EDITORIAL

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Memento Mori: Noticing Death in Global Media

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Abstract

This introduction to the thematic issue examines the paradoxical position of death in contemporary media where it is simultaneously ubiquitous and unevenly represented, even while digital technologies are reshaping long-standing journalistic norms governing the visibility of the dead. The works—selected from different countries and regions of the world—emphasize the need for research that moves beyond exceptional cases to include diverse geopolitical contexts and everyday forms of mortality, particularly as social media broaden the spaces in which death, mourning, and posthumous presence circulate. The thematic issue aims to bring together scholarship on the cultural construction of death in various contexts and the resulting collection highlights how bodies remain sites of competing narratives, ethically charged decisions, and political contestation. The issue further investigates how linguistic, visual, and structural choices in news reporting determine whose deaths are counted, witnessed, or overlooked, and how these representational practices shape public understandings of mortality. Grounded in theories of social construction, national memory, and mediated visibility, the thematic issue explores the instability of death as an object of representation and the affective, moral, and epistemic negotiations underlying its portrayal.

Keywords

death; digital media; journalism; media; news; obituary

Death holds a prominent but contradictory place in today's media: it is everywhere, but shown unevenly; constantly measured but often not pictured; even its physical reality is shaped and changed by different cultures and societies. Across journalistic practice, acts of counting the dead become forms of *recounting* through which the literal body—cadaver, corpse, or remains—emerges as a site of incompatible biography: an object with a history, but which no longer has a life. Prior research has shown that journalistic depictions of dead bodies have traditionally been infrequent (Fishman, 2017; Zelizer, 2010), yet the rapidly evolving

digital environment may be reshaping established norms of production, circulation, and reception. As digital and social media expand the spaces and logics of visibility, they simultaneously challenge and transform the conventions governing which deaths are shown, how they are framed, and whose bodies are rendered countable, or discountable, within public discourse.

While earlier scholarship has often concentrated on the mediation of exceptional death (Sumiala, 2022), there is a sustained need for empirical and also retrospective inquiry that encompasses a broader spectrum of deaths and geopolitical perspectives, and which offer local scholarly and professional viewpoints rather than outsider-ethnographic ones. In Lesley Mofokeng's (2025) study of black obituaries in the early South African press ("Convening Black Sociability Over a Corpse: Obituaries in the early South African Black Press") for example, there is a global celestial moment—the appearance of Halley's Comet in 1910—which Mofokeng and his central protagonist, journalist and author Sol Plaatje, use to explore the universality of mortality. The arrival of the much-anticipated comet heralds a "year of death," of kings and authors in the North, and of African chiefs and community leaders in the South. Plaatje's efforts to eulogise powerful and influential black African men, in the shape and form of Western literary-journalistic obituary, provides a remarkable example of the often unacknowledged minutiae and variations that exist within a "global" field of journalism that, then, was both well-established (as a form) and in its infancy (as a profession)—simultaneous processes that saw the dispersion of a "universal" model of journalistic practice, but one which was profoundly invested with Western and colonial values and ideologies (Sharra et al., 2025).

This thematic issue examines how different media in different times, contexts, and locations recognize or overlook the dead, how encounters with death shape journalistic practice, and how linguistic, visual, and structural choices influence public perceptions of mortality. It explores the diverse ways news media across the world investigate, portray, and narrate death and the dead through words and images. In the same context, these works also acknowledge that (digital) social platforms have increased the everyday visibility of death, mourning, and transformed the "presence" of the deceased; as these technologies become woven into daily life, they are fostering new forms of mourning practices. Chuanlin Ning's (2025) "You Have Not Disappeared: Digital Mourning Spaces After a Social Media Celebrity's Self-Obituary" examines how the viral 2022 self-obituary posted on the Chinese social media platform Bilibili by food blogger Yishiji (一食纪) sparked the creation of a sustained digital mourning space. Ning demonstrates that this evolving site of engagement, where users continue to converse, remember, and interact through diverse multimodal forms, constitutes a new, democratized mode of online mourning shaped jointly by user participation and platform algorithms. Ning's work, employing new computational methods to identify and analyse relevance within thousands of posts, shows how digital spaces become living eulogies/epitaphs.

The theoretical foundation for such inquiry draws on longstanding efforts to comprehend death as both culturally embedded and socially constructed. As Brussel and Carpentier (2014) argue, although definitions of death are shaped by cultural frameworks, the material transformations of the dying body impose constraints on how death can be conceptualised. Examining death and dying through the lens of social construction, they suggest, allows scholars to de-essentialise and critically interrogate concepts, practices, and assumptions that structure how individuals and communities confront "the only certainty in life." This perspective highlights the epistemic instability of death as an object of representation, as well as the political, ethical, and affective negotiations that attend its mediation.

Such negotiations are also central to the role of death in collective identity formation. Benedict Anderson (1983) famously noted that the deaths that structure "the biography of the nation" are selectively narrated: Exemplary suicides, martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and genocides are incorporated into national memory only insofar as they can be remembered, and forgotten, as "our own." Here, death becomes a narrative resource, woven into the imagined continuity of the nation-state and mobilised to produce forms of belonging and exclusion.

In the contemporary mediascape, the corpse has emerged as a powerful and increasingly spectacular object—an affect heightened by rising forced migration, conflict, and climate change. As early as 2005, Klaver (2005) noted that the dead body, especially in visual form, was frequently cast as a dramatic, attention-grabbing figure. In his overview of how death appears in news media, Hanusch (2010) identifies not a disappearance but a transformation of the taboos surrounding death and its representation. Still, this heightened visibility matters greatly, since mass media are central arenas through which societal understandings of death are formed and reinforced. As Weber (2014) points out, for many viewers who have never entered a pathology department or witnessed an autopsy, mediated images offer the primary visual encounter with the dead body. Such depictions, therefore, carry significant pedagogical, affective, and normative weight, shaping what death looks like and how it is to be understood.

By including both historical and contemporary studies, the works of this thematic issue demonstrate how both language and technology diversify and transform our lexicon of public death notices and memorialisation. Laurence Stewart and Thandi Bombi (2025), in their article "The 1927 Mapleton Train Disaster, Memorialisation, and the Media's Role in Narrating the Dead," show how a train disaster in early 20th Century urban South Africa revealed profound racial inequities in how death and suffering were treated at the time. Injured black passengers were relegated to coal trucks for medical transport and those who succumbed were buried collectively, some unidentified; while in contrast white victims received immediate care and individual funerals. Drawing on archival records and a thematic analysis of newspaper coverage, the article investigates how multiple journalistic narratives framed the tragedy and shaped whose deaths were rendered visible, grievable, and historically enduring. Through the lens of bearing witness, the study shows that the media not only mediates public responses to mass fatality events but also produces hierarchies of remembrance that elevate certain lives while consigning others to obscurity.

The articles selected for this issue include studies of works produced in more than six different languages, including English, Turkish, Mandarin, Finnish, Setswana, and Spanish, extending geographically from the northern-most reaches of Europe to the southern tip of Africa, and from Türkiye to China, covering a time span of more than a century. Asking for work that looked at representations of death in global journalism, the issue sought to platform research that we believed would contribute towards challenging or expanding the ways in which media reports of death and dying inadvertently or deliberately heightened (Sumiala, 2022) or even flattened the phenomena of death into predictable, newsworthy packages; and which visited narratives, languages, frames, visual depictions, and professional practices in ways that exposed where difference and commonality co-existed or competed. In some instances, these dynamics become visible through contrasts between regions; in others, they unfold within the same context. A striking example emerges from the resonance between the separate works of Önder Deniz, Hüseyin Vehbi İmamoğlu, and Taybe Topsakal (2025)—a study of the memorialization of murdered journalists in Türkiye ("Missing Bodies, Silent Pages: How Turkish Media Portrays Journalist Murders and Silence")—and Melike İşleyen and Barış

Çoban (2025)—an analysis of how gendered life and death are mediated in Turkish news reporting ("Mediation of Gendered Life and Death Within Intersecting Regimes of Patriarchy, Authoritarianism, and Necropolitics"). Together, these works illuminate the deeply rooted ideologies and power structures embedded in both media systems and the societies they serve. Deniz et al. (2025) trace the long-contested state of press freedom in Türkiye and examine how journalist killings are represented across traditional and digital platforms. Their analysis reveals whose stories are amplified or ignored, how long such deaths remain in the public eye, and how commemorations are handled, demonstrating that media narratives play a crucial role in shaping, yet also erasing, collective memory. Complementing this, İşleyen and Çoban (2025) investigate how news media mediate fatal violence against women, trans women, and travesti people, showing how intersecting power structures determine whose suffering is rendered visible. By comparing Islamist, pro-government, alternative, and queer feminist outlets, they reveal that dominant media often sensationalize women's deaths or obscure trans deaths entirely while queer feminist platforms resist these exclusions through practices of care, remembrance, and political reclamation. Taken together, these studies expose how media representations not only reflect but actively reproduce structural inequalities, revealing the political stakes involved in who is remembered, who is mourned, and who is systematically forgotten.

Perhaps equally significant is the use of language as an internal indicator of ideology and publics, an effect seen in particular in the studies from Türkiye as well as from China, which, even in translation, point towards unique nomenclatures that would otherwise remain invisible to outside audiences. In their article "Celebrity Suicides in China: How Social Media Shapes News Framing," Shiyu (Sharon) Zheng and Shiyi Zhang (2025) analyze how Chinese news media framed the suicides of celebrities Sulli and Coco Lee on Weibo, revealing three dominant and platform-shaped frames—mental health, gossip, and nationalism—that often blended responsible reporting with sensationalism. The findings show that social media affordances have shifted traditional gatekeeping and agenda-setting power, producing more dynamic yet less responsible narratives and highlighting the need for updated reporting practices.

Montse Morcate and Rebeca Pardo's (2025) study on the "Cut-Off Low (DANA) in Valencia: Visual Representation of Death and Grief in Photojournalism" and Liia-Maria Raippalinna, Suvi Mononen, Markus Mykkänen, and Turo Uskali's (2025) work on "Ethical Principles in the Portrayal of Death and Suffering: Finnish Photographers Covering the Russia–Ukraine War" look at complementary journalistic processes and practices in the context of reporting on and depicting mass disaster and conflict respectively. Morcate and Pardo's (2025) study on front-page representation of the Valencia floods is an important contribution to a broader body of work that looks at how such visual choices replicate or reflect political ones: Where human death becomes vague and distant, where visual near-metaphors are preferred (the carcasses of cars rather than people), and how the material traces of catastrophe are used to stand in for human loss, allowing newspapers to gesture toward tragedy while avoiding the direct representation of death itself. Raippalinna et al.'s (2025) detailed interviews with photojournalists covering the Russian invasion of Ukraine offer a different perspective on how individual journalists navigate human choices in life and death or about-to-die situations, and how this endangers their own humanity at times. The honesty and intimacy of the participants' responses will provide some valuable guidance for the surprising lack of standardisation and support in conflict reporting, particularly for photographers and multi-media reporters and editors.

Together, the selected contributions are important additions to a broader body of work that interrogates how news media perceive, represent, and hierarchise death, revealing the cultural logics, narrative

conventions, and power structures that shape whose lives are acknowledged, whose deaths are visualised or obscured, and how public memory is collectively constructed, contested, and sustained. Through this modest selection of works, coming from regions that often exist in the margins of the dominant journalism canon, the articles prompt important questions about *which* deaths are noticed, how they are reported, whose deaths are memorialised, and how deaths are disregarded or forgotten, either at the time or over time. By bringing together interdisciplinary scholarship on both historical and contemporary journalistic practices, this thematic issue aims to advance critical debates on the mediation of death in an increasingly digitised and globalised media environment—while also acknowledging that, in the archives of the global south, there remain many forgotten and/or under-explored records which are being rediscovered and re-imagined through often parallel efforts to decolonise and to digitise histories in more inclusive ways. Through these investigations and engagements, the assembled contributions illuminate how death is rendered visible or invisible, meaningful or mute, proximate or distant, and what these representational choices reveal about the societies and publics that produce and consume them.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT 5.2 was used to review sentence structures for editing purposes.

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