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Children, Death, and Digital Media

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CHILDREN, DEATH, AND
DIGITAL MEDIA

Kathleen M. Cumiskey

Introduction

The integration of digital media into everyday life challenges traditions and beliefs surrounding death and afterlife (Graham, Gibbs, & Aceti, 2013). Funereal rituals become remediated through digital media use. Intimate virtual spaces generate a kind of public grieving, including for child audiences (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017). Online communities have become important to individuals and families in the care of the dead and the dying (DeGroot, 2012; Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015). This chapter focuses on digital media in child and adolescent experiences related to death. It uses two case studies to demonstrate the complexities related to the use of digital media in the amelioration of traumatic experiences and the processing of loss. Digital media will be understood in this chapter as a means through which children facilitate the continuation of bonds with lost loved ones. Understanding children’s use of digital media in times of grief illuminates how relationships are maintained and losses validated through the storing, saving, and sharing of affective digital content.

Digital media are used to both engage with emotional content and to distract users from overwhelming emotion (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017). Most children in wealthier countries access digital media of their own volition (Haddon, 2013; Livingstone et al., 2017). They control when they want to approach their feelings of grief, and when they want to avoid them. Virtual connections generate a sense of presence of others which can relieve the user of feelings of isolation (Hampton, Sessions, & Her, 2011; Katz & Aakus, 2002). Users of digital technology often move through all life experiences with their digital devices as companions and witnesses (Papailias, 2016). People’s most private and intimate moments are shared with the public through social and mobile media (often without their consent) (Hjorth & Lim, 2012). As a consequence, mobile devices and digital media change how users think about death and cope with traumatic experiences (Brubaker, Kivran-Swaine, Taber, & Hayes, 2012).

Communicating death to children can become complicated by technology (Wandel, 2019). Indirect means of communicating information makes it more difficult for the child to comprehend what has happened. Children are often present in crisis situations. They overhear communication between adults. They receive bits and pieces of the facts of the circumstances. Adults often fail to communicate directly with children and, in the context of traumatic loss, this lack of direct communication can have long-term consequences (Ellis, Dowrick, & Lloyd-Williams, 2013). The indirectness of digital communication adds to children’s misunderstandings by
blurring details related to death. For example, children may become confused by posts that say ‘Rest in Peace’, mistaking death with sleep. Such references can reinforce that erroneous belief (National Institute of Mental Health, 1979) if the real situation is not clarified by the adults in children’s lives. On the other hand, digital media complicate matters with their directness when children are exposed to traumatizing details surrounding a death without being provided with a context of support. How a child engages (or not) with digital media in the immediate aftermath of loss differs from how they might use it later in the grieving process (Cupit & Kuchta, 2017).

As digital media users begin to transition from childhood to adolescence, they become contributors to growing digital affective cultures: the digital spaces within which users conceive, mediate, represent, and co-construct their social, emotional, and spiritual lives (Döveling, Harju, & Sommer, 2018; Hjorth & Arnold, 2013; Hjorth & Cumiskey, 2018). The porous nature of digital affective cultures means that the co-presence, non-presence, and virtual presence of others online, and the intimacy with which children connect to personal digital devices, allows death to become elusive and perplexing. Developmentally, children begin to comprehend the finality of death between the ages of five to nine, although they believe that it only happens to other people. After age ten, the finality and causes of death are understood as inevitable (Osterweis, Solomon, & Green, 1984). How children use digital media during their time of grief reflects their individual psychological and social development.

Children’s needs are often overlooked or avoided when a loss occurs (Blin & Jonas-Simpson, 2018), and adults tend not to recognise the need for children to grieve. Interestingly, on the YouTube Kids app, which supports parental control over YouTube content accessible to children, if a kid searches ‘my dad died’ no results are shown. This app allows for searches of the term ‘grief’, although results are not curated extensively for kid-related content. Many bereaved children are mourning the loss of a grandparent or parent (Silverman & Nickman, 1996). Some also experience grief related to sibling loss and the loss of peers (as well as mentors and adored celebrities). Ensuring that children and adolescents have safe venues for expressing grief is important for their healing (Buxton & Vest, 2018), as coping with the grief of adults often dominates children’s loss experiences and results in the child feeling isolated, neglected, and ignored in their own grief (Blin & Jonas-Simpson, 2018).

Digital Evidence of How Children Cope with Death

Adults dominate defining how (and even whether) children grieve (Arnold, 2018). As a consequence, adults have created dedicated online spaces for children to express their grief. For example, in the United States, the National Alliance for Grieving Children (n.d.) states that they are a “nationwide network comprised of professionals, institutions and volunteers who promote best practices, educational programming and critical resources to facilitate the mental, emotional and physical health of grieving children and their families”. None of their board members are children. Child Bereavement UK (n.d.) has the goal “for all families to have the support they need to rebuild their lives, when a child grieves or when a child dies”. Even though their website was created and run by adults, their royal patron is HRH The Duke of Cambridge, who experienced the loss of a parent as a child. Their website features the voices of children, but the site and the resources do not seem to be curated by bereaved children. This renders sites like these unwelcoming and difficult for children to access. YouTube provides ample evidence that children respond to digital material created and communicating by peers (Berg, 2019).

Meeting bereaved children in the spaces and places they occupy within digital media motivated game developers in the United Kingdom to create a game called Apart of Me. This game helps young people who have experienced loss to increase their emotional literacy and wisdom around death (“The mobile game created to help grieving children”, 2018). The game begins
with the player encountering a ‘Guide’, a figure who has not only experienced loss, but also learned about managing loss with the help of wise others. The Guide assists children in mastering knowledge about grief and using that wisdom to become a guide themselves. The game encourages players to access external UK-based resources and other players’ recorded stories of loss. Characters within the game challenge the player to complete quests in the real world, including building emotional supports and strengthening relationships. This hybridisation of experience, utilising digital media’s capacity to support a narrative, interactive approach to processing loss, offers significant potential for supporting bereaved children.

Children’s engagement with digital media is integral to how they process life experiences. Like adults, children use the digital platform they are most comfortable with to access people with whom they want to share their grief experiences (Sofka, Cupit, & Gilbert, 2012). Döveling (2017) argues that children are not sharing their experiences online to be judgemental or to make themselves seem exceptional despite their exceptional circumstances. Instead, children engage in emotional expression on social media platforms to generate a sense of intimacy between themselves and their online community and to strengthen the bonds they have with their followers, whether they know them in real life or not (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017). Children often express gratitude for those that have offered them support online and address their audiences as though they know each individual. Their willingness to share intimate moments of grief online happens in the context of the poster not knowing who is accessing their digital content. Contact happens when a viewer makes themselves known by either responding with a posted comment or by sending the user a direct message. Grief-related posts are viewed by those known to the poster, with secondary impacts on those with whom they have close ties. Video-sharing platforms like YouTube are used in this way. A simple search of ‘My dad died’ or ‘My mom died’ yields examples of expressions of childhood grief. As the following case study demonstrates, these videos are made by users that have followers for non-grief-related content (i.e., playing video games, singing, comedy, general vlogging).

**Case Study 1: James Playz (Age 9)**

James Playz, a YouTuber with 126,000 subscribers, has posted over 130 videos. The majority of those videos are scenes from his Fortnite gameplay with his recorded voiceover as an accompaniment. On 20 December 2016, James posted a video entitled “About My Dad” (James Playz, 2016). This video has been viewed more than 150,000 times since being posted and was a complete departure from his usual videos in both style and content. James was alone in the video with a close-up head shot of him in front of a plain white wall. He starts the video, which is 2 minutes and 33 seconds long, by saying:

Hey guys, welcome to a new video, it is James Playz here with a video and I’m here to say, that I have not really told you about my mom or dad so about my dad, this is about my dad this video.

*(James Playz, 2016, 0:01)*

James’ introduction of “Hey guys … it is James Playz here” characterises him as a YouTuber since he uses a video opening style that has come to be understood as the ‘YouTube voice’. It indicates his intention of being known on the platform, that he has subscribers to his channel, and that he broadcasts to his audience (Hagi, 2017). James continues:

Um, if it looks like I have cried it is because I have and I will tell you why I have been crying, it’s because my dad, he has brain cancer and he’s been through a lot of surgeries.
and stuff in his life so he had an MRI today and we thought it was going to be good but it didn’t turn out so good so I will try to keep you guys posted on what’s going on with my life and my family but just if I don’t just upload I just probably won’t feel like uploading any videos because of what’s going on ... so hopefully you’ve enjoyed ...

(James Playz, 2016, 0:16)

James’ motivation for making this video was to bring his audience and his community into his life, for them to better understand his circumstances and why his participation on YouTube and in the gaming community may be limited in the near future. He apologises to his viewers but also requests understanding. At 1 minute and 17 seconds into the video, it appears James was about to end his video with “hopefully you’ve enjoyed”, which again indicates his knowledge of how the most popular YouTubers’ videos begin and end. The sad and unusual circumstance of his dad’s terminal illness did not shift him away from meeting viewers’ expectations around typical video opening and closing sequences. This mismatch of format versus the emotional content of his video could indicate James Playz’ own conflict around the role YouTube plays in his life.

He appears to be struggling with his desire to maintain his channel and subscribers alongside the demands of his family life. He also wants to use the YouTube platform as a source of support during this difficult time. This is indicated by James’ decision at the 1 minute and 17 second mark to not end the video but to continue to talk about facing his father’s terminal illness. James continues from this point for another minute to discuss details related to his father’s cancer treatment.

Just over five weeks later, on 28 January 2017, James published his next video, titled “MY DAD DIED!!!! TODAY FOR REAL!!!” (James Playz, 2017). This video is 7 minutes and 42 seconds long and has been viewed close to 7.5 million times. The setting for this video is similar to the previous one. James is the only person in the video, shot as a close-up head shot with a white wall in the background. James appears to be visibly shaken based on his facial expression and hand gestures:

Hey guys, James is back with a video [hides face with left hand]. I haven’t made a video in such a long time, and I have a really, really bad reason [face starts to flush, eyes teary] ... So this morning, I got up at 1:30 and my mom had to wake me up and we had to go somewhere. So this morning ... it is like 8:51 at night now! ... I went to bed for only two hours [puts two fingers up], right ... I woke up at 1:30 [covers face with left hand] and we got a call from my uncle, well a text, and [covers face] so you know how my dad has brain cancer? Well [covers mouth with hand and puts head down, pauses for five seconds then lifts head] ... the nurses knew by his breathing that he was going to pass. Ok? [rests left hand on his temple].

(James Playz, 2017, 0:01)

It is evident in this video that James has adults around him that are honest with him and choose to share the details surrounding his father’s death. James explains how unexpected news disrupted his usual routine and his sleep pattern, causing him to feel disoriented. By emphasising the details of this disruption for him and his family, and his loss of continuity, he indicates the enormity of this loss and a source of his grief (Ellis et al., 2013):

So I went at 1:30 at night. My mom picked my mom and I up at 1:30. I stayed until 7 AM [emphasises the time] and I left at 7 AM, I didn’t get any sleep, only those two hours and I got only three hours once I got back until like 11 ...
emphatically] and then I didn’t go to sleep since. So this is really bad, like but then ... [face flushes and eyes tear up, pauses, covers face with left hand] ... um ... [covers mouth with left hand, pauses for 13 seconds] so around 12:35, that was the exact time, everyone, like everyone in my family, close friends to him, were circling around him, and they were like just talking and he was in his bed and then like he was taking like 50 secs [stares into camera intensely] like that was the highest like minute breath like he would only breathe like in one minute he would only breathe like twice in one minute. And so, everyone was around him at 12:35 and then it just happened like his last breath [4 second pause, he looks to the right away from the camera and then stares back into the camera] ... he ... he ... he passed. [pause] Today! ... [holds head in his hands] I don’t know ... [shakes head as he looks into camera for six seconds]. It all happened so fast, it’s like three hours [holds three fingers up to the camera. then four fingers] no, four hours after I got home, it happened and it was all over like. So it’s Saturday now ... my whole family got no sleep at all ... and I only got five hours [of sleep] and to me I keep on thinking that it’s a different day than Saturday but it’s Saturday ... I don’t know if I am going to school on Monday and Tuesday, my mom said I don’t know if I wanted to or not [then hides face in hands] I just don’t know. [holds head, appears distressed, shaking head for seven seconds] ... I don’t know.

(James Playz, 2017, 1:24)

James’ video, made on the very day his dad died, demonstrates how James is already actively engaged in processing the loss. He narrates how the experience of the loss is difficult to comprehend and dis-orienting. He also bravely faces this loss (and the camera), accepting its reality and expressing emotional distress (Mannarino & Cohen, 2011). James continues at the 5 minute and 46 second mark:

But we all knew that it was coming, we knew it and it happened [said emphatically] that day so ... [pauses and starts to tear up for nine seconds and hangs head]. This is really so crazy, I am only nine years old and this is happening to me ... almost 10? He was 46! His birthday was January 8th and it’s like January 28th – 20 days ago [said incredulously] that is freaky! . . . and if I look disgusting with this sweatshirt on, I know that I probably do, I don’t really care how I look anymore because I don’t, I don’t care [gets emotional] I can’t believe this is happening to me [pauses for ten seconds]. Well that’s pretty much it. I don’t know what else I am going to say so ... [covers face with hands, pauses for 12 seconds, visibly sad]. Ok, I am going to end the video then, so ... hopefully you enjoyed the video guys, and see you in the next one – buh bye.

(James Playz, 2017, 5:46)

James’ use of YouTube during the acute phase of his grief is not to ask his subscribers for help or advice. Indeed, James disabled the comment facility for all the posts relating to his dad. Instead, James turns to his subscribers at this time to provide information about a major event in his life; to intensify the connection he has with the community he has created. This intensification of his identity as part of the YouTube community is ritualistic, but also affirming. By posting a video, he is reinforcing his identity as a YouTuber and staying connected to his sense of self as “James Playz” despite the dissociative aspects of losing his father (Wheeler-Roy & Amyot, 2004).

The 7.5 million views of James’ post on the day of his dad’s death, in the context of a 123,000 subscriber base and the 130,000 views of the video about his father’s terminal diagnosis, indicates the need and demand for authentic materials that engage with children’s experiences of loss and bereavement.
Case Study 2: Farah (16 Years Old at Time of Loss)

Adolescents use social media for socialising and leisure. These platforms also play a critical role in identity development, relationship enhancement, ego validation, and emotional regulation (Throuvala, Griffiths, Rennoldson, & Kuss, 2019). Adolescent development includes challenges around emotional regulation and confusion around behavioural limitations and consequences, with adolescents particularly vulnerable to the emotional impact of loss (Dahl, 2004). Adolescent deaths are highlighted via digital media platforms. These deaths are often sudden or violent (Malone, 2007). The sensational aspects of a tragic death are provocative and at times alluring, and especially when promoted via viral news stories and blog posts (Green, 2019).

Teens use the private spaces on mobile devices to store content never shared with others (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017). In the following case study, mobile content is shown to be emotionally charged and capable of impacting the psychological well-being of the young person. This case study emerged from data collected and included in the book *Haunting Hands: Mobile Media Practices and Loss* (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017).

When Farah (pseudonym used) was 16 years old, her best friend was killed in an automobile accident. Farah believed she was responsible for her friend’s death because the authorities believed the accident occurred when her friend was reading a text message that Farah sent her. After the accident, Farah ceased texting anyone, other than her deceased friend. Farah’s use of her mobile phone shifted from typical use to a vehicle for her to communicate with her friend from beyond the grave. Farah described how she suspended her disbelief in order to make communicating with her friend real:

> [She] is the [only] person that I felt OK to text, even after her death. Other than that, because in that year and a half [after her death], I used to talk to her like she was around. Like she is not gone yet, so I would text her, “Hi, how are you, what are we doing today?” Stuff like that. [I would text her] in the morning, in the afternoon, sometimes between the morning and the afternoon. [It started] after the forty days [significant in Arab Orthodox funereal tradition]. So only her [the deceased], I would text, and not as often as we used to, we would text, uh, I would text, but not as often [as when she was alive]. (*Interviewer: did you anticipate her responding?*) Yeah, all the time. I remember I texted her one time [after she died] about the joke we had, I used to call her [wild] and she would say [when she was alive], “Of course, I am [wild], that is what you love”. One time I texted her that [after she died], “[Wild]?” And she’s like, well I anticipated her, “Yeah of course I’m [wild], that is what you love”. So I texted back, I said, “Of course that’s what I love, how could I not love you!” Stuff like that . . . I was having a conversation in my head and the texts were in the phone . . . I mean for most of the times, back then I could have sworn she was answering back. But now, I don’t know, was she answering? Was she not answering?

(*Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017, pp. 168–9*)

The personal and private nature of her mobile phone allowed Farah to construct an intimate space only shared between herself and her dead friend. The open, continuous, never-ceasing nature of most text messaging applications provides a perfect vehicle for cultivating a sense of presence with a loved one beyond death. The continuation of bonds with the deceased is a critical component in the integration of loss into the life of the bereaved (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). Farah’s life was shattered by her loss. She reported withdrawing from life, deepening her guilt related to the accident and mistrusting both her peers and her parents. Out of loyalty to her deceased friend, no one could ever match their bond. The mobile phone became
a safe private space through which Farah could strengthen her connection to the deceased and keep it secret from the rest of the world. Farah continued:

At that time [of her death], I wasn’t on Facebook all that much. My phone was really only for texting her. I feel like this stuff is mine. There, and not sharable with everyone. I feel like, maybe everyone forgot about her but I didn’t. I can’t.  

(Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017, p. 170)

Grief work for children and adolescents comes in the form of meaning-making, reconnecting with others, building support networks and developing resources, rituals, and collective activities (Papadatou, Bellali, Tselepi, & Giannopoulou, 2018). Engagement with digital media, whether it be via popular social media platforms or private mobile phone, enhances these processes.

Conclusion

For children born today, digital media, as a companion from before birth, becomes an integral part of their existence. As a consequence, digital media shapes their encounters with death, loss, grief, and coping while expanding their notions of existence, continuity, self-reflection, and connection. Maintaining a presence on social media is an investment in symbolic immortality: a protection against being forgotten. The on-going narration and companionship of social networks emphasises the importance of connection while also reducing the users’ ability to tolerate isolation and disconnection (Hoge, Bickham, & Cantor, 2017).

The power of digital media can be harnessed to improve mental health outcomes for children and adolescents. The impetus for memorialising the deceased is now built into some social media platforms like Facebook. These platforms serve as a fertile medium for the continuation of bonds and to guarantee that every person will have an eternal presence beyond death (DeGroot, 2012; Wandel, 2019). Experts predict dead users will surpass living users on Facebook by 2098 (Hiscock, 2019). As users come face to face with death on a daily basis through digital media, the focus shifts to how to control the distribution of disturbing content and questioning the motivations for such posts. Children now bear witness to tragic events and the pain of others and, due to the nature of the media, they can revisit these events over and over again (Papailias, 2016). These events go on to have personal significance for the young person and can become a part of how they come to understand the meaning of life (and death) (Hjorth & Cumiskey, 2018).

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