

Death and the media

Introduction

One of the ways in which members of contemporary 'modern' and 'post modern' societies learn about how to understand dying, death and bereavement and how to behave when they are confronted with these is through media representations and interpretations of these. It has commonly been argued that death is hidden from public view, and relegated to the private arenas of the side-ward and the widow's private emotions. Walter *et al*,[1] however, have shown how dominant death is on the front pages of national newspapers in the UK. Although death may be hidden in some arenas, this is certainly not true of the mass media. While medicine has largely taken over from religion in the practical management of death it does not purport to interpret death's *meaning*. But the mass media, it may be argued, do precisely this. It is the mass media, not medicine, that have inherited religion's mantle as the interpreter of death in contemporary modern societies. A number of papers published in *Mortality* have examined the role of the media in this area. Despite their differences in focus and approach, the common theme running through these papers is a concern with how media presentations of dying, death and bereavement draw upon and shape societal understandings of these related phenomena.

There are three components to any media product, performance or text: the process by which it is produced, the text, the performance, the image itself, and how the audience makes sense and responds to it. The second of these the text or image—is by far the easiest to study, and comprises the focus of the vast majority of media research. The researcher need only to switch on a video recorder, or to visit a newspaper archive, and there the data is. Researching the first phase—how the message was produced, what its creators thought they were up to—is more difficult, and requires access to and information from the creators of the message. Likewise, researching the final stage is also difficult, as the researcher has to ask the audience what they thought of the message or text; finding out how the message may have influenced their behaviour (e.g. does violence on TV make some viewers more violent?) is very difficult indeed. The temptation is always to analyse the text or image, and then to speculate about what its meaning is for both its producers and its audience. It is therefore no surprise that most of the articles in this virtual issue focus on the texts or images themselves, and the achievement of Armstrong-Coster[2] in looking at all three is considerable, not least as she shows that what the audience made of the film in question was not what its producers intended.

Obituaries are a common and popular way of honouring and remembering those who have died. In Britain local and national newspapers regularly carry obituaries of 'common folk' as well as of local and national celebrities and some papers are particularly noted for their obituary column. In the first volume of the

journal Bytheway and Johnson considered the role of obituaries in making sense of the lives those who had died.[3] Their research note examined 86 obituaries published in *The Guardian*, a national 'broadsheet' British newspaper. These mainly featured the mid-life careers of men (only 16 obituaries were of women) but reflected common expectations and fears about the relationship between age, illness and death in British society.

Three papers in *Mortality* focus upon the media coverage in Britain of the deaths of national figures—the popular Victorian actress Ellen Terry,[4] the Victorian Poet Laureate, Lord Alfred Tennyson[5] and Diana, Princess of Wales.[6] In their discussions of the burials of Terry and Tennyson Kazmier and Matthews both stress that the media used their coverage of the deaths of these icons of Victorian Britain to convey moral messages about the nature of society. Kazmier argues that newspaper coverage of the funeral and disposal arrangements for Ellen Terry, a famous Victorian actress, glossed over less acceptable aspects of her life such as her illegitimate children and three marriages, staging her 'final performance' to affirm what was good and desirable in contemporary British society, and to challenge the troubling rise of female emancipation. According to Matthews, Tennyson's death at the end of the nineteenth century (in 1892) became a focal point for the articulation of end of century anxieties. As with Terry, his funeral and disposal arrangements were similarly by his status as a national icon, and his love of privacy over-ridden: 'Despite his strong objections to publicity and funerary display, his loyalty to Queen and Country framed a nationally significant grave (in Poet's Corner) as an honour and duty' (p. 265).

Merrin[6] takes an irreverent and provocative stance in his analysis and discussion of the death of another British national icon, Diana, Princess of Wales. Drawing upon the work of Baudrillard, he argues that Diana's public persona was a simulacrum created and maintained by the mass media: 'an image that eclipsed both our lives and her own' (p. 44). From this starting point he goes on to explore and question conventional analyses of the 'grief of the nation' at her death. He argues that at every level Diana's life and death were inseparable from their media representations. As with Terry and Tennyson her funeral and disposal arrangements reflected contemporary national concerns.

In addition to obituaries and their coverage of the deaths of national and international figures contemporary newspapers and magazines frequently publish autobiographical accounts of the experiences of those who have been diagnosed with a terminal condition, usually cancer or AIDS. Such accounts often provide 'scripts' for coping with dying in a (usually) quiet but 'heroic' way and in so doing offer models of 'good dying' for their readers. In his paper[7] Neil Small discusses the 'public dying' of the two novelists Harold Brodkey and Oscar Moore as chronicled in their regular columns in the *New Yorker* (Brodkey) and *The Guardian* newspaper in Britain (Moore). Both authors died of AIDS in 1996. Small makes the point that an important source of our knowledge of the individual and social impact of AIDS (in 'Western' societies) has been autobiography and fiction. Although deeply stigmatising, the high profile of the AIDS epidemic led to a sharp focus upon 'the so-called cultural taboos of sex and death' (p. 215). Both

authors exhibit a continuing concern with their sexuality and its causal link to their death. Both writers provide a detailed chronicle of the progression of their illness, their small triumphs and hopes and their inevitable decline towards death in ways that are echoed in other media 'death autobiographies'. Small argues that their accounts reflect changing attitudes towards the male expression of grief and goes on to discuss the role of important role of metaphors used to make sense of death and dying.

Another important source of ideas and understanding about death is film. Armstrong-Coster[2] takes an ethnographic approach to look at the production and reception of two made-for-television documentary films about a woman who finally died from breast cancer. Her paper provides the subject's account of her experiences, the producer's account of its production and the reaction to the films by members of a focus group, all of whom had cancer. Despite the intent to present dying as 'something that could be rewarding' the comments of focus group members suggests that this was not achieved. She concludes that 'society's implicit rules governing behaviour exercise undue and excessive demands on those with cancer. The stresses of conforming to media images such as those shown in the films place (vulnerable) individuals ... into inequitable roles at precisely the moments in their lives when they are most in need of comfort and support, (p. 303).

Fictional cinematic scenes about dying can be very poignant and moving, engaging the viewer with a range of questions about death, but at a 'safe' distance. Margaret Gibson's paper is concerned with the visual depiction of dying and death.[8] Drawing upon the discussions by Levinas of alterity, death and the face she considers the use of facial expressions in fictional cinematic death scenes primarily through the discussion of three films where there is a hero who is facing death (*Blade Runner*, *Strange Days* and *To Die For*). At the centre of her analytic discussion is the impossibility of the cinematic attempt to represent and capture the experiences of dying and death (these are always experiences of the other rather than of the self). The 'alterity' of face, especially in 'close up', is central to the fictional cinematic representation of dying. In recognition of the role that film plays in reflecting and shaping attitudes and ideas *Mortality* has begun to review films about death, dying and bereavement.[9]

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February 2003.

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