COMMUNICATION MEDIA AND THE DEAD:
FROM THE STONE AGE TO FACEBOOK

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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 help legitimate and construct particular social groups and institutions - from the oral construction of kinship, to the megalithic legitimation of the territorial rights of groups larger than families, 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. The argument is based on critical synthesis of existing research literature, illustrated on occasion by personal observation.

Keywords: ancestors, social memory, collective memory, communication technology, internet, remembrance, group identity
‘There is an irreversible evolution from savage societies to our own: little by little, the dead cease to exist.’ (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 126)

‘The dead do not ‘disappear’ from our view as simply and as obviously as they did one hundred years ago...Indeed, the dead do truly ‘walk’ among us.’ (Kellehear, 2007, pp. 74, 76)

Preamble: A story

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 exploits in killing a rogue elephant what was trampling the crops led to the family name by which my friend knows he is related to anyone with that name. Stories of his ancestors that have been passed orally down the generations serve to legitimate the extended family and provide him with a sense of belonging to land and with 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 so far back 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 - who have provided him with an identity as a member of an institutional church that is part of a world religion. And he has yet other Western 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.
**Introduction**

My friend caused me to think afresh about the two quotes with which this article began. Do the dead have less of a presence in modern societies compared to traditional societies, or are the dead more around than ever before? One way of approaching this question, which his story suggests and which this article will take, is to look at communication technologies – 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 these ancestors legitimate or call into being. The answer about the social presence of the dead today may therefore not be 'more' or 'less', but 'different' - which would actually be a more interesting answer.

As well as communication technology, there are other variables that might 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 have analysed these in another article (author reference). But we might expect communication technologies to be a particularly significant independent variable: after all, they strongly influence how the living relate to each other so it would be surprising if they did not also influence how the living relate to, or at least communicate about, the dead. Against Baudrillard, we might predict that the more advanced and diverse the communication technologies available, the greater the possibilities for expanding the number and diversity of the socially meaningful dead and the ways they might be encountered.

The influence of communications media has been understood by students of cultural and collective memory. Thus, ‘without organic, autobiographic memories, societies are solely dependent on media to transmit experience’ (Erl, 2008, p. 9). And ‘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 [1941/1952]) 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 in collective memory studies by on the interest in sites of memory. Zerubavel (1996, 2003), for example, has briefly summarised what he calls sites of collective memory or remembrance environments, such as speech, writing, and statues, but he analyses these as sites where the present meets the past; he does not make explicit 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 (2005, p. 245)’s study of family ancestors and ancestors sacred to larger collectivities 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?

I am not concerned in this article 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 spiritualist mediums (Walliss, 2001), or through particular artefacts, pieces of music, or other triggers to memory (Hallam & Hockey, 2000). Rather I am concerned here with the significance of the dead for society, with how the dead find a presence within groups - from families through to the nation state and transnational collectivities. I am concerned with both the recent and the long dead and how they are brought into service to shape contemporary groups and societies and to shape people’s sense of membership of these groups.
Nor will this article focus on 'media' that are unique to the dead, such as dead bodies (Higonnet, Higonnet, & Higonnet, 1984; Verdery, 1999; von Hagens & Whalley, 2001), bones (DCMS, n.d.; Fontein, 2010; Geary, 1994; Hallam, 2010; Harding, 2002; Koudounaris, 2011; Krmpotich, Fontein, & Harries, 2010; Scarre, 2006), graveyards (Bachelor, 2004; Draper, 1967; Francis, Kellaher, & Neophytou, 2005), spiritualist mediums (Martin, 1970; Skultans, 1974; Wooffitt, 2006) or memorial objects (Gibson, 2008; Hetherington, 2003; Kwint, Breward, & Aynsley, 1999; Sturken, 2007); 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: speech, stone, sculpture, writing, printing, telegraph and telephone, photography and phonography, the mass media, and the Internet. These media are not specific to death. 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 all the main communications media have not been analysed together as enabling the dead to find a place within society, and how this may change over time. And whereas Zerubavel (2003) has set out universal patterns of how groups remember, I attempt here a sketch of how such patterns change as communication technologies change.

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 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. As Goody and Watt (1963, p. 310) put it:
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.'

Kin-based ancestry can define rights to land, to water resources, to inherited positions, and so forth. Usually, nothing is known and nothing need be said about those dead who are not kin (Steadman, Palmer, & Tilley, 1996).

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 is 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 in west Africa, professional story tellers recount the stories of the 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 (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 against 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 can be built only by a group considerably larger than an extended family and require major organisation and control over resources; they presumably had a 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 create a mark on 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, not least in demarcating the group’s right to land because its ancestors lie here. 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. Writing about the English village, Edward Bailey (1997) has argued that the ancestors lying in the graves that circle the church are what, in the eyes of villagers, make the church sacred, the church building in turn becoming a Durkheimian (1915) symbol of the village; the stone of the graves and the stone of the church symbolise the village and provide villagers with a sense of village as well as of family identity. This is even more the case in Finland where, with fire destroying most houses within a century or two, only the stone church and the stone graves in the churchyard provide material remains symbolising deep ancestral memory. 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 dead, providing the sacred dead with a public place at the heart of local or national society.

3) Sculpture.

I have mentioned the statues on Easter Island and at the heart of Egyptian pyramids. 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 a 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 18th 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 our image of the Bard is based today. 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.'

4) Writing.

Writing readily enables stories about the dead to be communicated beyond the family. Once there is literacy, the public memorials produced by stonemason and sculptor are, strictly speaking, no longer essential, for stories about dead heroes, saints and ancestors can be widely disseminated. Extensive genealogies can be recorded that define and legitimate not just families 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 challenge the canon.

Writing has enabled the dead to 'live on' through numerous social formations. Three will now be sketched: 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. So, secondly, world religions are ‘not confined to groups of people who consider themselves kin’ (Steadman et al., 1996, p. 74). Thus world religions tend to demote family-based ancestral cults in favour of a God who transcends family and tribe.

The move from ancestral knowledge to global religious knowledge is described by Jan Assmann. To be remembered, oral knowledge had to be repeated regularly and bodily in ritual and festivals.

Written knowledge, by contrast, ‘liberated people from the repetition compulsion of ritual obedience. What mattered now was understanding.’ The religious principle moves from secrecy to openness. Tribal or cult religions ‘are religions concerned with mysteries, just as book based religions are religions of revelation. They are dominated by proclamation and explanation; cult religions, in contrast, are dominated by keeping secrets, exclusivity, and esotericism.’ (J. Assmann, 2006, pp. 124-125) Of course, when only priests can read, there is a limit to this democratisation of religious knowledge, but Assmann is surely correct about the inherent universality of the knowledge contained within Scriptures compared to that contained within embodied ritual; in both Christianity and Islam, dissemination of religious knowledge eventually became a powerful motive for mass literacy. 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.

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 (in principle) concerned systematically with not just the family dead or even those of their own religion or nation but 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 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 opera – that outlives its creator. Before the invention of musical notation in tenth century Europe, any piece of music 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 came to be an identifiable product, written by its composer at a point in time. Composition and performance came to be separated. It became possible for a composition to 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 not only the performers but also the composer. The performance of written music is one way in which the dead, or rather some rather uniquely talented dead, are continually resurrected within musical society and are used to construct the social institution that is music.

5) Printing.

Though writing creates the possibility of stories about the dead being told beyond the closed circle of the extended family, handwritten manuscripts put ideological power in the hands of an 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 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 their own 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) has famously argued that printing and literacy were key to generating national consciousness. From the early nineteenth century, reading the daily national newspaper has become an activity shared by millions, creating a sense of belonging to a national society, especially as the stories run by national newspapers typically focus on events constructed as national rather than local or global. While a not inconsiderable proportion of national journalism concerns death (Kitch & Hume, 2008) and (in the obituary) the dead (Fowler, 2006), the majority of stories concern the living. However, the canonical dead to be found in school history books are central to the development of a national consciousness. It is barely possible to feel English without at least knowing the names of Horatio Nelson or 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 knowledge of Ghandhi. A nation may be, as Anderson argues, a community imagined through text, but central to the textual construction of nationhood is the idea of the nation as 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).

Feldman (2008, pp. 26-27), following Marvin and Ingle (1999), argues that ‘nationalism is a community of blood and not text’. It is when soldiers die that citizens most intensely feel they
belong to their nation, and historically most nations have been founded through civil wars and bloody struggles for independence. This thesis holds considerable force, but I do not see that it needs to be posited over against the ‘community of text’ thesis, for it is through text that, since the early nineteenth century, the sacrifice of soldiers has been reported in newspapers and then re-told in history books. A significant proportion of national heroes to be found in textbooks are portrayed as having given their lives for their country. It is in large measure through text that blood creates nationhood (though this is not to deny that sacrifice can also be ritualised through, for example, memorials and pilgrimages).

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 these remember some people more than others, for example British national newspapers obituarise 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 made in the lighter material of bronze in order to save the horse's legs. Even the second instalment of memorial mania (Doss, 2010) starting with the Vietnam Memorial in the early 1980s, this time employing abstract rather than representational art, still relies largely on stone, and equates nationhood with loss perhaps 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 a disaster in which a large number of civilians have been killed. Regime change, as for example after 1989, requires statue change (Verdery, 1999, pp. 4-13; Williams, 2008). Revolutionaries who failed (Che Guevara) and the stars of popular culture whose fame is more international than national (Marilyn Monroe, 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 popular, as opposed to the national, hero.

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 communications media discussed in this article that, telephone conferences aside, comprise inherently one-to-one communication. Hundreds may listen to a speech, thousands may walk by a statue, millions may read a book, but only one person can speak on the phone and one person listen; only one person can send and one other receive a telegram. The receiver has to use other media – such as speech or writing – to further disseminate the message. This may be why the telegraph and the telephone turned out to be unique among communications media in playing almost no role in enhancing the dead’s social presence.

It did not seem thus when these technologies were invented in the nineteenth century. In the American Civil War, the telegram replaced the letter as the means by which news of a soldier’s death was communicated, but, though it was the first of a series of modern communications media that
brought the reality of war more speedily and effectively to the folks back home, it did not give the dead themselves a greater social presence.

Developing at much the same time as the telegram and the telephone was spiritualism. Starting in the USA in 1848, nineteenth century spiritualism closely allied itself to experiments in electricity and to new technological modes of communication 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; some respected scientists were involved in these experiments (Carroll, 1997), including Thomas Edison who had planned to build a telephonic device that might enable the dead to speak to the living (Lescarboura, 1920). Interest in the paranormal continues to this day and some curious findings, such as telephone calls apparently from the dead, remain unexplained (Cooper, 2012). 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 ‘on the other side’ (Bourke, 2007; Hazelgrove, 2000), a task it continues today (Walliss, 2001). Post-war spiritualism, unlike Victorian spiritualism, generally accepted that though the dead may communicate through human mediums, they do not regularly speak on the telephone or through the telegraph and resist being photographed (Skultans, 1974), though since the 1990s spiritualist interest in material manifestations of the dead has increased.

7) Photography, phonography and the mass media

Though photography may have failed to demonstrate material traces of the dead within the setting of the séance, it 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 of course 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 the developed world whose memory of their recent forebears is not shaped by the family photograph album (Riches & Dawson, 1998) or in the twenty first century by the digital photo collection. Unlike the staged post-mortem or portrait photograph, the now much more common candid photograph – 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 in motion as though alive. Taking and displaying such photographs are a significant way in which families construct themselves in modernity.

Beyond the family, it is only 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 at a concentration camp or after a massacre, are of the nameless dead, it is precisely their namelessness that is so horrifying to modern sensibilities. 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 and social presence. As Barthes (1982) and Beloff (2007) have argued, the photograph is a memento mori; in depicting as once 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, Janis Joplin 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 would be profoundly undermined, for immortality is - arguably - the ultimate prize of celebrity (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 and patriotic heroes, but also media celebrities. Some celebrities are international, some national, some represent ethnic identities; some are known widely, some reinforce identities that criss-cross national identity; some are mourned significantly only by followers of a particular genre, reflecting and helping to construct – typically through photos, video and music - chosen neo-tribal identities based on, for example, musical style or a sports team (Maffesoli, 1996).

Photographic and phonographic archives also offer the potential for ordinary people to be immortalised. A remarkable, and moving, example is minimalist composer Gavin Bryars’ 1971 piece *Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet* in which orchestral and choral performers accompany the tape
loop of a now deceased old tramp singing two lines of this old Salvation Army hymn - the living and the dead sing along together.

8) The internet.

If writing and literacy radically expanded the number and range of dead who could be acknowledged, the Internet expands the range still further. If writing about the dead was key to the construction of 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 was the case with You-Tube footage of Iranian martyr Neda Agha-Soltan). The internet also has a remarkable capacity in the immediate aftermath of death to link family and non-family mourners – assuming survivors can access the deceased’s online address books (Moncur, Bikker, Kasket, & Troyer, 2012).

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 to readily add or even edit material (Roberts, 2012; Sofka, Cupit, & Gilbert, 2012). Accompanying this technological change was a cultural change away from privacy, at least in societies with no fear of state surveillance. The founder and manager of one British online memorial site reported in 2011 that when it began in 2006 its clients wanted privacy and control over who accessed their particular page but that now clients want all content to be public. He commented that the Facebook generation feels that online content is not mine or yours but ours, and we all have the right to modify it – which is of course the principle of Wikipedia (add reference on publication). The online pantheon is now interactive, blurring the roles of custodian and visitor.

Urbanisation, longevity and geographical mobility mean that, compared to pre-industrial times, main mourners are typically no longer co-resident, while the complexity of modern social networks can mean that lesser mourners may not even know each other. Twentieth century mourning thus
became an increasingly private experience. Since the mid 2000s, however, social network sites such as Facebook have brought into contact, after death as in life, the various members of a person’s diverse networks. Grief expressed through the deceased’s pre-existing Facebook pages may thus be read by a wide range of other mourners, and may also lead to conflict as different grieving styles or different estimates of the deceased’s character clash (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011-12).

Not only does mourning thus become more shared and more social, but online social network technology 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 by 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 alone, either silently or out loud at a site such as the grave when no-one else is around. On social network sites, however, 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 that hitherto some people may have felt somewhat embarrassed about (Kasket, 2012). Moreover, addressing the dead online (typing on a keyboard and posting it 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 half a belief that the dead is somehow receiving the message; cyberspace replaces or augments heaven as the deceased’s unfathomable home. More eerily, apps are now available that enable you to send, from the grave, timed greetings (such as birthday greetings) to those you love; messages from the grave are, literally, messages from cyberspace.

To see how cyberspace may enhance, rather than replace, traditional spiritual interactions with the dead in heaven, consider the cult of Dr Sousa Martins. Dr Martins was a nineteenth-century
Portuguese doctor who specialised in treating tuberculosis amongst the poor, and subsequently has become a grassroots secular saint, with offerings of thanks for healing laid around his statue in Lisbon. ¹ He now also has a Facebook site on which devotees post prayers and thanks. ¹ ² Officially authorised saints also have Facebook pages clearly set up by a sponsoring organisation, but Dr Martins’ page looks as though set up by himself. It is thus not just the recent dead who can have a Facebook site at which the living and the dead commune.

As well as the dead now living online through words and conversation, their digital property can be inherited by a community. By contrast, an item of physical property, including (if the negative is lost) traditional photos, 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 everyone or anyone 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 computer, 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 affords improved scope 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 be wiped out as soon as the Internet host is informed of the person’s death. iTunes, for example, are not actually purchased; instead a licence is given to the individual to use the recordings, expiring on his or her death. If you wish to pass on your digital music collection to your family on your demise, you are well advised to give them your password and instruct them not to inform the provider of the
death - otherwise your music collection will die with you. 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) – though physical archives are also frequented by family genealogists. 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 today is aware of the ease with which school children and college students can grow up in the presence of their national ancestors 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 run the risk of becoming even deader than before – unless a tenacious genealogist penetrates a dusty archive to resurrect 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 the dead that can be related to depends in large measure on available information and communication technologies.

I am not suggesting that communication technology determines the nature and extent of the dead’s social presence, simply that it affords 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

Or to give another example from my own neighbourhood. Friends of my local historic cemetery look after the gravestones; meanwhile, elderly members of the local history group talk to each other about their researches and deposit written materials in the public library’s archive. The technology is available to provide an app on the cemetery visitor’s phone that recognises a chip on each gravestone that tells the story of the life behind the stone. However, this would entail the cemetery friends and the history group collaborating, not to mention employing a technology their generation is unfamiliar with; there is no guarantee of such technologies being taken up by any but the most enterprising of cemeteries or history groups. Thus accessing a community’s ancestors through stone can be augmented by writing and the internet, but the possibilities are actualised only through entrepreneurial pro-activity; it is not automatic.

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 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. As Olick (1999, p. 342) has argued, '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 argued) but
through enhanced possibilities of collective remembering that ancestors are called forth, social
groups constituted, and individuals experience membership of those groups.


Klass, Dennis, & Goss, Robert E. (2005). *Dead but Not Lost: grief narratives in religious traditions*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.


I am grateful to yyy for this information.