characterized by more critical stands about developments across time up to the present. For example, the memory ‘The escaped cow’ (about the delivery of cows to the abattoir) received these comments (Penseel, 2003):

I know that many of the commenters here had some connection to the abattoir, so for them a cow was just a product instead of a living and sensitive animal that really doesn’t want to die. But I saw this all happening when I was a child and it broke my heart in two. [...] I don’t see anyone else among the commenters who felt the same. (Commenter b)

Hi [commenter b], we were not executioners; we were just doing our work. I had friends who shot sparrows out of the trees, but I did not see the fun in that, despite the fact that I had just slaughtered 600 pigs. I always say that you have to eat what you kill and otherwise you should leave it alone. (Commenter c)

Yes, [commenter b], my heart also broke when I saw the situation of these animals. But I do eat meat once in a while (not much). [...] I believe that if an animal has to be slaughtered it should be done in a HUMANE way. (Commenter d)

The examples illustrate that various kinds of knowledge are shared in the comments. Sharing the more factual elements is a process easily triggered by an online memory. Visitors like to complement the memory or comments with facts they know about related people, events, and locations. Once part of the interaction, quite many commenters also share related experiences from the present or the past. Finally, some discussions develop that transcend the memory by picking up a moral topic that is not directly introduced by the memory but related to it and introduced by a commenter. Especially the exchange of and interactions about the last kind of local knowledge invokes practices that facilitate social learning in which cultural values and morals are renegotiated (Burgess, 2006; De Kreek, 2016).

Along the lines of Misztals interpretation of Durkheim, embodiment, emotion and maybe a kind of spirit, also play a role here in morality development (2003). The latter is triggered by online memories of bodily, local experiences that are emotionally enriched in an attempt to complement the neighborhoods spirit, which leads to deeper discussion of what might be right or wrong. Like the slogan of the Memory of East states: ‘The future starts with the past.’

Important differences with Durkheim's ideas are that in this case these processes are not literally delimited by space and time, and non-institutional.

Concluding discussion: Ritual criticism from within

In this chapter, I illustrated that local memory websites are non-institutional affinity spaces that facilitate commemoration rituals in which morality development takes place. A thorough description of an empowerment study of two cases set the stage to reframe these websites and their communities from ritual and morality perspective. I would like to revisit both concepts to introduce some possibilities for further elaboration.

In terms of commemoration ritual I have shown that on micro level people like to memorize places or experiences in 'their piece of the' neighborhood online. In the present digital age this phenomenon is sometimes called a 'memory boom' (Hoskins, 2011) and nothing new. If, however, the memories of these pieces are put together on a local memory website, the collective process could be regarded as an ongoing, implicit commemoration ritual that concerns the whole neighborhood. This resonates with the part '*the* memory of...' in the names of the cases, which implies to give a complete, i.e. everyone's, picture of a certain area, which is an aim that will forever be pursued.

When it comes to morality development, the websites contain online discussions about values or morals. Again, these discussions happen on micro levels within a limited group of people. On another, more macro, level grounded in context we have seen pioneering (West) and preserving (East) sentiments that can be considered as moralities as well. These sentiments influence the other organizational aspects of both cases and ultimately the emergent properties of both websites – the capability to resist institutions (East) or to represent many inhabitants (West). The persistence of this moral order relates to Durkheim's idea that 'collective memory, viewed as a social fact that bestows identity on individuals and groups' (Misztal, 2003, p. 137).

However, in the case studies the directly involved participants showed to be sensitive for the persistence of the emergent properties of their websites. During a focus group meeting about the Memory of East, for example, I showed how the online diversity had decreased since 2010 and that the increasing online activity corresponds to a decreasing group of participants. Interesting enough, this was recognized immediately and interpreted in terms of various organizational aspects, such as the focus on success in terms of quantity of new contributions to the website. A result of this insight was that it fueled the

appreciation for efforts that involved new groups, new neighborhoods, and new collaborations. In the wake of this, more stories of the recent past were contributed to the website with less focus on preserving the past. In my opinion, this shows that, with the right information, morality development can and does happen ‘from within’ in the form of a critical stance towards the collective commemoration rituals of the neighborhood.

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Post-Camino storytelling: Navigating transformation in a digital age

Suzanne van der Beek

Introduction

The Camino de Santiago has been one of the main European pilgrimages since its installation in the 9th century. Over the centuries, the meaning of this ritual has developed due to changes in the political, religious, and cultural climate of Europe. As a result, the direct motivations of pilgrims who travel to Santiago have changed as well (cf. González, 2013; Talbot, 2015). Today, the Camino functions as an open ritual that welcomes pilgrims from many different backgrounds. Due to the open-ended meaning of this ritual, these pilgrims form a heterogeneous community that covers a broad spectrum of possibilities in terms of nationality, religion, gender, age, and socio-economic status. It is hard to establish one expectation or direct motivation that is present in every pilgrim traveling to Santiago, but a recurrent theme in this diverse group of pilgrims is the notion of transformation. In academic literature, pilgrimages have often been understood as ‘transformative journeys’, this is one of the ways in which they have been distinguished from other types of travels. The changes that pilgrims expect from their journey can be varied, but the promise of change seems to be a constant throughout (cf. Gothóni, 1993; Warfield & Hetherington, 2018).

Over the last six years, I have walked and talked with many different pilgrims on different pilgrimage routes through Spain. This fieldwork was analyzed, which resulted in a PhD thesis in 2018 (Van der Beek, 2018). In light of this, it might not be surprising that I have recently become interested in studying what comes after finishing a large and much-anticipated project. How do you move forward? What do you take with you and what do you leave behind? When we consider the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela to be a transformative journey, we might ask: how does this transformation affect pilgrims’ lives? As

classical as this question might sound, it is one that is very rarely explored within pilgrimage studies. Research into the pilgrim experience usually starts when the pilgrim leaves home and ends when the pilgrim arrives at their destination. This chapter argues that when exploring a transformative ritual, the afterlife of that ritual becomes a relevant phase of analysis.

What is more, this chapter argues that the digitalization of the Camino experience has changed the potential exploration of this question in recent years. Even though the role of digital media is still much debated on the Camino de Santiago, they undeniably play a role in the shaping of this pilgrimage today (Van der Beek, 2015a). In earlier work, I have addressed the important role social media play in the creation and communication of the pilgrim identity on the Camino (Van der Beek, 2015b). The digital storytelling that is facilitated by these platforms supports a reflexive perspective on the pilgrim's journey and functions as an important tool to self-analyze experiences on the Camino. Through these digital storytelling practices, pilgrims become more explicitly aware of their growth and transformation. In this chapter, I propose to analyze how pilgrims use digital media to navigate the post-Camino experience.

The Camino Blues

In 1997, anthropologist Nancy Frey writes: 'Curiously, despite the impact that pilgrims claim that the pilgrimage has on them while making the journey, both the academic literature and personal accounts of the pilgrimage to Santiago, rarely, if ever, mention the return' (Frey, 1997). This remains largely true today, more than twenty years later. There has been very little research done in the return of the pilgrim and the journey that starts after a pilgrim has reached Santiago and goes back to home and to a daily life. At the same time, pilgrims are keen to point out that this stage of the journey is of great significance. 'Your journey starts in Santiago' – pilgrims are prone to point out, referring to the idea that the true Camino project concerns the way you incorporate your experiences and growth as a pilgrim into your daily life.

This part of the journey, however, proves difficult for many pilgrims. Many pilgrims come back and feel ill at ease. Brendon Bolton, who we will meet more extensively later on in this chapter, describes the position of a post-Camino pilgrim as 'a jigsaw puzzle piece that no longer fits back into the box'. This experience is often referred to as the 'Camino Blues' and it manifests itself in different ways. Upon return, pilgrims frequently deal with experiences of restlessness and sadness. Some pilgrims might not be able to return to work for a

period of time, some pilgrims experience alienation from their partner or their family members. On her blog *Camino Adventures*, Irish pilgrim Leslie explains:

Make no bones about it, the Camino will change you. It does it slowly, and it is very subtle... most the time. [...] for all of us, when we step back into normal life, the longing of the Camino will eventually come our way. From conversations with many pilgrims post Camino, I can say for myself and many others that reintroducing yourself into your old life is one of the hardest parts of the Camino. (Leslie, 2017)

One of the things that makes re-integration after a pilgrimage a difficult process comes from the transformation that unfolds on the Camino. During the weeks or months spent on the Camino, pilgrims develop their personal pilgrim identity, which is a combination of their pre-existing identity and the transformations undergone along the way. Leslie explains:

You change, your daily habits change, your conversations change, your body changes, the food you eat changes, the way you see people changes, the way you see the world changes. So coming back to your old life can actually be quite a shock and a bit depressing for many. [...] People won't understand you when you speak of 'albergues', 'ampollos', and 'pilgrims'. The feeling of not having the Camino and pilgrims around you is certain to seek in when you are in a luxurious bathroom, with a nice hot bath... and all of a sudden you miss the small, rundown showers that numerous albergues have. Or maybe you are all alone in your home on a Sunday afternoon, and you long for a packed room full of noisy, smelly pilgrims. (Leslie, 2017)

Upon return, pilgrims relate differently to their immediate environment because their newly created pilgrim identity does not fit naturally outside the Camino setting. As a result, the place that was home before, does not accommodate them as naturally anymore. From now on, a part of themselves is naturally at home elsewhere.

Transformative journeys

The notion of transformation lies at the core of some of the most influential conceptualizations of pilgrimage. Victor and Edith Turner's structural approach to understanding pilgrimage would be the prime example of this. Turner and

Turner conceptualize pilgrimage as a journey to a sacred ‘center out there’ – this can relate to ‘out there in a different location’, or ‘out there’ in more symbolic terms. They relate pilgrimage to initiation rituals and propose that the sacred journey can be understood in the three phases as described by Arnold van Gennep in his *Les rites de passages*: a pre-liminal phase in which the ritual subject is separated from their known situation, a liminal phase in which the subject is in transition, and finally a post-liminal phase in which the subject is re-integrated in conventional social life. In this three-phased process, the liminal phase is of most interest to Turner and Turner. They argued that while in this transitional phase, the ritual subject finds themselves in a sort of limbo, ‘betwixt and between’, no longer part of the social environment they were a part of and not yet haven taken up their new position in that environment. (Turner, 1969; 1974; Turner & Turner, 1978)

Although this line of thinking has been, and still is very prominent within the study of pilgrimage and other rituals, it has also faced criticism. One important line of critique was based on the observation that this notion of extraction and transition is not found in all pilgrimage practices the world over (cf. Eade & Sallnow, 2013; Morinis, 1992). However, empirical studies do seem to agree that pilgrims all over the world experience a change in themselves on a more personal level. Rather than focusing on the notion of transition as a community-based development, therefore, it has been argued to look at the more universal notion of personal transformation. René Gohtóni argues:

If pilgrimage is considered not as a social process, as Turner saw it, but as an individual pilgrim’s journey to a shrine or a sacred place, listening to what the pilgrim says and what he experiences makes it obvious that, during the pilgrimage, the pilgrim experiences transformation from one level of spirituality to another. It is thus logical to conclude that this transformation is the specific quality by which pilgrimages do not differ, but are all alike. (Gohtóni, 1993, p. 108)

The observation that all pilgrims undergo a transformation, should not be taken to mean that all pilgrims undergo the same transformation. Gohtóni explores the different transformations that are sought after in the context of different religious contexts, but we can carry over this observation into the contemporary Camino de Santiago, where transformations often revolve around non-religious topics. The environment that a pilgrim travels through and towards does not have to be a religious one, but in order to achieve transformation, it should

inspire in the pilgrim an aspiration for development and growth. Sociologist Erik Cohen argues that what distinguishes a tourist from a pilgrim, is that the former travels towards the ‘Other’ – i.e. something that is completely different and exotic –, while the latter seeks the ‘Center’ – i.e. an intensified or heightened version of the known values and virtues (Cohen, 1992). This theory assumes that the pilgrim’s Center is not located where the pilgrim is normally at home, but outside of their usual environment. Cohen writes: ‘The pilgrim, whose ordinary abode is in profane space, ascends, both geographically and spiritually, from the periphery toward the “Center out there”.’ Through the process of pilgrimage, the environment that the pilgrim is used to call ‘home’ is transformed into the ‘peripheral’. At the same time, the surroundings of the pilgrimage become the new pilgrim’s center. The pilgrimage, therefore, becomes something of a homecoming. And spiritually speaking, the pilgrimage site becomes a more natural home to the pilgrim than their daily surroundings.

Within this newly found ‘home’, pilgrims often report to experience a sense of freedom and ease. As if they are able to develop themselves more freely than they could during their daily lives. The transformation that takes place as a result is therefore usually not perceived as a transformation into something new and alien, but rather as a development towards the pilgrim’s ‘true self’ (Van der Beek, 2015c). This process is usually described in terms of ‘discoveries’ or ‘lessons.’ For example, when describing how the Camino changed her, Leslie enumerates the most important lessons she has learned, including ‘I can do more than I believe’, ‘Crying is Okay’, and ‘Pain reminds me I am Alive’ (Leslie, 2018). These positive connotations to pilgrim transformation invite similarly positively connotated conceptual interpretations. One example is the notion of healing, which is applied by psychologist Heather Warfield. In pilgrimage practices, she locates several healing processes including ‘the movement from sickness to wellness, from grief to closure, and from fractured to integrated’ (Warfield & Hetherington, 2018, p. 1).

In line with these observations, I will argue that the transformation that occurs on the Camino relies on two important conditions. First, that the pilgrim is separated from their daily surroundings, and second, that the new surroundings invite a development towards an identity that is perceived as more authentic and truthful than the original, pre-Camino identity. Many pilgrims report that in fact the Camino has initiated an experience of transformation in them. And even though this transformation is understood as something positive, the re-integration of this newly transformed identity into daily life is not always an easy task.

Post-Camino re-integration

Pilgrims can react differently to the alienation that comes with the Camino Blues. In 1997, Frey distinguished three ways in which pilgrims navigate their post-Camino lives: 1) compartmentalization; 2) integration; and 3) a combination of the two.

First, there are some pilgrims who hold on to a strict division between two worlds: the world at home and the world of the Camino. 'The Camino is often envisioned as an unreal oasis which contrasts with "real" or daily life' (Frey, 1997). These pilgrims do not seriously attempt to bring the two together, but instead keep them firmly separated. This separation extends to their self-perception: they consider themselves to be one person at home and another person on the Camino. As a result, these pilgrims might become taken with the so-called Camino virus: they will come back to the Camino again and again, to inhabit that version of themselves that they have assigned to the Camino. Frey does not judge this first strategy to be very constructive, as she argues that these pilgrims do not trouble themselves to bring the 'lessons learned' with them into their daily lives. She writes: 'rather than bring the pilgrimage home as a way, for example, to question one's materialism, develop one's spiritual life, be more generous, these attitudes are usually understood to be practised while on the Way and part of one's identity as a pilgrim' (Frey, 1997).

A second group of pilgrims makes an attempt to do the opposite of this: they try to integrate their newly transformed and improved identity into their daily life. A pilgrim who transformed into a more independent person might choose to divorce their partner; a pilgrim who learned the benefits of simplicity might choose to sell their house. More often than not, these kinds of major changes prove difficult to implement. The many restrictions that daily life places on people have not transformed along with the pilgrim and try to undo the transformation as quickly as possible. Frey writes: 'Several pilgrims described how they came to question the materialism of their lives, but their work required them to sell to others – encouraging others to be materialist. In this case, the pull of the stability of a job and family obligations overcame the value of simplicity' (Frey, 1997).

As a result, many pilgrims end up somewhere between compartmentalization and integration. This final group will attempt to find a place for some more easily accomplished changes in their lives. Frey gives the example of a pilgrim who 'consciously attempts to bring home the simplicity of the Camino, her awareness of her body and its strength, and her deepening confidence and development of a spiritual life that needed the Camino to flourish' (Frey, 1997).

We can also think back to the lessons Leslie learned on the Camino, all of which could be implemented in some way into daily life at home without too much resistance.

Transformation and re-integration in a digital world

Both the process of transformation and the process of re-integration have changed in recent years due to ongoing digitalization. Although the presence of digital devices on the pilgrimage route is often critiqued and scolded, most pilgrims do not leave them behind when traveling to Santiago. Pilgrims carry phones and sometimes tablets with which they reserve *albergues*, write daily blogs, communicate via social media, read the newspaper, and watch TV (Jackson-Kerr, 2017).

As stated above, an important condition for transformation during a pilgrimage is the notion of separation from daily life. This condition is challenged by the presence of mobile devices on the Camino, as these allow for a continuation of the structures of daily life. Even though the pilgrim is physically separated from live at home, they are still able to read their morning paper, stay in contact with friends and family, and even continue work activities on the way. These possibilities undermine the notion of separation and the liminal sensation of being in between two states.

However, these same affordances also allow pilgrims who have returned home to stay in contact with the Camino. There has been a great increase in digital platforms that allow for a digital connection to the Camino, including webcams on significant spots along the way,¹ online services that offer to light a (virtual) candle in a church of your choice,² or complete cyber pilgrimages that allow for a virtual reconstruction of the journey to Santiago.³ All of these strategies allow for new ways of integrating the Camino into daily life, which were not readily available when Frey described her three ways for navigating post-Camino lives.

The most commonly used technique for continued connection to the Camino is through digital storytelling. Within this rather large category, we find all forms of storytelling that are facilitated by digital platforms, such as blogs, Facebook groups, YouTube channels, podcasts, or internet fora. Most often,

¹ For example: <https://www.lourdes-france.org/>

² For example: <https://www.247candle.com/>

³ For example: <https://www.interam.com/camino/>

these platforms allow for many-to-many communication, although some forms are better suited for a more scripted and organized kind of storytelling.

In previous work, I have argued that storytelling – both online and offline – occupies a central position in the way pilgrims construct and communicate their understanding of the Camino. As a reflexive practice, storytelling remains important after returning from the Camino. In an entry titled ‘The Camino Blues’, pilgrim Leslie advises other pilgrims to use storytelling as a way to transition back into daily life:

While you are on the Camino, I want to urge you to write those things down. Even better to write them down and put a date by them. This will signify when you want to accomplish those things. Then when you get home, and you are rested a bit, start working towards those things that you wrote down. (Leslie, 2017)

And many pilgrims do write down their experiences. They write in journals or start blogs, both to help a failing memory and to inform family and friends back home about their adventures. For most pilgrims, the stories they tell reflect the journey of their physical pilgrimage: they might write a couple of posts beforehand, discussing their training or their packing lists, and they stop their blog quite soon after coming home, with perhaps one post reflecting on their return and their plans for the future. Some pilgrims, however, keep on writing after their return. Their Camino story continues while they themselves have reintegrated in home life. To illustrate how digital storytelling can play a role in the navigation of post-Camino life, I propose a preliminary study of one case study: ‘Project Camino’, a multi-modal project about post-Camino storytelling.

Project Camino

As described by founder Brendan Bolton, Project Camino is ‘a platform for people to share their personal insights as to how they have “taken the Camino home with them”’ (quotation marks in original).⁴ Bolton started the platform after he walked the Camino de Santiago in August 2016. The transformative effect that this journey had on him prompted him to move to Santiago and continue his Camino story. He does so by talking to pilgrims about their pilgrimage and sharing their stories through his platform. By referring to the

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.projectcamino.com>

platform as a ‘project’, Bolton stresses the continuous work that the Camino proposes: the Camino does not end when we leave it, rather it initiates an on-going effort. By referring to this project as a ‘platform’, Bolton stresses the notion of exchange and communication in this project. This project is not something that you have to tackle by yourself; you can find likeminded pilgrims who can help you navigate your Camino Blues.

The main output of this project is a weekly podcast in which Bolton interviews pilgrims about how they ‘live their Camino’ at home. The first episode was posted in March 2017 and the platform has posted over 100 episodes to date (May 2019). In every episode, Bolton welcomes his listeners as follows:

If you want to learn how to take the Camino home with you, then you’re in the right place. Hi, I’m Brendan Bolton and I’m the pilgrim coach. I help pilgrims from all over the world reconnect with the person they were on the Camino now they’ve gotten back to their everyday life. I do so with the help of all of my guests, who I’m lucky enough to interview every week, here on Project Camino. And they’re pilgrims from all over the world, who share how they’ve successfully taken the lessons and the magic of the Camino and have applied it to their everyday life. If you enjoy the show, then please share it. It’s a great resource for those who are thinking of doing the Camino or those who have already done it and wish to reconnect with the person that they were when they were on their way. (Bolton, 2017-present)

In this opening monologue, we can already pick up on the notion of the Camino Blues as described above. The podcast appeals directly to those who struggle to re-integrate their pilgrimage experience into their daily lives, or to those who ‘want to learn how to take the Camino home’. The statement also explicitly addresses the feeling of a fragmented identity: Bolton’s mission is to ‘help pilgrims [...] reconnect with the person they were on the Camino now they’ve gotten back to their everyday life’. In this, we recognize the notion of a pilgrim who struggles to connect their pilgrim identity to their daily life identity. In the way that this mission is formulated, we also recognize the well-documented fear that one could ‘lose’ the pilgrim identity when the familiar identity of the day-to-day reality takes over again. One way to overcome this problem, as suggested by this monologue, is to take the ‘lessons and the magic of the Camino’ and apply it to daily life. What this podcast proposes, therefore, is to exchange success stories of people who have been able to make a place for the pilgrim identity within the ordinary identity.

This vision on a possible navigation of the Camino Blues is constructed throughout the whole Project Camino platform. Besides the weekly podcast episodes, Bolton is active via his Twitter account and his Facebook page. Additionally, Bolton moderates a private Facebook group called ‘Post Camino Transformations’ that seeks to provide support to pilgrims who have returned from the Camino and are in need of a place to share their stories.⁵ The beginning of the description of the group reads:

This group is for Pilgrims who have returned from their Camino and want a supportive place to share their stories. Many Pilgrims have spoken to me about a feeling of sadness, depression or feeling ‘out of place’ when they return from their Camino and this group is a place where we can all share these feelings without judgement or fear of being ‘shot down’. This group has been created for you to share your thoughts on what happened to you on The Way as well as what has happened to you since you got back to the ‘real world’. (*Post Camino Transformations*, 2018)

In this introduction, we find a similar notion of the Camino Blues. However, where the podcast uses a more hopeful frame of inspiration, this Facebook group focuses more explicitly on notions of support for those who experience feelings of ‘sadness, depression or feeling “out of place”’ after returning from the Camino. Where the podcast is a place to be inspired by pilgrims who have navigated their post-Camino experience successfully, the Facebook group offers a support group for those who are stills struggling. The main strategy for dealing with this sadness is through sharing stories in supportive environment.

And so the Project Camino offers two main ways of support for navigating the Camino Blues: first, through their podcast, they offer inspirational success stories for integrating the pilgrim identity into daily life, and second, through their Facebook group, they offer a safe space where pilgrims who are struggling to overcome their experience of a fragmented identity can share their stories.

⁵ Bolton combines Project Camino with his career as a life coach, by implementing the lessons he learned on the Camino to those in need of guidance in life. He also uses his platform to promote the sale of specially made Camino jewelry. I will not take these commercial extensions of his program into account in this chapter, as it does not relate directly to the topics of this research. However, it might be important to keep in mind that projects like these often have a commercial dimension to them.

The podcast: Stories of transformation and re-integration

As stated before, the purpose of this podcast is to present stories of pilgrims who have successfully integrated the Camino into their daily lives. This conversation is structured as follows: Bolton introduces his guest and asks them about their expectations and experiences with the Camino. After that introduction, he asks specifically what lesson his guest has learnt and how they manage to translate those lessons into their post-Camino lives.

In February 2019, Bolton speaks with Kate Spencer, who was inspired by the Camino to rethink herself as an artist. Besides artistic inspiration, the Camino brought her more general life lessons. For example, Spencer tells how one day at the Camino, she realized that she would not be able to obtain a bed at the village she had planned to stay at. Instead, she had to walk on an additional 5 kilometers to the next *albergue*. As she had already walked a distance of 27 kilometers, she was not looking forward to it. However, the last stretch was not as bad as she had anticipated and she reached her final destination feeling proud of herself. She tells how this impacted her then and still today:

We thought we were done, physically done, mentally done, when we got to that first village. And your heart sinks and you think: what are we going to do? But then you stop and reflect, and you just keep going. And initially you think that you won't be able to do it, but you have to, and so you do it. And then you get it done and you realize: it wasn't actually that bad! We can push ourselves a lot further than we think. A lot of it is mental attitude. That is one of the biggest things I learned: if you have the right frame of mind for something, you can get it done. (Bolton, February 26, 2019)

For Spencer, this experience on the Camino is directly translated into a life lesson that can be applied to other situations she might meet in her day-to-day life. Bolton reflects on this story and adds that much like Spencer, a lot of his guests found out on the Camino that they are capable of more than they realized. Bolton stresses that this is a strength that they already carried within themselves, and that was brought out by the Camino. He argues: 'The Camino doesn't make you tougher it reveals a lot about yourself and that toughness is certainly there' (Bolton, February 26, 2019). In this, we can recognize the notion described above, that pilgrims experience the growth on the Camino as a growth towards one's identity, rather than a transition into a new identity.

This podcast has several potential ways to help pilgrims struggling with the Camino Blues. There is a first very practical outcome: the tips and tricks shared

in these episodes might be applicable to listeners and provide them with practical instructions on how to overcome their struggle. For example, you might follow the choice of pilgrim Anne who incorporated walking into her life and like her, commit to walking 10.000 steps a day (*Project Camino*, December 4, 2018). Or you might be inspired by pilgrim Jeff, who made a conscious decision to accept the conditions of life as they are. Like him, this might help you to focus on the now and stop worrying about past or future events that are beyond your reach (*Project Camino*, December 11, 2018).

However, the podcast has additional affects besides these practical notes. The setup of the podcast also allows the pilgrim to leave their daily life for a little while and return to a substitute version of the Camino. While listening to the podcast, you can escape that world that you do not really fit into anymore and enter a world that does fit your transformed identity, a world that works with the Camino logic that shaped your new identity. While listening to the podcast, you can inhabit your pilgrim identity again: notions like *albergues* and *compostelas* are re-installed as meaningful and common sense, and the ‘magic of the Camino’ is assumed as a given, rather than something that needs to be explained and justified.

The Facebook group: Digital storytelling and identity construction

We see a similar function in the Facebook group. Compared to the podcast, this group is more explicitly designed to connect pilgrims and to function as a safe space in which support and understanding are essential virtues. In the description of this group, these virtues are explicitly named as Camino virtues – in which we recognize the positive connotations of the pilgrimage as a place for understanding and growth. So again, we find in the set-up for this Facebook group an opportunity to communicate with like-minded people in which the desire for the Camino does not need to be defended.

We might study one post as an example of how this group is used. In July 2019, one pilgrim posts a message to the group in which she tells about a recent trip she undertook to a retreat in the UK (*Post Camino Transformations*, July 25, 2019). As a part of this trip, she needed to drive an unfamiliar car for a long stretch in uncomfortable circumstances. This made her very anxious. However, she felt that in this situation she could apply some of the important lessons she learned on the Camino in 2018. She tells the group how ‘the strength and lessons of the Camino’ helped her through drive in four different ways:

- 1 By staying present and in-the-moment she could convince herself to just keep moving forward – ‘I kept reminding myself of how far I’d already traveled.’
- 2 She could convince herself that unexpected delays and other challenges were no indication that her journey would be a failure – ‘I could meet them one at a time.’
- 3 When it took her longer than expected to get her journey started, she would remind herself not to worry, because even on the Camino this would be the case – ‘I almost always was the last one who left to walk each morning, but I wasn’t always the last one to finish each afternoon.’
- 4 When she was afraid that she would not be able to muster the focus to complete the drive, she reminded herself to instead enjoy the journey.

This pilgrim expresses gratitude for the lessons learned on the Camino and the fact that she can now apply these lessons into her life. In light of this, we can understand the Facebook group as a place for pilgrims to continue their storytelling practices and thereby continue the construction and therefore the upholding of their pilgrim identity. After returning home, it is difficult to nourish your pilgrim identity because you are no longer in that environment. However, through this digital storytelling, you are able to grow as a pilgrim while not actually, physically being on a pilgrimage. That pilgrim identity that does not fit into other aspects of her day-to-day life, can still find a place and develop on this digital platform.

What is more, the Facebook group does not only allow this participant to grow as a pilgrim, but also places her story within a broader community of pilgrim stories. In her post, she notes explicitly that she feels vulnerable in sharing a very personal story that has great significance for her. However, to her this group seems to be the perfect place for it: ‘I’m writing today as the Camino and it’s (sic!) life lessons have been very alive for me lately and I want to express my gratitude for them with a group who might understand them.’ This feeling of community also resonates in her hope that her narrative ‘benefits others as well as myself’. Within this digital community, her story becomes bigger than an individual experience as it supposedly resonates with the problems and needs of other members in similar situations.

Conclusion

The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela has become a hermeneutically open ritual, free to interpret in different ways by the heterogeneous community that

partakes in this journey. Within this diversity, the notion of transformation seems to occupy a central position. This transformation, the notion of a change, a transition, is usually understood as an opportunity for growth and personal development. Despite these positive connotations, the transformative element of a pilgrimage also poses challenges to the pilgrim. For after this transformative ritual, the pilgrim still has to come home and be re-integrated in everyday life. And if the pilgrimage transforms you into a more desirable person, how then does one come home and pick up life post-Camino? This chapter has looked at one upcoming strategy to pick up this challenge: through post-Camino storytelling in digital settings. Via platforms such as the Camino Project, pilgrims can reconnect to their Camino identities, operationalize lessons learnt during the pilgrimage, and find support within digital communities where their specific knowledge and transformation is understood and celebrated.

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The algorithms of personalized funeral rituals

Janieke Bruin-Mollenhorst

Introduction

In 2018, a student told me about the funeral of her grandmother. She explained she remembered the most the music, especially one song. For the student, that song had become her grandmother's song, a song that really belonged to her grandmother. When I asked the student about the title of the song, she told me it was *Time to say goodbye*. A couple of minutes later, I showed the class the Top10 of contemporary funeral music in the Netherlands (see Table 1), which also contains *Time to say goodbye*. The student was – initially – confused: for her, *Time to say goodbye* belonged to her grandmother, it was her grandmother's song. How could it be that her grandma's song was also part of the funeral Top10?

In the Netherlands, people are free in their selection of the musical repertoire for a funeral. Most of the time, next of kin select music because of memories attached to the song. For example, because the music was also played at the wedding of the deceased, or because next of kin find the music appropriate for the moment of saying farewell (see also Bruin-Mollenhorst, 2018; Bruin-Mollenhorst & Hoondert, 2018). Previous studies on funeral music have shown that funeral music has different functions, such as creating a (comforting) atmosphere and controlling emotions (Adamson & Holloway, 2012; Caswell, 2011; Garrido & Davidson, 2016).

In studies on funeral music, hardly any attention is paid to the effect and influence of digitalization and the use of internet on the ways people choose music for a funeral. Music is often produced, distributed, and listened to via digital technology, increasingly also online. As this research will show, both funerary professionals and next of kin now make use of online rankings of funeral music and playlists on Spotify and YouTube, or make use of search-

engines on the internet to search for ‘funeral music’. The influence of these ‘online environments’, i.e. the various websites and services on the internet, often remains invisible to outsiders who are not involved in the process of preparing the funeral ritual. Therefore, the main part of this chapter focusses on the often invisible influence of online environments and its algorithms on music that sounds during (offline) funerals.

Table 1: Funeral Top10 anno 2017 according to funeral organization Monuta¹

1	Ave Maria	Various composers and artists
2	Time to say goodbye	Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman
3	<i>Mag ik dan bij jou</i> (Can I be with you)	Claudia de Breij
4	<i>En de vogels zongen</i> (And the birds sang)	Sweet People
5	<i>Een trein naar Niemandland</i> (A train to nowhere)	Frans Bauer
6	<i>Afscheid nemen bestaat niet</i> (Saying farewell does not exist)	Marco Borsato
7	My way	Frank Sinatra
8	The rose	André Rieu
9	<i>Waarheen, waarvoor</i> (Where for, where to)	Mieke Telkamp
10	We’ll meet again	Vera Lynn

Previous research on online aspects of death mainly focuses on ‘death online’, for example how the internet has become a place to commemorate the dead (e.g. Walter, 2011). So far, hardly any attention is paid to online dimensions of offline funerals: ‘There is virtually no academic research into how the internet is affecting the contemporary funeral’ (Walter, Hourize, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2012, p. 281). This is also applicable to the field of ritual studies, in which ‘ritual online’ (offline ritual transferred to online environments) and ‘online ritual’ (ritual performed online) are distinguished (Post, 2015, p. 13), but hardly any attention is paid to how online environments affect offline rituals and vice versa.

¹ Retrieved September 10, 2018, from <https://www.monuta.nl/uitvaart/mogelijkheden-bij-een-uitvaart/uitvaartmuziek/>

Theoretically, this chapter builds on the concepts of mediatization and algorithmic culture. Mediatization is a concept that can be used to study the ‘long-term interrelation processes between media change on the one hand and social and cultural change on the other’ (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2010, p. 223).² One of the major features of this concept is that it does not point at a one-way causal relationship for these changes. Instead, changes in media, and social and cultural changes mutually affect each other. Moreover, mediatization stresses the *long-term* of these processes. Mediatization is not the same as mediation, which ‘stands as the more general term, denoting regular communication processes that do not alter the largescale relationship between media, culture and society’ (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2015, p. 318). Earlier research on mediatization was centered around, for example, politics (Strömback & Esser, 2014) and secularization (Lundby, 2016). In this chapter, the concept of mediatization is used to focus on 20th and early 21st century changes in funeral music on the one hand, and changes in socio-cultural attitudes towards death on the other, the so-called ‘death mentalities’ (see e.g. Ariès, 1974; Jacobsen, 2016). Regarding funeral music, the focus lies mainly on technological changes in music facilities, and – related to that – on changes in musical repertoires.

To explicitly focus on automated, computational processes in musical media, the concept of algorithmic culture will be introduced in the context of this mediatization-research. Algorithmic culture considers algorithms as socio-technical assemblages, stressing that algorithms cannot be regarded as computational processes that are external to cultural processes and vice versa. This chapter will show how the concept of mediatization benefits from the concept of algorithmic culture and how these concepts can be of use in ritual studies and death studies. This introduction of mediatization and algorithmic culture in the context of funeral music will pave the way for much-needed research on the influence of digitalization and online environments on rituals in general and death rituals in particular.

The findings in this chapter are based on an analysis of newspaper reports, observations of funerals, and interviews with funerary professionals and next of kin.³ Interview-quotes are anonymized, which means that the real name is replaced by a fictive name. As the development of music facilities is most clear

² The part of this chapter on mediatization is a revised version of an article on the history of music in funeral rituals in the Netherlands (Bruin-Mollenhorst & Hoondert, 2018).

³ These interviews and observations are part of a PhD-research. For a full description of the research, see Hoondert and Bruin-Mollenhorst (2016). For methodology regarding interviews and observations see Bruin-Mollenhorst (2018).

in the context of crematoria, changes in musical media in crematoria are described.

Death mentalities and musical media

In 1913, the first crematorium in the Netherlands was opened. This crematorium would be the only crematorium until the fifties. In the first half of the 20th century, burial was the only legal way of body disposal – cremation was only acquiesced. The emergence of cremation was mainly a result of efforts of socialist groups that strived for the introduction of cremation (Cappers, 1999). The influence of these groups is also visible in the music that sounded during funerals in the crematorium. Newspaper reports from cremations in the first half of the 20th century show that during cremation rituals, a socialist musical repertoire was often played. For example, according to one newspaper report, during a cremation ritual in 1939 ‘the organist played *Morgenrood* (Day-spring)..., *Aan de strijders* (To the combatants)... and when the coffin went down *Ruh'n in Frieden, alles Seelen* by Schubert’.⁴

Even though classical and religious music remained the most commonly used musical repertoire, the advent of a socialist repertoire during funerals reflects how socialist groups had a strong influence on funeral rituals. This must be seen against the background of the so-called ‘pillarized’ Netherlands, in which ‘orthodox Protestants, Catholics, and Socialists [had] created their own organizational worlds’ (Van Rooden, 2003, p. 117), the so called ‘pillars’. These pillars had a strong influence on their members and informed the funeral rituals and the music that sounded during these rituals. The music was sung or played on an organ.

Funerals in the second half of the 20th century were fixed and standardized in form. In that period of time, influences of the so-called pillars decreased and processes of depillarization started: traditional (Roman-Catholic, Protestant, and Socialist) pillars lost their influence on their members (Van Rooden, 2003, p. 123). As a result, the ‘pillarized’ funerals lost their meaning for former members of the pillars and people had to search for other meaningful funeral rituals. In addition to these processes of depillarization, other processes were at play. In the socio-cultural invisible and avoided death in that time (May, as cited in Wojtkowiak, 2012, p. 49), signs of death and grief were reduced to a minimum: people no longer died in their homes accompanied by their relatives, but

⁴ *Haagsche Courant*, November 10, 1939.

increasingly died alone in the hospital; the custom of wearing mourning attires disappeared; ceremonies were discreet and avoided emotions; and next of kin were expected 'to go on with their lives' (also see Ariès, 1974, pp. 85–90; Cappers, 2012, pp. 746–747). Other factors that contributed to a standardization of funeral rituals were processes of professionalization of the funeral branch, resulting in a more uniform offer, and the rising cremation rate, resulting in an increasingly busy schedule in crematoria (Bruin-Mollenhorst & Hoondert, 2018).

What is more, funeral music became standardized in preselected combinations of three pieces of music. These selections were, for example, three pieces of music composed by Bach, three religious hymns, or three socialist songs. In the same period, recorded music came into fashion during cremation rituals (Cappers, 2012, p. 612, p. 613). Even though the advent of recorded music could have easily broadened the musical repertoire that sounded during funeral rituals, this did not happen: the musical repertoire became even more 'fixed' in standard combinations of three pieces of music. For undertakers and next of kin this meant that they only had to select one standard combination to determine the music for the entire funeral. This standardization perfectly fitted the death mentalities of the 'avoided death'.

After recordings on reel-to-reel tapes had replaced organ-music, the advent of the easy-to-handle and less heavy cassette tapes had made it possible for employees of crematoria to quickly prepare the funeral music in the increasingly busy schedule at crematoria.

At the end of the 20th century, processes of ongoing secularization and individualization, and the influx of migrants contributed to more diverse funerary practices (Venbrux, Peelen, & Altena, 2009). Funerals were no longer fixed and standardized as earlier in the 20th century, but increasingly became 'celebrations' of the life of the deceased. The life of the deceased is celebrated by, for example, listening to his or her favorite music, looking at pictures and movies of the lived life, recalling memories, and by toasting the life of the deceased. Personalization is key in contemporary funerals in the Netherlands. It can be questioned whether these personalized funerals reflect an avoided or hidden death, or point at another attitude toward death. The Danish sociologist Michael Hviid Jacobsen suggests the term 'spectacular death', 'in which death, dying and mourning have increasingly become spectacles' (Jacobsen, 2016) but he might stress the presence of the – indeed often spectacular – death in media

too much.⁵ The ways death is dealt with nowadays might be more fruitfully characterized as an attitude aiming at continuing bonds with the deceased: bonds with the deceased are no longer severed, but are continued and help next of kin to cope with death (Klass & Steffen, 2018). This is not phrased in religious terms but rather in words and rituals that, for example, stress that ‘the deceased lives forth in our hearts’.

The music that sounds during contemporary personalized funerals no longer consists of preselected combinations of three pieces of music but is often carefully selected by next of kin. Most of the time, the music is selected because it evokes memories of the life of the deceased or because it was the favorite music of the deceased. As a result of this personalization of funeral music, the musical repertoire has become much broader, now including a diversity of genres such as jazz, classical music, rock, and – by far the most chosen genre – pop music.

In addition to personalized music, contemporary funerals regularly include music that is (explicitly) related to the moment of saying farewell. These are, for example, songs as *Time to say goodbye* by Andrea Bocelli, *Afscheid nemen bestaat niet* (There’s no such thing like saying goodbye) by the Dutch singer Marco Borsato, and *Tears in heaven* by Eric Clapton. These songs are played during many funerals and are in the Top10 of rankings of music that is most frequently played during funeral rituals in the Netherlands.⁶

At the end of the 20th century, the advent of digital music files and portable music devices had made it possible to listen to music in everyday life at any desired place and time. Especially after digital music files became easily accessible for anyone online, people had continuous access to music files and could even let services such as YouTube and music recommendation systems such as Spotify suggest music to them. In this way, musical identity is increasingly created through digital tools that are even given the ‘agency’ to play an active role by recommending music via (automated and computational) algorithms that are part of these tools. So, technical affordances provide people the possibility to fine-tune their taste in music. This fine-tuned, individual taste for music is one of the key elements in personalizing contemporary funerals: listening to the favorite music of the deceased is one of the ways in which a

⁵ More about death and media, see e.g. Penfold-Mounce, R. (2018), *Death, The Dead and Popular Culture*, Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing.

⁶ See <https://dela.plechtigheidonline.nl/muziekboek/top-50>, <https://www.monuta.nl/uitvaart/mogelijkheden-bij-een-uitvaart/uitvaartmuziek/> and <https://www.yarden.nl/uitvaart-regelen/uitvaartmuziek-aanleveren.htm>

funeral can be personalized. So, when the deceased had fine-tuned his musical taste via music recommendation systems and his favorite music is played during the funerals, algorithms indirectly enter the funeral.

In addition to this indirect entrance, there are more ways in which algorithms are connected to contemporary funeral music. For example, in online available rankings of funeral music and funeral playlists on YouTube and Spotify. Every time next of kin search for ‘funeral music’ on music recommendation systems such as Spotify, algorithms are part of the process that determines which music will be suggested to the user. In the next section, this phenomenon will be explored further, for which the concept of ‘algorithmic culture’ will prove to be useful.

Algorithmic culture and contemporary funeral rituals

In 2006, media-theorist Alexander Galloway introduced the term ‘algorithmic culture’. In recent years, the term was taken up by various scholars in among others humanities and social sciences (see Seyfert & Roberge, 2016, pp. 3–4). According to Ted Striphas, one of the leading scholars in the field of algorithmic culture, algorithmic culture is ‘the enfolding of human thought, conduct, organization and expression into the logic of big data and large-scale computation, a move that alters how the category *culture* has long been practiced, experienced and understood’ (Striphas, 2015, p. 396, italics in original). Referring to the work of media-theorist Gillespie (2014), Striphas considers algorithms as “‘socio-technical assemblages” joining together the human and the nonhuman, the cultural and the computational’ (Striphas, 2015, p. 408, note 1). He points out, referring to Flusser, that ‘a key stake in algorithmic culture is the *automation* of cultural decision-making processes, taking the latter significantly out of people’s hands’ (idem, Italics in original). This is not to say that in algorithmic culture algorithms have taken cultural decision-making processes fully out of people’s hands. In algorithmic culture, computational and cultural processes can be distinguished but not separated, as computational and cultural processes inform each other. In algorithmic culture, automated, computational algorithms become part of cultural processes, just as cultural processes become part of (the design of) algorithms.

Algorithms unfold in innumerable ways that are often partly covered in a ‘black box’: they are designed to be outside our grasp (Gillespie, 2014). Therefore, it is hard to sharpen *the* definition of algorithmic culture (Seyfert & Roberge, 2016, pp. 3–4) and to precisely pinpoint which algorithm(s) influence

specific cultural processes and vice versa. Despite these limits, the concept of algorithmic culture is useful to focus on automated, computational processes within cultural processes. The concept of algorithmic culture can be regarded as part of mediatization processes. Algorithmic culture, however, has a more explicit focus on automated, computational processes that are part of cultural processes.

The analysis of 20th century long-term mediatization processes related to funeral music already indicated the use of online rankings of funeral music, YouTube, and music recommendation systems as Spotify. In the following, I will focus on how automated, computational processes are part of contemporary funeral rituals. I do not want to suggest that *all* funeral music is selected via automated, computational processes or that the popularity of a specific repertoire is exclusively determined by these processes. However, as in earlier research the influence of these processes was hardly taken into account at all, in the remainder of this chapter I will mainly focus on how these processes are related to funeral music. This will be explored via rankings of funeral music, for example a Top10, which contains music that is most frequently played during funeral rituals (Table 1), and the use of Spotify in searching for funeral music.

Rankings of funeral music

In interviews with next of kin and funerary professionals, I found that next of kin often use online funeral playlists as a source of inspiration when they have to select music for a funeral. A quick search on the internet leads to dozens of funeral playlists, such as a Top10 or Top50 of funeral music. In the Netherlands, funeral organization create rankings based on the actual use of music during funerals and make these rankings available on their websites (see Footnote 6). However, neither in earlier studies on funerals, nor during interviews and observations, I have found that people had selected music ‘because it was in the Top10 of funeral music’. When people used these online sources, the meanings that are attributed to this music are often more related to, for example, the context of the funeral (‘because it *is* time to say goodbye for *Time to say goodbye*’) or to relational aspects (‘because he *is* my daddy’ for the song *Papa* (daddy)). In this way, the online rankings are a source of inspiration that remains hidden to outsiders (and researchers). The rankings available online are used for the selection of funeral music, but the meaning attributed to the selected music is not related to the internet or the popularity of the songs.

The use of external sources of inspiration is not a new phenomenon. In past *and* present, people copy-paste from other funerals they attended or heard about.

Even today, next of kin often ask funeral directors and celebrants ‘how it should be’ when they talk about the design of the funeral in general or the music in particular. Although this does not apply to all bereaved families, I found that some next of kin worried about the opinion of others about the ways they designed the funeral for their beloved one. Many of the interviewed funeral directors and celebrants regard a selection from the Top10 as a ‘safe’ choice. Regarding the choice for *Time to say goodbye*, one of the funeral directors characterized this as: ‘the safe road of “let’s not do stupid things” and “this is how it should be”’. That is still a common way of thinking. Especially in the elder generation’ (interview funeral director Henk, 2019).⁷ The online available rankings can be regarded as an online source for finding out ‘how it should be’, which is still an important feature of funerals for many next of kin. As the rankings function as a source of inspiration that show ‘how it should be’, they reinforce the popularity of a specific repertoire.

Even though the creation of these rankings can be considered as an automated process – they are created by software of the audio-visual companies that create the musical systems used by crematoria – the *selection* of funeral music from these online available rankings is not automated.

Search for: ‘funeral music’

However, not only the online available rankings of funeral music, but also music streaming services such as Spotify and funeral playlists on YouTube are a source of inspiration for next of kin. Even though the algorithms behind these services are a ‘black box’ to researchers, it is clear that the algorithms that recommend music make use of data provided by the user and other users. For example, if I look for funeral music on my Spotify account and start to listen to a piece of music, Spotify might recommend other subsequent songs to me than to a listener who is used to listen to different music styles. In this way, algorithms that make use of listening behavior of the user, become part of the process of selecting funeral music (also see Prey, 2017, pp. 5–6).

However, according to Spotify employee Ajay Kalia, ‘[A] person’s preference will vary by the type of music, by their current activity, by the time of day, and so on... [We] believe that it’s important to recognize that a single music listener is usually many listeners’ (Kalia, as cited in Prey, 2017, p. 7). So Spotify does not take the musical identity of a listener as a fixed, stable identity, but as

⁷ Translated from Dutch: ‘Het veilige pad van nu, laten we maar niet gek doen en dat hoort zo. Dat zit er ook nog wel sterk in. Zeker bij de oudere generatie.’

many music identities: the identity is not ‘decided’ based on age, gender, or income, but on actual listening behavior. From the perspective of recommendation systems, ‘people have more in common with other people in the same situation, or with the same goals, than they do with past versions of themselves’ (Pagano et al., as cited in Prey, 2017, p. 7). This means a search for ‘funeral music’ does not only take into account previous listening behavior of the bereaved user, but also listening behavior of others who searched for ‘funeral music’. As a result, the user is ensnared by algorithms, even when searching on a service like Spotify, which seems to offer any music available. Even though people feel free to select any kind of music, they want and feel that ‘all music of the universe’ is available online, algorithms decide what they will and what they will not find. Especially when music recommendation systems make use of other users’ preferences in the same context (e.g. funerals), there might well be a converging effect of these algorithms when people search with keywords such as ‘funeral music’. However, the algorithms do not decide which music sounds at a funeral. Next of kin still decide which music they select, whether it fits the context of a funeral and whether it matches the musical preferences of the deceased or themselves. So, algorithms have become part of the process of selecting funeral music, but do not fully take the decision process out of the hands of next of kin.

Ritual studies and algorithmic culture

In this chapter, the concepts of mediatization and algorithmic culture were used to study funerals. The first proved useful in studying how, on the long term, changes in death mentalities and changes in musical media relate to each other. The latter showed that, even though online dimensions often remain invisible in the context of offline funeral rituals, contemporary personalization of funeral rituals is partly created (and facilitated) by digital tools and algorithms. Therefore, in mediatization research, an explicit focus on algorithmic culture, which might easily escape the eye of the researcher, should always be incorporated. However, an explicit focus on algorithmic culture might easily suggest that that are one-way causal relations between, in this case, algorithmic cultures and personalization of funerary rituals. Here, the long-term perspective of mediatization is useful to prevent from this.

As this research is situated in the field of ritual studies, the question can be raised how future research on ritual in a digital society can benefit from these insights. This chapter has shown that the perspectives in rituals studies on ‘ritual

online’ and ‘online ritual’ do not cover the whole range of how ritual and online dimensions are connected. The notion of ‘ritual online’ refers to an offline ritual that is transferred to online environments, while ‘online ritual’ refers to a ritual that is performed online, such as rituals in the Church of Fools and churches in Second Life (Post, 2015, p. 13). However, as online environments also affect offline rituals, for example via algorithms behind the keyword ‘funeral music’ on Spotify, the perspectives of ‘ritual online’ and ‘online ritual’ do not cover the entire range of online dimensions of rituals. Therefore, the field of rituals studies would benefit from a focus on how online dimensions inform offline rituals and vice versa.

In presenting my work on algorithmic culture, people often suggested that digitalization and algorithms ‘depersonalize’ the personalized funeral. I would argue, however, that this is not the case. Instead, algorithms have become an accepted tool for constructing the personalized funeral in a digital society. They do not ‘depersonalize’ the personalized funeral any more than offline copy-paste behavior of music from other funerals, as the meaning that is attributed to the selected music becomes ‘personalized’ after having used online or offline sources of inspiration.

Let me conclude by stating that the ‘layered and often particularly complex dynamics’ (Post, 2015, p. 11) that manifest in the field of death rituals have gained an extra layer: the algorithmic ‘black box’ of dealing with death.

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Death and death rituals in digital games

Karin Wenz

Introduction

Digital games challenge the concept of death but also the function of death rituals in specific ways. Replay and the possibility to start over again or return to the last safe spot show that the concept of death is challenged or even becomes an empty shell. Fingarette (1996, pp. 1–5) describes death as an empty concept that has no meaning in itself but needs to be interpreted by its rituals, symbols, and contexts in which it is embedded to make it meaningful. He describes death and its rituals and contexts as a building on which many perspectives are possible: ‘There are as many correct perceptions of that building as there are perspectives from which to view it’ (Fingarette, 1996, p. 85). The following perspectives on death in digital games will be discussed in this contribution: 1) the function of death and dying of the player’s avatar will be discussed as symbolic and didactical; 2) the use of the game space for death rituals or memorial space for the death of a player; and 3) the inclusion of rituals related to death and burial as part of the player’s activity.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: in the sections ‘The avatar’s death’ and ‘Serious ends’ I refer to those digital games in which a player controls a game character. This includes single- and multiplayer games, genres such as action, adventure, and role-playing games. The function of death to either improve the performance of the player or the symbolic function of death within the game world is central in these sections. The discussion of death rituals and memorials in the sections ‘A player’s death’ and ‘Death rituals’ focuses on multiplayer games and specifically the genre of massive multiplayer role-playing games exclusively as these are games in which players form groups and communities and develop emotional bonds with each other. The game space is then used for commemoration. The last section, ‘Burial without engagement’,

describes the player performing a death ritual in a game as part of the tasks a player has to finish. This discussion is based on my own observations in a massive multiplayer role-playing game.

The avatar's death¹

The term 'avatar' refers to the game character we use as our double or representation in a computer game, the character that represents us on the computer screen. It can be described as a tool that players can manipulate and by which players can interfere with the world of the game. These characters are virtual and the question is whether we can speak of 'death' in case of something that is not alive. However, players refer to the avatar's death in the game with the words: 'I died.' The concept 'death' is used here rather metaphorically as neither did the player die, nor is the avatar dead in the strict sense of the word. I focus on games that use a character the player can play with, so called avatar-based digital games. These do not only let us watch dying and death, but we actively are involved in the death of our own avatar or those of others. A wide range of different types of games use avatars: they range from action games (such as *First Person Shooters*, though they often reduce the avatar to a hand holding a weapon), to adventure games and role-playing games, and some simulation games – to mention the main categories. In strategy games the player usually controls a whole group of characters (e.g. settlers and/or soldiers to build cities and buildings related to warfare).

Avatar-based games have in common that the player controls an avatar and often identifies with it. Players in many computer games begin by designing their own character. Depending on the game's universe, the user can select sex, race, profession, and physical features of his or her game character. Filiciak (2002, p. 90) describes this as 'an idealized image of the situation of the post-modern human creature, in which a user freely can shape his [or her] own "self".' However, this shaping and developing of an avatar is not comparable to the identification with a protagonist we all know from reading books or watching movies. Rather, Filiciak uses the term 'introjection' when speaking of the relationship of the player to the avatar: 'the subject is projected inward into an "other". The subject (player) and the "other" (the onscreen avatar) do not stand at the opposite sites of the mirror anymore – they become one' (Filiciak,

¹ This section of this contribution is an update of Wenz (2013) while the following sections are written for this publication exclusively.

2002, p. 91). Filiciak expresses a unifying fantasy typical of many descriptions of digital worlds: the fantasy of entering a space that enables us to become one with another that represents us. This explains why players use the words 'I died' when their avatar dies.

When we play a new game and are not skilled yet, we are forced to watch our avatar die over and over again. These deaths, then, have a didactic function and take place on the ludic level of the game and not on its narrative level. Dying leads to 'game over' when the player is pushed out of the game, but he or she might still be able to re-enter and replay the game. Playing a game means, in most cases, to develop our avatar further, to learn to control the game, and to adapt our actions to the affordances of the game software. This can be compared to a process in which the player is asked to improve his or her skills, or, to put it differently, to submit to the rules of the game, internalize them, and follow them. Internalization of the game rules is rewarded with staying alive. The task in most digital games is to stay alive until all missions are fulfilled. At the same time the game includes death traps for the player. Ntelia (2015, p. 94) puts it as follows:

In digital games, one can be reborn just as easily as pushing a button. One may see in this trait a mechanism by which players are distanced from how death really works, but I will argue the opposite by saying that it is precisely in digital games that we have the ability to possibly fathom death in its closest approximate representation.

Grodal (2000, p. 203) has shown that 'the sense of realism is enhanced because the player's control is not absolute but relative to his skills'. While the player partly gains control, the game controls the activities of the player. The possibility of replaying a sequence to improve one's own gameplay does not only give the impression that the player gains control, but it also controls the actions of the player and establishes a functional circuit between player and game. Staying alive is rewarded by being able to enter the next level, improving skills, gaining experience points, or reaching a higher rank in a game. Dying results in punishment by losing experience points or the rank and the status related to it, paying for damaged equipment or for a soul healer² (e.g. in *World of Warcraft*

² Non-player characters such as the soul healer in *World of Warcraft* and in *Aion* exist in most massive multiplayer online role-playing games, sometimes under different names such as e.g. 'Nui' in *Archeage*.

or *Aion*) to retain the full functionality of the avatar in game again. Dying then is equal to failure and the goal is to develop skills to avoid dying as much as possible (Curtis, 2015; Nohr, 2012; Wenz, 2013). Following Nohr (2012, p. 67),

[t]he player subordinates to a routine of repetition that is on the one hand technical (insofar as the program defines the parameters that have to be reached in order to display the visual representation of a successful jump) and on the other hand also reaching in to fields of social and cultural meanings. The player subordinates willingly to a procedure of optimizing his or her actions—a *self-optimization*.

Playing a digital game includes several decisive moments a player has to solve by using a trial and error method. In a situation where the player makes a wrong decision or lacks the skills to solve a problem, the avatar dies. This does not end the avatar's existence since most games offer a 'replay' function through resurrection or revitalization of the avatar. The experience of the player can be described as a playful encounter of death and dying. A player plays through several deaths of his avatar. These are symbolic deaths comparable to those in comics or movies, as we do not speak about physical bodies here, nor about an irreversible state.

Using an avatar as a tool to play a game helps the player to become immersed into the game world and become a part of it. The avatar's death turns out to be a disruptive factor for the player's immersion and the game's narrative experience in those games in which a narration is integrated. An identification of the player with the avatar breaks down in the moment of the avatar's death (Neitzel, 2008, p. 158). The player reacts to this with irritation or a shrug of shoulders, depending on what the in-game consequences look like. Calleja (2011) describes this as the end of the game experience as simulation: 'Even if we play in multiplayer mode and, as a result, after our death the game continues, for us it has ceased to be a simulation and continues on as a mere representation' (p. 98).

For most single-player games, dying means to go back to the last save point, and gained points and items are lost and need to be gained again. For a multiplayer game, like a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), experience points and sometimes also equipment is lost, or at least becomes broken and needs repair. Furthermore, the death can affect the group a player plays with, and all group members might die as result of the death of one avatar, or lose points. Ntelia (2015, p. 91) argues that for games 'death is considered the obstacle against the player's efforts for success'. The death of the avatar is

a loss, but mainly a loss of time and money. Both are annoying, rather than a reason for mourning.

Serious ends

While violent death and being killed by another player's avatar or a non-player character is central in digital games, natural death has no place in digital games since the player cannot win against it. Exceptions are games that evolve around narratives about death and dying as *The Graveyard* (2009), *The End* (2011),³ *To the Moon* (2011), and *That dragon, cancer* (winner Games For Impact Award, The Game Awards 2016). They offer a different approach. These games are designed to make its players think more about complex questions concerning mortality.

The Graveyard follows an elderly woman through a graveyard to a bench and her memories of the beloved ones she lost. The game ends either with her leaving or dying sitting on the bench.

The end starts with the avatar's death and gives different options as to what might follow after death. Death is a central topic in this game and players are asked to reflect on death instead of playing with it as we do in most digital games. The player is asked to collect 'death objects' and will come across 'keys of knowledge' represented by quotes, like Somerset Maugham's 'dying is a very dull, dreary affair and my advice is to have nothing to do with it'. Later on, the player is asked to answer questions like 'Is there such a thing as a cause worth dying for?' and 'Can we understand what death is actually like?' The answers to questions about death help to construct an explanation of death based on the player's decisions.

To the Moon plays through the memories of a dying old man and his thoughts about how his life could have developed differently had he made different decisions. It tries to simulate last thoughts on a death bed when looking back.

That dragon, cancer also deals with dying. A young child is dying from cancer in this game. The game is based on a real event and has been developed by the parents and their friends to help them deal with grief. The death of the child is the final ending of the game and the game evolves around questions how to deal with loss and bereavement.

³ *The End* (2011): information missing. The website has been taken down in 2017 and only a description of the game is left online with no further information.

A player's death

Death of players (and game developers) are events gaming communities react to in the worlds of online games as a way to cope with their loss. Arnold et al. (2018) investigate a broad range of gaming practices from memorials to virtual funeral services. Memorials are added to the game worlds by developers or players to remember deceased friends. We find graves, statues, and monuments or even characters that look like the avatar of a deceased player in game worlds. Also, memorial services take place, partly similar to traditional ones, e.g. a come-together to share stories about the deceased. Players log on with their avatars, meet at places such as a cathedral, a cemetery, or a place in the game world that the deceased loved. These meetings often include the use of voice-over software such as *TeamSpeak*, *Ventrilo*, or the voice-over tool of *Discord*, where the community can talk to each other and they do also meet via these tools to extend the service they hold and deal with their loss on a much more personal level. These funerals and memorial services have taken place several times in online games such as *Eve Online* and *World of Warcraft*.

Memorials and services such as funerals are traditional practices taken into the online worlds of games by the players themselves and the related rituals are performed in the online spaces. Arnold et al. (2018) have shown that these memorial practices are not without their controversies. Some players feel uncomfortable about them and describe them as 'creepy'. New forms of commemorative practices enter games where they are not yet established, nor expected. Norms about what we consider appropriate in gaming contexts and what not can be unclear, because game spaces are playfields for a variety of practices including e.g. counter-play (grieving and other practices to disturb the gameplay of other players). Gaming communities, especially those engaging in Player versus Player battles (PVP), are known for their toxic behavior and they are interfering with memorial services intentionally as happened during a memorial service in *World of Warcraft*.

Players who do not know about the double function of specific sites in the game might not treat them with the respect that we usually would expect when interacting with memorials. As for most objects within a game (e.g. statues, cemeteries and gravestones, inscriptions on a wall) the information that they also function as memorial sites external to the game's storyline is not provided. This leads to a clash between those who know the function as memorial and maybe even have known the player being commemorated or even personalized in game, as in the following example.

Arnold et al. (2018) refer to a controversial example of an enthusiastic player whose face and body was scanned during a visit to the studios while he already was terminally ill. The scan was used as model for the soldiers of the game *Rome Total War 2*. The game developers commented in an interview as follows: ‘Even though he won’t get the chance to see *Rome Total War 2* released, he will live on in some small way in our game’ (Arnold et al., 2018, p. 90). For some, this adds personhood to the character and creates a desire to protect his life. However, the fact that he can now be killed in this game over and over again, adds an unintended macabre element to this game.

Famous is the event during an online funeral being held in the online game *World of Warcraft* (WoW) when a group of players (known under the name *Serenity Now*) interrupted the funeral intentionally. This has been recorded and shared on YouTube under the title ‘Serenity Now bombs a WoW funeral’.⁴ The attackers were accused of acting disrespectfully towards the mourning community. The mourning community held a ritual that was peaceful and by some even considered religious, even though the memorial service took place in an area of the game where players usually fight each other. This led to a discussion whether these memorial practices do belong in a game and whether it indeed shows respect for the deceased to use such an environment for a memorial service. Arnold et al. (2018, p. 92) reflect on this: ‘Game memorial services usually combine the profundity of death and commemoration with the frivolity of violent play that is the norm in these games.’

Some argue that players playing together for a longer time form communities and develop emotional bonds. For them memorial services have the function to support each other and help to share the loss. Others consider these rituals being held in a ludic space as inappropriate. The question arises whether games are an appropriate environment for memorial services. Arnold et al. (2018) claim that whether they are interpreted as appropriate ‘depends on how individuals and communities understand the ontology of game worlds, the aesthetics of commemoration, and their own sense of morality’ (p. 92). The problem we face here is a clash between conventions and expectations that are related to memorial practices on the one hand and gaming conventions on the other hand. This aspect will be addressed next.

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEpv7YxnLCO&t=117s>

Death rituals: Mixing repertoires

Memorial practices are part of death rituals. These rituals are embedded in narratives about dying, death, and maybe also an afterlife. Scrutton (2018, p. 215) describes them as sensorily rich and powerful as they provide experiential knowledge. Post (2014, p. 193) also underlines the relevance of experience and performance for rituals: ‘In a “true” ritual observing means doing, participating, experiencing.’ However, he also points out that this approach has changed in our modern context ‘with its cinemas, radio, television, the tourist’s approach. Are we still able to truly see? In the ritual “act” the symbol comes to life, this “act” requires practice’ (Post, 2014, p. 193). While Post refers here to rituals in concrete offline contexts, I will discuss the difference of the performance of such rituals in the online environment of digital games, where the question is not whether we are still able to truly see, but rather what the transfer of rituals to a game world means.

The memorial service held in *World of Warcraft* and the disruptive behavior of a group of players during this service, already points at the difficulty to include serious rituals and practices into a ludic space. The funeral service that was hosted in WoW included a funeral eulogy, a walk to the grave, and a moment of silence in front of the grave. Through these practices, the WoW community tried to perform a ritual within a game space. In an offline context, this is a ritual that all participants expect to be respected, even considered sacred by some and only sometimes disturbed by a child who is part of the mourning family and does not understand why everyone is so silent and sad. This is different in a game space where the service held is surrounded by others playing the game and unintentionally or intentionally interfering and disturbing the ritual. Even more so when a part of it takes place via a voice-over software such as *TeamSpeak* and the eulogy is only audible to those sharing the *TeamSpeak* channel that is not part of the game, and therefore cannot be listened in by other players not being invited to this channel. There is also not a grave of the player who died in a game space. However, the ritual might make use of cemeteries that might be a part of the game design, or players choose a site the deceased player loved in the game space for their memorial service. The burial itself is also not possible so that part of the ritual takes place in the imagination of the community involved. Lastly, the service is played out in different spaces: partly in the game space, partly on a shared voice-over channel, and partly in the imagination of the players involved. As Post (2013) put it:

For ritual and religion, the understanding grew that there were, in the space of the new media but not only there, other forms of community coming into being. We have to abandon the idea of ritual repertoires in fixed ritual spaces that are borne by a defined, fixed, and attached community. [...] They are determined by coming and going, change in composition. This given has major consequences for the profile of a ritual community and space.

The use of multiple spaces is typical for gaming communities who do not only inhabit the digital game space, but use additional software to connect to each other, share knowledge about the game or simply their interest in gaming outside of the game. These are game forums, the software *Discord* (a digital distribution platform, specifically used by gamers), voice-over software such as *TeamSpeak* or *Ventrilo*, or the voice-over channel provided by *Discord*. Some also have WhatsApp groups and use other social media platforms to stay in touch. The time spent together inside and outside the game via these tools is high and leads to a sense of community and belonging. The gaming communities are then experienced as ‘real’ as you play with real people, hear their voices, and maybe sometimes even share pictures or meet in real life. The distinction between the game world and the physical world cannot be made that clearly for those communities, and they also rather speak about ‘online’ and ‘offline’.

In that same sensory connection, new network media are constantly being connected with the ambivalence of virtual and real, by which the opposition ‘real’ and ‘not real’ is invoked [...]. The crux here again is the strong relation between online and offline culture, between virtual and real space. ‘Virtual’ is easily connected with and equated to ‘unreal’ from a certain comparative perspective. The nature of the ritual performance is different and is always contrasted with existing mediations in which the primary parameters are physical presence and encounter. In this context, people use terms like ‘simulating’ and dichotomies like genuine/non-genuine, real/virtual, as well as authentic/inauthentic and even legitimate/illegitimate. It is extraordinarily difficult to describe or define the precise character of that virtuality. Various elements come together here. The major question is whether the traditional conception of ritual really is at issue here. (Post & Van der Beek, 2016, pp. 80–81)

We can observe a modification of the traditional ritual and its adaptation to the affordances of the game space and the gaming practices of players in- and outside the game space. The fact that not all channels during a memorial service

are shared by all players present in the environment leads to conflicts and misunderstanding. Role-playing in online spaces is part of the game for many but does not include the earnestness and deep-felt loss of those being present at a memorial service. Those not being informed about this service are not ‘able to truly see’ (Post, 2014, p. 193). Or – as in the case of the group intentionally disrupting the service as described above – do not consider the performance of such a ritual as adequate for a game space.

Burial without engagement

The burial is a ritual mentioned above already. Its function is to put the body back into the ground where it becomes again part of the life cycle. The decomposing body nourishes animals and plants, and supports life. At the same time, this ritual is a cleansing ritual to prevent the living to be infected (Scrutton, 2018). One game specifically includes the active performance of a burial as task for the player. The Massive Multiplayer Online role-playing game *ArcheAge* differs from what I have encountered in other games. The player finds corpses of human-like creatures splattered around one area. In this area, the Hiram Mountains, remnants of an ancient civilization can be found: ruins and abandoned structures, a shrine to a goddess, and decomposing bodies on the ground. The player does not see the bodies alive but they are already present in the map as corpses surrounded by flies. But the player can interact with them to bury them.

When we click on the bodies our character starts to use a shovel and dig a hole, after which the body sinks into the ground and disappears. Burying the bodies unlocks an achievement in game. This action includes a burial ritual into the game world. The burial ritual in *ArcheAge* tries to include sensorial aspects as described by Scrutton (2018), even though the focus is on the image and sound provided during the burial, the flies around the decomposing corpses speak to our olfactory imagination as well. An experiential cognition could be offered to approach death within this game frame. In a death ritual affliction is mapped onto a mythic landscape with the aim to provide healing. Burying the decomposing corpses is not ‘healing’ the player from grief, but has a cleansing effect on the landscape. What we observe here is what Arnold et al. (2018) describe as ‘mixing repertoires’. When having a closer look at the burial activity and its context in *ArcheAge*, we see that the player engages in this ritual within a situation where she is surrounded by aggressive characters (called ‘mobs’ in games) in an area that is open for fights against other players every second hour.

Burying, then, is contextualized by fighting and killing mobs and players – or being killed by them. Burying the corpses is done by a click without any further attention to a farewell ritual. The opposite is true as the aggressive mobs respawn in this map, the player has to be careful and observe the environment carefully while burying a corpse. As burying a corpse is rewarded with an achievement in *ArcheAge*, players compete for the dead bodies on the ground but the burial also becomes another, repetitive chore, typical for tasks in these games. This is an example that shows that ‘[...] without engagement, reflection and sometimes reinvention, rituals can lose their meaning’ (Schillace, 2016, p. 11). Repertoires we know from death rituals and those from repetitive actions in games to gain rewards are mixed in this example.

Closure

Playing with death, or, even, playing at death, in this way opens dying [and death rituals] up as an aesthetic experience for the individual, enabling to a certain extent an otherwise unknowable moment to be lived through. Obviously, such virtual death is not commensurate with its biological analogue but its interactivity distinguishes it from the more static engagements with mortality to be found in traditional media. (Curtis, 2015)

The active engagement with the game, the death of the own avatar or the death of another player we meet in this game space, distinguishes games clearly from death experiences we can observe in other narrative media. Ntelia (2015, p. 96) describes this as an experience of death that ‘remains intact in the gamer’s mind’. The game session is ended with the death of the player and even if the player can respawn, the session cannot be repeated in the same way again. She also shows clearly that while the avatar has no knowledge of death and dying, the player has. She speaks of a double consciousness caused by the I of the avatar and the I of the player which creates ‘a limbo of the only possible death experience’ (p. 96). This double bond between the player and the avatar is based on the capacity of digital games to simulate our offline experiences, but in an altered manner.

If it were not for the possibility of dying another death every time we play, the representation of death would be no different to the fictional deaths of characters in novels, films or drama. A book hero will always die the same way; an avatar finds his/her death in variegated circumstances. (Ntelia, 2015, p. 96)

Playing with death and death rituals, and the possible variations a player can experience through game play, adds to a culture of sharing through storytelling. Through stories, death is given meaning through the player's experience of her/his avatar's death, in rituals, memorial practices in digital games. Games offer a ludic space that includes narratives as part of their design and as part of the player's performance within this space. I have shown how rituals and related narratives from our offline practices can be included into these game spaces but also how this leads to conflicts between the convention and meaning of rituals on the one hand and gaming conventions on the other.

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Gay Victims & Heroes: Narratives of identity in online 9/11 memorials

Sarah J. Griffiths

Introduction

Online memorialization is rapidly becoming an acceptable way to mark losses, whether by purchasing a plot in an online cemetery, memorializing a deceased individual's Facebook page, or creating a purpose-built website. These online commemoration options are limited only by the ability and imagination of the person creating the site, and the technology available to them. Such memorial sites can be a reflection or an extension of a physical counterpart, for example, the Auschwitz twitter feed (@AuschwitzMuseum). Whereas others, like the Jewish Monument, which is a Dutch national site that marks the Jewish victims of the Holocaust,¹ exist purely in an online space (Hess, 2007). When we think that so many aspects of our lives are now managed online, from banking, to shopping, to work, it should hardly be a surprise that we are now also memorializing people and events in this context (Maddrell, 2012).

However, online memorialization is not simply a new medium for commemoration that functions in exactly the same way as a traditional offline memorial. The specific properties offered by a website or social media platform, coupled with the fact that anyone can create a memorialization site, give scope for new possibilities around who is remembered and in what way. In terms of national events, the narratives used in memorialization are considered to influence political culture (Bodnar, 1992), which means that how society remembers and chooses to commemorate such an event is political (Edkins, 2003).

On September 11, 2001, four commercial planes were hijacked by members of Al Qaeda and flown into the north and south towers of the World Trade

¹ Retrieved from <https://www.joodsmonument.nl/en/>

Center in New York, resulting in their collapse, and into the Pentagon building. The final plane, United Airlines Flight 93, crashed into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, when the passengers tried to regain control from the hijackers. In the immediate aftermath, many 9/11 memorials were created, both in the form of offline shrines and online spaces. September 11, 2001: *Gay Victims & Heroes*² is one of these websites, created and maintained by two members of the public to commemorate the gay victims of the 9/11 attacks, and to raise awareness of the struggles that their bereaved partners faced to gain legitimacy and support. In this chapter, I will be looking at how *Gay Victims & Heroes* memorializes the gay victims, and whether the narratives are different to 'official' narratives (i.e. those used by the mainstream news media). I will also explore how the site's approach to remembrance ritual creates an identity for a minority group with little presence in official narratives.

There is no agreed standard approach to analyze offline or online memorialization, with scholars taking different approaches based on their areas of interest. My approach uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore the discourse present in the website narratives, and the results of a series of email questions with Michael Lombardi-Nash, one of the creators of *Gay Victims & Heroes*, to clarify the intentions and actions behind creating the site. CDA is particularly relevant as it examines instances of communication and considers the power structure and ideologies present, specifically in relation to those who created the discourse and the intended recipient (Van Dijk, 1993). It will allow me to identify the narratives in *Gay Victims & Heroes*, which create a collective memory to support the group's identity.

Collective memory and online memorialization

Creating an official memorial to remember an event is a complicated process. In the case of national events, especially those involving a high death toll such as 9/11, it is not uncommon for there to be a number of voices with different narratives which they want somehow acknowledged. Even the dead are given an opinion, through claims of 'what they would have wanted' (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 24). Although the expectation is that the finished memorial should satisfy everyone, it is not required to take all narratives into account (assuming it could) and the chosen version is interpreted in line with societal values by those in positions of power (Sierp, 2014). This becomes the dominant

² Retrieved from <http://www.angelfire.com/fl3/uraniamanuscripts/sept11.html>

narrative that shapes national memorialization. However, with the advent of the Internet in the 1990s, new remembrance options became available for groups or individuals who previously would struggle to have their narrative heard in the official memorialization process. Working from Halbwachs and Edkins' theories of memory informing identity, these unofficial, online memorials to national events illustrate and support the identity of the groups who create them and can have a wider impact on dominant narratives of events such as 9/11.

Halbwachs' work on collective memory argues that all memories of events are anchored in and maintained through social interactions. Collective memory is itself an academically contested term, but I use it here to mean an agreed narrative of an event held by a particular group. Individuals are part of a number of social groups, and we can only understand a memory if we examine it within the context of a group (Halbwachs, 1992). Our place within these groups is defined by the use of a shared language, which does not only refer to words, but also to non-verbal forms of communication such as symbols (Edkins, 2003; Kansteiner, 2002). In this way, Halbwachs contests the idea that our memories are stored unchanged in our minds like files in a computer, providing an identical result each time they are retrieved (Edkins, 2003). Instead he argues that 'everything seems to indicate that the past is not preserved, but is reconstructed on the basis of the present' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 40), meaning that our present day knowledge and experience, which is socially obtained, creates the lens we use to examine past events (Zehfuss, 2003). The connection between collective memory and identity is inherently political, as it is a form of communication about a group's past and therefore what the group is, or how it sees itself. To engage with a group, a person needs to position themselves in relation to the group's memory, as even if that is purely to reject it, the memory is still being used as the point of reference (Hobsbawm, 1972). The collective memories, once created, feed the identity of the group, providing context and lending authenticity to views being promoted. In terms of memorialization, these are confirmed through commemoration activities (Bodnar, 1992).

The power which a collective memory has over a group's identity is most obvious at a national level, with accepted narratives of events in a nation's history influencing national identity, both in how it defines itself and how a state is viewed in the international system (Bell, 2006). Therefore, the selection of events that are memorialized by a nation and the manner in which they are commemorated can demonstrate not only the identity, but the nature of the political system in place, and how the elites would like their state to be perceived (Sierp, 2014). Collective memory used in this way is intended to endure, and is

supported through an accepted structure of symbols, institutions, and laws. Online memorialization can disrupt this prevalence of a collective memory through the promotion of alternative narratives.

The advent of the internet has changed how we store and access information, and therefore our relationship with the past (Recuber, 2012). Within a short space of time, the internet has gone from being a new technological frontier, to something that is so embedded in our lives it is generally taken for granted (Miller, 2011). Initially, the idea of an online monument for a national event was seen as inappropriate, with concerns that memorial content could end up in close proximity to adverts or porn. The potential longevity of these sites was also a problem; whether they would last and resist time in the same way that a physical monument is expected to (Faro, 2015). Today, these concerns have decreased as the internet is assumed to be a permanent fixture, and a better understanding of how websites and online advertising works means that purpose-specific memorials are less likely to end up including inappropriate adverts. Online memorialization is no longer seen as simply a support to an offline memorial, but can function as a legitimate form of memorialization in its own right. Commemoration acts also take place online, adapting to the new format as technology and narratives allow.

The nature of an online memorial has certain benefits and offers a different experience. The most obvious change is that it removes the geographical constraints, which are an inherent part of offline memorials. If people believe that the presence of a body or place of death gives a greater form of legitimacy, then offline memorials would be seen as superior to their online counterparts (Veale, 2004). However, an online site can be an acceptable alternative, especially for those who are unlikely to be able to visit the offline memorial, whether due to logistical constraints or more emotional reasons. Online sites are also able to offer space to memorialize those who do not have a grave or designated offline location (Maddrell, 2012), offering the opportunity to articulate alternative narratives, as shown in *Gay Victims & Heroes*.

Another unique characteristic of online memorialization is the fluidity of the content, allowing the author of the site to add to and adapt the memorial as frequently as needed (Veale, 2004). This change is accepted as an integral element of the medium, as are changing methods of accessing these sites, from PCs to smartphones. This means that the content can literally be mobile, travelling with the smartphone user. Traditional memorials are not expected to change in this way, in fact, changes to established memorials are not taken lightly (Graham et al., 2015), as the perception of their ability to endure for future generations is an

essential consideration (Hallam & Hockey, 2001). How long online memorials can remain in their original form is a legitimate question not often considered, as web-hosting platforms are commercial entities with their own agendas and pressures.

These sites also lend themselves to communication and interaction among those who visit them in a way, which is not always available to visitors of offline memorials. Almost all online memorial sites have a visitors' book or comments function, allowing anyone to join in commemorating and promoting ongoing discussion. This makes online memorialization more adaptable to an individual's specific needs (Veale, 2004), in contrast to official commemoration acts which frequently promote specific people or elite groups. But, as shown with the guestbook on *Gay Victims & Heroes*, memorial sites can attract both those who intend to memorialize and those who trespass. These sites can fall foul of trolls, who anonymously post inappropriate messages, impacting the integrity and memory of the online memorial.

As Hess argues, '[w]eb discourse holds promise: the promise of free and unrestricted discourse, the ability to create communities across long distances, and the ease of collection and distribution for the participant groups' (Hess, 2007, p. 827). Post also discusses the unique reach offered by the web, transcending usual boundaries of place and temporal restraints to create fluid communities (Post, 2013). The opportunity that the internet provides through creating a platform for memorializing alternative narratives of events can have far-reaching effects. Memorialization is no longer only in the hands of elite groups who commission national monuments. As examined in the next section, *Gay Victims & Heroes* is an example of a memorial website created by members of the public to articulate a narrative of a specific group, which was not being reflected in mainstream commemoration.

Gay Victims & Heroes

The website *Gay Victims & Heroes* was created by Michael Lombardi-Nash and his late partner Paul Nash, who were already involved in gay activism at the time of the attacks. In the days following 9/11, as they started hearing about gay victims, they wanted to do something to pay tribute to them and acknowledge their bereaved friends and family. The couple had previously built a website celebrating Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, the first known gay activist, therefore creating *September 11, 2001: Gay Victims & Heroes* seemed an appropriate platform. The site itself is based on *Angelfire*, a web hosting and building site,

which is now owned by Lycos (About Angelfire, n.d.). It allows the authors to have control over the editing, formatting, layout, and content. *Gay Victims & Heroes* includes banner advertising and has limitations around bandwidth, both of which could only be changed at a financial cost.

September 11, 2001: Gay Victims & Heroes is made up of two main pages. The first shows obituaries of the gay victims, including pictures where possible. The authors of the site posted details as they became aware of each victim. The second page focuses on issues, which gay people were struggling with at the time, from legal constraints around their relationship status, to a culture of homophobia. In the United States in 2001, the extent of gay rights depended very much on location (Becker, 2003), with the nationwide legalization of gay marriage not taking place until 2015 (BBC News, 2015). Therefore, gay partners were not considered to be next of kin, which made them ineligible to receive pension and social services pay outs on their partners' death. Depending on the views of the family members who were the legal next of kin, they could also be left out of obituaries and other forms of remembrance. In the specific case of 9/11, the September 11 Victims Compensation Fund, which offered money if families agreed not to sue the airlines, did not explicitly exclude same sex partners (Becker, 2003). Despite this, without the cooperation of the legal next of kin, it was still a very difficult process to make a claim (Gross, 2002). The website highlights Peggy Neff, who lost her partner of eighteen years, and was the first gay person to successfully receive money from the Compensation Fund (Murphy, 2003). The recognition from organizations such as this did not only mean that gay partners had some financial pressures alleviated, but were also granted the legitimacy to grieve their loss, which was available without question to the spouses of heterosexual victims. Alongside providing links to those campaigning for access to the Compensation Fund, the website draws attention to mainstream charities which refused to acknowledge gay victims, such as the American Red Cross who initially turned away same sex partners from their Family Assistance Center in New York. It also highlights wider examples of homophobia and hate teaching (Becker, 2003).

It is possible to click from the main pages through to smaller pages offering additional information, such as advice around how to deal with feelings of panic and helplessness as a result of 9/11, or song lyrics and poetry. Originally, the site also included a guestbook for messages of support, which acted as a conduit for people to request other gay victims of 9/11 to be added to the main pages. However, due to the volume of homophobic abuse that was posted, which then needed to be moderated and deleted, Lombardi-Nash decided to remove this

feature, at the cost of also losing the positive comments that people had left. Like the link to the guestbook, the site today has a number of other links, which no longer work. These remain in place to show the history of the struggle for recognition and support that the gay victims and their partners faced.

Narratives of the site

September 11, 2001: Gay Victims & Heroes is available to anyone across the world with internet access. It can be found via Google searches on terms such as ‘9/11 memorialization’ or ‘9/11 victims’, or via other publicly-created 9/11 memorial pages, which frequently include lists of links to similar unofficial sites. The site is written with the view that the visitor would be at least broadly sympathetic to the gay partners’ circumstances following the attacks, as well as pro-gay rights. It assumes a certain level of knowledge around the events that took place on 9/11, not spelling out what happened. This is appropriate for the time period it was created, as the attacks were broadcast across the world.

The website solely names and commemorates the known gay victims of the attacks, disrupting the official narratives of victims that were otherwise available in obituaries such as the *New York Times*’ Portraits of Grief series³ and protesting the accepted view of a heterosexual relationship as a norm. In contrast, the site offers less information about memories or experiences of the day itself, focusing on those who died and the specific difficulties faced by those left behind. Openly gay victims did not usually have their sexuality mentioned in news reports, with journalists arguing that it was not relevant, whereas in contrast, heterosexual spouses and families were frequently included (Becker, 2003). With an online ritual space that acknowledges the gay victims and their partners, *Gay Victims & Heroes* creates an identity; that of a group which is facing discrimination due to their sexuality. The site is aimed at everyone, irrespective of sexual preference, with a goal of raising awareness of the issues that gay people in the US were facing, both as a result of 9/11 and more generally.

The main themes of the site are gay partners, homophobia, and patriotism, with ‘gay partners’ as the most frequently mentioned phrase. *Gay Victims & Heroes* even refers to the partners more frequently than it mentions victims. The first page of the website begins with a dedication to Paul Nash, one of the

³ Retrieved from <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/pages/national/portraits/index.html>

original creators who has since passed away, and to ‘The Lovers Who Awaken Each Morning without Their Gay Patriot & Hero beside Them’. This starkly sets out the realities of the loss that so many people experienced, specifically using an emotive term to underline that these people were in love and are now bereaved. This emotional emphasis is not seen as frequently in the official narratives, even in terms of heterosexual relationships, but the creators were emphasizing the nature of the relationships that were not considered valid elsewhere.

‘Gay’ as an adjective is always capitalized, showing its importance and that it is a defining part of the individuals’ identity. Following the quotation that opens the site, ‘gay’ is not separate from the fact that the victim is a patriot or a hero. They are both or all these things and should be remembered as such. However, within these narratives, the named victims on the page are not framed as heroes simply as a result of the fact that they were gay. The term ‘hero’ is used very much in the same ways as in official 9/11 narratives, specifically focusing on people such as firefighters and first responders, alongside other people who committed selfless acts. There is a specific hero narrative for the passengers on Flight 93, who fought the hijackers and crashed their plane rather than letting it get to the planned destination (usually considered to be Capitol Hill or the White House). These narratives are legitimized on the site through reference to awards and/or medals, such as Mark Bingham, who, along with other athletes on Flight 93, posthumously received an Arthur Ashe Courage award. This is an award for sportspeople who reflect the spirit of its namesake ‘possessing strength in the face of adversity, courage in the face of peril and the willingness to stand up for their beliefs no matter what the cost’ (About the Award, n.d.). Another celebrated hero was Wesley Mercer, who supervised the evacuation of his company from the World Trade Center and had previously served his country as a decorated veteran of both Korea and Vietnam (Becker, 2003). Both these people were recognized as heroes in mainstream narratives, but without the acknowledgment that they were gay.

The obituaries follow a recognized ritual, identifying the victim, including their age, where they were from, and who they were survived by in terms of family members. The site is ensuring that it gives the partners the legitimacy that they may not have received in other obituaries by treating them as heterosexual couples were treated in the same circumstances, and protesting omissions. This includes quantifiable evidence, such as stating the length of time they had been together, and facts from their shared life:

Larry Courtney and Eugene Clark were partners for 11 years. Clark, 47, worked for Aon Consulting [...] Clark sent Courtney a voice message: "I'm OK. The plane hit the other tower. And we're evacuating." (*Gay Victims & Heroes*)

These obituaries illustrate that the relationships were valid and recognizable, with day to day lives and future plans, including personal information, such as friends of one of the victims keeping the garden trimmed, which was a comfort to his partner (*Gay Victims & Heroes*). This humanizes not only the person who died, but also the partner. This act of humanizing through ordinary facts was particularly shown in the *New York Times*' Portraits of Grief which published short obituaries of as many victims as they could as an attempt to make the 9/11 death toll more than just numbers. *Gay Victims & Heroes* also notes facts about their lives in relation to the gay community, such as one couple who founded an organization to help gay couples adopt, and a co-pilot who was a member of the National Gay Pilots Association. These rituals of commemoration emphasize the identity of the gay community as a group and people's actions within it, demonstrating the role of collective memory in supporting identity as previously discussed.

As the list of obituaries continues, the focus moves from the victim to the surviving partner. The later entries highlight the partners' problems, whether with recognition of their place in the person's life or with obtaining financial support from one or many of the organizations offering it. Despite Wesley Mercer's actions being indisputably heroic and widely celebrated, his partner of 26 years, Bill Randolph, was not eligible to receive his army pension, social security, and workers compensation, which went to his wife as they had never divorced. Randolph received help from Mercer's employer and charitable organizations (Gross, 2002). Seamus Oneal's partner Tom Miller is quoted as saying 'I did not have the luxury of grieving without having to defend myself and prove who I am and who we were' (*Gay Victims & Heroes*). In Oneal's Portrait of Grief, Miller is not mentioned, focusing instead on his wife and children (Baranauckas et al., 2001). However, his wife and family chose to pay tribute to his relationship with Miller in the online Cantor Fitzgerald memorial (Cantor Families Memorial).

Gay Victims & Heroes does not only focus on the negatives. It includes success stories in terms of awards from the 9/11 Fund, couples having wills in place, and/or a good relationship with the victim's family. But these stories do have the implicit message that such measures should not have been necessary, as heterosexual partnerships would not need to rely on these for validation. As a

result, surviving gay partners are mentioned more frequently than any other types of family members, such as children or parents. Over time, the page was updated to reflect that some people originally recorded as missing had been confirmed dead. The website even records the suicide of Mike Lyons, who lost his partner in the attacks, as part of the narrative of that death.

Protesting the lack of recognition, both at federal and more local levels, is another key feature of the site, with attention drawn to issues of homophobia and discrimination in various areas of US life. Referring to the group's struggles in this way is an unusual element to include in a memorial but which is understandable given the focus. This is an example of how the editable content of online sites can offer more capacity to elaborate on topics than is available in traditional offline memorials, allowing a website to focus on the requirements of a particular group by reiterating their narratives of the event and shaping their identity. The page raises questions about why gay people are treated differently at all in the US, using a quotation from the Editor in Chief of *The Advocate*: 'When you ask what difference does it make if the heroes were gay, I say I agree with you. That's precisely our point. They were just like everybody else. So we ask, why is it that when they died, they were equal to everyone, but had they lived, they would not have the same equality as heterosexuals?' (*Gay Victims & Heroes*)

The site builds on the issues gay partners faced after 9/11, and draws attention to homophobia in other areas of American society. After 9/11, Jerry Falwell, a well-known Christian evangelist, blamed the attacks as divine retribution on those who were living an 'alternative lifestyle', such as gay people. Although this view was condemned by several in the media, it had a polarizing effect, causing some to agree and providing the push for others to come out as gay (Becker, 2003). The site highlights this, along with other evidence that these views were entrenched in US society, including an image of a US navy officer signing a bomb alongside a homophobic slogan. *Gay Victims & Heroes* does not shy away from the fact that many Americans held these viewpoints. It names well-known people as bigots, and recommends to the reader that they should avoid products from certain countries in the Middle East as a result of their treatment of gay people, and instead buy from countries that are pro-US. Both of the main pages finish with the command: 'Take the joy out of homophobia: Have lots of Fun and Make lots of Gay Love.' This underlines the identity of the group as a persecuted minority, but offers ways for anyone to support, emphasizing that humor and fun are still important.

Despite the societal issues of homophobia raised by the website, it follows several American patriotic rituals, situating both the creators and the individuals commemorated as part of the nation. As mentioned above, the site opens with the quotation framing the gay victims and their loved ones as patriots, and a 9/11 memorial image featuring the twin towers, the American flag, and the phrase ‘never forget’. Although not unique to 9/11 memorial narratives, ‘never forget’ is regularly used and was even later adopted as one of the few hashtags used by the 9/11 Memorial & Museum social media pages. The site’s main color scheme is red, white and blue, and features a number of images which contain recognized US symbols, such as eagles. To accompany the obituaries without a picture, a picture of a ribbon with a stars and stripes pattern is used, such as people wear on their lapels to show support for a cause in the offline world. This emphasizes that all the victims memorialized by the site were American patriots, with some having received specifically American bravery awards. *Gay Victims & Heroes* does not simply include visual patriotic elements, but articulates pride in America, linking to the lyrics of a verse from *God Bless America*, a patriotic song, and defining what it means to be American: ‘History shows that Americans don’t tolerate anyone saying he’s going to destroy America. There’s no reason to believe anything has changed. Allah may be great, but so is Uncle Sam’s Big Stick!’ (*Gay Victims & Heroes*).

This sense of national pride is coupled with sadness. Despite having such strength of feeling for their country, and the way it responded following 9/11, members of their community are being treated poorly by this same country, and the patriotic rituals are invoked also as a form of protest within the site. ‘I have never been more proud of being an American or a New Yorker, but at the same time it has made me sad. The greatest country in the world and yet we are treated like second class citizens...’ (*Gay Victims & Heroes*). The site extends its identity to those who it is not able to name; people who died without being able to be open about the fact that they were gay, and their partners who therefore could not openly grieve without outing them. The narratives implicit in *Gay Victims & Heroes* identify the tension between the desire for recognition experienced by this group, and the pride in a nation that in many cases is the reason that the gay partners experienced such a struggle in the wake of 9/11.

Conclusion

Gay Victims & Heroes memorializes a specific group of victims, who, due to perceptions of the time, were not receiving appropriate recognition in official

9/11 victim narratives, as well as fighting for associated issues, such as access to financial benefits. The *Gay Victims & Heroes* site illustrates the opportunities that online memorialization can offer to alternative voices who do not fit with the dominant narratives. The memorialization rituals that are used to commemorate the gay victims named in the obituaries on the website follow standard tropes for reporting of that nature, which were used in the official narratives in the press and later by the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. However, the site moves away from the expected ritual obituary of individual victims with an emphasis on the surviving partners, and their experiences with support and recognition in the aftermath. It does not stop there, expanding into the culture of homophobia, which would be recognized by any of the gay visitors to the site.

However, in spite of the criticisms of the way gay people were being treated by various American institutions, the site is heavily patriotic. It uses recognized American symbols and language, which were prevalent in 9/11 memorial narratives, identifying those who died and survived as US patriots, and supporting those who had served in the military. This frames the inequality the gay community was experiencing as unworthy of the nation of which they were proud to be a part.

Working from the theory that memorialization creates and reinforces a group's identity, this site, although focused on the gay victims of 9/11 and their unique needs and experiences, simultaneously underlines their identity as Americans. Throughout the site, *Gay Victims & Heroes* reiterates the gay community's membership of a larger national group, rather than emphasizing the importance of a group defined by their sexuality. While memorializing the gay victims, the website promotes the message that the gay victims and heroes are Americans like every other, ahead of anything else.

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Online education: Online pesantren

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Introduction

One of the characteristics of the modern society is the creation of an interactive space with many different types of people and cultures. This interactive space is not only physical, but also exists online. Pesantren as Islamic education institutions are spaces for many people to interact and learn. In this chapter, online pesantren¹ will be studied as spaces for mutual interaction through reference to two concepts: affinity spaces and online *ummah* (the Islamic community). Departing from these concepts, I will elaborate on the characteristics and forms of the phenomena of online pesantren in Indonesia.

In general, Indonesian society has a thick communal culture. The characteristics of a communal community include a simple pattern of social support because all participants are familiar with each other. Togetherness is paramount, and the closeness and the design of reciprocal relations emerge and develop smoothly. Moreover, Indonesian communal communities consider social support as part of interdependence which improves guarantees and security, whereas the adopted cultural values are shared benefits which easily arouse people's awareness to feel, think, and act together based on an impulse that meets the desires of others. Also, other Indonesian communities are mostly Indonesian people who are part of a particular group and have a specific circle of friends. If traced, the communal culture of Indonesia might be a form of manifestation of religious or local culture values. In Islam, for example, a benefit of *silaturahmi* (social visit) is often preached by the *Kyai* (pesantren leaders) and *Ustadz* (Islamic teachers) in Indonesia. Meanwhile, many non-Muslim communities in

¹ Although the literature mentions 'virtual pesantren', we prefer 'online pesantren' in order to avoid the connotation of 'false' of 'inauthentic'.

Indonesia manifest similar teaching in common local terms and activities, such as *bersih desa* (cleaning villages), *gotong royong* (working together), *rembug desa* (village meetings to discuss the community), religious rituals, cultural rituals, and much more.

This tradition of communality is also brought to the internet and can be seen in the participation of Indonesians in various online sites, especially on social networks and communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Line. Online accounts are created for groups based on the same backgrounds and interests. Online pesantren allow groups of people to come together who want to seek Islamic religious knowledge and learn and study together. The reason why online pesantren is chosen as a communal space is because *santri* (students) can socialize and mingle with people who have the same goal. Moreover, pesantren are seen as Islamic educational institutes which are already familiar with the day to day activities of *santri*.

In direct proportion to the communal culture and society, the concept of an affinity space refers to a place or a collection of sites where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, even if they do not necessarily share the same race, class, culture, ethnicity, or gender (Gee, 2005) The same interests in an affinity space accommodate these differences. Therefore, by referring to online learning environments as affinity spaces, we refer to affinity spaces as an alternative approach to informal learning by focusing on environments rather than communities. The pesantren community consists of *santri*, *Ustadzs*, and *Kyai*. These participants come from a variety of backgrounds, but the differences are bridged by the same interests. As such, an affinity space is created on the platform of online Islamic education.

The online Islamic Community (*ummah*) has paid particular attention to the role of the diaspora of the Muslims in bringing Islam to the internet. Therefore, online *ummah* is an online public space for certain Muslim groups or communities who meet on online platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Line, and others (Bunt, 2009; Lawrence, 2002; Mandaville, 2001; 2003; Roy, 2004). In this context, the members of the online *ummah* may have a spiritual union guaranteed by their participation in the same religious practices, regardless of where they are and what their background is. They also have moments where the universal practice of Islam helps to bring this online community to the offline world. The phenomena of pesantren with all its dynamics in the online *ummah* context – that *santri* from different spaces who may not know each other are involved in the same activity and interact in an Islamic education space – is similar with pesantren in the offline world.

The characteristic of offline pesantren

Generally, pesantren are traditional Islamic boarding schools. Mas'ud (2004) stated that the word 'pesantren' stemmed from santri, which means someone who seeks Islamic culture. According to Wahid (2010), pesantren are places where a santri lives and pursues Islamic knowledge. Similarly, Dhofier (1982, p. 19) defines pesantren as institutions of Islamic education where santri live together in a complex and study under the guidance of a teacher and Kyai. Misbach (1996, p. 56) definitively defines pesantren as Islamic educational institutions with a dormitory or cottage system, where Kyai act as the central figure, the mosque as the center of activities, and Islamic teaching under the guidance of Kyai and followed by santri as their primary learning activities.

In the Indonesian context, there have been several terms used to refer to pesantren. In Java, pesantren are sometimes referred to as Pesantren, Pondok, and Pondok Pesantren – abbreviated as 'Ponpes' (Dhofier, 1999). In Aceh, pesantren are referred to as *dayah*, *rangkang*, or *meunasah*, while in Minangkabau the local people call it *surau*. Some of these terms and attributes make pesantren unique places for Islamic studies, not only because of their long-held existence, but also the culture, methods, and networks set by pesantren as religious and educational institutions.

Historically, Indonesian pesantren have existed since the Hindu-Buddhism era (Berg, 1955; Geertz, 1983; Kuntowijoyo, 1991; Ziemek, 1986). In the early days, pesantren were established as a part of Islamic indigenization and as an expression of 'cultural Islam' in Indonesia, especially as Islam in Java is never separated from the model of religious propaganda done by the *Wali Songo* (the nine Islamic guardians in Java) (Lukens-Bull, 2010, p. 8). The localized Islamic cultures resulted in the pesantren pattern of Sufi-Fiqih. Johns (1961) claims that Sufi was the primary agent of conversion in the early development of Islam in Indonesia. So it is not surprising that the existence of pesantren in Indonesia was dominated by Sufis (Bubalo & Fealy, 2005; Dhofier, 1999; Hasymy, 1981). Additionally, the value system developed in the pesantren, like in other Islamic institutions, are rooted in Islamic teachings, especially Sunni Muslims. This teaching is also known as the followers of the Prophet Muhammad's tradition and the consensus of the *ulama* called *Aswaja* or *Ahl al-Sunnah Wa al-Jamā'ah* (a group that practices the Sunnah of the Muhammad Prophet and imitates the companions of the Prophet in *aqedah* (belief), *sharia* (Islam law), and *ahklaq* (morality) (Madjid, 1997, p. 10).

Furthermore, according to Dhofier (1999, p. 44) pesantren have five essential elements:

- 1 *Kyai* are the leaders of the pesantren. In general, *Kyai* are the principal owners of the pesantren who act as pioneers, founders, managers, and maintainers. On the other hand, the existence of the *Kyai* is a source of inspiration and moral support in the lives of santri and the surrounding community. Therefore, it is not surprising that the growth of pesantren is very dependent on the figure, the ability, and the expertise of the *Kyai*.
- 2 *The mosque* is a place of worship for the five daily prayers but also functions as a place to teach *Kitab Kuning* (classical Islamic books) and Qur'an. The mosque is the center of education.
- 3 *Pondok* (the cottage or dormitories, or the place for santri to stay) are some of the essential elements of the pesantren for various reasons; the fame and the depth of the *Kyai*'s knowledge about Islam usually attracts students from afar, so they must have a place to settle and learn. Additionally, *Pondok* also create a place to shape the attitude and reciprocal behavior between the santri and the *Kyai*, where students regard the *Kyai* as their own parental figure and the *Kyai* consider students as their responsibility. Also, *Pondok* are essential places for santri considering that at the beginning of its establishment, almost all pesantren were located in villages where there was practically no housing to accommodate students.
- 4 *Kitab Kuning* or yellow books (classical Islamic texts) are the primary reference in pesantren and are used in various teaching methods: textual with *sorogan* methods (santri present materials that they want to learn to get guidance individually) and *bandongan* methods (santri learn by listening collectively).
- 5 *Santri*. There are two connotations to the term 'santri': people who obey and carry out the commands of Islam (orthodox Muslims) and people who study in the dormitory of Islamic educational institutions.

Wahid (2010, p. 9) states that from the five elements of pesantren grows a sub-cultural society. In some aspects, the pesantren have their own uniqueness: 1) the leadership pattern of pesantren is independent and separated from the state; 2) the literature 'kitab kuning' as a general reference has been used for centuries; and 3) the value systems used are part of the wider community. In the daily life in pesantren, santri live in pondok under the care and guidance of the *Kyai* and Ustadzs while studying religion which is realized in a harmonious relationship between the santri and the *Kyai*, where santri are always obedient and submissive to their *Kyai*. Moreover, santri learn to live independently, disciplined, and *tirakat* (ascetic; in order to fulfil a wish or commemorate an

event) with the essence of the spirit of religion and brother- and sisterhood. Based on the type of institutional aspects and teaching methods used in pesantren, there are three classifications of pesantren in Indonesia, namely *salafiyah* (traditional), *khalafiyah* (modern), and the combination between *salafiyah* and *khalafiyah* (Azra, 2017; Depag RI, 2003, p. 29–31; Murdaningsih, 2015).

As a traditional educational institution in the form of early *madrasas* (Islamic school), pesantren have three main functions, namely transferring Islamic sciences to the community, developing and inheriting Islamic traditions, and the maintaining and reproducing of Islamic scholars (ulama) (Masyhud, 2005. p. 21). In pesantren, traditional Islamic education always blends with culture and they are close to the surrounding community. In the Ministry of Religious Affairs's (*Kemenag*) book (2003, p. 7) three main characters of the pesantren are always side by side with the community. First, the pesantren stand on the willingness and support of the local community. Second, the existence of pesantren is a form of social equality for santri because it will always be open to anyone who wants to learn, disregarding status, class, and race. Third, as Islamic educational institutions, the primary mission of pesantren is to educate the ummah and to reduce ignorance in the community.

Historically, the primary function of pesantren is to educate scholars and religious expert. It also cements the existence of pesantren as educational institutions, especially in improving religious literacy. Arifin (2013, pp. 110–111) reveals that there are two objectives of pesantren, namely general goals and specific purpose. The general goal is to guide santri to have a distinctive Islamic attitude and propagate it to the larger society. Whereas the specific goal is for pesantren to act as a place to prepare santri to become human beings who are pious and well-mannered in society. Meanwhile, Dhofier (1999, p. 55) argues that the primary purpose of pesantren is not only to enrich the minds of the santri with various sciences, but also to improve morale, train and increase passion, teach them to respect spiritual and humanitarian values, improve their attitude and behavior, and prepare them for a righteous life. Thus, the purpose of the pesantren is very much in line with the spirit of the Islamic mission to develop responsive contexts spiritually and socially.

The emergence of online pesantren

Based on data reported by The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2019), currently, the number of Muslims in Indonesia is 209.1 million out of 268.2

million total population, making Indonesia the largest Muslim community in the world. Meanwhile, the active internet users of Indonesia's total population in 2019 have reached 150 million. The data are a tremendous demographic asset in contributing to Islamic content in the dynamic of Indonesian community life on the internet. Moreover, current Islamic information disseminated on the Internet has given rise to new Islamic organizations, networks, and nobilities (Barendregt, 2009; Bowen, 2008; Machmudi, 2008; Noor, 2012). Muslims now use a variety of media for educational purposes. An example of this is the establishment of online pesantren.

Online pesantren can be considered as Islamic boarding schools without the physical institution. It shares the same functions of conventional pesantren, or as a *tafaqquh fiddin* (providing spiritual guidance) institution to the community (Rifa'i, 2009). Despite the similar role with the conventional pesantren, online pesantren are characteristically different from their traditional counterpart. Not only do they not exist in a physical form, the teaching and learning are also different. In online pesantren, the santri learn through a screen as opposed to the face-to-face teaching of offline pesantren (Nur'aeni, 2005, p. 479).

Historically, the trend of the emergence of online pesantren in Indonesia began in early 2000. Initially, online pesantren were founded and organized by institutions, community organizations, communities, and individuals. An example is virtualpesantren.com, a website for Islamic *da'wah* (religious proselytizing) established on August 11, 1999, by the Muslim student's community. Examples of institutionally owned online pesantren are www.sidogiri.net, which is run by Pesantren Sidogiri in Situbondo; NU Online, which belongs to Nahdatul Ulama organization (the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia); and www.tebuireng.org, the official site of Pesantren Tebu Ireng, Jombang. Meanwhile, online pesantren organized by individuals also exist. Some examples are the Online Pesantren Alfalah Darussalam, which was founded by Ustadz Ajib Mustofa on October 14, 2008; www.bukhari.or.id, which is established by Imam Bukhari; and www.wisatahati.com, which is founded by Ustadz Yusuf Mansur, one of Indonesia's contemporary *da'is*.

The very emergence of online pesantren in Indonesia can be traced back to 1999, when one-way-communication through mailing lists and websites was established through platforms such as pesantren@yahoo-group.com (launched on August 11, 1999). This mailing list was confined to spreading recitation. It initially had 41 members and continued to rise until it reached 332 subscribers. Finally, on September 27, 1999, this mailing-list-based platform launched its website on pesantren.hypermart.net. In less than a year, on the same domain

(hypermart.net), the pesantren website acquired traffic of nearly forty thousand hits, encouraging it to develop its domain. The domain was finally established in April 2000 (Rifa'i, 2009).

Other than the online pesantren which are only based on the internet, there are also online pesantren which exist offline too, such as Pesantren Darut Tauhid by KH Abdullah Gymnastiar (famously known as 'Aa Gym') established in 2004. Under Management Qolbu's (MQ) official website, the online pesantren of Darut Tauhid has e-mail facilities, chat rooms, ftp facilities, and Telnet facilities. In addition to these facilities, santri can also access Aa Gym's speeches through the website, Facebook, and a YouTube channel (Nur'aeni, 2005, p. 495). About nine million people in 82 countries all around the world have accessed to the MQ webpage.

The development of online pesantren in Indonesia follows the development of the internet. In such an expansion of the information technology, social media play a vital role in the everyday life of most people who are connected to the internet (Van Dijck, 2013, pp. 3–23) and online pesantren are no exception. Consequently, almost all pesantren in Indonesia currently have official websites and social media accounts. Online pesantren nowadays also manage various accounts on multiple social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Moreover, managing social media accounts and website are no longer only the works of pesantren khalafiyah (modern pesantren) but also of pesantren salafiyah (traditional pesantren).

Nowadays, many online pesantren use various platforms on the internet, especially via social media, and they can be found relatively easily. The pesantren also make use of almost every internet technology available: websites, webmail, usenet newsgroups, listservs, chat rooms, search engines, social media, streaming services, download opportunities, polling, rating, linking techniques, and many others. The presence of online pesantren, both modern and traditional ones, has given rise to a new culture in the online realm. It also means that whatever platform they use, online or offline, pesantren in Indonesia are always contributing to the Islamic civilization (Asnawi et al., 2016, p. 28).

The development of online pesantren comes with different opportunities. The highest achievement of online pesantren is to spread information about Muslim lives and practices, which is subsequently applied in daily religious life and traditions. Another benefit is that online pesantren give access to a broader distribution of santri compared to offline pesantren. Additionally, they introduce pesantren to the public and thereby contribute to a broader dissemination of Islamic teaching and learning thereby helping santri in performing prayers and

rituals, strengthening of the relationships between management, santri, and alumni, helping santri in solving their spiritual problems, and providing space for advertising their products. According to Winarko (2007, p. 69), the emergence of online pesantren on websites and social media platforms has provided many benefits:

- online pesantren can fulfil the needs of the community regarding the teachings of Islam which cannot be obtained in offline pesantren due to limitations of time and distance;
- online pesantren can provide broader access and distribution of santri compared to offline pesantren;
- online pesantren can help santri everywhere to pray and perform religious rituals by facilitating these rituals through text downloads and al-Qur'an reading streams;
- online pesantren also can introduce pesantren to a large market of new users through information such as pesantren profiles while also provide news about the pesantren;
- online pesantren can fulfil the need for a source of life and Islamic practice and give consultation to santri wherever they are, especially regarding issues related to knowledge and religious experience;
- online pesantren can facilitate and maintain relationships by facilitating communication between the Kyai or Ustadz and santri, and even amongst santri.

The types of online pesantren

Online pesantren have grown rapidly since their first appearance. This is indicated by the number of online pesantren on the Internet as well as the number of applications to them. Current online pesantren can be grouped into five classifications: online only pesantren, hybrid online pesantren, organizational online pesantren, online University pesantren, and personal online pesantren.

1 Online only pesantren

This type of pesantren is purely online, they have no offline counterpart. They are unique. By using online application systems, the entire organization and management is run online, including its communication system and its workflow. Even the section of the editorial team, instructors, and web teams, as well as executors and day-to-day executives are carried out online. There are many

online pesantren of this type, especially on social media, including Pesantren-virtual, ngaji.web.id, ngajionlineAswaja, and Pesantren.online.com.

2 *Hybrid online pesantren*

Hybrid online pesantren are a combination of online and offline pesantren. Usually, these are well known pesantren such as Pesantren Lirboyo, Pesantren Tebu Ireng Jombang, Pesantren Gontor Mantingan, and Pesantren Darul Ulum Jombang that have been well-established offline long before online pesantren existed, some can be dated back to a century ago or more. Nevertheless, they also have online presence. Hybrid online pesantren are the most common type because almost all offline pesantren in Indonesia now also have online accounts.

3 *Organizational online pesantren*

As a country with the largest Islamic population in the world, Indonesia also has many Islamic community organizations. Some of these organizations have or are affiliated with existing pesantren. This type of online pesantren appears because of the existence of these organizations. Not all Islamic organizations in Indonesia have or are associated with pesantren, only the most significant Islamic organizations with a concern in Islamic education register and/or own pesantren. These organizations are Nahdatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, PERSIS (Islamic Unity), and Al-Irsyad.

- *Nahdatul Ulama* (NU) is the largest Islamic organization, not only in Indonesia but also in the world (<https://cnnindonesia.com/01/02/2019>). There are many pesantren who are affiliated with NU. NU's official website is NU online (to be found on <https://www.nu.or.id>), which has a special rubric on pesantren to promote traditional pesantren or *salaf* in all its publications. The website is also directly integrated with their social media platforms. NU online consistently broadcasts '*ngaji* online' (live streaming of Islamic traditional learning) in studying the '*kitab kuning*' or classical text carried out by senior and junior Kyai and Ustadz, who are usually called *Aswaja Muda* (young Aswaja). All of NU's social media accounts and websites broadcast the latest rubric on pesantren issues, and the website even has a particular section on online pesantren.
- *Muhammadiyah online pesantren*. While the movements of the NU organizations are more culturally based, the Muhammadiyah organizations are characterized by modern education, especially at schools. They rarely refer to themselves as pesantren. Instead of using the term pesantren, they use

Madrasah. So far, the famous Muhammadiyah Pesantren is usually referred to as the Madrasah Muallimin and Muallimat Muhammadiyah.

- *PERSIS online pesantren*. PERSIS or ‘Persatuan Islam’ (Islamic Unity) is the third largest Islamic organization after NU and Muhammadiyah that has many pesantren. The focus of the PERSIS organization is aimed primarily at the dissemination of the Quranic and Sunna teachings. To realize this goal, one of its main movements is establishing various levels of Islamic education which started in 1924 and peaked in 1988. In 1936, initiated by Kyai Hasan, PERSIS changed the education system to a pesantren system to include *Ibtidaiyyah* (elementary school) and *Tsanawiyyah* (junior high school). Following this, the pesantren retained the same name as the organization: ‘Persatuan Islam No. 1’ (Noer, 1996, p. 297). Since then, it has been active in developing pesantren-based Islamic education institutions. Currently, it owns an estimated 230 pesantren (Persis Website, 2018). Furthermore, PERSIS is also an organization which actively campaigns for internet literacy throughout Islamic society. For example, there is one program called ‘Mari Berdakwah Melalui Facebook’ (Let’s Preach through Facebook).
- *Al-Irsyad online pesantren*. Being active for almost a hundred years, the Islamic organization Al-Irsyad has contributed significantly to the renewal of Islam in Indonesia. Similar to other Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Al-Irsyad is engaged in education, cultural teaching and Islamic da’wah, as well as community projects based on the Qur’an and Sunnah. Moreover, there are a number of Al-Irsyad pesantren branches that are now considered advanced and successful in developing their pesantren institutions in various regions in Indonesia, such as in Ponpes Al-Irsyad in Surabaya, Ponpes Al-Irsyad Bondowoso, PonPes Al Irsyad Semarang, Ponpes Al Irsyad Pekalongan, Ponpes Al Irsyad Tegal, Ponpes Al Irsyad Purwokerto, Ponpes Al Irsyad Bogor, PonPes Al Irsyad Bandung, PonPes Al Irsyad Cilacap, and in several other areas.

4 *Online university pesantren*

One of the pesantren initiatives to adapt the current guidelines was to align the pesantren tradition in a university environment. This is done by integrating campuses with pesantren through programs commonly called *Ma’had*. The *Ma’had* university program has been developed in several campuses in Indonesia, such as the Islamic State University (UIN) Sunan Ampel Surabaya, UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, the Islamic State Institute (IAIN) Padang, IAIN Jember, Islamic University of Bandung

(UNISBA), and others. The concept of establishing pesantren in a university, or Ma'had, does not only offer dormitories such as *rusunawa* (student flats), but it also incorporates various facilities to accommodate the presence of Kyai and Ustadz (religious teachers). Additionally, the Ma'had in various universities do not only conduct physical activities, but they are also engaged in the online domain. Hence, in its online activities, the university's pesantren display live pesantren programs on both the Ma'had website and on its social media platforms, such as the 'Ngaji Kitab Kuning' (learn classical texts), 'Ngaji Qur'an,' 'Khatamnan,' 'Ngaji Tafsir,' and others.

In addition, there are other types of pesantren whose physical presence is around the university environment, in which all the santri are university students. This type of pesantren is essential in contributing to the development of pesantren traditions on campuses. Examples of these are 'Pondok Pesantren Al-Jihad' Surabaya, 'Ponpes Mahasiswa Putri An Nuriyah', and 'Ponpes Mahasiswa An-Nur' Wonocolo.

5 *Personal online pesantren*

Personal online pesantren is a type of online pesantren which is created based on an individual character as an icon. However, due to their very personal nature, it allows more exploration of the strengths of individual abilities in the field of religion, and personal popularity or fame in the community. It can be raised or built by the media as well. Commonly, individuals with the skills and abilities in this religious field are referred to as ulama or Muslim scholars.

The late 1990s saw the emergence of the starting point of celebrity preachers in Indonesia (Watson, 2005, pp. 177–210). It was a time of increasing popularity for celebrity preachers, who were called Kyai and Ustadz. For example, Aa Gym was the forerunner of the emergence of *Da'i* (preachers) on Indonesian media platforms. He became a phenomenal *Da'i* or Kyai figure because people were affected by media exposure, especially through Aa Gym's television presence, which attracted many people to this new trend of celebrity Kyai. As a result, he became even more famous as an individual figure than his pesantren. Even though his popularity has dimmed to some extent, Aa Gym is still established as a Kyai, as demonstrated online. Furthermore, he is active in pesantren activities, mainly through his accounts of KHAbdullah Gymnastiar, and through his Aa Gym Facebook account, whose religious programs are broadcasted live, reaching an estimated 6,780,528 viewers (April 2019).

Some prominent pesantren leaders can become really popular because they carry a certain charisma and they have really profound and even scientific

knowledge on Islam. Examples of such figures include personalities such as Gus Mus, KH. Quraish Shihab, and KH. Syeh Habib. For his part, KH. Ahmad Mustofa Bisri (commonly referred to as ‘Gus Mus’) is known as a charismatic *ulama*’ and Kyai in Indonesia; from his *pesantren* (Raudlatut Thalibin, Rembang) he broadcasts live *pesantren*-style *ngaji* through his Gus Mus YouTube Channel.

Another example is Kyai Ulil Abshar Abdalla, the founder of Online *Ngaji Ihya* (Islamic classical learning), who is personally developing the traditional *pesantren* through his online ‘*Ihya Ulumuddin Kitab*’ activities. Even though he does not have an offline *pesantren*, he is a scholar who has abilities and experience acquired through living in *pesantren*, which have led him to be known by his online *santri* as ‘Kyai Online’ or Kyai KO, and Kyai Facebookiyah.

Rituals on online *pesantren*

Almost all of the activities in conventional, offline *pesantren* are filled with teaching and learning. In traditional *pesantren*, religious learning or teaching activities are usually referred to as *ngaji*. ‘*Ngaji*’ or ‘*mengaji*’ means learning or studying the religion of Islam. The words ‘*ngaji*’ and ‘*mengaji*’ are originally Indonesian terms that come from the word ‘*kaji*’, which means: 1) lessons (religious or otherwise); and 2) investigations (about something). Meanwhile, the word ‘*ngaji*’ has several meanings, namely: 1) reciting, reading the Qur’an; 2) learning to read Arabic writing; and 3) learning, studying religion (Poerwadarminta, 1976). In the *pesantren* tradition, *ngaji* and *mengaji* are the core parts of the teaching and learning process. Almost all *salaf* (traditional) *pesantren* in Indonesia hold several forms of *ngaji*.

In the *pesantren* tradition, the word ‘*ngaji*’ is used to describe both studying the Qur’an and the classical *Kitab*. *Ngaji Kitab* is an essential activity in *pesantren* education because the *Kitab* is the central handbook for the *santri*. Almost all *salaf pesantren* curricula use *Kitab* as the primary reference. Additionally, all the *Kitab* taught in *pesantren* in the form of *Kitab Gundul* (textbooks written in Arabic without *harakat*/punctuation). Therefore, the *Kitab Gundul* requires an excellent understanding of the Arabic language to understand its contents. In addition, there are usually many *santri*, especially new ones, who do not understand Arabic, so they learn from the Kyai’s explanation. For this reason, *santri* are *Ngaji* and *mondok* (stay and live in *pesantren*) to the Kyai. They write down the translation under the Arabic sentence in the book. The activity of writing this translation is known as *njenggoti*, which literally means

‘bearding’ because the notes hang like a beard. It can be interpreted as a form of learning by interpreting or learning to understand what is written and what is implied. The other terms of ‘njenggoti’ are ‘*meloghat*’ (transliteration) and *maknai* (from the word *makna*, which means ‘meaning’), which both refer to giving meaning to every word in the Kitab.

The peak of the Ngaji Kitab in pesantren is during the month of Ramadan or Fasting. Ngaji Kitab is scheduled to take place every day, almost every time after the obligatory five prayers (*Fajr*/dawn, *Dhuhr*/midday, *Asr*/afternoon, *Maghrib*/sunset, and *Isha*’/night). There are even pesantren that add to the activities of the Ngaji Kitab at the time after the Dhuhr.

The peak of activities during Ramadan in the offline pesantren is mirrored by those in online pesantren. During Ramadan, many pesantren hold daily Ngaji Kitab activities, whether through Facebook, YouTube or pesantren websites. For instance, Gus Mus from Raudlatut Thalibin Pesantren, recites the Riyadhus Sholihin Kitab after Tarawih prayer, Ngaji Burdah Al-Bushiry Kitab after the Fajr prayer, Idhatun Nasyi’in kitab after the Dhuhr prayer, and Kimiyaus Sa’adah Kitab before breaking the fast – all of which are streamed through Gus Mus’ YouTube channel. Meanwhile, after the Fajr prayer during the month of Ramadan 2019, General Chairperson of PBNU KH Said Aqil Sirod recited Ngaji of Burdah by Sheikh Muhammad bin Said Al-Bushiri, which was held at the Al-Tsaqafah Pesantren in Ciganjur, Jakarta. He also broadcasted live on the Altsaqafah Facebook. While Kyai Ulil Abshar Abdalla through his Facebook also broadcasted Ngaji Kitab Ihya Ulumuddin from his home every day during Ramadan after the Isha’ prayer. Meanwhile, through the Nahdatul Ulama online channel and the Ngaji Kitab online, the activities of the Ngaji appeared online from various pesantren affiliated with the Nahdatul Ulama Organization, not only featuring young Kyai but also senior Kyai. Almost all the activities of the classical Ngaji-style on traditional pesantren held online are carried out using the *bandongan* system. The bandongan method is a system of learning from Kyai, which is carried out in groups or commonly called a public lecture (Kuntowijoyo, 1991, p. 252). The bandongan method is also called *bandungan*. The term ‘bandungan’ comes from Sundanese ‘ngabandungan’ which means paying close attention or listening. With this method, the students will learn by listening collectively. But in Javanese, ‘bandongan’ is also said to come from the word ‘banding’ (appeal), which means ‘go in droves’. This is because bandongan is held with relatively large numbers of participants. This method is typical because of the system in transferring knowledge or teaching and learning processes in pesantren which is explicitly from the classical Kitab.

The bandongan method is a one-way learning method from Kyai to santri, and it intends to place the Kyai as an expert who must be respected, trusted, and emulated. Ngaji bandongan also helps the Kyai to be more systematic, profound, and not easily tempted to stray off the reading. For this reason, the Kyai must master the Arabic language and the sciences of Islam. In offline bandongan activities, every santri must pay attention to their own Kitab and make notes (both meaning and explanation) about difficult words or thoughts. But when online, not all santri hold and interpret the Kitab like the conventional offline Ngaji. In online bandongan, they will make their notes while sometimes doing other activities. There were also santri who only listen to digital texts, which were shared by one of the online santri or Kyai. But there are also very serious online santri, who treat the online broadcast just like the conventional one, who start listening to the Kitab and interpret it one by one according to what was conveyed by the Kyai. One santri in particular wrote a translation from the Kitab with Arabic Pegon (Arabic letters written using Javanese) and completed it using a symbol system that had been agreed upon in the world of pesantren.

Moreover, in addition to the bandongan method, in the ritual Ngaji online in pesantren, the Kyai also applies other traditional pesantren traditions, namely *hadhoroh*. It is by sending Fatihah surah (the opening Surah in the Qur'an and a compulsory surah which must be read in prayer for Muslims) to the author of the Kitab so that the santri can easily master the knowledge contained in the Kitab. Kyai usually always did hadharoh before starting the Ngaji Kitab. Not only for the author, but they also invited Fatihah surah prayers for all their previous teachers. In the tradition of the salaf pesantren, hadhoroh is a way of a Kyai to get a clear *sanad* (the pedigree and background of the teacher who taught the Kitab) from a teacher and blessing. In the pesantren tradition, Kyai and santri must remain clean and holy when starting the bandongan. To do so, they would always take ablution beforehand.

Other than reading classical Kitab, ngaji is also usually identified with reading Qur'an, which is also a ritual in pesantren. During Ramadan 2019, other than reading Ihya Kitab, Kyai Ulil also read Qur'an online and broadcasted it through his Facebook page. What is interesting is that he read the Qur'an with a Javanese-styled notes and rhythm called *Langgam Jawa*. Every morning, for 30 full days in Ramadan in 2019, he broadcasted himself through Facebook reciting the Qur'an with Javanese style. He tried to read the Qur'an with tones based on *laras pelog* and *laras slendro* which are widely used in *gamelan* instruments (Javanese musical instruments). Both laras are part of the Javanese musical notes and are often used in a *gending* (melody arrangement that forms a certain

atmosphere and character in Javanese music). The *laras slendro* is a tone sequence system consisting of five notes in one *gembyang* (octave), while the *laras pelog* is a scale consisting of seven different notes. Although reading the Qur'an with a Javanese style is still a subject of debate in Indonesia, the Ngaji of the Qur'an carried out by the Kyai Ulil using Javanese style received positive responses from the santri online on Facebook. At the beginning of Ramadan (May 5, 2019), the number of viewers was 37,0000 and 2200 people liked the video, and it has been shared 432 times (Ulil Abshar Abdalla's Facebook).²

Meanwhile Kyai Aa Gym from Daarut Tauhiid Pesantren conducted a Ngaji in the form of studies, namely the Study Ma'rifatullah Live and Ngaji Alhikam Kitab. In addition to the two studies, the Daarut Tauhiid Pesantren through Kyai Aa Gym's Facebook broadcasted all activities in the pesantren, 24 hours a day. In addition to the ritual of Ngaji, there are also other rituals performed by Kyai Aa Gym. He also broadcasts live prayers together, *Umrah* or *Haji* rituals directly from Mecca and Medina.

Along with the many features provided by internet platforms that are used as online pesantren, the life of online pesantren is more dynamic and attractive. As an example, the atmosphere of pesantren life is recreated in the comments section. In online pesantren, fellow santri can interact and communicate with each other, and give input to convey ideas and converse with each other. Meanwhile, Kyai comment and convey their *tausiyah* (religion advises) to santri online. So far in the general conversation column, it is usually emphasized that santri online is present in the Ngaji Online, or it just gives greetings as a form of respect from a santri to the Kyai. Some of the features and facilities provided by the online platforms enable online pesantren to come alive like conventional pesantren life.

Conclusion

Based on the characters of pesantren which tend to be open to accepting the development of internet technology, the online pesantren phenomenon will continue to develop over time along with the development of Internet technology itself. Meanwhile, the formation of online pesantren is inseparable from the existence of the offline ummah community around it. Online ummah in online Islamic pesantren are different groups of people from different backgrounds but are united by the same goal, which is to learn Islam within the cultural space of

² Retrieved, June 1, 2019, from <https://www.facebook.com/ulilabsharabdalla99/>

traditional Islamic education. Meanwhile, online pesantren can be classified based on the background of community groups and individuals.

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Recent publications

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Recent publications

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Recent publications

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Recent publications

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We live in a digital society, where life takes place at the offline-online nexus. The shift towards a continuous blending of offline and online dimensions also affects rituals. Understanding digital rituals challenges us to explore new questions, new rules, new possibilities, and new limitations regarding rituals that are shaped by digitalization. In this book, the authors address these issues by relating ritual studies to digital culture studies. The book offers different case studies in the field of digital rituals, including pilgrimage and online storytelling, digital death rituals and mourning practices, religious online education, and online memorial practices.

This book is published on the occasion of the retirement of Paul Post, professor of Ritual Studies at Tilburg University from 1994 until 2019.

