# THE PERSON HOLDING THE PHONE: MOBILE PHONES AND MEDIATED GRIEF-WORK

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In 2018, I attended my aunt's funeral virtually from my office in The Netherlands. The ceremony took place in the United States, where she lived. Like me, several of our relatives, scattered across Europe and Latin America, could not travel, including my grandfather, who was already over 90 years old. He said goodbye to his daughter through the Internet.

The church live-streamed the mass, showing the coffin, the guests in the front rows, and the podium from which the priest spoke. He acknowledged the remote viewers several times, thanking us for joining from home. I texted and shared photos with my brother, cousins, and parents throughout the ceremony, using our regular WhatsApp channels.

Five years later, my grandfather's life came to an end, and once again, digital communication played a crucial role in uniting distant relatives and friends. Nurses held a mobile phone to his ear when people living abroad called. I texted with my father constantly, and he shared photos of my grandfather in his final days, which are now stored on my phone and cloud service. The family arranged for the funerary mass to be accessible online. I joined from a distance, once again. After the live-stream stopped, being 'present' during the procession to the cemetery and the burial depended solely on the images and texts my brother, who was there, sent through his mobile phone.

In this paper, I revisit these events and draw inspiration from Bruno Latour's writings on actor-network theory to reflect on transnational families like mine and the integration of digital media into our death and grief experiences. I want to challenge the tendency to become overly fixated on the role of technologies such as messaging apps and mobile phones when discussing these experiences, often overlooking the human actors at the forefront: *the people holding the phone*. These individuals are on the ground, sharing images, ensuring that the camera is optimally positioned for the video call, sending the correct link to the streaming site, answering questions, and filling in the gaps (often at the expense of their own ability to fully engage) so that those of us who are physically distant can more fully partake in end-of-life and death rituals. The person holding the phone—in my experiences with mediated grief, this has been my brother—emerges as a novel and often underrecognized participant in the socio-technical assemblages that emerge around care and grief.

## Reassembling family in times of grief

Actor-network theory explores the interplay between human and non-human entities, the groups (or assemblages) they form, and the ties that hold these groups together. The continuous performance of these ties defines and maintains the boundaries of what we call a group. Or, as Bruno Latour states, "there are no groups, only group formation" (2005, 27). To further explain this idea, Latour uses the analogy of a newspaper, where traces of group-making activity appear every few lines. One article, for example, might quote an anthropologist disputing distinctions between two ethnic groups, juxtaposed with a story about a CEO discussing corporate culture and an impending merger. Elsewhere, a summary of EU regulations might outline the policies that sustain economic ties. Each of these statements is surrounded by evidence supporting different perspectives and expert opinions. These are all traces of individuals and institutions navigating and negotiating their affiliations (and the affiliation of others) with various categories of being. In principle, "relating to one group or another is an ongoing process made up of uncertain, fragile, controversial, and ever-shifting ties" (2005, 28).

Latour's concepts of 'group' and 'assemblage' can also be applied to the experience of *being* a family. A simple dictionary definition might describe family as a unit composed of parents and children, often living together, or people with common ancestry. During my childhood in Colombia, these definitions sufficed for me. I lived with my parents and brother and had extended family nearby. I saw my grandparents and cousins weekly; my parents visited their siblings, and we vacationed together. Sharing the same physical spaces was part of 'doing' family.

However, the definition of 'family' is mutable and situated. Social aggregates, including families, if seen through Latour's writing, "are not the object of an ostensive definition—like mugs and cats and chairs that can be pointed at by the index finger—but only of a performative definition" (34). Migration has transformed how families like mine perform and maintain ties. A 30-minute drive was enough to see each other, but now most of my cousins and several aunts and uncles are based in Europe and North America. I, too, have lived in the Netherlands for over a decade. Moving beyond simple definitions—which I recognize have never applied to many people—I turn to

Latour's concepts to reflect on how geographical distance compels us to re-imagine what being and acting together means, especially in times of crisis and grief, when absence is felt most deeply.

A death in the family unsettles normalcy and initiates rituals, bureaucratic processes, and actions designed to help us cope. Death re-assembles human, posthumous, and non-human entities into new formations. Latour's hypothetical newspaper would also include obituaries, which are traces of a different kind of group-making. Announcements in newspapers and on social media inscribe death socially, with the length and detail of an obituary indicating perhaps something about their social status, resources, and community ties. Cann (2014) also notes new forms of inscriptions, such as memorial tattoos or roadside shrines marking the sites of fatal accidents. Mundane objects (e.g., photographs) become precious mementos after people pass, and labels such as 'orphans' and 'widows' are employed. Yet corporate bereavement policies might deny some people their belonging to such a group, as many only recognize parents, spouses, and children, thus having free time for bereavement becomes dependent on "one's status in society […] one's relationship with the bereaved, and one's relationship with one's supervisor" (Cann 2014, 10).

In Colombia, Catholic funerary rites, including masses and burials, are central to how families manage death. According to Red Funeraria (redfuneraria.com), an information resource for professionals in the death industries and bereaved people, preparations begin with notifying the authorities and obtaining a death certificate. Simultaneously, communication with family and friends is essential. If the deceased had a burial plan, contacting the insurance office and selecting a funeral parlour are the next steps. The architecture of the parlour tells a story and becomes also an actor in the assemblage forming around a family death: close family members sit at the front, while acquaintances tend to occupy seats further back. The funeral director helps with decisions regarding the body, such as whether to have an open casket, a cremation, or a burial, and with finding flowers, planning speeches, and selecting music. Transportation to the cemetery should also be arranged and guests must observe proper etiquette. Mourners dress in subdued attire and wear black, with a Colombian etiquette expert advising against loud accessories and high heels and against posting about a person's death on social media, especially if you are not an immediate relative. Photographing the deceased is also considered impolite.

When families are geographically dispersed, rituals and protocols need to be adapted. Hybrid funerals, like my grandfather's, are held in person and streamed online. These events sometimes involve detailed planning. For example, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Support Funeral Directors Working with Families During Social Distancing* advises that when existing traditions need to be modified "technology actually opens up new opportunities to support your families in entirely new ways" (Live Web 360 2021, 4). The guide suggests creating a dedicated account on platforms like Zoom or Skype to have 'calling hours' for people to offer condolences virtually. Ideally, live-streamed events also include creative ways for helping the family feel the support of those absent from the room, such as having the officiant read statements or tie balloons to the backs of chairs with notes from people watching at home (Live Web 360, 2021, 35). Hybrid funerals, as I expand on in the following section, also involved personal rather than professional interventions, that respond to the needs of the moment.

Overall, for transnational families, integrating media into rituals may not be an anomaly but an extension of their performative practices. As Tanja Ahlin notes in *Calling Home* (2023), "in many countries, overseas and interstate migration has disrupted predictable rhythms of care, how care is defined, and the pathways of its delivery" (xi). For many, calling, video chatting, and texting are essential ways for caring for each other at a distance. In these transnational assemblages, "mobile phones, smartphones, and social media are much more than tools that passively channel communication. Rather, digital devices and online platforms participate in transnational care collectives as active members, shaping what care comes to mean and how it should be done to be considered good" (Ahlin 2023, 9). These hybrid rituals expand the range of actors (both human and non-human, such as WiFi, cameras, and mobile phones) and challenge traditional notions of attendance and participation.

In the following section, I reflect on my grandfather's funeral by highlighting the role of a specific actor in the network: the person holding the phone after the official live-stream stops, acting as a lifeline for the people who participate remotely.

### The people holding the phone

Unlike the meticulously planned hybrid funerals in *A Step-by-Step Guide to Support Funeral Directors*, my grandfather's service only included a live-streamed mass. Watching it on my laptop allowed me to feel somewhat present. However, upon reflection, it was my brother and his mobile phone that truly made a difference in creating a sense of togetherness.

On that day, my foremost concern was for my father and his grief. I struggled with how to be *there* for him, given the physical distance between us. Normally, we would stand beside each other, holding hands and offering encouraging words. Yet, our physical separation rendered these gestures impossible. It became crucial that my father knew I was watching him online, following the events closely, and bearing witness to his emotions. When he stood on the church's podium to deliver the speech we had prepared together the night before, I took screenshots and immediately sent them to my brother. It was my way of saying: I see you; I'm here. Throughout the ceremony, I messaged my brother via WhatsApp to share thoughts on the speeches delivered by other family members and the venue's atmosphere. Once the church ceremony concluded and the live-stream stopped, my brother took it upon himself to share images and updates of the procession to the cemetery and the burial. I constantly asked him about my father's well-being to ensure that they both understood I was still closely following the service. To an outsider, my brother might have appeared distracted, rudely texting during the ceremony, when in reality, he was acting as a lifeline. Taking photos might also seem to contradict the etiquette guidelines mentioned earlier.

My grandfather's funeral was an assemblage of various (living and dead) human and non-human actors, including communication devices, data, and architectural elements, all interacting and exerting influence on each other. While accounting for actors, Latour distinguishes between intermediaries and mediators. The camera that streamed the mass, one could say, acted as an intermediary, transporting meaning or force without much transformation—like a window into the

church, defining its inputs was sufficient to explain its outputs. Conversely, my brother was a mediator. In Latour's theory, mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or elements they are meant to convey—they *matter* differently. My brother's photos and texts enriched my understanding of the event, adding layers of interpretation and emotion for my benefit and allowing me to experience the funeral more profoundly. My brother was on that day— as he has been on so many other days—the actor who counted the most and made the greatest difference.

I'm not alone in these experiences. They resonate with broader trends observed in how transnational families manage end-of-life and death experiences and their evolving communication habits, in and beyond rituals like funerals (Sánchez-Querubín 2023; Baldassar 2014; Bravo 2017). These practices come from people repurposing everyday media devices and platforms, for example, when videoconferencing with ill relatives, caring for aging parents from a distance, or, indeed, attending a funeral virtually. Mediated grief practices also came to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic, when public gatherings, international travel, and hospital visits were severely limited (Alexis-Martin 2020), preventing families from being with their gravely ill and dying loved ones. In response, healthcare professionals harnessed technology and improvised ways to bridge the gaps between patients and their families.

For example, a Colombian newspaper reported on how nurses at a local hospital used their phones to facilitate calls with families just before a patient's intubation: "When they are conscious, we explain that they will be intubated and sedated until they recover, but we also talk about the risks: that the probability of recovery is 50%. That is scary, and many ask to speak with family members. Video calling was the only option" (Monsalve 2021, n.p.; translation is mine). A US newspaper also recounts the story of a nurse who spent two hours holding a tablet so that her patient's children and in-laws could bid their farewells and find solace in the knowledge that he was comforted during his last moments (Vanderbilt Health 2022). When one of our family members succumbed to COVID-19, a nurse also orchestrated a video call, affording my mother and others the opportunity to say goodbye. For each person who has been able to be present at a distance, someone on the ground is holding up the phone for them.

## Uncertain content

I saved the texts and images exchanged during my grandfather's funeral. They are on my cloud storage and phone's photo gallery, alongside other digital content related to illness and death that has accumulated there over the years. For example, I have a video a friend shared of her father's funeral, a photo another friend sent of their parent in a coma, and images I took while visiting my mother in the hospital. Taking 'funeral selfies' has become somewhat common too, suggesting that they are "a means of reassurance when faced with the reality of death" (Guntarik 2022, 167).

These images and data have become a form of 'digital remains,' namely, "online content on dead users" (Lingel 2013, 191), and "digital traces that will remain even after we die" (Wright 2014; Maciel and Pereira 2013; Stokes 2012; Gach and Brubaker 2021). As time passes, I wonder what I'm

supposed to do with the digital objects I created and received during my grandfather's funeral. Should I print the images? Should I leave them on my devices until they become inaccessible and obsolete?

Using our phones to create and share images during times of sorrow seems to strengthen our social bonds; however, there is also uncertainty about how to put this content to rest, so to speak, and integrate it back into the world in ways that feel meaningful. Literature on earlier traditions, such as Victorian death photography, may ground contemporary practices in media histories, where "photographs were regularly taken of and with the deceased; the photographs were seen as keepsakes and special mementos to the family of the deceased" (Guntarik 2022, 165). Yet contemporary images and, more generally, our mobile devices feel uncertain and "can become haunted, digitally and materially" (Cumiskey and Hjorth 2017, 19). Images from my grandfather's funeral act now spectrally and 'count' also in the sense that my photo gallery automatically tags, classifies, and suggests them to me, making them retrievable. They also have an afterlife as data for the machine learning models and algorithms that power my photo gallery.

'Digital remains' may become objects of intense affect acting on people. For example, bereaved parents come to value previously unknown online photographs of their children "because they allowed [them] to learn something new about their child" (Widmaier 2023, 32). Mundane texts also hold significance: "It wasn't the profound or purposeful WhatsApp and text messages the people I interviewed found most comforting, but rather the everyday messages—such as 'I'm ringing the doorbell', 'speak later' and 'I'm with you in spirit'" (Bassett 2019, n.p.). People also keep texting to the mobile phones of their deceased loved ones while social media profiles evolve into digital memorials, living an afterlife within the web's vast machinery, where they also face issues of erasure and misuse. As Kneese notes, when it comes to the place of death in digital culture, there is plenty of tension "between platform ephemerality and digital persistence, and between short-term gains and long-term futures" (Kneese 2023, 14).

Today, memorialization, prayer, and observing anniversaries are usually considered 'healthy' ways of maintaining ties with the dead, but newer practices, such as sending a text message to a dead person's phone, remain more uncertain. How we may relate to the 'lively' digital remains of our loved ones is an open question. It sits at the centre of an emerging area of inquiry into how digital and networked media support death-work and rituals of passing, enabling forms of presence and participation with the human and non-human.

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## Biography

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