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How Users Perceive Online Coverage of Death-Related Issues: A Qualitative Study

Zhengpingxi

School of Exhibition and Communication, Shanghai University of International Business and Economics, Shanghai, China

Email: xixizi0012@163.com

Abstract

This study employs qualitative research methods to explore how death-related reporting in the internet era shapes users' perceptual biases toward death events and the deceased. Based on in-depth interviews and textual analysis, the research reveals three predominant tendencies in current online death coverage: First, by emphasizing suffering and tragic narratives, death becomes deeply associated with pain, amplifying public emotional resonance while risking cognitive biases and emotional polarization. Second, storytelling strategies (e.g., scene reconstruction, perspective shifts) enhance dissemination effectiveness but may compromise factual objectivity and obscure core issues. Third, information fragmentation on social media and emotional contagion mechanisms intensify the sensationalized portrayal of death, fostering partial public perceptions under incomplete information. The study argues that ethical frameworks for death reporting must balance journalistic professionalism and commercial logic, avoiding excessive sensationalism and consumerism, and shifting toward constructive narrative modes that respect the solemnity of death and guide rational public reflection.

Keywords: Death reporting; Perceptual bias; Qualitative research; New media narratives; Emotionalized communication; Cognitive bias

1 Background

1.1 The Publicization of Death as a Topic

Death, as an inevitable final chapter in the human life cycle, has long occupied a central position in human intellectual exploration and philosophical inquiry due to its universal pervasiveness and fundamental nature (Paulson, 2014). During the medieval and early modern periods, death was regarded as part of the natural order, with widespread acceptance of its inevitability—an attitude termed "familiar death," reflecting society's tranquil acceptance and realistic confrontation with mortality (Mazlish, 1975).

From the 1930s to the 1950s, industrialization accelerated the medicalization and segregation of death: dying shifted from homes to hospitals, and corpse handling became professionalized (Compton, 2012). In the United States, 85% of deaths occurred in hospitals, resulting in complete disconnection between families and death experiences (Tierney, 2001). Studies indicate that modern industrial societies treat death as an "awkward family secret," forming a culture of "death denial" (Michael, 2016). Consequently, death gradually retreated from the public sphere into private domains, becoming an increasingly individualized and intimate experience.

The publicization of death required overcoming this culture of denial. Not until the mid-to-late 20th century did social interventions gradually transform societal attitudes. The hospice movement and euthanasia movement emerging in the late 1960s in the United States catalyzed public attention to death rights (Moon & Ilse, 1981). The UK's "Death Cafés" utilized informal gatherings to dismantle conversational barriers, facilitating death detabooization (Kristian Pollock et al., 2024). Philip A. (1993) observed that late modernity features both the privatization of death experiences and institutionalized public discussions, creating "sequestered death." Graham-Wisener et al. (2022) demonstrated that education enhances public understanding of mortality, aiding in better end-of-life planning and bereavement management. Community engagement and group discussions also prove effective in promoting open death dialogues (Kirshbaum et al., 2011). Media and art play crucial roles in death's publicization, with films, literature, and exhibitions reframing mortality as part of daily life, thereby reducing its taboo status (Sumiala et al., 2024).

Under comprehensive societal forces, death undergoes progressive detabooization. In the digital age, new media and social platforms provide novel arenas for death's public discourse. Online "Death Cafés" and discussion groups foster open exchanges about mortality (Gruszecka et al., 2013). Additionally, Mallow's (2015) research reveals that digital media transforms funeral rituals and memorial practices, enabling individuals and communities to freely share experiences and emotions related to the deceased.

Ultimately, the taboo surrounding death has been incrementally dismantled, evolving toward publicization and even spectacularization.

1.2 The status quo of death issue reports on the Internet

News media pay particular attention to the emotions of survivors—a phenomenon that greatly interests Britons uncertain about appropriate grieving behaviors (Walter et al., 1995). Research by Lim et al. (2016) found that audiences' focus on death-related news may stem from a desire to alleviate their own death anxiety. Through sharing and discussing mortality-related information, people can better understand death and reduce personal anxiety. During the traditional media era, when information flow was less developed than today, audiences were more eager to obtain relevant information through news to mitigate personal anxiety and unease.

In the traditional media period, coverage of death-related topics primarily relied on news outlets. Traditional media (e.g., newspapers, television) tended to adopt formal and solemn approaches, typically presenting death through obituaries and news reports that emphasized control and standardized handling of mortality (Aleksandra, 2010). Consequently, traditional media often avoided overly detailed depictions of death, particularly bloody or violent scenes, to minimize audience distress (Tucker, 2014). Additionally, constrained by media technologies, traditional reporting was largely limited to specific regional or national audiences, with relatively narrower reach and influence.

However, contemporary coverage of death-related issues has expanded beyond traditional media. The rise of the internet enables netizens to directly access mortality information. Compared with the traditional media era, current death-related reporting exhibits the following characteristics (see Table 1.2). First, new media (e.g., social media) prefer interactive, real-time, and personalized approaches to report death events—such as through online memorials and virtual tribute websites—that maintain the "active presence" of the deceased, even extending into a "post-life" state (Moiseev, 2016). Through user-generated

content and interactivity, the public can participate more directly in discussions and commemorations of death events. Reporting now covers broader scope, including more personalized and sensitive content like suicide motives and private notes—subjects traditionally restricted or avoided by conventional media (Campion-Smith B, 2015). Furthermore, features like hashtags and comment sections enhance event-related discussions and dissemination (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2022), enabling public engagement in memorializing and debating mortality issues.

Table 1.2

Dimension	Traditional Media	New Media
Information Source	Relies on official briefings and on-site journalist reporting	Integrates user-generated content (UGC), e.g., real-time Twitter updates
Interactivity	One-way communication with limited commenting	Allows public comments, sharing of memorial messages, and even creation of digital memorials
Ethical Challenges	Guided by editorial guidelines; less likely to disclose autopsy details	Higher risk of privacy breaches
Timeliness	Longer publication cycles with emphasis on fact-checking	Real-time updates but with higher error rates

This demonstrates that the ethical framework governing death-related reporting has undergone significant transformation in the networked media environment. The primary question this paper explores is: How does death-related reporting on the internet shape users' perceptions of death events or deceased subjects?

2 Method

2.1 Depth interview

In-depth Interviewing is a qualitative research method. Through face-to-face and open-ended dialogue with a small number of interviewees, we can deeply understand their experience, views and feelings on a theme or phenomenon. This interview form emphasizes that the interviewees use their own language to express their understanding of the world, so as to reveal the emotion and cognitive structure behind it. The in-depth interview method is used, which helps researchers to conduct in-depth exchanges with users who have received Internet

death information, and excavate users' deep perception and Thoughts on current death issues, making the research more reflective and practical.

2.2 Data collection

In this study, online recruitment was used to collect data texts. At the beginning of the interview, we adopted a large-scale open sampling method, and then further refined the samples through the snowball sampling strategy to ensure the diversity and representativeness of the interviewees. The interview was semi-structured, aiming to reveal the user's perception of death topic reports in the network comprehensively and objectively through multi-angle and in-depth discussions. In the stage of data processing and results display, this study strictly abides by academic ethics and confidentiality norms, and strictly anonymous processing was implemented for all the personal information of the interviewees. In specific operation, we use "N" as the prefix of the anonymous identification, followed by the sequential coding with the digital sequence, so as to ensure that the privacy of the interviewees is fully protected.

2.3 Ethical considerations

This study strictly adheres to the ethical standards of qualitative research. Prior to data collection, written informed consent was obtained from all participants, clearly and in detail outlining the research objectives, principles of voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw without penalty at any stage. In order to protect the confidentiality of participants in this sensitive topic, all interviews were conducted under pseudonyms, and identifiable personal information (such as name and location) was anonymized during the transcription process. The recordings and transcripts are stored in password protected cloud storage, accessible only to the research team, and will be permanently deleted three years after publication.

Considering the pain that media exposure related to death may bring, participants were provided with a list of mental health resources, including counseling services, prior to the interview. At the report meeting, we further clarified that their response will not be used for commercial purposes.

3 Research findings

3.1 The sensationalization of suffering in death-related reporting

There exists an intrinsic and essential connection between death and suffering, with suffering

serving as a central theme that holds significant weight across literature, film, education, and broader societal discourse. Within the vast cosmos of literature, suffering is not merely an indispensable component for constructing narrative frameworks but also a profound medium through which writers dissect human nature, probe social issues, and pursue the meaning of individual existence. Aristotle posited that suffering tied to death could be overcome through courage and patience, advocating for a life of moderation and reason (Barua, 2021). His work engaged in deep philosophical reflection on suffering, aiming to uncover its root causes and expand intellectual horizons for humanity. Similarly, modern philosophers like Hegel and Nietzsche explored the significance of suffering and death, regarding them as catalysts for spiritual growth and self-transcendence (Sayilgan, 2023). In cinematic art, *Les Misérables* uses the suffering and resistance of 19th-century French populace as its historical backdrop, profoundly resonating with audiences and inciting deeper exploration of humanity. Through narrative devices centered on death, the film vividly portrays suffering, culminating in emotional climaxes (Flynn, 1984). Yet death merely marks the story's endpoint; the enduring, gripping focus lies in the suffering that permeates the narrative—these are the film's true focal points.

Through the aforementioned arguments, a core perspective emerges: suffering inherently constitutes a procedural link toward the endpoint of death, with death itself remaining the central focus of inquiry. By framing death against a backdrop of suffering, discussions surrounding mortality gain profound depth, prompting wider societal reflection. A analogous phenomenon manifests in societal attention. The "pathologization of suffering" immerses audiences in mediated environments where they witness and empathize with others' hardships. Death inherently possesses journalistic appeal—conflict, novelty, and emotional impact—and media often links fatal events to specific narratives or news values, such as celebrity deaths, suicides, or accidents, amplifying drama and emotional resonance to captivate audiences (Duncan et al., 2022). Consequently, selective reporting by online platforms skews public perception of death (Galvin et al., 2023).

Interviewee N05: "There was an actor named Matthews—reports suggested he struggled with depression, which proved true. During mourning, his negative experiences were disproportionately highlighted; media tended to emphasize his life's scars rather than joys. While grief over normal deaths is inevitable, human existence encompasses both sorrow and happiness. There's no need to dwell on mortality, especially natural deaths, as it harms mental health. Yet online platforms persist in this approach, plunging us into deeper sorrow."

Interviewee N11: "Information incessantly ties suffering to trivial matters. Take Coco Lee—she never publicized her struggles, yet online narratives fixated on her supposed depression and unhappiness."

By intertwining suffering and death, discussions on mortality gain heightened visibility and depth in public discourse. Furthermore, in death-related reporting, mediated suffering transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, employing multimedia techniques to heighten realism and immerse audiences in the experience of hardship (Hanusch, 2013). Research on mediated perceptions of suffering indicates that such coverage fosters emotional resonance and cognitive engagement.

Interviewee N02: "First impressions matter deeply. Some news stories seize on tragic aspects of an event, prompting immediate attention and driving further exploration of death or misfortune. This intensifies emotional responses."

Evidently, suffering-centric narratives swiftly galvanize public attention, evoking empathy, condemnation, compassion, and helplessness. Such reactions reflect the complexity and diversity of public sentiment toward distant hardships. While mediated death narratives, leveraging suffering and technological immediacy, deepen emotional solidarity and social cohesion, they also risk inducing emotional exhaustion (Kiefer, 2019). More critically, suffering-driven narratives skew public perception toward tragic interpretations, burdening audiences with excessive emotional weight while potentially compromising journalistic objectivity and eroding credibility.

3.2 The tendency of narrative reporting on death-related issues

Narrative reporting is a form of storytelling that conveys information through constructing and narrating stories. Its core lies in engaging audiences and evoking empathy through emotions, plotlines, and character development. By employing emotional elements, this approach enables readers to more easily resonate with the characters and events in stories, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of information dissemination (Markova & Sukhovi, 2020). Particularly in reporting emergencies or complex events, this narrative method proves more effective in transmitting information, quickly capturing public attention while providing multi-dimensional perspectives (Marcos-García et al., 2021). In the current internet era, news dissemination has become increasingly interactive, with netizens participating in the co-creation of storified information under mainstream media guidance, thereby highlighting highly engaging and dramatic story elements.

When reporting death-related events, narrative techniques can process grief more gently, providing the public with emotional catharsis and facilitating the acceptance and understanding of heavy topics within a relatively moderated atmosphere. However, as subjects carrying specific structural tensions, death events inherently possess high negative emotional valence that more easily triggers viral information spread (Berger & Milkman, 2013). Media coverage of such events largely serves as affective triggers for the public, where minor missteps in reporting could provoke collective reactions. Excessive narrativization risks diminishing journalistic seriousness, potentially undermining public trust in news authority and objectivity, even obscuring significant social issues. As the interviewees stated:

Interviewee N10: "News should report the stories behind deaths rather than sensationalizing death itself for traffic acquisition. This feels like putting the cart before the horse."

Interviewee N15: "This fabricated storytelling or exaggerated characterization consumes public resources and distracts from the real issues we should be focusing on."

Two case studies deepen our understanding of these concerns. In the "Chongqing Fat Cat River Jump" incident, excessive dramatization of the "Fat Cat" character significantly distorted public perception, preventing comprehensive understanding of objective facts and triggering emotional overspill on digital platforms. Similarly, the reporting on the "Black Bow Girl in China Eastern Airlines Crash" fell into the trap of over-narrativization. Online narratives portrayed "the girl changing her flight for love before tragically perishing," framing her as a sacrificial figure in a love tragedy while overshadowing the inherent grief and gravity of death itself, reducing life's misfortune to a subplot of romantic storytelling. Regarding the China Eastern Airlines crash case, the interviewee stated:

Interviewee N09: "For social events like the pandemic or the China Eastern Airlines incident, I strongly support in-depth reporting. Whether it's social news, group incidents, or individual cases, I endorse media efforts to explore victims' life stories. However, I cannot comprehend the hasty emotional manipulation and fabricated storytelling."

Excessive reliance on narrative storytelling in death reporting often obscures or dilutes objective facts. This journalistic tendency not only hinders public engagement in profound contemplation of significant events but may also divert attention from core issues. Therefore, when handling and discussing such sensitive and momentous events, greater prudence should be exercised in presenting and analyzing factual information. This approach aims to prevent cognitive biases and emotional reactions induced by excessive narrativization, thereby

ensuring the public can make rational judgments based on accurate information.

3.3 Emotionalized portrayal of death topics

Information fragmentation and emotional contagion on social media exacerbate social polarization. For instance, personalized recommendations and "like" mechanisms on social platforms may lead users to preferentially accept and share information aligning with their existing views, thereby reinforcing preexisting beliefs and intensifying societal divisions (Könneker, 2020). Additionally, emotional contagion influences information dissemination dynamics by amplifying entrenched positions (Lerman et al., 2024). Through in-depth observation of death-related reporting dissemination, we identified a notable phenomenon: the frequent emergence of contradictory information. This phenomenon primarily stems from information fragmentation, with most interviewees experiencing emotionally charged responses induced by fragmented content. Multiple respondents noted: **"I generally encounter whatever viewpoints and ideas appear in my feed. The information feels incomplete and particularly one-sided"** (Interviewees N01, N04, N18), indicating that death-related topics in fragmented communication contexts tend to provoke emotional reactions and constant reversals in discussions. Disjointed information fuels widespread speculation among netizens, which is subsequently incorporated by big data algorithms, ultimately becoming integral to the discourse.

Another key factor lies in the loss of informational agency and discursive subjectivity following an individual's death. Digital remains - the persistent virtual presence of the deceased - often face inappropriate manipulation, being fragmented, repurposed, and assimilated into commercial or social systems. This process diminishes personal data control while subjecting it to external manipulation (Brubaker et al., 2013). Consequently, both institutional media and individual users become primary sources of (often unreliable) information about the deceased. Within death reporting contexts, this information demonstrates heightened fragmentation and significantly increased verification challenges. Interview analysis reveals that users primarily rely on scattered online information or marketing accounts when engaging with mortality topics.

Interviewee N06: "The information we see online is fundamentally fragmented. You might encounter a marketing account describing someone's biography, then another discussing their current posthumous circumstances."

Interviewee N08: "The piecemeal nature of information - not just in news but across all

digital media - creates a mixture of truth and falsehood. This forces people to cultivate discernment skills to evaluate information quality. While constructive content could facilitate collective mourning, half-truths inevitably breed problematic comments."

These accounts demonstrate how fragmented information consumption directly impacts public perception, enabling emotional expression. The constant influx of new content sustains public attention through a crowd effect (Yang & Yin, 2023), amplifying event impact and accelerating its fermentation in public discourse. Mortality topics inherently carry high sensitivity and broad public interest. The proliferation of social media platforms like Facebook and Weibo, with their real-time interactivity, has intensified information fragmentation and emotional dissemination. However, this acceleration comes at the cost of information quality and depth, resulting in "weak factual foundations coupled with intense emotional reactions" - a hallmark of emotional polarization that now characterizes social media's discursive ecology.

4 Discussion

Reporting on death does not equate to reporting on suffering, nor is death synonymous with suffering. However, contemporary media increasingly demonstrates a tendency to frame death-related issues through tragic narratives. As the internet era completes the disenchantment of death, extensive coverage of mortality continues to unfold in virtual spaces. Notably, while mainstream media traditionally focused on major death events such as wars, accidents, and suicides, the current communication ecology exhibits new characteristics: not only "abnormal death incidents" but also deaths of ordinary individuals are entering public discourse, even triggering reporting competitions among online media. In this context, the traditional narrow definition of death-related topics has become obsolete, necessitating a crucial re-examination of the cognitive stereotype that "death equals suffering".

Fundamentally, media's tragic framing of death issues creates cognitive biases in audience reception. Specifically manifested through communicators deliberately amplifying representations of pain and misfortune to evoke empathetic resonance. As demonstrated by Hs et al. (2024), such narratives may enhance event visibility but trap public discourse in pessimistic sentiment. More critically, formulaic tragic narratives risk dual alienation: both objectifying the living conditions of vulnerable groups (Rebecca et al., 2024) and allowing celebrity suffering narratives to overshadow genuine victims' voices.

Story-driven death reporting, grounded in narrative psychology, employs core strategies like scene reconstruction, perspective shifting, and emotional embedding to enhance communication effectiveness (Van Krieken, 2018). A representative case is the Eastern Airlines crash coverage that reduced the "Black Bow Girl" to a romantic tragedy symbol - by extracting the most communicable emotional elements, it deepened public memory anchors while establishing empathetic connections. Though significantly enhancing news readability and dissemination, this narrative strategy risks dual consequences: eroding event complexity and potentially inducing new cognitive biases.

In practice, death reporting often employs storytelling techniques to break communication barriers. Examples include typological construction of suicide reports (event-driven/memorial types), chronological restructuring of judicial processes, and family-perspective narration, all enhancing narrative tension through plot arrangement. Significantly, suffering elements frequently serve as catalysts for dramatic climaxes: Cal and Lage (2015) revealed how child labor reports reflect structural violence through individual suffering scenes; Wald et al. (2021) demonstrated how farmer narratives enhance drought relief willingness; particularly Li Dingtai et al.'s (2023) study of the "Second Uncle" video, which ignited collective compassion through dramatized disability representation. The coupling effects of these narrative strategies enable death reporting to achieve paradigm shifts from information presentation to moral mobilization - aligning with the core proposition of urgency journalism theory that transforms audiences from safe bystanders to responsible actors

5 Conclusion

Through the public's direct perception of death-related issues, this study reveals three predominant tendencies in current online platform information regarding mortality: suffering-oriented, narrative-driven, and fragmented emotional approaches. The integration of death-related reporting with narrative construction and suffering amplification essentially constitutes a battleground where journalistic professionalism clashes with commercial logic, and ethical responsibility contends with communication efficacy. While these three dimensions can collaboratively construct socially meaningful death narratives, they risk devolving into instruments of exploitation. The core challenge ahead lies in replacing sensational stimuli with constructive narratives that respect the sanctity of death, transforming media from mere "chroniclers of mortality" into "interpreters of life's meaning".

Furthermore, social media platforms have established a novel public discourse domain

focused on death and grief. This digital sphere not only exposes these existential themes to widespread public scrutiny but also profoundly permeates the fabric of daily life, providing citizens with a legitimate and indispensable platform for mourning expression. However, the deep involvement of diverse stakeholders on social media and their inherent biases frequently lead to oversimplified representations of death-related reporting - a phenomenon demanding critical attention.

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