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Communication media and the dead: from the Stone Age to Facebook ⁱ

Tony Walter

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Abstract: This article argues that i) the presence of the dead within a society depends in part on available communication technologies, specifically speech, stone, sculpture, writing, printing, photography and phonography (including the mass media), and most recently the internet. ii) Each communication technology affords possibilities for the dead to construct and legitimate particular social groups and institutions - from the oral construction of kinship, to the megalithic legitimization of the territorial rights of chiefdoms, to the written word's construction of world religions and nations, to the photographic and phonographic construction of celebrity-based neo-tribalism, and to the digital re-construction of family and friendship. iii) Historically, concerns about the dead have on a number of occasions aided the development of new communication technologies - the causal connection between the two can go both ways. The argument is based primarily on critical synthesis of existing research literature.

Keywords: ancestors, memory, communication technology, internet, group identity

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Introduction

A Shona friend of mine can name his male forebears back for seven generations, including the great, great, great grandfather who moved from Malawi to the area of Zimbabwe that the family now inhabit, and the great grandfather whose heroic exploit in killing a rogue elephant that was trampling the crops led to the family name by which my friend knows he is related to anyone with that name. His ancestors, whose stories have been passed orally down the generations, legitimate the extended family and enable him to identify who are kin; and it is extended family connections that enable him and his many dependents to survive in contemporary Zimbabwe's failed economy. By contrast, as a middle class westerner I cannot name my forebears beyond my grandparents, and even if I could (say, because I had taken up genealogy as a pastime) they would be written 'family history', not oral 'family present'. But as well as benefitting from a traditional oral African culture, my friend also belongs to a global educated elite. Trained as a Methodist minister at a leading British university, he has other sacred dead, encountered in books and with whom I am more familiar - Jesus Christ, Martin Luther, John Wesley; they provide him with an identity as a member of an institutional church that is part of a world religion. And he has yet other ancestors who have shaped his life, from the founding fathers of anthropology whom he studied at university to the gurus of international development who have influenced his work in that field. So he has as many identity-shaping ancestors encountered through books as through oral storytelling.

My friend caused me to ponder. Is there, as Baudrillard (1993, p. 126) supposes, 'an irreversible evolution' as societies develop so that 'little by little, the dead cease to exist'? Or are the dead actually more socially present than ever before? One way of approaching this question, which my friend's story of orality and literacy suggests and which this article will take, is to look at communication technologies. As Kittler (1999, p. 13) suggests 'The realm of the dead is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a given culture.' So this article examines a wide span of communication media – from speech through writing to the internet - to see a) whether they enable different kinds of ancestors to become socially manifest, and b) which social institutions and identities these ancestors legitimate or call into being. The answer concerning the social presence of the dead today may therefore not be 'less' or 'more', but 'different' - which would actually be a more interesting answer.

As well as communication technology, other variables arguably influence the dead's social presence, such as demography (Blauner, 1966), property and inheritance (Finch & Mason, 2000), religion (Klass & Goss, 2005), culture (Smith, 1974), and nationalism (Kearl & Rinaldi, 1983); I discuss these elsewhere (Walter, n.d.). But we might expect communication technologies to be particularly significant: they strongly influence how the living relate to each other so it would be surprising if they did not also influence how the dead communicate with the living and how the living collectively remember their dead.

The influence of communication media has been understood by students of cultural and collective memory: 'without organic, autobiographic memories, societies are solely dependent on media to transmit experience' (Erll, 2008, p. 9). Thus 'the extension and complexity of collective memory is to a large extent dependent on the available media' (Ruchatz, 2008, p. 367). This relates to Halbwach's (1992 [1925]) distinction between orally communicated memory and written history, elaborated by Nora: 'Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image.' (Nora, 1989, p. 13) Writing, recording devices, photography, are all implicated in how the past is reconstructed. What is true of collective memory in general must also be true of the dead who comprise much of that collective memory.

This interest in technologies of memory, however, is outweighed by collective memory studies' interest in *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory. Zerubavel (1996, 2003) has identified speech, writing, and statues as sites where the present meets the past; but he does not make clear that these are communication technologies, nor does he show how different mnemonic communities can be legitimated by different technologies and by different kinds of ancestors. Within death studies, Klass and Goss's (2005, p. 245) study of family ancestors and ancestors sacred to larger collectives such as a world religion or nation asks a related question: 'Which collective – family, community, government – controls the performance by which the dead are remembered?' My question here is slightly different: what communication technologies are available to call up the dead, and what collectives do they legitimate or call into being?

This article is not concerned with *private* encounters with the recent dead, about which much has been written by bereavement researchers (Bennett, 1987; Rees, 1971); such encounters may come unbidden through particular artefacts, music, or other triggers to memory (Hallam & Hockey, 2000). Rather, I examine the significance of the dead for society, and how the dead find a presence within groups - from families through to the nation state and transnational collectivities. Coverage includes both the recent and the long dead and how they are brought into service to shape contemporary groups and societies and people's sense of belonging to these groups.

Nor will this article focus on 'media' that are unique to the dead, such as dead bodies, bones, graveyards, spiritualist mediums, or memorial objects. Their very specific role as mediators between the living and the dead is rather obvious and already has a not inconsiderable literature - summarised by Harrison (2003) and theorised by Walter (2005). Instead I consider generic communication media, not specific to death: speech, stone, sculpture, writing, printing, telegraph and telephone, photography and phonography, the mass media, and the Internet. The role of certain individual media in relation to death and the dead has been researched (Doss, 2010; Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina, 1998; Seale, 2001), but the main communications media have not all been analysed *together* as enabling the dead to find a place within society, and how this may evolve over time. Analysing them together is important, since only then can we compare and contrast what each technology affords the dead and how it expands or contracts our relationships with them.

1) **Speech.**

In unilineal kinship systems, which comprise many but no means all oral societies (Fox, 1967), descent is traced through just one parent - either the father (patrilineal) or the mother (matrilineal). Thus the entire society comprises discrete lineages/families, each descended from the lineage's ancestors. The means by which ancestors are traced and kin identified are typically oral, whether by telling one's children about their forebears or tracing kin connections with more distant kin at ritual or other social events. Genealogies are not remembered purely as feats of memory, but as *aides memoires* to systems of social relations. Kin-based ancestry can define rights to land, to water resources, to inherited positions, to mutual obligations, and so forth.

'Genealogies often... act as 'charters' of present social institutions rather than as faithful historical records of times past. They can do this more consistently because they operate within an oral rather than a written tradition and thus tend to be automatically adjusted to existing social relations as they are passed by word of mouth from one member of the society to another.' (Goody & Watts, 1963, p. 310)

Usually, nothing is known and nothing need be said about those dead who are not kin (Steadman, Palmer, & Tilley, 1996). The childless cannot become ancestors; nor in patrilineal systems can females (or in matrilineal systems, males).

Precisely which family ancestors are known depends on the society. In some societies, family ancestors can be named for only two or three generations, that is, as long as there are people alive to remember them, and then there is a gap between them and the lineage's mythical founding ancestor (Vansima, 1985), though where writing is available more complete genealogies may be constructed (Humphrey, 1979). In some societies, the name of the recently dead may not be spoken (Frazer, 1914). Other media than speech may be used in order to communicate with the ancestors, who may speak through dreams or trance. But in everyday life the primary medium through which kinship stories are told and ancestry constructed is speech. Whereas books can communicate long after the writer has died, in oral societies the dead can speak only through the living. Stories evolve as they are passed on by word of mouth, so the words and deeds of the ancestors become part of the present; purely oral societies do not have the modern sense of a past separate from the present (Ong, 2012 [1982]).

2) Stone.

Though some west African professional story tellers recount the stories of ancestors, going back to the fourteenth century and with audiences of up to 100,000 people (Vansima, 1985), the oral telling of ancestry has traditionally been restricted to family ancestors. The first new medium with potential to generate ancestry beyond the family was stone. As people settled and became farmers, they constructed houses, typically of mud or wood. About 5000 years ago, however, stone tombs and megaliths became more substantial than houses, providing a focus for life and power in societies that had grown in scale to become chiefdoms or, bigger still, early states (Parker Pearson, 1999; Wilson, 1989). The ancient Egyptians, for example, built not only their homes but even their palaces of non-durable materials such as mud; only their tombs and some temples were built of stone. Within each stone pyramid resided not only the deceased but a statue of the deceased where his or her spirit was believed to reside and to which food offerings could be made. By comparing Stonehenge with megaliths still used in Madagascar today, Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina (1998) have argued the significance of stone over wood; wood decays and is used to ritually to represent the passage of the recently dead, while stone represents the durability of the ancestors. (For critiques of their interpretation, see Barrett and Fewster (1998) and Whitley (2002).) Prehistoric monuments such as Stonehenge or the statues on Easter Island could be built only by a group considerably larger than an extended family and required major organisation and control over resources; they presumably had significance beyond any one family. Vast stone monuments in literate societies, such as the Egyptian pyramids and the Taj Mahal, display to a wider society the power, wealth and/or grief of one family (Childe, 1945).

As landscape archaeologists have argued, stone – along with earthworks - enable funerary monuments to mark the landscape, and thereby to have significance for a wider society (Edmonds, 1999; Tilley, 1994). In Britain, bronze age round barrows marked the landscape in ways meaningful to both insiders and outsiders; the placing of the dead defined their descendents' right to land. In Madagascar, the elaborate stone tombs that define membership of the deme (a large extended kin group) are clearly visible to members of other demes (Bloch, 1971). People know they belong to a society wider than the family in part because of the visibility of other demes' tombs.

Even in modern Western societies, stone makes graves visible to anyone, whether or not family. And in many countries, whether at village or national level, public memorials are still typically constructed of stone. The white limestone war memorials to the dead of the Great War at the heart of each English village (King, 1998) and the black marble Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC (Fitzpatrick, 2011) provide potent sites where the living may meet the sacred dead, sites at the heart of local or national society.

3) Sculpture.

Stone and other durable materials have from prehistoric times been shaped into sculptures representing the human head. The portrait sculpture has a unique ability to reproduce the physical presence of the departed; this derives from its durability, its three dimensionality and, when taken from a death mask or life mask, an accuracy and direct physical connection with the person exceeding even that of a photograph (Sturgis, 2012). In ancient Rome, death masks of family members were set up within the family home. 'These images would then be carried (or worn as masks) at the public funerals of the family members, so that Romans would both live and be buried in front of an ever present cast of their ancestors.' (Sturgis, 2012, p. 59)

The portraits hanging in aristocratic houses in the early modern era, like sculpture, 'display' family (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011), but sculpture can be more public than painting. As well as sculpture's ability to be erected in outdoor public places, casting enables multiple, portable and exact copies to be made of the original sculpted head. Thus in eighteenth century England the busts of literary and theatrical stars were placed in libraries, theatres, and gentlemen's clubs. An interesting case is William Shakespeare who, it seems, may not have been the most handsome of mortals. In the late 17th century, however, a more flattering portrait prompted the production of thousands of busts, and it is on these that today's image of the Bard is based. As Sturgis comments (2012, p. 70), 'The power of the three-dimensional image, even when based on a fiction, can nonetheless continue to engender an insistent individual presence.' Given the patriarchal nature of both families and art in European history, most of these presences are, of course, male.

4) Writing.

The writings of the dead can communicate to posterity without interpretation by an intermediate storyteller. Written stories *about* the dead can be communicated beyond the family. Strictly speaking, writing renders stone memorials redundant, for writings by and about dead heroes, religious teachers and ancestors can be readily reproduced and disseminated. Extensive genealogies can be recorded that define and legitimate not just ordinary kinship but also royal or religious dynasties, as in the Old Testament. Just as human memory limits the number of ancestors that can be remembered in oral tradition (Humphrey, 1979), so the greatly expanded number of ancestors that can be recorded in writing becomes meaningless unless ordered. Most of the dead need, sooner or later, to be forgotten, in order that a few can be remembered in what Aleida Assmann (2008) calls the canon, the group's canonical story, its working cultural memory. But writing also provides the possibility of a more passive cultural memory, the archive, that once excavated can generate counter histories and counter memories that challenge the canon.

Writing has enabled the dead to 'live on' through numerous social formations. I now sketch three: religion, history, and music.

Religion. Compared to indigenous religions, two things define world religions. First, they are based on sacred scriptures; in Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, holy books enable knowledge of the founder's teachings to extend across the globe centuries and millennia after his death. Indeed, in both Christianity and Islam, dissemination of religious knowledge eventually became a powerful motive for mass literacy. So, secondly, world religions are 'not confined to groups of people who consider themselves kin' (Steadman et al., 1996, p. 74). Disseminated sacred texts enable world religions tend to demote family-based ancestral cults in favour of a God who transcends family and tribe. Knowledge of the religious founder's teachings comes to replace, or at least to supplement, knowledge of family ancestors, both as a guide for living and as the basis for identity. (J. Assmann, 2006)

History. Writing also enables the production of history. Historians, along with archivists, archaeologists, and curators, are special among the guardians of the dead, as they are concerned systematically with not just the family dead or even the dead of their own religion or nation but potentially with *all* the dead of history, 'the near and the distant, the known and the anonymous' (de Baets, 2004, p. 140). Historical storytelling is not confined to kin. Not only is the content of history widened beyond the small group, but so too are the rules for writing history. 'Memory is blind to all but the group it binds... there are as many memories as there are groups... History on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority.' (Nora, 1989, p. 9) Of course, much history is national history, and postmodern historians and archaeologists claim that history and pre-history can never be objective or detached. But my point stands: history and pre-history are not the property of any one specific clan or family group. Historians and archaeologists from different societies and at different times argue with one another over evidence which is open for all to debate. That is not the case with oral traditions about the ancestors, where only in-group members may participate in the ongoing story-telling. History has the potential to foster a global identity, even if in practice it much more frequently fosters a national identity.

Music. Notations have been developed to enable the writing not only of words, but also of music, calling into being the 'artwork' – whether play, novel or symphony – that outlives its creator. Before the invention of musical notation in tenth century Europe, any piece of music (like any other kind of performance) was handed down orally within the group (whether monastic or folk), in the process constantly evolving, its origins lost in the mists of time. No one person could be identified as its 'composer'. Once music could be written, however, the composition became an identifiable product, written by its composer at a point in time. Composition and performance came to be separated, so a composition could outlive its composer. Indeed since the Renaissance, the touchstone of a great piece of music has been that it does precisely this, becoming not lost in the mists of time but, no longer bound to the time of its composer, timeless. Thus the musical world we inhabit today comprises largely the spectres of the dead: Monteverdi, Beethoven, Elvis Presley. Music history is largely a history of styles and of individuals. When the audience claps at the end of a Mozart opera or a Tchaikovsky symphony, it is clapping both performer and composer. The performance of written music is one way in which the dead, or rather some rather specially talented (and usually male) dead, are continually resurrected within musical society and used to construct the social institution that is music.

5) Printing.

Though writing creates the possibility of stories by and about the dead being told beyond the closed circle of the extended family, handwritten manuscripts put ideological power in the hands of a tiny elite. The possibilities become much extended first with printing, and second

with mass literacy. Readers' access to literature may, of course, be limited by their economic resources and/or the control of literature by powerful groups, but printing and literacy afford an unprecedented potential for anybody to read writings by or about anybody, alive or dead. (As I will discuss later, the internet offers the further potential for anybody to *publish* about anybody, alive or dead.) Printing and literacy, therefore, radically expand the range of groups that can claim ancestors. Chief among these groups today is the nation state. National ancestors create national identity, just as family ancestors create family identity, and religious ancestors create religious identity.

The nation. Benedict Anderson (1991) famously argued that printing and literacy are key to generating national consciousness. From the early nineteenth century, reading the national newspaper became an activity shared by millions, daily creating a sense of belonging to a national society, especially as national newspaper stories typically concern national rather than local or global events. While a not inconsiderable proportion of national journalism concerns death (Kitch & Hume, 2008) and (in the obituary) the dead (Árnason, Hafsteinsson, & Grétarsdóttir, 2003; Fowler, 2006), the majority of stories concern the living. School history books, by contrast, depict the canonical dead, and are key to developing national consciousness. It is barely possible to feel English without at least knowing the names of Admiral Horatio Nelson or Prime Minister Winston Churchill, to feel American without knowing the names George Washington or Martin Luther King, to feel Italian without some knowledge of Garibaldi, or Indian without Ghandhi. If a nation is, as Anderson argues, a community imagined through text, central to the textual construction of nationhood is a community of memory, a mnemonic community populated by canonical heroes (and the occasional heroine). Printing produces these heroes not only in books and magazines, but also on postage stamps and banknotes (Zerubavel 1996).

The non-canonical dead, including a very small number of not-yet canonical dead, are found in newspaper obituary columns. Fowler (2006) has analysed how British obituaries remember some people more than others, for example artists and scientists more than business people; but the main over-representation, which she does not analyse, is of UK citizens over foreigners. Whatever else the obituary columns legitimate in terms of class, gender, ethnicity or occupation, they certainly legitimate and call forth a sense of nationhood.

Intriguingly, once western nation states became established in the nineteenth century, stone was brought into play again, in the form of statues of national heroes (Johnson, 1995) - though equestrian statues tended to be of the lighter material of bronze (in order to save the horses' legs). Even the second modern period of memorial mania (Doss, 2010), starting with the Vietnam Memorial in the early 1980s and employing abstract rather than representational art, still relies largely on stone, and equates nationhood with loss even more directly than did Victorian memorials. Whereas the nineteenth century statue depicts a (possibly still living) hero on his horse, the contemporary memorial is more likely to commemorate mass death. Regime change, as for example after 1989, also requires statue change (Verdery, 1999, pp. 4-13; Williams, 2008). By contrast, revolutionaries who failed (Che Guevara) and the stars of popular culture whose fame is more international than national (Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, James Dean) are more commonly memorialised in printed posters than in stone. Stone is placed, typically at sites of national or local significance; posters can be replicated and disseminated, reflecting the international, placeless significance of the hero of popular culture.

Other groups. Printing and literacy also enable many other groups to identify themselves in terms of ancestors. Among these groups are academic disciplines; my introduction at high

school to physics and chemistry, and at university to sociology, all relied heavily on these disciplines' founding fathers and paradigm shifters. The title of one introductory sociology text, *Dead White Men and Other Important People: sociology's big ideas* (Fevre & Bancroft, 2010), suggests not only the importance of ancestors for those who wish to identify as sociologists, but also that sociology is a tribe in which gender and ethnicity define status and authority. Businesses (Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010), trades unions and many other kinds of organisations often have founders whose carefully honed story is at the heart of the organisation's presentation of self (Zerubavel, 1996).

6) Telegraphy and telephony.

The telegraph and the telephone are the only technologies discussed in this article that, telephone conferences aside, enable just one-to-one communication. Hundreds may listen to a storyteller, thousands may walk by a statue, millions may read a book, but only one person can speak on the traditional telephone and one person listen; only one can send and one receive a telegram. This may be why the telegraph and the traditional telephone turned out to be unique among communications media in playing almost no role in enhancing the dead's social presence.ⁱⁱ

It did not seem thus when these technologies were invented in a nineteenth century fascinated both by technology and by communicating with the dead, and by how each might stimulate the other (Sterne, 2003). The telegraph was the first communication technology to create 'telepresence', a form of co-presence unyoked from the interlocutors' physical co-presence or from the physical movement of letters; it thus resonated with how the living and the dead might communicate. Starting in the USA in 1848, spiritualism soon allied itself to experiments in electricity and to new communication technologies in an attempt to prove scientifically that communication with the dead was possible; photography was also used to try and prove that spirits could materialise. These experiments involved respected scientists (Carroll, 1997), including Thomas Edison who had planned to build a telephonic device that might enable the dead to speak to the living (Lescarbourea, 1920). However, with no conclusive results by the early twentieth century, and prompted by the violent slaughter of the Great War, spiritualism turned away from experiments in high-tech communication toward the more pressing task of assuring the bereaved that those they loved were at peace (Bourke, 2007; Hazelgrove, 2000), which remains spiritualism's main task today (Walliss, 2001) - despite a revival of interest since the 1990s in material paranormal manifestations, including phone calls from the dead (Cooper, 2012).

7) Photography, phonography and the mass media

The nineteenth century culture of death and the inventions of photography and phonography (i.e. sound recording) fed into each other: many Victorians wanted the dead to live on, and these new technologies (unlike the telegraph and telephone) enabled this. Nipper, the dog on the His Masters Voice label, was originally understood to be listening to his *dead* master's voice. It is not just that new technologies gave the deceased's voice or face an enduring presence, but that a culturally validated desire for their presence stimulated interest in the technologies (Peters, 1999; Sterne, 2003).

Thus, though photography eventually failed to demonstrate material traces of the dead within the séance, it had and has enormous potential for giving the dead a social presence in a multitude of other settings. The German Renaissance painter Albrecht Dürer observed that one of painting's two principal purposes is to 'preserve the likeness of men after their death' (Sturgis, 2012, p. 59), though in his time this applied only to those men and women whose

family could afford a portrait. Photography is more democratic. By the end of the nineteenth century, middle-class people could afford at least one commercial photographic portrait of each family member, including dead children for whom the photographic portrait might provide the only visual record (Burns, 1990). With the spread of cheap and easily portable cameras in the first half of the twentieth century there are now few families in industrial societies whose memory of their recent forebears is not shaped by the family photograph album (Riches & Dawson, 1998) or in the twenty first century by digital photos. Unlike staged studio portraits, these candid photographs – and even more so home movies and videos - have a remarkable capacity to capture a moment in time so that, uncannily, subsequent generations can witness the dead as though alive. If through reading newspapers people imagine nationhood, it is through taking and displaying photos that they imagine kinship.

Beyond the family, it is typically the rich, the powerful and the influential who have been named in photographs; the poor have gone unnamed (Sontag, 2004, p. 68). After a disaster, however, that may now be changing. While some photographs, for example of bodies piled up in a concentration camp or after a massacre, are of the nameless dead, late-modern sensibilities (Giddens, 1991) find namelessness adds to the horror. There is thus a drive to name, as in the named photographs displayed in Holocaust museums (Zelizer, 1998), posted after 9/11 both informally and in the press (Hume, 2003), or published in newspapers after an air crash or terrorist attack (Riley, 2008). Indeed, one of the purposes of contemporary memorials (Doss, 2010), spontaneous shrines (Santino, 2006) and memorial museums (Williams, 2007) is to name victims, expressed most clearly at Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial and in the San Francisco names project for those who died of AIDS. The ordinary dead who die in extraordinary circumstances comprise a significant proportion of both text and pictures in news media (Hanusch, 2010; McIlwain, 2005), frequently dominating newspaper front pages rather than being hidden away in obituary columns. Any glance at a newspaper or time spent watching the television today is, frequently, to find oneself in a pantheon of the dead.

But photography does more than simply give the dead a visible presence. As Barthes (1982) and Beloff (2007) have argued, the photograph is a *memento mori*; in depicting as young and vibrant the person who is now old or dead, the photograph reminds viewers that they too will grow old and die. Photography shares this characteristic with phonography (Keightley & Pickering, 2006), recorded music taking the listener directly to the time and even sometimes the place where the recording was made – made especially poignant when the performer died tragically young. It is almost impossible to listen to a recording of Kathleen Ferrier, Jacqueline du Pré, John Lennon or Amy Winehouse without at some level being aware of their premature death. It is likewise difficult to watch a Marilyn Monroe movie or to see a photograph of Princess Diana without a similar awareness of her, and thus our, mortality.

Photography and phonography offer a remarkable potential to sustain or even augment celebrity status after death. Indeed if celebrity status were not sustainable post-mortem, the cult of celebrity (as of the composer) would be profoundly undermined, for immortality is – arguably – celebrity's ultimate prize (Giles, 2000). The post-mortem celebrity continues to be an economic actor long after physical death, often earning more – and contributing more to the economy - in death than in life (Kearl, 2010). The pantheon of the socially significant dead now includes not only family ancestors, religious founders, saints, artists and patriotic heroes, but also pop musicians, film stars, sports stars and other media celebrities. Some celebrities are international, some national, some represent an ethnic identity; some are

known widely, some reinforce an identity that criss-crosses national identity; some are mourned significantly only by followers of a particular genre, reflecting and helping to construct –through photos, video and music - chosen neo-tribal identities based on, for example, musical style or a sports team (Maffesoli, 1996). In terms of imagining nationality, twentieth century radio has perhaps been more influential than television. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s announcing on the BBC that ‘We are now at war w Germany’, Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream’ speech, and Margaret Thatcher’s ‘This lady’s not for turning’ influence how Britons and Americans imagine their history and themselves. Though King’s and Thatcher’s speeches were delivered in the television era, their voices are firmly lodged in collective memory.

Photographic and phonographic archives can also enable ordinary people to be immortalised. In Gavin Bryars’ 1971 minimalist composition *Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet*, orchestral and choral performers accompany the tape loop of a now deceased old tramp singing two lines of this old Salvation Army hymn; thus the living and the dead make music together. Another example of living/dead duetting is Natalie Cole singing and recording ‘Unforgettable’ with her father Nat King Cole, 26 years in his grave.

8) The internet.

If writing and literacy radically expanded the number and range of the dead who could be known, the internet and digital technology expands the range still further. Pointing a smart phone at the QR code on a gravestone brings up information about the deceased. If writing about the dead helped construct world religions and nations, posting information about the dead online enables a much wider diversity of cross-religious and cross-national identifications, sometimes bypassing, sometimes feeding, national-based media (as with YouTube footage of Iranian martyr Neda Agha-Soltan). Online game players know their co-players only as avatars, and on their demise mourn them as such (Boellstorff, 2009).

Twenty first century technology also has a remarkable capacity in the immediate aftermath of death to link family and non-family mourners who online may not have known, or even known of, each other. Social network sites such as Facebook can bring back into contact, after death as in life, diverse members of a person’s diverse networks. Online cemeteries and online memorial posting began in the mid-1990s, but it was not until the mid-2000s that these became sufficiently interactive for any mourner or site visitor readily to announce their presence and add or even edit material (Roberts, 2012; Sofka, Cupit, & Gilbert, 2012). The Facebook generation feels that online content is not mine or yours but ours, and we all have the right to respond to it (as with Facebook) or modify it (the Wiki principle). The online pantheon is now interactive, blurring the roles of custodian and visitor.

Not only does mourning thus become more social, more shared and potentially more conflictual, but social network technology also affords the dead themselves the possibility of becoming more vibrantly present among their network of family and friends. After death, a Facebook page can be memorialised, but Kasket (2012) has observed that more mourners visit the living Facebook page since it is permeated with the spirit of the person when alive. Many online messages are addressed directly to the dead. Talking to the dead is far from a new phenomenon, but in secularised Protestant societies has traditionally been done in stylised ways at particular times, such as local British newspaper anniversary *In Memoriams* (Davies, 1994) and Icelandic obituaries (Árnason et al., 2003); or alone, either silently or out loud at a site such as the grave when no-one else is around. Online, addressing the dead is done in the knowledge that there is a living audience which, by accepting such direct address

and even actively joining in, legitimates a practice about which hitherto some people may have felt somewhat embarrassed, and it informalises traditions of addressing the dead via the newspaper; so much so, addressing the dead informally has on many sites become a new norm (Kasket, 2012). Moreover, smart phone technology means I no longer have to go to a special place – my PC terminal – to find my dead; they are anywhere my phone is, which is everywhere. The dead are no longer sequestered.

Moreover, addressing the dead online (tapping on keys and posting online) is no different from addressing them when they were alive – unlike speaking (aloud to no-one) or writing a letter (with no address to post it to). Several posts reflect this, indicating at least a semi-belief that the dead is somehow receiving the message (Kasket, 2012); cyberspace replaces or augments heaven as the deceased's unfathomable home. More eerily, apps enable the dead to send timed greetings (such as birthday greetings) to those they love; messages from the grave are, literally, messages from cyberspace. Digital technology can also preserve text messages and emails, outgoing as well as incoming, after the co-respondent has died; in so far as these replace telephone calls rather than paper letters, they constitute a new way that conversations can live on after death. All this has been noted not only by theorists of continuing bonds such as Kasket but also by critics worried that the online environment prevents mourners from 'letting go'.

Digital property can be inherited not only by individuals but also by communities. By contrast, an item of physical property, including (if the negative is lost) a traditional photo, can be bequeathed to just one individual; hence I can remember the deceased by using her furniture or placing her picture on the mantelpiece - a rather personal memory. But digital content can be copied to any number of inheritors, or put on the web for anyone and everyone to see. So, distributed digital content can enhance the deceased's communal or public presence, as well as their private presence. If writing and printing allow words to go beyond the confines of face-to-face conversation, digital dissemination of artefacts such as photos or music allows inheritance beyond one-to-one inheritance. I have on my laptop, for example, a photo of a recently deceased member of a sports club to which I belong, taken by another club member and circulated to the club by a simple click of the mouse. This locates the now dead member more securely as a club 'ancestor'. The technology thus expands the potential for ordinary ancestors to move beyond the family to all kinds of formal and informal groups and organisations.

Digital immortality, however, is not assured. While digital materials such as the photograph of my sports colleague, once forwarded, may spin around cyberspace indefinitely, other digital assets may disappear as soon as the Internet host is informed of the person's death, though few users read the fine print and know which digital assets will suffer this fate. Just as it is unpredictable which bits of paper or other material possessions will outlive you or for how long, so there is considerable uncertainty about the post-mortem longevity of your digital bits.

Meanwhile, many of the archived papers left behind by those who died before the era of the Internet no longer reside entombed in dusty library basements but may now be found online, contributing to the popularity of family genealogy (Kramer, 2011). Online archives contribute to a democratisation of memory, arguably returning cultural memory from formal museums and historians to the people, though as Haskins (2007) has pointed out this can also entail an acceleration of amnesia. Any teacher of history is now aware of the ease with which students can grow up in the presence of the dead by writing essays based on original sources found online, giving each new generation a direct feel for what it was like to live in a past

age, but arguably at the cost of not even considering offline archives. The online dead speak, more directly and in greater numbers, to students and genealogists, but the offline dead risk becoming even deader than before – unless some tenacious historian or genealogist penetrates a dusty archive and resurrects them.

Conclusion

This article has made two original arguments. First, the nature and extent of the social presence of the dead within society depends in part on the information and communication technologies available to that society. Robin Dunbar (Stiller & Dunbar, 2007) has argued that there is a limit to how many other living people an individual can relate to; what I have argued here is that the number, diversity and significance of dead people who can be related to depends in large measure on available information and communication technologies. In particular, media offering tele-presence - co-presence without physical presence – have rapidly expanded since the mid nineteenth century, each with more or less potential to function as mediums connecting the dead to the living. Technologies can be cumulative, thus contemporary digital technologies build on literacy, telephony, photography and phonography to enable users to integrate the deceased's music, pictures, speech and writings into a rich, and socially available, ongoing presence.

I am not suggesting that communication technologies *determine* the nature and extent of the dead's social presence, simply that they afford possibilities. Whether people take up these possibilities depends on individual motivation and on culture. For example, woodblock printing was invented in eighth century and metal printing in thirteenth century Korea, yet it is still the family dead that provide a Korean's identity. And in the age of the mass media and the internet, though a few Korean fans commemorated Michael Jackson there was nothing like the wall-to-wall public mourning for him found in the West. Despite access to advanced communication technologies, the Korean dead are still largely the family dead.ⁱⁱⁱ

Second, each new communication technology affords possibilities for the dead to legitimate and help construct new social groups, from the oral construction of family, to the megalithic construction of chiefdoms, to the written construction of world religions and nations, to the photographic and phonographic construction of celebrity-based neo-tribalism, to the digital re-construction of family and friendship relationships. To this list, we may add the online storage of the dead who have been posthumously baptised by the Mormons and who thus constitute the Mormon church.

But causal relationships between communications media, the dead and social institutions can work in more than one direction. Early megalithic constructions may have been motivated by, as much as enabled, the need of groups larger than the family to immortalise their ancestors. Some religions' mission to spread knowledge of their deceased founder has motivated them to promote mass literacy. In the mid nineteenth century, romantic attachment to the dead promoted interest in new communications technologies as much as the other way around. And Mormon concerns for the dead have significantly resourced the digitisation of a wide range of burial records.

Olick (1999, p. 342) has argued that 'It is not just that we remember as members of groups, but that we constitute those groups and their members simultaneously in the act.' In a modern society thin on ritual but rich in information and communication technologies, it is perhaps not so much through ritual, as Durkheim (1915) argued, but through media-enhanced possibilities of collective remembering that ancestors are called forth, social groups constituted, and individuals experience membership of those groups.

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ⁱⁱ Contemporary smart phone technology's ability to call up the dead is briefly considered later.

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