

# Editorial

**Elaine Kasket** – *Guest editor*

The arrival of a special issue tends to be a matter of feast or famine. If the chosen focus resonates with you, happy days; if your interest is not piqued, the issue is consigned unread to the shelf or the rubbish bin. This instalment of *Bereavement Care*, which was inspired by papers presented at the Centre for Death and Society's (CDAS) 2011 conference, *Death in the Digital Age*, will be no exception.

Those of you in the former category need no encouragement to read on, so this is a gauntlet thrown down to those of you who groaning inwardly and thinking how little the digital age has to do with you. Perhaps you are a reluctant or infrequent user of email, a social networking phobic, someone who has functioned just fine personally and professionally and for many years without the Internet and Facebook and smartphones and weblogs, and hopes to continue on that way. Let me emphasise two points, however.

First, if you have not yet experienced an intersection between digital-age phenomena and your work with bereaved individuals, you will. Online mourning and memorialisation are increasingly commonplace, not just among the young. Second, there are more layers to this interface between death and the digital age than you have probably imagined. Biased though I may be I believe that every professional who works in the death and bereavement fields needs to be familiar with this territory, and consider his or her path through it.

The impact of digitalisation is difficult to overstate, and it is little wonder that the digital age is also known as the information age. Hundreds of millions of people are producing, storing, and often sharing a huge quantity of information about themselves and their lives, sometimes without even realising it. More and more of us will leave behind a vast bricolage of data sets constituting our persistent, posthumous digital selves. When we walk the earth no more, our telepresent ghosts will continue to represent us long after we are gone, easily summoned up from the ether of the World Wide Web to commune with loved ones left behind.

As is always the case with any massive transformation in society, academics, researchers and practitioners from many fields have something to say about it. The multidisciplinary nature of the 2011 CDAS conference is reflected in this issue. This diversity of perspectives on post-death digital phenomena, specifically digital mourning and legacy, provides rich food for thought and holds multiple implications for practice.

We begin with social, cultural and historical geographer Avril Maddrell, who considers the nature and significance

of the Internet's virtual space to the bereaved, explaining how it is like more time-honoured vernacular memorials (eg. spontaneous shrines in public spaces) but also how it is different. Her observations about the therapeutic and facilitative possibilities of the online space for mourning are balanced with practical, psychological and social caveats.

All modes of memorialisation on the Internet are not created equal, and educational psychologist Pamela Roberts, whose research in the past few years has focused primarily upon the use of the world wide web in bereavement, provides an essential primer on ways of grieving on the Internet and how the format of a Web memorial can positively or negatively affect bereaved individuals' experience.

Counselling psychologist Elaine Kasket focuses more specifically on the social networking site Facebook, helping bereavement care professionals understand more about what grieving on Facebook looks like, but also illustrating how well the phenomenon fits within an existing model of bereavement – in this case continuing bonds – encouraging links between theory and practice.

If the digital age is a revolution, computer scientist Joanna Bryson's thoughts on intelligence, identity, memory, and fantasies of 'immortality' highlight just how much that revolution touches some of the fundamentals of what makes us human. Yes, some kind of posthumous digital identity may persist for a long time after your death – but how influential will that identity be, and for how long?

Technology and the notion of a persisting (auto) biography are also discussed by film-maker Evangelo Kioussis in 'Spotlight on Practice'. Kioussis uses the medium of digital video to construct biographical films with hospice patients, and describes how, as with other types of digital-age phenomena such as Facebook and Youtube, people are using technology to connect with the world and say, 'I was here. I was'.

Although Bharat Malde's first-person account of the loss of his son and Ana Draper's research article on childhood bereavement do not focus on death in the digital age, their references to continuing bonds, the dual-processing model of grief, and the importance of durable biography connect them strongly to the other pieces in this special issue. For me, these connections highlight that the more things change, the more they stay the same – as different as mourning in the digital age may appear at first glance, upon deeper investigation it chimes quite harmoniously with familiar theories and practices around bereavement. Whatever your take on the digital era, therefore, I suspect that you will find much of value in this issue.