

Chapter 10

The Burden of the Screen: Virtual presence and death during Covid-19

Jennifer Good

London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, UK

ABSTRACT

In the isolation of pandemic lockdowns, photography was a lifeline of connection, but for many families, it carried a greater burden. Separated at their darkest moments, relying on screens for connection as never before, loss became mediated suddenly by photography in a completely new way. There was no choice but to say goodbye to dying loved ones, isolated in care homes and hospital wards through Zoom and Facetime, technologies created by digital media corporations and developed for the purposes of business conferencing and ‘chat’. What does it mean to say goodbye in this way? To share final words, final gazes, and the last moments of a life—and then to undertake the work of mourning—through a screen? This chapter considers the ways in which the pandemic has taken established thought regarding not only death and photography, but also cyberspace and the digital image, and turned it on its head.

INTRODUCTION

My father had become increasingly unwell and infirm with vascular dementia. As the pandemic gained momentum and the first lockdown was announced, we were unable to go and visit him. This first lockdown was severe, and I spoke to my father weekly over Facetime on the carer’s mobile phone. In his state of confusion, he could not understand why we were not there, and the conversations unsettled and upset both him and I. My last conversation with him was over the screen of the carer’s mobile phone. He was crying and confused and did not want to give her the phone back...All I could do was tell him that I loved him. He passed away that night. (Maria)

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The Burden of the Screen

By the time I joined my unit, it was one year into the pandemic, so a system was already in place. The job of setting up these calls mostly fell on the Patient Care Assistants, not nurses nor doctors. To be very blunt, it was one of the more traumatic things I've ever experienced. No amount of training can prepare someone to carry an iPad into the room of a sick (and contagious) person so that their loved ones may say goodbye. I will never forget the echoing sounds of loved ones sobbing, screaming, begging, and praying over an iPad that is strategically placed so that only the face of their loved one is seen. (Alex)

Photography has always, in the famous words of Susan Sontag, 'kept company with death,' not least in the expanse of literature dedicated to the subject in European and American photographic writing of the twentieth century, of which Sontag herself is a central figure. But the Covid-19 pandemic has propelled photography into a new relationship with death. One which, like many of the changes wrought by the pandemic, has emerged under emergency conditions; unforeseen, urgent, often rudimentary, and as such, not yet fully understood in its implications. In the isolation of pandemic lockdowns, digital photography and video provided a lifeline of connection for people everywhere. But for many families, these technologies carried a greater burden. Separated from one another at their darkest moments, relying on screens for connection as never before, their loss became mediated suddenly by photography in a completely new way. There was no choice but to say goodbye to dying loved ones, isolated in care homes and hospital wards, through Zoom and Facetime, technologies created by social media corporations and developed for the purposes of business conferencing and 'chat'. Healthcare professionals were tasked with facilitating video calls between patients and family members, taking time out of urgent acute medical care, to provide a very different kind of care. What does it mean to say goodbye in this way? To share final words, final gazes, and the last moments of a life – and then to undertake the work of mourning – through a screen?

When Sontag writes of photography, she means something very different from the screen-based, moving/still hybrid technologies that have defined the Covid era. For her, what sets photography apart as a tool for the validation of trauma and the mastery of experience is stability as printed object. The capacity to hold a print in one's hand, to *feel* it, means "putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power." (1979, p.4) This depends on the photograph being a print, but even more importantly, on its being *still*; graspable, arrested. Live, moving images on video screens are a different kind of photographic practice; an encounter which I nevertheless define as photography in the simple sense that it exists within the long social tradition of using lens-based 'indexical' images in attempts to slow time and to hold on, both to experiences and to people.¹

Sophy's Mum, Ro, died of cancer in November 2020, during the UK's second lockdown. Ro had been receiving chemotherapy in the preceding year, which had stopped in March 2020, just as the pandemic began. Sophy was allowed some visits to the hospital, so during her Mum's last days and weeks they shared a combination of time together in person, and virtually, on screens. She tells me, as we talk together in March of 2022, about how different these two experiences were from one another. We find ourselves talking more than anything else about time – how it functions, what it feels like; how elastic, or empty, or uncomfortable it can be. The car journey to visit her Mum at the hospital was thirty or forty minutes each way – a time that she describes now as a 'ritual', for which she feels somehow grateful. Time to prepare, and afterwards to 'process' or 'decompress.' 'A buffer between the grief and ordinary life', which wasn't in place when they communicated via WhatsApp video call.

As well as the most immediate, visual aspects of these calls – 'everything converges into this tight, static space' – Sophy grapples for words to convey the distorted physical and temporal dynamics of the

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