

# The Digital Age of Grieving Rituals: Mobility and the Hybridization of Memory. A Project

*Fiorenza Gamba*

*University of Sassari*

*fiorenza.gamba@gmail.com*

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Approach

The paper that I'll present today is situated at the crossroads between my previous research and my future project. My previous research involved a historical/typological mapping of digital grieving and commemorative rituals analyzed through the lens of personal exigencies about mourning time, commemoration practices and emotion expression. And my future project involves a study on mobility and the hybridization of memory in the digital age of grieving rituals. It employs an interdisciplinary perspective that includes sociology, anthropology, communication and internet studies and which find its greatest affinity in ritual studies, mobilities studies and thanatology.

### 1.2 Actual context: passage

Over the last two decades, the quest for the personalization of commemorative and grieving rituals has found a ritual context in digital spaces to satisfy people's multiple exigencies regarding the grief elicited by the loss of a loved one. Indeed, the quest for personalization is the main explanation posited for the propagation of these new rituals on the web. In this view, these new rituals are the result of personal choices made by the mourners, who prefer these rituals to traditional funeral rituals, which they see as lacking in feeling and symbolically exhausted, and that, as a result, have shown their inability to meet the needs caused by death.

These commemorative technologies have had two specific impacts. Some, like personal and social media, have emphasized the personalization of rituals, while others, such as QR codes, have created a hybridization of the physical and digital spaces of rituals and memory.

The present moment is a turning point in the history of digital rituals: a transition is occurring from the existence of parallel and separate grief and commemoration rituals in the digital and physical worlds to the emergence of rituals that take place in hybridized spaces. This transition in the way in which individuals live extended experiences of grief and share emotions is consistent with the mobility prevalent in the present era – of people, but also of objects, places, ideas, representations, and emotions (Urry, 2000).

### 1.3 The challenge

The challenge of my earlier study on digital rituals was to understand this transformation through the key of personalization. The challenge of my (future) project on the hybridization of digital rituals and its consequences is to understand further transformations of memory in everyday life through both the digital practices of death and Eliade's concept of homogenous space.

The core purpose of the project is to analyze how people and places are remembered and transformed by mobility in urban and digital society. In particular, the project aims to understand how personal and collective memories are produced, managed, retrieved, and shared, and how they interact through extended death and commemorative rituals that involve various combinations of digital tools and urban spaces.

I'll try to explain this in this paper in three steps. First, I will present the aims of the project. Second, I'll illustrate a contemporary map of digital rituals and the conceptual tools to understand the transition to a new hybridized phase. And third, I'll suggest what the new homogeneous space of memory as a hybrid space looks like.

## **2. THE AIMS OF THE PROJECT**

First, I want to present the starting hypothesis and the aims of the project.

### **2.1 The hypothesis**

The starting point of the research is the transformation of the parallel but separate digital and physical rituals into a new hybridized space. This hybridized space is both digital and physical, and it has emerged partly a result of people's increasing mobility (Elliot, Urry, 2010; Hirschauer, 2014; Licoppe, 2004). The project examines whether this new hybridized space influences the construction of a hybrid memory as an element of stability and continuity in everyday life. In other words, whether the hybrid memory, as a necessity caused by mobile lives, becomes a digital-based form that can connect the experiences and memories of individuals into a repository of identity.

This conceptualization of hybrid memory results from the intersection of human, digital, and media memory. It highlights the complexity of mobile identity and will be used to identify the specific characteristics of hybridized rituals of grieving and commemoration, particularly those that are represented by QR codes. The research will analyze the duration of the rituals, the mode of grieving and commemoration they involve, the roles of the participants and of the primary object (the deceased) in them, and the places in which they occur.

The core of the project is to analyze the shapes, places, and practices of these new rituals, the dynamics of the construction of the identity of the mobile people they involve, and the role of memory, places, and the digital in this process.

### **2.2 The aims**

The project aims to investigate memory, identity, and space.

#### **Memory**

1. In regards to memory, the project investigates the influence of digital rituals, from the first and simplest to appear on the web – for instance, the web memorial and the virtual cemetery – to the most recent – like QR codes and digital-afterlife sites – on the production of hybrid memory as the intersection of digital, human, media, and place-situated memory.

#### **Identity**

2. In regards to identity, the project investigates the role of the subject in digital commemorative and grieving rituals, which also involves the idea of extended identity in a double direction: horizontally, concerning the hybridization between physical and digital identity; and vertically, concerning the possibility of extending identity beyond its physical and temporal boundaries.

#### **Space**

3. In regards to space, the project investigates the impact of hybridization, linked to mobility, on the space/time setting of rituals, on grieving, and on the rethinking of urban spaces of commemoration as places of memory and places of living and identity.

The development of these axes defines two components of research: the first focuses on the relationship between rituals and memory; the second on the redefinition of ritual space and context as hybridized space.

### 3. DIGITAL AGE OF GRIEVING RITUALS

Before developing the concepts with which to analyze the emergence of the new phase of digital rituals, it may be useful to trace the development of these rituals from their first appearance to the present.

#### 3.1 The first phase

The first website dedicated to mourning appeared on the web on April 28, 1995 – the “World Wide Cemetery,” created by Canadian engineer Michael Kibbee, who had offered a manifesto on coping with loss through communication.

Kibbee wanted create a permanent monument to memory to allow people to share the lives of their loved ones in ways that traditional printed death announcements or stone inscriptions did not.

Following this simple project, several similar sites arose on the web. In this first phase of digital mourning, these sites had specific, formal characteristics that I have divided into three types.

*Websites inspired by video games* were the first form of digital rituals to appear on the web. They have evolved over time and given way to new formats, but they have not completely disappeared. They reproduce some visual and ritual-related elements of real cemeteries, but they also reproduce the specific chromatic harmonies and interactivity of video games through very simple and attractive graphic animations. These sites encourage users to perform certain commemorative actions that also serve as personalized expressions of grief. Although they are restricted to a limited and rudimentary range of possibilities – laying flowers, lighting candles, and posting messages – they represent the commencement of using the internet as an efficient tool to cope with grief.

([www.worldwidecemetery.org](http://www.worldwidecemetery.org))

*The web memorial structured as hypertext* creates a rupture with traditional rituals of mourning because it provides users with additional digital tools to express grief and share common experiences. As a result, it produces a narrative that encompasses the biography of the deceased, the experiences of grieving relatives and friends, and the sharing of mourning and memory.

The hypertext link does not merely connect users to information, but also to each other. In addition to sharing data such as photos, videos, and texts about the deceased, users host forums, chats, and blogs in which relatives, friends, and experts participate with the common intent of benefiting one another, for instance with services that include bibliographic resources, services for grief support and education (“ShareGrief”), and practical information about funeral and cremation arrangements (“US Funeral On Line”).

([www.memory-of.com](http://www.memory-of.com)), ([www.sharegrief.com](http://www.sharegrief.com)), ([www.us-funeral.com](http://www.us-funeral.com))

*The individual web memorial* can be managed entirely by mourners in the form of an independent website. Because of this, there is significant variety in the use of traditional visual references and narrative functions, the combination of which depends on personal experiences and preferences. These web pages, created from the personal histories of the dead, offer the mourner a potential space to express their emotions. The person, troubled by loss, comes to the website with their own hierarchy of values and preferences and wants to find a time, a space, and a personally satisfactory mode of mourning through which to celebrate the memory of the loved one.

### 3.2 The second phase

The second phase in the history of digital mourning is formally coincident with the proliferation of social network sites (SNSs), platforms for the creation of semi-assisted content that can be shared, developed, transformed, used, and re-used by users. Such sites are highly heterogeneous in terms of their functions. Their slogans often involve the terms “common” and “share,” and they involve different types of media (e.g. texts, videos, photos, and sounds) and different areas of experience (e.g. leisure, work, joy, rage, faith, emotion, cognition, and pain), including death and grief, which have also found a place in SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

*Facebook.* As a digital and material trace of the deceased, the individual’s Facebook site acquires for family and friends the significance of a grief object that can be shared with several circles of users. It provides a means for users to maintain a personal relationship with the deceased and their network, an arrangement much more satisfying than that granted by the traditional customs of everyday life. A relationship between the dead and their relatives takes place through narrative actions performed through digital memory objects. In this way, grieving becomes a communication activity performed through writing, and by using the “digital remains” of the dead (that is, the content of the account) as a supporting memory or sentimental artifact.

*Twitter.* Because of its 140-character limit, Twitter does not allow for the composition of an extensive narrative; thus, it is not effective as a means of sharing the continued emotions of loss during the mourning process, even if it can expand its narrative space through the inclusion of links. However, it reflects the collective and globalized participation in emotion aroused by death, for instance the death of celebrities. One of the most striking examples of this was the death of Steve Jobs: within 24 hours, news of his death was met with 3,500,000 tweets wishing that he “rest in peace.”

*YouTube* is a largely heterogeneous website that contains many documents on death, each of which can be considered an example of the practice of “cybermourning”. The most salient element of YouTube as a tool of mourning is the power of images in communicating grief. The site has a considerable number of videos indexed under the category of death and loss, and their purpose is “to let the images speak” so as to share the feelings accompanying different experiences of death. Indeed, the visualization, combined with the opportunity for viewers to leave comments, strongly speaks to common processes for coping with loss.

### 3.3 A new phase

In the present, the emergence of two specific ritual practices is creating a new phase of grieving in the digital age. One of these practices has emerged as a result of a new digital technology, while the other has emerged as a result of the consequences of existing technologies. The new digital technology is QR codes, which have also been applied to gravestones. Rituals concerning the use of technology also face a new problem – the management of digital remains after the user’s death. As a result, users are beginning to plan their own digital afterlife.

These two forms of digital hybridization underline both a vertical extension of memory, which involves an extension of identity, and a horizontal extension of memory, which involves the physical and digital identity at the same time.

The multiplication of accounts, of evidence, and of data regarding the subject in the digital environment, together with the integration of these identity items in the subject’s experience both on- and off-line, creates an extended identity that pushes its boundaries beyond time and space.

With regard to time, identity raises multiple legal and moral questions about the management of users’ data, even after they have died, a paradoxical condition that forces users to plan the future

administration of their data concerning the digital afterlife of identity, which a dedicated website has defined as “the continuation of digital life and presence after the user’s death” (<http://www.cirruslegacy.com/>). The diffusion of a set of practices produces a new concept of immortality as a territory of identity that possesses a digital and a symbolic dimension. In this view, the digital afterlife, posed as a technological problem, becomes for the users a voluntarily search for a new form of immortality that can be included in their extended identity.

With regards to space, the characteristics of an extended identity can be explained through mobility and hybridization. Mobility is an interpretative category of the contemporary age (Urry, 2000) – and of identity (Gössling, Stavrinidi, 2015). It presupposes that incessant movement, crossed by technology – especially digital technology – produces a multiplication of and continual changes to life contexts (Urry, 2007), involving both belonging (rootedness) and mobility. This dynamic requires an extended identity capable of gathering – both personally and collectively – its multiple expressions. Individuals experience mobility and stability in hybridized spaces of the physical and the digital world through virtual proximity, which has become essential to maintaining close relationships. This dynamic is a hybridization between being present with others (at work, at home, in leisure) and being distant, and overcoming that distance – through digital mobile devices – requires an imagined presence dependent on multiple connections linking people and spaces.

This hybridization also expresses the link between the living and the dead through memory: digital rituals are a personalized form mediated by digital devices of commemoration, where technology delimits a hybridized ritual space constituted by both the physical space of commemoration, which is specific and limited, and the unlimited digital space, activated by mobile devices, which continue personalized commemorations and extend their ritual space (Gotved, Bjerager, 2014).

## **4. CONCEPTUAL TOOLS**

This new phase of rituals in the digital age is the subject of my upcoming research. Here, I would like to outline some important concepts to delimit the research context.

These concepts are a reinterpretation of Eliade’s concept of homogeneous space, which has permitted me to define the concept of ritual context precisely, as well as personalization, contemporary interpretations of death, memory, and extended identity.

### **4.1 Homogeneous space**

The concept of ritual context, as it has developed from my research on the personalization of digital rituals, and based on Victor Turner’s (1979) analysis of the liminoid and Mircea Eliade’s (1965) analysis of the non-homogeneous space of the sacred, is an interpretative key helpful to understanding the hybridization of space in grieving and commemoration rituals. Unlike in physical space, in hybridized space the ritual context is constituted only through the symbolic agreement of the participants and is effective only because of its symbolic power, which depends primarily on the liminoid nature of these rituals, which are fragmentary, peripheral, and, most importantly, voluntary. This process of ritualization is defined above all by the sharing and linking of emotions and symbolic values, and not exclusively by the place of performance, as digital rituals have already shown. In this sense, the ritual context redefines a contrario the concept of Eliade: instead of a non-homogeneous sacred space – namely, an exclusively devoted and sacred space – nowadays ritual space is a homogeneous one that is adapted to the different activities that take place within it, and it has two main characteristics. The first is multi-functionality; or, in Eliade’s language, it is a space that mixes the sacred and the profane. The second is multi-dimensionality; namely, it can be both physical and digital, a hybrid space.

## **4.2 Personalization**

Personalization has redefined a system of personal values through which individuals pursue their quest for meaning in many different ways and has involved every aspect of experience, including death. Traditional and institutionalized rituals, felt by participants to be emotionally empty, have changed in various ways: through the introduction of secular objects, called by Segalen (1988) ritual inventions that simply complete the ceremonies; through the formalization of parallel rituals, for instance the itinerant exposition of a patchwork quilt of individuals who have died of AIDS; through the replacement of traditional ceremonies, as with cremation; and finally, through the emergence of digital rituals, practices of remembrance that are parallel to but also independent of traditional rituals.

Technology transforms the space-time dimension of rituals. The physical and official spaces and times of ceremony are enlarged, and, in a similar manner, ritual times depend on the exigencies of everyday life or on the emotional demands of commemoration to express a continuing personal bond with a loved person.

The web is a privileged observatory of personalization demanded and practiced by individuals unsatisfied with traditional rituals. The webpages created from the personal histories of the dead simultaneously present a space for the mourner's own self-expression.

## **4.3 Contemporary interpretations of death**

Two theses coexist in the contemporary Western interpretation of death : the denial of death, whose main consequence is its disappearing as a social object ; and the individualization of death , its collocation in a greater self-narration concerning the subject, and which involves a personal and collective engagement with as well as responsibility for death.

Within this context, digital grief rituals reveal traces of the multiple contemporary approaches to death. On the web can be found several superficial approaches, including the use of fixed formulas of condolence, like "RIP," that amount to a denial of death. However, most websites offer a clear expression of the opposite attitude. In fact, the aim of these websites' users is to share emotions, but also to give each other support, because each person must cope with loss according to their personal needs in a network of collective empathy and proximity .

Another aspect of contemporary interpretations of death in the web is the dimension of play. Depending on both the structure of the digital environment (Gamba, 2008) and the essential schema of given rituals (Rappaport, 1999), a symbolic value can be accorded to play that can help the grieving process and aid in the search for different types of rituals that can provide meaning for those who use them.

## **4.4 Memory**

Grieving is a process that transforms an absence in memory, but it is also an interaction between personal and collective memories, and it is exactly in this passage from one kind of memory to another, in this exchange of common emotions and memories, that pain is relieved and the individual can find meaning. In digital rituals, memory is a measure of social space and an element of a community's cohesion and belonging as a result of the interaction of individual, collective, and social memories in the sense that Halbwachs has given to these concepts (Halbwachs, 1997). The intersection of digital, human and medial memories involved in these rituals fulfills a process that is characterized by the capacity for the storage of data, namely memories; the ability to select content in the form of activation, selection, diversification, and, very recently, self-determination; and especially by the sense that memories are retained for the benefit of users' personal exigencies regarding the loss of and mourning for a loved one. The specificity of digital ritual memory is

revealed in the individual and personalized dimension of bereavement – intense, continuous, and extended – of users coping with loss (Gamba, 2016) without necessarily conforming to established conventions.

#### **4.5 Extended identity**

The main characteristic of modern identity is that its negative elements are simultaneously adaptive characteristics: fragility, loneliness, and narcissism are all modes through which the identity is fragmented – and at the same time the tools, increasingly managed by the digital, through which the identity maintains itself in this fragmentation and in this society. This duality contributes to the creation of a new extended identity composed through an interaction and exchange between physical and digital experiences (Belk 2013) that expresses its presence and effectiveness through the collection of its digital clues, which occurs according to a digital dynamic of visibility/invisibility that is very close to desire of extimacy.

We can best understand the possible range of this extended identity through the idea of narrative identity, *récits de soi* (Ricoeur, 1991). This narrative identity results from the crossing of a historical narration of users, backed by documentary evidence and other types of historical narrations, with a fictional narration built from a reservoir of imaginative variations. On the web, this dynamic shows that identity is built in a historical framework that reveals its authenticity and coherence, but also assimilates the fictional content that enriches the intrigue of different elements of identity.

### **5. NEW HOMOGENEOUS SPACE AS HYBRID SPACE BY MOBILITY**

I have presented the theoretical framework useful to delimit the research field of the project that builds upon my previous work.

Especially important in my previous work on the personalization of digital rituals of commemoration, based on the homogeneous space, was the intersection of the concepts of personalization, the contemporary interpretation of death, memory, and extended identity with some urgent existential exigencies and some technological possibilities.

Now the pervasive diffusion of mobile technologies and the increasing diffusion of mobility in the lives of individuals leads us to once again analyze the homogeneous space of ritual that mobility produces as a hybrid space.

I will study the phenomenon considering the previous results, the interpretative pattern, and the aims indicated above in the following way:

About **identity** – namely, the role of individual in ritual practices and extended identity – the question is “Who?” Who are the actors in these rituals? What kind of mobile people remember and commemorate in this hybrid space. Are they migrants, workers, travelers? Do they have religious beliefs or not?

About **memory** – the shapes of digital and hybrid rituals, and the kind of memory involved in them – the question is “How?” How the memory is produced, conserved, and retrieved? What kind of memories and memory processes are privileged? Written or visual memories? Personal or collective memories? Do these processes extend or limit grief? When is the memory activated?

And about **space** – the ritual context – the question is “Where?” Where is the ritual symbolically located? What kinds of spaces is it composed of? Personal or collective? Formal or informal? Indoor or outdoor? Institutionalized or not? Physical or digital?

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