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Article

Digital Death and Spectacular Death

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Abstract: Throughout human history, individuals, communities and societies have always had to confront and tackle the problem of death. Consequently, death remains a topic of social scientific relevance, highlighting the need for its study and for theorising around it. This article analyses the development of the social scientific study of death and dying, taking inspiration from Philippe Ariès's historical stages to discuss the recent developments in the field, namely the study of *digital death*. The article begins with a discussion of the visibility of death in modern society in the context of *spectacular death*. The analysis emphasises its four dimensions: mediatisation, commercialisation, re-ritualisation and the revolution in end-of-life care. The article moves on to discuss the emergence of digital death as the current stage and reflects on its similarities to spectacular death and its transformation of public imaginaries around death in contemporary society. The article concludes with a reflection on future developments in the field, specifically the emergence and study of artificial intelligence (AI) in digitalised death culture.

Keywords: Ariès; historical stages; ideal types; spectacular death; digital death



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1. Introduction

This article begins with the premise that societies in different historical eras have been formed by specific socially shared collective imaginaries and attitudes towards death (see, e.g., Ariès 1974, 1981; Kellehear 2007; Kerrigan 2007; Walter [1994] 2002). In the language of social theory, these changing imaginaries and attitudes are best characterised as a Weberian ideal type. Typically, they cannot be captured by direct empirical accounts, but are rather social theoretical abstractions that can provide heuristic tools to interpret changes associated with the place of death in society.

This analysis reviews the development of the social scientific study of death and dying in this Weberian framework, taking inspiration from Philippe Ariès's idea of historical stages and expanding these ideas using the frameworks of two more recent stages, i.e., *spectacular* and *digital death*. We maintain that both stages—spectacular and digital—share similarities when it comes to modern shared imaginaries and collective attitudes towards death and dying. However, digital death also extends the limits and scope of spectacular death by accelerating the processes of mediatisation, commercialisation, re-ritualisation and developments in end-of-life care (Jacobsen 2021a, 2021b), which—as will be demonstrated—are typical aspects of spectacular death in modern society.

In his seminal work, Ariès (1974) shows how collective attitudes and imaginaries around death and related ritual practices change over time, thereby impacting how death is conceptualised, understood, managed and experienced (see also Porter 1999). In this article, we place special emphasis on the changes brought by the increased public presence and the related spectacularisation and digitalisation of death in modern society. In this endeavour, we first describe spectacular death as a recent historical stage and identify its specific features. We then analyse how the stage of digital death not only draws on previous

developments, but also transforms social imaginaries around death and dying in society. In conclusion, we discuss how the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) is shaping the collective imaginaries of and around death and their social scientific study.

2. Spectacular Death

The notion of spectacular death builds on the idea that death in modern society has gained a new type of visibility (Jacobsen 2016, 2020; Sumiala 2021). In contrast to earlier theorising that argued for the invisibility of death in public life and for death to be put into hiding from the public eye (see also Jacobsen 2020), in the 1990s scholars began to consider a 'revival of death' (Walter [1994] 2002) to better acknowledge the growing public visibility of death as mediated (see e.g., Sumiala 2021).

Theoretically speaking, the idea of specular death draws on the notion of the *spectacle*, which was prominent among social theorists and critics such as Guy Debord ([1967] 1970) and Jean Baudrillard (1983). From Debord's ([1967] 1970) perspective, the rise of the spectacle masks *reality* and creates a split or drives a wedge between an authentic experience (seen as *real*) and its commodified/commercialised consumption. Baudrillard (1994) later accelerates this idea in an argument for immersion, in which *the real* (death) and *the imagined* (death) are no longer separable, but whirled into a condition of *simulacra*—a never-ending spectacle around death without any origin or destiny beyond itself.

Empirically speaking, it is important to acknowledge that the notion of spectacular death is not so much about those specific deaths that are experienced as particularly spectacular (i.e., highly dramatic and tragic deaths following accidents or violence, or the deaths of celebrities, which receive massive media interest), but about people's *imagined relationship* with death: collective imaginaries of and around death. This relationship is perceived as spectacular since the mediation of death has become more visible in society (Sumiala 2021), and the process of modernisation has matured in European and, more broadly, Western societies. That said, the purpose of the concept of spectacular death as a recent historical stage is primarily to direct scholarly attention to the fact that something has changed within the realm of death and dying in society, and it requires the development of adequate tools with which to study it (Jacobsen 2021b, p. 204).

To further investigate the special features of spectacular death as a stage in the social scientific study of death, in this article we identify its four dimensions¹, each of which points to some profound changes in social imaginaries and collective attitudes around death following Ariès's proclamation of death as forbidden (and invisible) in the 1970s and 1980s. The four dimensions are listed as follows: (1) the mediation of death and dying; (2) the commercialisation of death; (3) the re-ritualisation of death; and (4) the palliative care revolution (Jacobsen 2021a, pp. 6–7). All of these various dimensions of spectacular death—its nature as a media-saturated, marketable commodity re-ritualised by the demands of individualised modern subjects, that is also de-institutionalised—also mirror broader developments in modern (Western) society (see, e.g., Bauman 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). In the following, we provide a more detailed account of each of these dimensions and explain how they relate to spectacular death in theorising death.

2.1. The Mediation of Death and Dying

The mediation of death is a concept that explains the *changes* and *transformations* through which death has become more visible in society (Sumiala 2014). It reveals the increased significance of modern communication technology in shaping the realm of death in modern society (Walter 2020). Mediation thus impacts society's practices, rituals and institutions that manage death in society (Lundby 2014). This idea builds on the premise that people experience death increasingly often in and through the news media and popular media. Thus, death is filtered through its diverse platforms (Sumiala 2014). According to Folker Hanusch (2010) and many other scholars of death and media, the role of mass media, journalism and popular media has been significant in making death visible, resulting in its publicity on a new scale (see also Seaton 2005).

By applying the notion of the mediatisation of death, scholars (see [Sumiala 2014](#), p. 687) have referred to a process in which the following steps occur:

- (1) The *media extend the natural limits* of human experiential and communicable capacities for death (real and actual death as well as completely fictional death). This implies that the media can bring distant death—death occurring in geographically distant locations—close to ‘home’.
- (2) The *media provide a substitute for social activities* and social institutions related to death. This development points to social and cultural practices of managing death, which may include the creation of new rituals regarding public mourning and commemoration.
- (3) The *media amalgamate various non-media activities* in social life dealing with death. For example, this can encompass a circumstance in which funerary rituals performed in a physical location can be broadcast, to invite people to follow the ritual on their screens.
- (4) *Actors and organisations* of all sectors of society dealing with death *must accommodate the logic of the media*. This development affects many professions in society that manage death and dying, including people working in palliative care, funerary industries and religious or civic institutions.

As such, mediatisation as a social and cultural evolution has had explicit implications in making death more spectacular in modern society. This change has impacted society at different levels by affecting how people prepare for death, die or conduct burial rituals ([Sumiala 2014](#)). Most importantly, mediatisation has brought death back into people’s everyday lives and transformed it into a media-related matter. In this condition, death as a mediatised form of spectacular death simultaneously creates the potential for a new familiarity with death (through media); however, it may also endorse a growing alienation towards death as a physical experience and condition.

2.2. The Commercialisation of Death

It is not an exaggeration to say that modern (Western) societies are driven by capitalist logic and the intense commodification of human and social life (see, e.g., [Jameson 1992](#)). This situation has also profoundly affected the realm of death in society. The commercialisation of death refers to the notion that death has become a marketable commodity (as is anything else in late capitalist society) that can be used within diverse and multiple commercial enterprises to attract attention and sell products ([Jacobsen 2021a](#), p. 6). We may think of the funerary industry as a classic example. In her book *The American Way of Death*, Jessica [Mitford \(1963\)](#) illustrates how the US funeral industry has heavily manipulated death and grief in its profit-seeking business strategy over the last century. Further, privately owned medical companies providing care for dying people, or end-of-life care businesses, including hospices and institutions of palliative care, stand out as examples of the commodification of the death care system in society ([Piemonte and Abreu 2021](#)).

One key site of the commercialisation of death is mass media. Not only has death become an object of commercial life, but it has also become a commodity in itself. Death sells. We can look to the news and popular media to see how death is a recurrent topic in these outlets. News about war, crime, accidents and natural disasters relate to death in many cases. The more casualties (or the more prominent casualties), the more likely they are to make (big) news that sells (see, e.g., [Hanusch 2010](#); [Seaton 2005](#)). Detective stories, crime novels and several other versions of ‘whodunnit’ are examples of successful means of commodifying death. Additionally, the media sells death in various forms and formats, while other leisure businesses also thrive by selling death. Tourism stands out as one example. In addition to more conventional guided tourist visits to cemeteries and war monuments in different parts of the world, there is a special subfield in tourism called ‘dark tourism’. In this business model, sites of atrocity, such as concentration camps or brutal murder sites, are regularly visited as tourist attractions ([Kaul and Skinner 2018](#); [Stone 2018](#)).

As an aspect of spectacular death, commercialisation makes death visible in society by transforming it into a commodified good that can be marketed, sold and consumed like any other commodity. As consumers buy and consume death-related goods and services,

people can expect that the product they have purchased meets their quality standards. Consequently, people are invited to adopt a more customer-like attitude towards death, which can result in death gaining more instrumental value in society.

2.3. *The Re-Ritualisation of Death and Dying*

In modern society, many traditions, customs and rituals of the past related to death, dying and mourning—and many of the beliefs underpinning them—were called into question due to processes of rationalisation, demands for time efficiency and the changing roles of religious institutions (see, e.g., [Bocock 1974](#); [Walter \[1994\] 2002](#)). The Weberian idea of the disenchantment of society aptly describes such societal developments. However, social scientific research on death in modern society has also identified many counter-movements to this process of societal de-ritualisation. In recent decades, scholarship has witnessed a growing interest in new and more personalised/customised rituals better fitting a more individualised society ([Walter \[1994\] 2002](#); [Winkel 2001](#)). These rituals—particularly those marking important life events such as death—have to be made personally meaningful instead of mirroring some institutional religious or conventional cosmological worldview. By seeking out more ‘secular’ or personalised rituals—also in connection to death and dying—there is a demand to make death and dying an occasion for celebrating and commemorating the unique person who has passed away. In what has been called a ‘society of singularities’ ([Reckwitz 2020](#)), singularity, uniqueness and individuality matter in life as well as in death. What has been termed the quest for a ‘life of one’s own’ is thus reflected in the quest for a ‘death of one’s own’ ([Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001](#), pp. 151–55).

This evolving re-ritualisation of death and dying in modern society can be witnessed in a multitude of different practices and initiatives—both professional and private—sometimes taking the form of a recovery of relics from the past, while other times taking the form of innovative and experimental attempts at reclaiming death. For example, consider initiatives such as the increasingly popular choreography of funerals as personalised ‘life celebrations’, the rise of ‘spontaneous memorials’ collectively marking and mourning dramatic or tragic deaths in public, internet-based forms of expressing grief and solidarity while sharing stories and experiences with others, ‘memorial walks’, ‘death awareness weeks’, ‘death cafés’, new types of environmentally sustainable coffins and urns, new ways of disposing of dead bodies (resomation/alkaline hydrolysis) and—at least in the Danish context—the revival of All Saints’ Day (which was previously almost a ‘dead’ event) as a now much-attended celebration of death. We argue that all of these initiatives and practices bear witness to what Erika [Doss \(2010\)](#) memorably terms *memorial mania* in spectacular death—a collective attempt at reappropriating and redomesticating death through an individualist composition of old and new, religious and secular, and nascent or more lasting rituals.

2.4. *The End-of-Life Care Revolution*

Besides mediatisation, commercialisation and re-ritualisation, spectacular death is also characterised by movements that aim at ‘humanising’ death in modern society. Many of those writing critically about death taboo and death denial in the latter part of the 20th century (e.g., [Ariès 1974](#); [Elias 1985](#); [Illich 1977](#)) observed an institutionalisation and medicalisation process in which death became less ‘natural’ and instead a rather technical or scientific phenomenon managed by the ‘doctors of death’. However, during the 1960s, a counter-movement—sometimes referred to as ‘the death awareness movement’ or ‘the happy death movement’ ([Doka 2003](#); [Feifel 1974](#); [Hoefler and Kamoie 1994](#); [Lofland 1978](#))—began to emerge within the areas of care for the dying, later also expanding into the field of death research. These ideas became important forces behind the establishment of the hospice movement and the emerging focus on palliative care—and not least for creating a discourse on ‘the Good Death’. Pioneers such as Cicely Saunders and Elisabeth [Kübler-Ross \(1969\)](#) were relentless voices in arguing for the humanisation of death with

powerful concepts such as ‘dying with dignity’, ‘total pain’, ‘total care’, ‘death education’ and many other initiatives that aimed to make us better equipped—as professionals, but also as individuals—to live and cope with death. Now we have ‘palliative medicine’, ‘palliative care’, ‘palliative care wards’, ‘palliative care doctors’, ‘palliative care nurses’ and ‘outgoing palliative teams’ armed with the most current knowledge, a more patient-centred care strategy and a more ‘open awareness context’ (Glaser and Strauss 1965) for talking about and recognising death than what was previously the case in most hospital settings. As a result, in many European or Western societies, hospices and palliative care units are no longer regarded as obscure institutional ‘outliers’ or alternatives to conventional treatment. Instead, they are increasingly considered integrated parts of the healthcare system, specialised in managing the difficult situations when people die. This so-called Death Positivity movement—however loosely defined—aims at creating awareness and responsibility regarding end-of-life decisions and care (see, e.g., Incorvaia 2022; Koksvik 2020). As an example of spectacular death, the palliative and end-of-life care revolution thus highlights a more human-centred, individualised and culturally sensitive approach to how death and dying are (and should be!) managed in society.

3. Digital Death

Since the evolution of the internet, mobile media and social media, the question of the visibility of death today has perplexed scholars of death and dying and invited new research to look beyond the (mass) mediated spectacularisation of death in modern society carried out by news media and popular media (see, e.g., Kasket 2020). When discussing digital death, scholars typically refer to the increased digital immersion of death in society (Arnold et al. 2018). The evolution of the internet, mobile communication and social media platforms have provided new means to mediatise death in society and increase its visibility. The concept of digital death can, thus, refer to a range of different ways in which rituals and practices related to death have become entangled with diverse digital communication technologies (see, e.g., Pitsillides et al. 2012). Consequently, the literature suggests that the current circumstance has implications for how people imagine end-of-life care, mourning, commemoration, organising and participating in funerals, visiting graveyards and exercising posthuman communication with the dead. Next, we will analyse this development by further developing ideas first discussed in the stage of spectacular death.

3.1. Mediatisation: The Digitally Networked Engagement with Death

In line with spectacular death, digital death is profoundly mediatized (see also Kasket 2020). But while spectacular death shapes social imaginaries and perceptions of death and dying in society mainly through the means of news media and popular media, digital death is mediatized to an increased level through digital communication technologies that are available to anyone with digital access. As a stage, digital death can thus be illustrated as evolving from mass media, news media and popular culture to a digitally networked engagement with death. However, this does not imply that journalism, the news media or mass-mediated popular culture would cease to matter; instead, they have lost their *privilege* as a key access point in shaping collective imaginaries around death through mediatization.

In this new condition, ordinary people, but also influencers and different types of activists, have the means to contribute to the mediatization of death in society. We may think of ritualised social media-driven public mourning in the Black Lives Matter movement as one example of such digital mediatization that has explicit political value. This development can be characterised from one perspective as the ‘vernacularisation of death’ (Sumiala 2021). Consequently, we may witness a development where the social imaginaries of death become more diverse as more people (and different people with diverse backgrounds, experiences and histories) share their death experiences online. Many scholars of digital death argue that today, a rich culture of digital mourning (see, e.g., Arnold et al. 2018) exists.

Furthermore, the digital mediatisation of death has the potential to impact what were previously considered more private moments of dying, such as terminally ill people expressing their emotions and thoughts related to their dying in digital contexts. Deathbed scenes, last breaths and suicides are already livestreamed online and distributed on social media at the exact hour of death (Sumiala 2021). Looking from this perspective, social imaginaries and perceptions around death can be perceived to have become more diverse but also scattered (see also Kasket 2020).

3.2. Platformed Commodifications

As a stage, digital death intensifies the commercialisation of death (Van Ryn et al. 2019), a second aspect to align it with spectacular death. Digital death contributes to enhancing new business opportunities in society. Digital platforms—including Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, X, TikTok and many others—where people now engage with death and dying are global mega businesses and corporations (Kneese 2023). Additionally, a massive range of *thanatechnological* (e.g., Bassett 2022) innovations have been developed to sell goods and provide services related to death and dying. When we consider the commercialisation of death as an aspect of digital death, it is essential to acknowledge its instrumental nature. In this context, both death and its digital consumers are sold to platform corporations who monetise their users' clicks, posts, likes and shares to collect data on these actions for future commercial targeting and marketing (see e.g., Zuboff 2019).

As Kneese (2023) reminds us, even if the dead do not function as marketable objects, they nevertheless continue to maintain social networks and social relationships between and among the living, who continue to post and share emotional content and memories about the dead. The value, hence, lies in the monetisation of these social networks. The very dynamic of this communicative capitalism (Dean 2005) as a commercial transaction is shaped by the laws of supply and demand connected to death and dying. One empirical example of this development is gurus on Instagram who provide advice, consultancy and coaching around grief and mourning-related issues. The expertise of these actors is typically built around their own experiences as widows or widowers who have lost their partners (Sumiala and Pentikäinen 2024). As Instagram gurus, they have monetised their personal experiences and actively market products to their followers and a broader audience (see also Baker and Rojek 2020).

Yet another aspect of commodification in digital death is the diverse death services that utilise digital communication technologies, e.g., digital estate planning start-ups. These companies provide services that help people to plan for their death, or in some cases, as Tamara Kneese (2023, p. 100) reminds us, to help mourning family members who find it hard to manage the digital remains of their next of kin. One key challenge related to this business model is its ephemerality: as start-ups, their life spans can be very short. New companies are started, and old companies go out of business and die (!) all the time. This condition poses new challenges for customers who entrust their or their loved ones' digital remains to these businesses. Digital platform temporality and the business model of digital estate planning companies do not always go hand in hand with the longstanding expectations of the dying customers and their next of kin (see also Kneese 2023).

3.3. Digital Mourning and Commemoration

Perhaps one of the most researched aspects of digital death has to do with the digital mediatisation of mourning and commemoration (see, e.g., Recuber 2023; Kasket 2019, 2020; Refslund Christensen and Gotved 2015). While digital death as a stage shares many similarities with re-ritualisation in spectacular death by mediatising such practices, it also transforms them, as new ritual practices of digital mourning and commemoration are created and flourish on various social media platforms (Gibbs et al. 2015; Gibson 2016).

To study digital mourning and commemoration, scholars have developed new analytical models. For example, Moore et al. (2019) discuss 'social media mourning', Brubaker et al. (2019) introduce a concept of 'networked grief' to analyse certain dynamics around

mourning and commemoration and [Giaxoglou \(2020\)](#) talks about ‘hypermourning’. Characteristic of these new research models is the active role of ordinary media users in engaging with mourning and commemoration in diverse social media platforms (see also [Sumiala forthcoming](#)). Consequently, researchers have identified ritual practices where grieving people post videos as tributes to the lives of their loved ones. Different hashtags such as #RIP (rest in peace) and their numerous variations exist and circulate on social media to help people ritually cope with the loss of life. Facebook profiles are reappropriated as sites of shared mourning and commemoration. New digital ritual practices are also adopted to mourn people of different social relations ([Kasket 2019, 2020](#)). People can make and participate in digital rituals created for people they know personally and for those whose death impacts them—a fully digital experience ([Recuber 2023](#)). Deaths of celebrities and high-profile public figures belong to the latter category ([Burgess et al. 2019; Sumiala forthcoming](#)).

Furthermore, digital mourning, in many cases, is embedded in people’s everyday digital lives (see also [Kneese 2023](#)). Instead of halting one’s ordinary life, participation in digital mourning is typically incorporated into people’s mundane use of social media, and hashtags, memes and posts of digital mourning are shared alongside standard content. In this line of thinking, the use of digital mourning and commemoration is linked to the increased opportunities that social media platforms provide users with to share significant moments in their everyday lives, enabling them to build and maintain social relationships with fellow mourners and the dead, as well as create a sense of co-presence with imagined and networked publics in grief ([Giaxoglou 2015](#), p. 56). This type of digitalisation of public mourning in contemporary society has the potential to further increase the presence and visibility of death in society ([Sumiala 2021](#)), even if compared to the stage of spectacular death.

3.4. *The Digitalisation of End-of-Life Care?*

In line with spectacular death, the revolution of palliative care during the stage of digital death typically points to the de-institutionalisation (from the perspective of conventional institutions managing death), secularisation (from the perspective of institutional and established religions) and individualisation of end-of-life care practices in present-day (Western) societies. From one perspective, such tendencies can be argued to endorse the development of the *democratisation* of death (see also [Sumiala 2021](#)), as the aforementioned Good Death movement indicates. In this circumstance, new groups and actors, such as laypeople, have new digital means to act and the right to take part in social processes aiming at the management of death in society, whether by creating new digital ways to manage end-of-life care (apart from the control of traditional medical institutions such as hospices) or by organising new ways to participate in societal processes that deal with policies and practices around end-of-life care in society.

Moreover, digital technologies based on AI are used increasingly in healthcare, hospitals and palliative care in many ways. For example, one lively debate surrounding AI and the digitalisation of end-of-life care relates to the use of robots as caretakers for terminally ill people ([Nwosu et al. 2019](#)). There are apps available for death prediction that calculate people’s death date, but also suggest solutions on how to extend one’s remaining life and consequently push death further into the future. Maggi [Savin-Baden \(2022\)](#) gives another example of AI-driven digital tools applied in US healthcare that can calculate the time of death within 3–12 months for a hospital patient. This process, [Savin-Baden \(2022, p. 33\)](#) writes, ‘claims to be >90% accurate, and thus, hospital admission decisions in the future could be made on the basis of screening health records with AI to determine the patient’s need for palliative care before death’. From this perspective, digital death as a stage also functions to technologise death in society and make it more quantifiable than spectacular death. What is more, some of these tendencies may also be counterproductive, thwarting attempts to make death a more ‘human’ condition in society.

In summary, as the present stage, digital death can be perceived as a condition that has the power to shape collective imaginaries and attitudes towards death, transforming it into a more networked, horizontal, democratic and vernacularly oriented societal phenomenon. Much like spectacular death, this historical stage grounded in the present continues to challenge imaginaries and attitudes towards conventional hierarchies, authorities and related social structures of death and dying in society. As such, digital death endorses the presence of death in society and morphs the related social relationships between the living and the dead into something that allows trends and tendencies that are typically evaluated positively in modern society (e.g., wider engagement with death practices and the subsequent democratisation of death). However, it also endorses trends of instrumentalisation, commodification and even narcissistic self-conceptions related to death (Sumiala 2021). Such social and cultural processes may also breed a tendency towards the trivialisation (Jacobsen 2020, 2021b) of death—a condition where death's extravagant and ubiquitous commodified digital presence paradoxically begins to lessen its meaning in society (see also Elliot 2018, p. 117).

4. Conclusions

In this article, we have analysed the evolution of the social scientific study of death and dying by applying and further elaborating Ariès's idea of historical stages as Weberian ideal types. This analytical framework has allowed us to characterise the latest developments in the field through the perspectives of spectacular death and digital death. As ideal types, the historical stages discussed here provide a heuristic tool for understanding certain social and cultural changes concerning the meaning of death in society. The basic narrative of the stages can be articulated as a shift from spectacular death to digital death. Through this development, death has not only become a more public, visible and horizontally networked phenomenon in society, but also a more instrumentalised and commodified matter. We should also acknowledge that such transformations—even if only conceptual ideal types—should not be perceived as unidirectional or radical ruptures, but rather conceptual developments born in a sequence of continuities and disconnections.

Finally, what has occurred within the historical stages and their social scientific study should not be discussed independently of the empirical developments within social institutions and structures in societies. For example, the aforementioned social activities around the Death Positivity movement, the consolidation of the hospice initiative and the inclusion of the palliative care perspective into the conventional healthcare system (Jacobsen 2021a) have pushed scholars to broaden their view on what spectacular could mean when we look at it within the framework of modern end-of-life care, and how to conceptualise such social and cultural developments. Digital death is the latest attempt to grasp but also challenge such changes as new digital innovations in end-of-life care might suggest.

Today, thanks to the development of AI and related technological innovations, imaginaries and collective attitudes towards death continue to shift. These technologies promise to bring the dead to life through thanabots (Savin-Baden 2022) and mindclones (Stokes 2021, p. 164) and provide new means for post-mortem communication and maintaining social bonds with the departed through, for example, AI Chat GPT communication technologies (Bassett 2022; Morse 2023), or digital estate planning services that promise to create digital back-ups of people's minds and DNA and consequently transplant human consciousness into computers and robots (Stokes 2021, p. 164). This rapidly changing condition poses new challenges for the social scientific scholarship of death and dying by pushing scholars to re-visit concepts such as the afterlife and immortality (Savin-Baden 2022; Stokes 2021) and consider how to theorise the realm of death in a condition where we have the AI technologies to continue living with the dead. Though they have physically lost their lives, they remain very much virtually alive and socially active dead members of our society (see also Bassett 2022).

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Note

¹ Jacobsen's (2021a, pp. 6–7) original theory also includes a fifth dimension, the specialisation of death.

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