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A statistical survey on death and digital practices
Reflexivity on methodological biases

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Abstract: Constructing a questionnaire, both in terms of methodology and ethics, supposes an exercise in reflexivity, especially when the context relates to a taboo subject such as death. Drawing on a statistical survey aimed mainly at understanding the role of digital technologies in mourning practices, this paper explores a raft of methodological and ethical questions raised by the different steps spanning the design, communication and administration of the survey. We pinpoint the limits of statistical data and the need to supplement these with a qualitative approach as well as "quali-quantitative" data to decipher socio-digital uses in mourning, which relates to the emotive dimension.

Keywords: digital, death, statistics, methodology, reflexivity

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D'une enquête statistique sur mort et numérique
Réflexivité sur des biais méthodologiques

Résumé: La construction d'un questionnaire, tant sur des plans méthodologique qu'éthique, suppose un exercice de réflexivité, notamment lorsqu'il intervient dans le contexte d'un sujet tabou comme celui de la mort. D'après une enquête statistique ayant notamment pour objectif de comprendre le rôle du numérique dans les pratiques de deuil, cet article s'intéresse à un ensemble de questions méthodologiques et éthiques posées par les différentes étapes de ce questionnaire depuis sa conception en passant par sa communication et sa passation. Il pointe les limites de la statistique et de la nécessité d'user en complément d'une démarche qualitative, voire de données « quali-quantitatives » pour décrypter les usages socionumériques mortuaires, du ressort du sensible

Mots-clés: numérique, mort, statistique, méthodologie, réflexivité

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Introduction

Drawing on an ongoing academic statistical survey on the uses of the Web and digital eternities,[1] this paper aims to question the way in which the dissemination of the survey and its communication to target populations – in other words, the approach used to collect the responses as well as to communicate about the survey – have influenced both the overall survey methodology and the results (Rothgeb, Willis & Forsyth, 2007; Creux, 2007).

We also aim to share the many difficulties, not only methodological but also social and cultural, that underlay this statistical questionnaire on the theme of death, which is a subject that is scarcely amenable to a figure-based approach.

To understand what prompted our reflection, it should be borne in mind that this statistical survey involves a subject that some will view as curious, not to say grim. Certainly, designing a questionnaire on the theme of death, which involves using specific terms and ensuring cultural neutrality – an illusory objective, of course – and disseminating it is a complicated affair.

We will begin by focussing on the methodological and ethical issues that determined the dissemination of the questionnaire and then move on to the process used for communicating on and disseminating the survey in view of collecting the results. Finally, we will investigate the methodological problems involved in exploiting the results and the need to bolster the statistical survey with a qualitative survey, especially for a subject as intimate and sacred as death, which is ill-suited to enumeration and classification.

Constructing any questionnaire is a very time-consuming and complex exercise as it involves trying to explain the social dimension through figures and thus produce and clearly define relevant questions (de Singly, 2014) in order to obtain standardized data (Martin, 2014). And constructing a questionnaire on death and digital practices is even more tricky, as it requires competencies that do not relate to statistics and general sociology alone, but also to the psychosocial field, the sociology of death and even anthropology... For this reason, the fine-tuning of the questionnaire was the result of a long collective process that called on expert competencies from a wide range of fields.[2]

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[1] The survey *Usages du Web et Éternités Numériques* is part of the ENEID digital eternities research project funded in France by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche and grouping together the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3, the Université de Technologie de Compiègne (UTC) and the Université Paris 13 and coordinated by Fanny Georges. Designed as a questionnaire, a first version of this statistical survey was disseminated at the end of June 2015 and its second reworked version on 29 October 2015, that is to say just before the commemorative period that corresponds to the French All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day on 2 November.

[2] The construction of this survey is the result of inputs from various people whose comments were valuable and we would like to thank them for their contribution: Lucien Castex (research engineer), Laurence Larochelle, Orianne Pellois, Morgane Mabille and Mathilde Petit (interns), Michael Vicente (sociologist in digital humanities), Fabrice Buschini (researcher in social psychology), Fabienne Duteil-Ogata (anthropologist), Laurence Hardy (socio-

1. Constructing a questionnaire on death and digital practices: methodological and ethical issues

1.1. *Targeting respondents*

At the outset, the ENEID Éternités numériques project explored the question of the persistence of digital information. More specifically, the question arose of what became of an individual's mass of self-produced digital traces after his or her death and how these might have a hand in shaping new mourning practices and support for the mourning process. This dual entry point – the persistence of an individual's digital footprint on the one hand and the mourning process via digital technology on the other – was intended to document the way these data are managed by the major Web industries, by the individuals themselves during their lifetime, and by the bereaved.

The quantitative survey – supplemented by a qualitative survey aimed at gathering data not captured by a self-administered questionnaire – was designed to gain an understanding of the uses of *post mortem* digital traces on commemorative Web platforms (Paradis Blanc, Toujours là, Le cimetière virtuel[3]) and generalist social networking sites such as Facebook, which has now partly become an online memorial site due to the features it has developed.[4] Given the role of digital technologies in mourning practices, the aim was also to document the uses of websites offering funerary or obituary services (www.dansnoscoeurs.fr, www.avis-de-deces.net/...), as well as websites that conserve and share digital data (E-mylife, Edeneo, Geneanet…[5]). Given this two-pronged line of inquiry, the target of the survey did not

[3] www.paradisblanc.com/, www.toujoursla.com, www.lecimetiere.net… Websites consulted 15 April 2016.

[4] The Facebook features relating to death of a user were introduced tardily. These first appeared on the Web in 2004, but it was only in 2009 that Facebook created the "memorialized account" feature. This type of account can only be modified by a legacy contact, and displays the wording "In memory of" on the user's profile next to his or her name. The "memorialized account" no longer appears in public spaces such as users' friend suggestions or birthday reminders. In 2015, Facebook created the legacy contact, who is the person appointed to manage the memorialized account after a death. This contact is able to change the contents of the profile and reply to new invitations (adding friends, etc.) but cannot remove publications shared in the past or delete friends (website https://www.facebook.com/help/1506822589577997/, consulted 4 April 2016). Finally, came the creation (by a different company) of the Facebook application "If I die" (http://www.ifidie.net), which offers the possibility of recording an audio or video message to be published after a person's death on his or her Facebook "wall". Other applications now exist along the same lines.

[5] www.e-mylife.fr, https://secure.edeneo.fr, http://www.geneanet.org. Sites consulted 20 April 2016.

just involve memorial website users but, more broadly, all those who had left their footprint on the Web. The objective of working on both the persistence of digital traces and on the new practices created by online uses in situations of mourning thus implied addressing a "double target", which in fact encompassed the majority of French people given that most of the population[6] has already published online information such as date of birth or age (27%) and only 24% of respondents had published none of the online information referred to in a survey conducted in 2012[7] (Axa prévention/IFOP, 2012). This survey dates back to 2012 and all the signs suggest that the presence of self on the Web is increasing insofar as some 80% of the French population have registered with at least one social networking website (Aura Mundi/Argus de la Presse, 2015). Moreover, this presence is sometimes unintentional or unwitting, if only because of the footprint left when a person conducts business, administrative or relational transactions on the Web (Merzeau, 2009); or also because all personal data (searches on search engines, image-sharing, etc.) are collected by the major Web industries (ibid.), unless a person has recourse to a virtual private network to protect their data and ensure confidentiality of their exchanges and above all encrypt their data (CNIL, 2010, p. 25).

How then can one reach such a broad-based public when the means to hand are modest and certainly incomparable to those of a large statistics institute? As far as the questionnaire design was concerned, the questions needed to address not only all individuals involved in a mourning process in which digital technology had (or not) played a role, but also all individuals present on the Web; and notably those who had given thought to the future and legacy of their digital traces, whether or not these were intentional and visible. Although the "funnel" approach to questions (i.e., ordering them from the most general to the most specific) made it possible to reach a broad target, dealing with the section on online mourning practices and beliefs proved to be a delicate matter. How can one ask questions when the respondent has lost someone close or dear? How is it possible to enter into a user's intimacy while at the same time complying with the protocol of a statistical questionnaire? This free-form comment from one respondent confirms the relevance of these concerns: "Some questions are too private to answer in this type of questionnaire…" (version 2, woman, aged 46, with 5 years of higher education, intellectual profession, publisher, married with children, Paris 12th district)... How should the structure of the questionnaire be organised? For psychosociological reasons, an accounting-like approach to matters of death is ill-advised, at least in France, where death was long a taboo subject (Thomas, 1976). For example, although it would have been interesting to collect the number of deceased persons that a someone had lost and link these losses with *sui generis* rituals (online tributes, religious services or traditional vigils,

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[6] According to the IFOP/AXA survey (2012), carried out on a quota sample of 1,006 people representative of the French population aged 18 and over.

[7] Among these displayed items of information are: date of birth/age (57%), family name (53%), personal email address (40%), photographs of self (38%), family relationships with other people (32%), place of birth (32%), personal hobbies or interests (30%), photographs of family or friends (23%), home address (17%), personal postal address (16%), CV (13%), our political opinions (12%), our employer's identity (11%), our sexual orientation (10%), our religion (9%), our level of income (7%).

etc.) to better understand the rituals of the bereaved, this type of approach would inevitably meet with hostile reactions from the survey recipients. Furthermore, in this case as in others, the questionnaire design has to take into account the social and cultural context in which the survey population is immersed (Le Gall, 2001), and match the respondents' profiles to the strategies for disseminating the survey (Creux, 2007). This context thus gives rise to representations and influences that affect the preparation of the statistical survey. Drafted in French, the questionnaire thus addressed a French-speaking public and did not exclude any geographical regions. Furthermore, the questionnaire was designed in line with a research subject grounded in a theoretical framework where death (Thomas, 1976; Clavandier, 2009; etc.), digital technologies (Cardon, 2008, 2009, 2010; Merzeau, 2009, etc.) and digital afterlife (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011, etc.) are questioned from the viewpoint of notions and concepts characterized by the norms, traditions and social realities found in Western culture, and sometimes more specifically in French culture. The design of the overall survey methodology is not therefore neutral and the resulting data are very highly dependent on its structure. As D. Le Gall points out in his comparative analysis of questionnaire design in different country surveys on sexuality, the research subject is clearly constructed differently depending on the intellectual tradition and cultural context concerned (Le Gall, 2001). In this case, the author critiques the statistical survey as a methodological tool and shows how national contexts play a role in orienting and constructing the scientific subject of inquiry (ibid.). Such social and cultural contexts give rise to a scheme for constructing the questionnaire in France. To take the example of traditional sociodemographic characteristics, we know that a statistical questionnaire does not allow singularities to be observed, but instead produces an enumeration of standardized data in view of measuring social practices or social realities (Martin, 2014). Yet, collecting individual statistical data on the respondents' occupation and socio-occupational category or gender, for instance, remains an undertaking fraught with difficulties. For reasons of statistical treatment, we chose to use the categories[8] defined by the French statistical authority, the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). However, their socio-occupational classification is, as A. Desrosières and L. Thévenot point out, "closely linked to the operations required for the *representation* of a society: certainly, a *statistical* representation subject to certain technical constraints; then, a *political* representation, as today we routinely speak of 'socio-professionnals' for people holding a mandate comparable to other elected officials; and, lastly, an everyday *cognitive* representation that each person has in order to identify themselves and establish connections in their social life, and which relates to their occupation or social environment" (Desrosières & Thévenot, 2002, p. 5). Thus, "the presentation of SCs [social categories], their evolution, their content, their use and the effects of this use must necessarily take into account the ties maintained with other forms of social representation. We could view these ties from three successive perspectives that afford enough distance to call into question the seeming obviousness of this classification: a historical perspective (Chapter I), a political approach to occupational representation (Chapter II), a sociological and cognitive study of ordinary categories du social identification and their influences on the statistical processing chain (Chapter III)" (ibid.).

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[8] *Professions et Catégories Socio-professionnelles* (PCS).

This classification is, however, problematic and subject to debate and discussion among the very people who helped put it in place. Does categorising these social groups in such a way not run the risk of statistically imprisoning individuals in a specific social position and developing a statistical representation that is reduced to a number (Desrosières & Thévenot, 2002, p. 4)? As A. Desrosières and L. Thévenot (2002) pointed out at the time it was published, this nomenclature "completely erases both its historical genesis and the recording, coding and interpretive conditions that led to the development and understanding of the data tables" (ibid., p. 5). While these taxonomies are clearly social constructs, they are nonetheless useful for "shedding light on a whole process of *interpreting* social categories" (ibid., p. 4) and extrapolating knowledge. Yet, this socio-occupational breakdown is complex and does not always make sense to the respondents, particularly when they are not in a face-to-face interview situation; they are not always able to identify the category they belong to, or fear being assigned to a social position that is not fully representative of their social milieu. One way of limiting these biases in our questionnaire was thus to propose – immediately following these broad INSEE-defined categories[9] – an open question inviting the respondents to mention their precise job, which thus enabled us to re-analyse the data ourselves.

Gender was another classification that needed to be taken into account. Proposing the Male/Female categories without offering the choice of "Other" is, as M. Cervulle and N. Quemener (2014) remark, to comply with a binary model that not only conflates the notion of gender with that of sex (2014, p. 84), but also fails to take into account the diversity of gender identities (ibid.; Butler, 2006). This observation is legitimate in the context of our survey and raises awkward questions for several reasons. Firstly, the questionnaire is part of a "gender-stamped" research project (the full project title being "*Post-mortem* digital identities and the Web's innovative memorial uses seen through the gender prism". Secondly, it is disseminated on feminist mailing lists (e.g., EFiGiES,[10] an association grouping young researchers in Feminist Studies, Gender and Sexuality), which could lead to specific comments and criticisms from groups that explore the relevance of the binary "sex"-based classification and its structuring effects. Admittedly, although it was suggest-

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[9]   Following   the   broad   lines   of   the   INSEE   nomenclature (http://www.insee.fr/fr/methodes/default.asp?page=nomenclatures/pcs2003/liste_n1.htm, website consulted 17 April 2016), the ten main categories identified in our questionnaire are the following: Farmer (*agriculteur exploitant*); Craft worker, retailer or business owner (*artisan, commerçant ou chef d'entreprise*); Manager and higher-grade intellectual occupation (*cadre et profession intellectuelle supérieure*); Intermediate occupation (*profession intermédiaire*); Lower-grade white-collar worker (*employé*); Blue-collar worker (*ouvrier*); Retired (*retraité*); Jobseeker (*en recherche d'emploi*); In secondary or higher education (*élève ou étudiant*); No professional activity (*sans activité professionnelle*).

[10] Questionnaire disseminated on the list 2 November 2015, which is in France is All Souls' Day, in memory of the dead. On 3 November, we recorded 117 unique visitors out of a total 1,248 (9.38% of unique visitors). In all, we recorded 132 unique visitors (out of 4,024 visits) on 25 March 2016 – the tenth most consulted link out of 99 (including 17 with 0 unique visitors), which corresponds to 3.28% of unique visitors. At the time of dissemination, on the first extraction on 3 November, it was the third most consulted link after having been distributed to the personal networks of the team's researchers and the website of the Université de Technologie de Compiègne (representing 9.27% of total unique visitors).

ed we include the "Other" category, our main worry was that the respondents' reactions or non-responses might result in unclear answers and thus potentially hamper an analytical treatment of the questionnaire.

The qualitative survey clearly aims to understand, from a gender viewpoint, how identity norms are integrated, what gendered social relationships exist within families, what role gendered education plays and how this impacts practices and professional activities, etc., in terms of sexual orientation. The (statistical) questionnaire on the other hand analyses a binary variable (but for how much longer?). As F. de Singly (2014, p. 43) comments, "quantitative sociology does not encompass a 'queer'[11] perspective, whereby individuals play on the social constraints of the sex they belong to. It is still only able to rely on the officially registered "male/female" categories. Strictly speaking therefore, there is no gender variable despite the shifting uses of vocabulary" (de Singly, 2014, p. 43).

2. Biases relating to how information on the survey was communicated and to the dissemination of the survey

If designing a survey questionnaire in itself raises many methodological and ethical questions, the same holds true for the way in which it is administered (Kalton & Anderson, 1986). Communicating on and disseminating a statistical survey involve a number of underlying pitfalls and asperities and, as both these phases are part and parcel of the overall survey methodology, they need to be well thought out and fully taken on board. The researcher must not downplay the difficulties and ensure that her overall methodology is transparent, as this – like the results – needs to be scientifically robust if it is to play a role in creating useful knowledge.

2.1. *The methodology in question*

During the dissemination of our questionnaire *Usages du Web et Éternités Numériques* (Uses of the Web and Digital Eternities), we came up against a number of problems that affected the sampling frame and produced many imperfections. It should first be remembered that we had no specific budget for dissemination; the job was taken on by the research team, which proved inadequate given the size of the task. In short, we lacked the necessary resources not only for defining a target population, but also for accessing and delimiting this population.

For communicating on the survey and distributing the questionnaire, the main actors identified were as follows: the research team's personal and professional networks (mailing lists, social networks, emails…), the websites of the universities involved in this research (Université Paris 3 - Sorbonne Nouvelle, Université de Technologie de Compiègne, Université Paris 13), funeral industry websites (Vivresondeuil.asso.fr, Testamento.fr, Comitam-obseques…), Facebook memorial web pages, websites likely to be concerned by the question of digital traces and their future use (Internet Actu…), health forums (Doctissimo…) and, more generally,

[11] Butler, J. (2006) [1990]. *Gender Trouble – Feminism and the subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

various news media that had already addressed the subject (*Rue 89*, *Les Inrockupti-bles*...).

With regard to our communication campaign and our resources, the information sent was intended to cover a large spectrum of actors likely to constitute a multiple sampling frame (creation of a sample using sub-samples from separate sampling frames), which would help to improve both the coverage and the response rate (Sautory, 2015, p. 2).

The team thus set about communicating on the survey to the research community and to the funeral sector. The goal was to make it known that research was being conducted on this theme – which at the time of the project proposal was innovative in France[12] – with support from the French National Research Agency (Agence Nationale de la Recherche: ANR), whose mission is to fund and disseminate project-based research. As communication about the survey was closely tied to its dissemination, it seemed difficult to avoid a number of hurdles that could potentially "contaminate" the material collected.

One of the first dissemination operations, which also served as a "test" for the questionnaire design, thus targeted the social spheres in the research team's entourage; in other words, spheres that were relatively close to their social capital. This tended to create a group of people who identified themselves very similarly in terms of socio-professional characteristics and who most often had a high position in the social hierarchy. A second operation was conducted to disseminate the survey to the websites of the universities partnering the project, and then to electronic mailing lists dedicated to research in communication, digital technology and sociology. These dissemination vectors were of course more likely to garner responses from populations with similar social characteristics and not necessarily concerned by digital mourning. In these circumstances, it was difficult to avoid a form of social homogamy inherent to these dissemination processes.

The operation of communicating and disseminating to the French funeral industry was a different matter. Firstly, because in France this sector is still compartmentalized and involves only a handful of actors, although now tending to develop; and secondly, because reaching these actors is but a first step, while actually contacting the mourners themselves is another matter. Moreover, while the funeral industry is used to working and dealing with death, this is not the case for the bereaved, who thus need to be treated with discretion.

Lastly, we also disseminated the survey on the online tribute pages of generalist social networking platforms such as Facebook. These pages are growing in number (doubtless spurred by Facebook's introduction of memorialized accounts in 2009). Yet, although these are in principle easily accessible as sometimes public, dissemination posed several problems.

Not surprisingly, the first survey results observed showed an overrepresentation of a population with higher-education diplomas, mainly with a baccalaureate plus

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[12] When the proposal for this research project was submitted in 2013, the subject seemed innovative in the landscape of French scientific research. However, in several Anglo-Saxon countries studies on a digital afterlife following physical death were already well advanced.

five more years of higher education.[13] This socio-professional homogamy due to the channels of dissemination was nonetheless balanced out and corrected in the results (Sautory, 2015) by intensively disseminating the survey to actors in the funeral sector. Likewise, although we were unable to pinpoint the exact provenance of the respondents (to be discussed later), the method of short links that we used revealed that many of the unique visitors were from the research team's networks, representing 1,227 unique visitors, equivalent to 29.9% of the total 4,024 unique visitors as at 25 March 2016, which considerably biased results. This preponderance of graduates in our sample seems to indicate that the vectors of dissemination to universities had been particularly active, representing 15.3% of the total unique visitors.

The task of disseminating the questionnaire to online funerary platforms and services came up against several pitfalls. Upstream of the survey, a long observation period was necessary, but between this initial phase carried out during the early stages of the project proposal (2011/2012) and the second phase, when the questionnaire was being finalised and actors contacted (early 2015), many of the actors had disappeared or their website had ceased to be active.[14] The list of actors to be contacted was thus more limited. We contacted the developers or initiators of funeral-sector websites (via emails, interviews, telephone calls, etc.) to ask for their help in disseminating the questionnaire, proposing in exchange to make the results available to them. However, collecting their consent proved an arduous task and, although we obtained several agreements in principle, the questionnaire was not always put online. In the end, out of the 80 funeral actors approached, 20 agreed to put the questionnaire online and half of these actually did so (as at 25 March 2016, they accounted for 503 unique visitors, that is 17.74% of the 4,024 unique visitors).

The strategy used to reach actors in the funeral sector also involved publications in the relevant trade press. We wrote short articles presenting our study together with a link to our survey in the two specialist magazines (*Résonance*, *Magazine funeraire*...[15]). The idea of using this channel was more to publicise the research project rather than hope for any significant level of participation. In terms of actual participation, the results were in fact very limited as paper-based distribution is not really suited to this type of research project. This is corroborated by the results of

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[13] Diplomas proposed in the questionnaire: elementary or primary school; lower-secondary-school leaving certificate (*brevet des colleges*); diploma of occupational studies (BEP) / certificate of professional competence (CAP); baccalaureate (B); B+1 year; B+2 years; B+3 years; B+4 years; B+5 years; B+6 or more years.
[14] Digital memorial platforms are not a specifically French phenomenon and are above all very present in the Anglo-Saxon world. In France, many memorial websites were created around 2010, but these quickly disappeared as they lacked a sound business model and were probably crowded out by competition from the more generalist socio-digital platforms such as Facebook. The only economically viable and profitable French websites in this domain are those that publish obituary notices, Avis-de-deces.net and Dansnoscoeurs.fr, the latter being owned by French press groups or their subsidiaries.
[15] http://www.resonance-funeraire.com/and
http://www.funerairemagazine.com/parutions_pa.php. Last consulted 21 April 2016.

our distribution of flyers[16] in various venues (the Salon du Funéraire,[17] funeral parlours, letter boxes, etc.).

In order to encourage a higher response rate from funeral industry actors – and given that some of the major players in the memorial business such as the socio-digital platform Paradis Blanc had refused to help disseminate the questionnaire[18] –, we made individual contact with the creators of memorials using the features available on the Paradis Blanc website. This dissemination strategy in fact proved more productive than that used for other mourning websites. Here, a further bias should be pointed out, but one which nonetheless gives an insight into the uses of online memorials with respect to the "visibility" and "sex" of those who manage the mourning process (Hardy, 2007) and, more broadly, into the uses of social networking sites. In fact, our interview with the co-developer[19] of Paradis Blanc and our statistical calculations[20] show that this website is for the most part used by women (about 80%).

Lastly, in parallel to the dedicated memorial websites, it soon become clear that dissemination on a network such as Facebook was necessary given the compelling questions that this digital platform raises about death. The main reason was that this social networking site is used massively, with 1.59 billion active Facebook users[21] worldwide in 2015, including 30 million in France. In addition, the evidence seems to suggest that, in the long run, the "active" Facebook accounts for the dead will outnumber those for the living.[22] Much has been written about this eventuality ever since Hachem Saddiki[23] (researcher at the University of Massachusetts) calculated that by 2098 more than half of Facebook profiles will be those of deceased people, factoring in the number of Facebook users worldwide, the users' demographic profile and mortality rates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (the US national public health agency). This estimate is relatively robust as it is based on the

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[16] On 25 March 2016, from over a hundred flyers handed out, we recorded only 6 unique visitors for this distribution mode, that is, 0.15% of the 4,024 unique visitors.

[17] The Salon du Funéraire (Funeral Trade Exhibition) held at Villepinte (France), 19–21 November 2015.

[18] www.paradisblanc.com/. This memorial website, created in 2011, allows mourners to leave messages, exchange memories and light virtual candles. Although so far not very profitable, this website has nonetheless proved successful in its field. The website also allows people to contact the creators of memorials individually without having to go through a moderator. Last consulted 7 April 2016.

[19] Interview with Anne-Sophie Tricart, co-developer of the Paradis Blanc website and project, on 3 April 2015.

[20] Figures collected through our extraction approach and analysis of the publicly available data on the Paradis Blanc memorials.

[21] According to the news release, "Facebook Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2015 Results", 2016 (http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/facebook-reports-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-2015-results-300210893.html. Website consulted 8 April 2016).

[22] Facebook does not communicate any statistics on the number of (active) profiles of deceased persons, but some estimates indicate that 1/100 profiles are probably those of deceased users.

[23] Kristen V. Brown, "Digital graveyard. We calculated the year dead people on Facebook could outnumber the living": http://fusion.net/story/276237/the-number-of-dead-people-on-facebook-will-soon-outnumber-the-living/. Last consulted 8 April 2016.

two following assumptions: first, that a Facebook profile will be kept intact after the user's death and, second, that world mortality rates will be equivalent to those reported in the United States and will stabilise over time. The estimate is interesting on account of the debates and many questions it raises about the relation between the living and the dead, or the physically dead but digitally alive. It is true that Facebook has many active accounts of people who have died and that this digital persistence, whether or not intended by the deceased or their bereaved family or friends, can create strange situations when the Facebook platform, which considers that the Web user is still alive, proposes interactions through various notifications (friend requests, birthday reminders, etc.). This is also the case when applications (Movieternity,[24] Après La Mort[25]…) make it possible for the living to receive emails, memories or videos from deceased persons who, before they died, had arranged for such items to be sent out. This hybrid figure of the dead-yet-living person – where the deceased is physically dead but has acquired a persistent online social identity sent via an IT programme to remind the living, whether or not the latter so wish – can create an absurd situation and an ambivalent relationship liable to heighten the distress of the bereaved (Pène, 2011; Bourdeloie, 2015; Gamba, 2016). This incongruity highlights the clash between algorithmic logic and the reality experienced by mourners (Bourdeloie, 2015, p. 110).

What is clear is that the features developed by Facebook are such that the platform can now be classified among the virtual memorial sites. Not only has the platform created memorialized accounts (cf. *supra*) that, *ipso facto*, show the "status" of the deceased person, but it also offers the possibility of creating "Community" or "Cause" pages or groups dedicated to posting tributes.[26]

These different web pages thus proved to be a valuable source for disseminating the survey and offered a potential channel for recruiting respondents for the qualitative part of the survey. Yet, dissemination to these a priori accessible pages proved to be a complicated task on account of their vast number, their varying statuses (some very active, others not) and the privacy terms for groups, as some groups were closed and, to post messages, access had to be requested via a private email. Using this method, we asked mourners if they would agree to participate in the survey.[27] However, this approach was unfortunately disrupted as a member of our re-

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[24] http://www.movieternity.com, website consulted 16 April 2016.

[25] http://www.apreslamort.net, website consulted 16 April 2016.

[26] According to Facebook, "Pages allow real organizations, businesses, celebrities and brands to communicate broadly with people who like them. Pages may only be created and managed by official representatives….Page information and posts are public and generally available to everyone on Facebook." On some pages the wording "In tribute to...", "In memory of…", "RIP" (Rest in peace), etc. appears in the title of the page, chosen by the person who created the page. Groups allow web users "to communicate about shared interests"; "In secret and closed groups, posts are only visible to group members" (https://fr-fr.facebook.com/help/155275634539412, website consulted 15 April 2016).

[27] The message generally posted went as follows:
"Hello, I apologize for this intrusion as I know that you have lost someone close and that the subject is difficult. I am a university researcher and we are working on a sociological survey where your help can be very valuable. Have you sent anyone details of your online accounts

search team was excluded from some groups (cf. *infra*), which led us to target our dissemination at open tribute pages. Faced with the vast number of such pages, we decided to disseminate the survey using the Facebook page of the Paradis Blanc website[28] and selected "liked" pages offering a freely accessible space. Once again, this dissemination method needs to be relativized as it accounted for only 0.8% of unique visitors. When a message is posted on this type of account without first contacting the administrator, the message is automatically placed on the left-hand side of the screen as a "visitor's message" rather than on the main discussion thread. To save space, the message is also truncated, meaning that a user has to be actively interested in discovering the whole of the message content.

Another strategy that was likely to broaden the participant sample involved sending the statistical survey to websites specialised in digital-related subjects and clearly concerned with what becomes of *post-mortem* data. However, only a handful of actors in this sector agreed to participate. For example, we contacted a journalist from the online magazine, *Rue 89*, who had written an article[29] along similar lines to our research themes and who agreed to publish a link to our survey. This link is currently one of the most active in our statistics (82 unique visitors as at 25 March 2016, that is, the 15th most visited link out of a current list of 99 active links).

Finally, the use of this dissemination model – which is akin to the "overlapping frames" model (Sautory, 2015) – runs the risk of complicating data treatment. In our case, however, this choice was more prudent in that it allows for a greater number of sampling frames and is thus conducive to a higher participation rate. The greater the number of frames, the more complex the explanation of non-responses is likely to be as non-responses within each sample may stem from different reasons (Sautory, 2015). As O. Sautory points out, the difficulties raised by this type of method include: the handling of non-responses, because the reasons for non-response can differ depending on the identity of the respondent and the frame to which (s)he belongs (the higher the number of frames, the more varied the meanings that checking a given box may have, depending on the provenance of the respondent); the effect of current trends, which corresponds to a potential increase in "errors" due, for exam-

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or data? How do you use digital technology with respect to the loss of someone close? How does digital technology change our funerary practices?

This 10-minute questionnaire headed by researchers from the universities Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 13 and the Université de Technologie de Compiègne addresses these questions, and you will help this research to advance by participating in it and sharing it with your family and friends.

Here is the link to the survey: XXXXXX. Thanking you in advance for taking part and please accept my sincere condolences, [signature]".

[28]   The   Paradis   Blanc   website   has   a   Facebook   page (https://www.facebook.com/pages/ParadisBlanccom/153046161405277. Last consulted 12 April 2016). To disseminate the survey, we selected 210 Paradis Blanc "liked" tribute pages (out of 314), as at 5 April 2016. The questionnaire was disseminated to 45 Facebook groups, accounting for only 32 unique visitors as at 25 March 2016 (out of 4,042 unique visitors), which represents 0.8% of unique visitors.

[29] Bruno Lus, "Repose en paix petit ange': enquête sur les fantômes de YouTube". Published 13/02/2016:   http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2016/02/13/repose-paix-petit-ange-enquete-les-fantomes-youtube-262988. Last consulted 18 April 2016.

ple, to the data collection methods used (notably, dissemination via smartphones): and finally, differentiating the provenance of the respondents (in our case, thanks to the diversity of the short links) (Sautory, 2015, p. 10).

All in all, we encountered the following issue regarding our frames: on the one hand, the dissemination to the various personal and professional networks of our research team members resulted in a high participation rate and a social class-based homogamy; on the other hand, the massive dissemination to many funerary-sector actors produced a relatively low participation rate, which is now being corrected by an intensive personalized dissemination to mourners who use the Paradis Blanc memorial site (cf. *infra*).

2.2. *Ethical biases and reflexive challenges when tackling a sensitive subject*

Communicating on a survey on death requires a number of precautions. Above all, it necessarily means taking into account the prevailing social norms for mourning practices, as well as the social, political… contexts in which the questionnaire is administered. Death is still a traumatic phenomenon, at least in our Western societies. It is, as F. Gamba reminds us following on from the work of E. Morin (2002 [1951]), an unacceptable fact "from both the rational and emotional point of view; a state…death is a fact that we cannot avoid), a traumatic awareness (it inspires horror due the disappearance of a person), and finally the possibility of an afterlife (a desire to survive that is also a form of self-assertion)" (Gamba, 2016, p. 19). And this latter dimension is what basically underpins the issue of the digital life of the dead. What happens to data after death is a topic on which much has been written in recent years. This is particularly the case in France in recent months, ever since the legal world began to address these questions – which had previously been debated in the social sphere and foreseen by the major Web industries. French law states that during their lifetime, Web users have the right to determine the conditions for communicating and conserving their data after their death. It also stipulates that heirs have the right to access the digital data of the deceased as part of the estate.[30]

Online death has also become a highly topical subject from a scientific angle and death studies research groups have been set up at an international level. At a societal level, the media have enthusiastically seized on the subject, propelling death to the front of the social scene, making it a part of everyday life through the digital presence of the deceased and narrowing the distance between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Yet, while the theme of death is increasingly discussed, it is important to take into account the effects of context. When a death is recent, we noticed that mourners were less inclined to respond. For example, one respondent contacted via the Paradis Blanc website explained his refusal for an interview by the recency of his mother's death: "Madam, While I understand the usefulness of your survey, for the time being, it is very hard for me find time at the moment, as my health has considerably suffered from the immense sorrow I experienced one year ago. As there are too many uncertainties regarding my possibilities I cannot, for the moment, respond to

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[30] See: http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/ta/ta0663.asp. Last consulted 11 April 2016.

your request. I apologise for this.…ALAIN MARCHAL."[31] This is also confirmed by the reactions of Web users who, when interacting after the publication of articles on the subject, clearly find it difficult to deal with the subject.[32] Context effects played a particularly noticeable role regarding the events that dictated our research schedule. Following the tragic events of 13 November 2015 in Paris,[33] we judged it fitting and necessary to interrupt the dissemination of our survey until after the New Year holidays. The national turmoil was such that the intentions of the study were likely to be perceived as taking advantage of a dramatic situation and wrongly interpreted despite its scientific nature. The offended and sometimes abusive reactions to the survey postings on the Facebook tribute pages confirm this misunderstanding. The following comments, posted in early November 2015 on several of Facebook's[34] closed[35] tribute groups that we had asked to join,[36] are telling:

> "I suppose that you have all received the private message from Nathalie,[37] I don't know what you think about it, but I take it as cashing in! it's shameful to think of doing a survey taking advantage of the death of a young man, a lack of respect he's not even buried mourning is not even over! I didn't hesitate to reply this to her: 'and do you think that it's the moment for people who are mourning to reply to your questionnaire! It's shameful this lack of respect!!'"[38] (post 1)

> "have at least the respect of waiting for the funerals!!!!!"

> "You are sickening. You don't even realise it."

> "I beg u some respect and not to post this kind of article just anywhere!!! we don't give a damn yours sincerely!"

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[31] Quotation from an email correspondence, 6 April 2015. The name of the person who created the online memorial to his late mother on the Paradis Blanc website has been changed.

[32]   http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2016/02/13/repose-paix-petit-ange-enquete-les-fantomes-youtube-262988. Last consulted 20 April 2016.

[33] On the evening of 13 November 2015, a series of deadly attacks hit Paris, causing the death of 130 people and…injuring over 400.

[34] These groups are closed, meaning that is not possible to give their URL.

[35] On Facebook, there are three privacy settings for groups: "public", "closed" and "secret". The "public" setting means that anyone can join the group and all the postings are visible. For the second "closed" setting, one has to ask to join the group or be invited to join it. The group's postings can only be seen by its members. For a "secret" group, membership is by invitation only. The group is invisible to Web users who have not received an invitation (https://fr-fr.facebook.com/help/220336891328465. Last consulted 14 April 2016). For pages, there are no privacy settings: a page is necessarily "public". All Facebook users can "like" a page (https://fr-fr.facebook.com/help/155275634539412, Last consulted 14 April 2016).

[36] Note that we only had time to record a few of the comments as some of them had been deleted from the pages in question by Facebook administrators.

[37] The first name of the person who posted the message concerning the dissemination of the survey has been changed.

[38] The posts quoted in this article have been translated (from French) to reflect the poster's original punctuation and style.

"I agree! I forbid you to post anything whatsoever on my daughter's tribute! You've been warned.... in this way, you'll respect our suffering"

"I don't want to see you on this group any more yr advertising is shamefull here it's a tribute you are in the wrong place"

"Shitty advertising get out of here"....

Over and above their offended tenor, these posts speak volumes about the dividing lines between private and public communication and the limits of the sphere of intimacy (Tisseron, 2001). The situation experienced here is certainly characteristic of the ambiguities specific to the Facebook system (and all other relational platforms), which radically alters the dividing lines between the public and private spheres (Cardon, 2008; 2009). The situation is not only symptomatic of the binary nature underlying traditional social relationships, which separates private and public formats. But, more broadly, it is characteristic of the economy of visibility, in which public space is now defined in normative more than legal terms (Cardon, 2010). Although we used a private message to communicate on one platform, one recipient began to reply to us on the discussion thread in the collective space (cf. post 1). This posting prompted further posts from Web users, which changed the private approach into a semi-public discussion; the conversation then moved into a "grey" conversational space (Cardon, 2008), or in other words a space where privacy is visible to a social network of close friends and family. For the members of such groups, the survey researcher's post was perceived as hi-jacking the intentions of the "mourners' community", which had been created for the purpose of grieving and memory. The content of these messages fails to recognize the scientific character of the research, which was nonetheless clearly stated, and instead assimilates it to business advertising – which actually gives a glimpse of the poor level of digital literacy and suggests that we were dealing with socially disadvantaged profiles. These negative comments nonetheless had a direct impact on our dissemination via Facebook, which was thereafter considerably reduced. These comments also led us to question not only the methodology – the tension between ethical considerations and the need for results – but also the position of the researcher and the distance that she needs to take with respect to her research subject. This distance is likely to be jeopardised when emotion causes the figure of the researcher to recede, which may well happen when the subject is as traumatic as death,[39] and this is likely to compromise the researcher's scientific practice. This terrain is clearly a sensitive one insofar as it "potentially poses a substantial threat to the people involved, a threat that, when it appears, makes it difficult for the researcher and/or the participant to collect, keep and/or disseminate the research data" (Renzetti, 2012, p. 12). These affect-related implications could usefully be investigated given that they impact reflexivity concerning the principles of surveys. They have been addressed by some action-research-type studies that propose solutions enabling researchers to integrate their relation to the field into their research method (Tuffa, 2012). Certainly, the scientist

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[39] The violence – at least the perceived violence – of some of the comments impacted the progress of the research project as it further exacerbated the fragility of one of our intern colleagues who was affected by the research subject and the tragic events in Paris on 13 November 2015 among other things and who left the project early.

is a plural actor with multiple behavioural dispositions (Lahire, 2004) and his actions are influenced by prevailing social norms (Elias, 1991 [1983]) that, *ipso facto*, he cannot leave behind when he dons his researcher's hat. Far from being the figure of an individual free of subjectivity, he is unable to demonstrate his absolute neutrality in his research and rid himself of all normative or emotional considerations: "normativity is clearly a part of scientific practice and objectivity a social construct in that any (social) fact is always worked on from a human point of view" (Bourdeloie, 2014, p. 22; Granjon, 2014). In itself, the survey approach presupposes, at least for this research subject, that is not simply the scientific practitioner who is engaged, but also the individual as a human being subject to emotion, who uses raw material of which he is often an integral part: the researcher observes digital practices in which he is usually both actor and active. Certainly it would seem that obtaining results is specifically conditioned by the researcher's engagement – an engagement in his research that spills over into his personal engagement, giving him the "capacity" to grasp the social world he is studying (Thévenot, 2006).

For these reasons, we decided to use our own personal Facebook account to contact mourners liable to take part in the survey. This meant giving the research a more human and less neutral dimension. However, as the members of some Facebook tribute groups interpreted the initiative as immoral, this approach triggered an outcry from certain Web users. Admittedly, the initiative did raise questions of integrity: by joining (closed) "communities" devoted to mourning, the researcher could be perceived as a "peer" (Latzko-Toth & Proulx, 2013) having the same engagement as the other group members. This confusion of roles and postures is well illustrated by the research of Zimmer (2010)[40] on a group of researchers who used this hybrid posture to access student Facebook profiles and collect data whose source was easily identifiable. To dissipate this unease and employ a more ethical albeit less effective approach in terms of results,[41] we decided to create a Facebook account specifically dedicated to disseminating the questionnaire.[42]

Despite the various precautions (creating a "professional profile" and taking account of the context and prevailing social norms), we came up against numerous problems when administering the survey, mainly via Facebook and Paradis Blanc.

[40] See: Zimmer, M. (2010). "But the data is already public": on the ethics of research in Facebook. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *12*(4), 313–325.

[41] At the time of dissemination to closed groups, the number of unique visitors increased. The same high numbers of visits have not been recorded since we began disseminating the questionnaire on the more anonymous, open tribute pages.

[42] The name of the Facebook account dedicated to dissemination is *Immortalités numériques* (https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100010827763118). This account is separate from the *Éternités numériques* account, which is the project's official information site and observatory for this theme. The *Immortalités numériques* account was specifically created to avoid any risk of Facebook closing down the official account, as happened to one or our research colleagues. Facebook has in fact introduced "policies to stop behavior that other people may find annoying or abusive". If the account is blocked, one can still log on to the site but cannot use the proposed features; the length of time that the account is blocked depends on the situation.   (https://www.facebook.com/help/174623239336651/   and https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards. Last consulted 18 April 2016).

On the Paradis Blanc website, a great deal of energy and time was spent contacting the creators of memorials individually. This was laborious as in each case we had to consider the death or anniversary dates of the deceased. It also seemed advisable to take the funerary calendar into account for the survey phase. This meant waiting a certain time in the case of a recent death or an "anniversary date" marking the deceased person's birthday or death, since these are "special" moments for mourners, as shown by the steep rise in postings on such occasions. In the case of prenatal or neonatal deaths, it seemed reasonable to wait several weeks, if not months, before contacting the creator (most often a woman) of the memorial.

Finally, the Paradis Blanc memorials have a codified structure. Thus, when a memorial is created, the user is invited to give the deceased's date and place of birth and death and the relationship to the deceased, as well as to add one or more photographs... The website features make it possible to know the date on which the memorial was created, the number of ''tributes" and "candles" lit, as well as the number of visitors… Thus, when we contacted individual Web users who had created a memorial on the site (analysis of 2,272 memorials out of 4,484 on Paradis Blanc as at 4 April 2016, including 164 created by the Paradis Blanc team), we already had these data to hand (more or less complete depending on the profile) and had mostly identified the sex of the memorial creator and the deceased person on the basis of their names and photographs[43] (although the platform asks for the sex when the memorial is created, this information is not visible to the general public). For some profiles, we also had access to the place of birth or death of the deceased and information on the cause of death in the "En sa mémoire" (In his or her memory) section. We exploited this raw lexical material to enter significant data onto an Excel spreadsheet as our dissemination the survey on the Paradis Blanc website progressed. However, once again, aggregating these data raised deontological questions, especially as this was done unbeknown to the users of the site. Observing practices without the observed being aware is, of course, convenient for the researcher as it provides a situation unencumbered by artifice: would the observed write in the same way if they knew they were the subject of scientific research? In other words, this situation is doubtless ideal for the researcher wishing to observe without being seen and thus avoid what Labov (1972) describes as the "observer's paradox": "To obtain the data most important for linguistic theory, we have to observe how people speak when they are not being observed" (Labov W., 1972, p. 113). On the other hand, the practice of observing without individuals being aware of the fact is surely the "malaise of sociology" (Jounin, 2008). It must be acknowledged that hidden observation raises the question of "a professional ethic to the effect that any survey must rest on the 'informed consent' of the respondents" (Jounin, 2008, p. 260). But how are the ethical frontiers of research delimited? The data recorded by Paradis Blanc are public – a principle stated on the website's charter – and the platform makes it technically possible to contact a mourner through a form.

Could it be that the researcher's ethical rules have in fact shifted owing to the confusion created by the accessibility of data on the Web, which not only offers both public and private platforms but also transforms spatio-temporal frameworks? As

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[43] This information needs to be taken into account, as the biological sex of the deceased and the creator may be different.

Latzko-Toth and Proulx (2013, p. 32–33) highlight, the fast growing interest in the ethics of social sciences research has been prompted notably by "the effects of de-compartmentalization or blurring of what formerly made for clear-cut dividing lines between the categories underpinning researchers' ethical judgement. For example, the distinction between private life and the public sphere is being undermined by the new forms of computer-mediated interactions and the visibility that the Web confers on them" (Latzko-Toth & Proulx, 2013, p. 33[44]).

Viewed from this angle, the question of consent arises when the individual is free to agree or not to an interview with the researcher. This is illustrated by the example of Nadine[45] (accountant, aged 66, living on the island of Réunion). Three weeks after the death of her 85-year-old father in October 2013, Nadine created a Paradis Blanc Premium[46] account, which offers a broader range of features. During the interview, she pointed out that this online memorial was "private", insofar as she has told no one in her entourage about its existence:[47] "In fact, yes, it may seem strange but in fact what I feel, I write it, I don't want the others to see it…. That's because for me it's personal" (interview with Nadine, 8 April 2015). In fact, although her choice of the Premium format would indeed allow her to make her account totally private,[48] this is not the case as her account is completely accessible via any search engine.

In any event, the ambiguity of writings on the Web, as we see from the above example, shows the extent to which the narrowing divide between the public and private spheres due to socio-digital technologies is leading researchers to heighten their vigilance when working within the framework of online ethnography.

3. Analysing the results: methodological biases and the need to use a qualitative approach

At the time of writing this paper, the survey questionnaire is still in progress. As at 4 April 2016, we had a dataset of 670 respondents, exported from the online platform. While this is acceptable for statistical purposes, these data are not in fact high-

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[44] See: Latzko-Toth, G., & Pastinelli, M. (2013). Par-delà la dichotomie public/privé: la mise en visibilité des pratiques numériques et ses enjeux éthiques. *Tic&société, 7*(2,), 149–175. Available at: <http://ticetsociete.revues.org/1591>.

[45] For reasons of confidentiality, all or the respondents' first names have been changed.

[46] A Premium account allows you to create up to five memorials, post an unlimited number of photographs and videos and light candles. The subscription charge is 5.90 euros/month or 39 euros/year (http://www.paradisblanc.com/aide#r17). Last consulted 5 April 2016.

[47] For ethical reasons, as Nadine did not inform people about her page, we do not give her URL here. Even so, it should be mentioned that this page is in fact public.

[48] When a memorial is really private, it can only be accessed by people who have been invited via Facebook, Gmail, Hotmail or e-mail from a Paradis Blanc member's personal space. The memorial is then no longer accessible via search engines or the directory of memorials available on Paradis Blanc (http://www.paradisblanc.com/aide#r11). Last consulted 8 April 2016.

ly representative (social homogamy, female hegemony, etc.), which is why our methodology needs to be examined not only with respect to the questionnaire's design and dissemination, but also to the way that the results are used.

3.1. *Statistical treatment*

It is of course impossible here, and certainly not ethically acceptable, to identify the provenance of the respondents (i.e. the means used to reply to the questionnaire). However, our method for segmenting the targets (using R software to extract data by exporting them into an Excel spreadsheet[49]) enabled us to identify some of the clicks of total visitors and unique visitors[50] for each dissemination vector (101 in total: mourning websites, mailing lists, emails, flyers, etc.). This method only indicates whether someone has clicked on the questionnaire link, as evidenced by the attrition rate between the number of unique visitors (4,210 as at 15 April 2016) and the actual number of respondents (678 as at 14 April 2016). It does however give a probabilistic indication of the click-through rate for each dissemination vector. Sixty-three websites/actors agreed to disseminate the survey. Of these 63 websites/actors, 26 are websites/actors specializing in the funerary sector and 14 are university websites/actors. In total, of the 4,024 unique visitors as at 25 March 2016, 688 (17.1% of unique visitors) were from 29 funerary-sector actors that disseminated the questionnaire, with a higher participation from the memorial platforms Paradis Blanc (5.12% of total unique visitors) and Toujours là (2.91% of unique visitors). Next, the 14 links generated for university websites or electronic mailing lists gave rise to 2,007 unique visitors, i.e. an average of 148 unique visitors per link or 51.6% of total unique visitors, bearing in mind that the link that produced the most unique visitors was via the personal and professional network of the person running the statistical study (735 unique visitors, i.e. 18.27% of the total), closely followed by university websites (e.g. UTC, with 373 unique visitors or 9.27% of the total).

Overall, three times more unique visitors were recorded on university links. In view of this, it is hardly surprising that women are preponderant in our sample (73.16% women versus 26.84% men), as are highly educated social groups.

This sample is thus in no way representative of the French population and far from meets the "statistical ideal" (de Singly, 2014 p. 37). To achieve this, one needs to have a reference population and an exhaustive list of the sampling frame, which is a condition that usually only large statistics institutes can meet. Moreover, based on the knowledge about this reference population, it would have been necessary to

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[49] We are grateful to the project research engineer, Lucien Castex, who regularly extracted the data.

[50] To obtain some idea of response rate per survey vector, we generated a great many short links, which gave us the number of people who clicked on a particular link to the survey. These statistics must nonetheless be put into perspective as they simply provide a snapshot of the success or failure of a given dissemination vector.

While the visit (click) shows the number of times the link was activated, the concept of unique user allows the actual number of website visits to be estimated. This indicator limits the number of visits by checking the IP (Internet Protocol) address over a given period and the user agent (e.g. the browser) or cookie. As a result, over a given period the visitor is counted as one visit regardless of the number of times (s)he visits the link.

obtain a comparable quota-based sample considered to be representative (ibid.; Thompson, 2011) Not only did we lack the means to do this, but also dissemination via the Web presupposed that participants were not limited by geographical areas but included all Francophone respondents. As a result, 10.62% of responses came from foreign countries, both French-speaking and non-French-speaking (Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, Portugal, Germany, the USA, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, etc.).

In reality, although this sampling frame is distorted and raises various issues, it is not devoid of meaning, for several reasons. While we have not clearly identified studies showing that women have a higher propensity to respond to surveys, it appears that, in some domains, men participate less and their rate of non-response is higher (Régner-Loilier, 2007, p. 29). Moreover, our experience as researchers has led us, in all our surveys, to interview more women than men. This should probably be viewed as an effect of the interviewer's sex. In this case, the research team members who designed and disseminated the questionnaire are all women.[51] The question also arises of whether this very female-weighted sample is not a result of the "sex" of the survey subjects (Monjaret & Pugeault, 2014). Are we conducting a survey on subjects that are more "feminine"? Thus, while statistical research on technology use shows that men and women in France now have almost equal access to digital technologies (e.g. 85% of men have a home connection compared with 80% of women – Arcep, 2015, p. 44[52]), women are more active than men in in social networking (Bigot et al., 2013, p. 127). In particular, they are more likely to be registered on Facebook (51.8% according to Médiamétrie/NetRatings in December 2013).

As regards mourning, research shows that women have long been in charge of this domain by virtue of their role of mother. As the ethnologist Y. Verdier observed in her studies on the role of the "woman helper" in a French village in the Côte-d'Or department, "a dual task is assigned to the so-called woman helper: 'caring for the newborn' and 'caring for the dead'" (Verdier, 1976, p. 103). Generations of women have indeed been involved in the role of mourning: "taking care of death and the body of the deceased has long been a woman's job. They have an active role at both ends of life: birth and death, and it is they who 'look after' the dead, mourning and the veneration of tombs with visits to the cemetery, where they pray, clean and lay flowers on the graves" (Hardy, 2007, p. 141). Moreover, mourning is expressed differently depending on the gender of the bereaved (Beauthéac, 2008), with women tending to express their emotions more than men (Braconnier, 1996); Anglo-Saxons refer to men's way of managing mourning as somewhat "instrumental", oriented

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[51] Except for the research engineer. However, he dealt specifically with the technical design of the survey.

[52] It should nevertheless be noted that most of the individuals excluded from technology are elderly, less qualified women with lower incomes (Arcep, 2015). For example, "People who do not have Internet access at home are, in 2014, more often women (44% are 77 or older)….They mostly live alone (59%) and have low levels of qualification: 42% have BEPC-level qualification and 41% have no qualification. 53% are pensioners on a low income (32% belong to the low-income category and 31% belong to the lower-middle class). And finally, 31% live in a rural town (less than 2,000 inhabitants)" (ARCEP, 2015, p. 42).

towards action and thought, while women have a more intuitive style and are more inclined to show their emotions (Beauthéac, 2008, p. 17).

For all these reasons, the media that we used to disseminate the survey seem more likely to reach a female audience. On this point, however, it should be borne in mind that the highest rate of unique visits was obtained through dissemination of the survey to the personal and professional networks of two female members of the research team, which suggests that a higher number of women received the survey. Next come the university websites[53] and fora (http://forum.psychologies.com…), then funeral-sector actors (toujoursla.com: 117, comitam-obseques.com: 94, paradisblanc.com: 206…) – in short, websites frequented more by women.[54] Dissemination to the Paradis Blanc website is significant on this count: firstly, women are proportionally even more numerous for the current version of our survey than for the two previous versions[55] (women stating their sex represent 82.4% of respondents for this third version, which targeted very specifically Paradis Blanc members,[56] compared to 68.37% for the first two versions). Moreover, 83.8% of those who create memorials on Paradis Blanc are women (data from the analysis of 2,272 Paradis Blanc memorials out of a total 4,320 memorials (added to which are 164 created by the Paradis Blanc team, i.e. a total of 4,484 memorials), as at 4 April 2016.

While the sex (male/female) variable proves to be a determining factor in our respondent sampling frame not only in terms of the design and orientation of the overall survey methodology but also of the dissemination of results, the correlations between the variables and other socio-demographic data must also be taken into account. Although women are the most frequent visitors to websites related to mourning and memories of the deceased (32.4% of women vs. 20.8% of men), it is useful to note that the visitors are more often lower-grade, white-collar workers than managers and higher-grade intellectual occupations (the former representing 44.2% and the latter 23.5%). Our sampling frame contains more female than male lower-grade, white-collar workers (18.1% women against 9.7% men) and, conversely, fewer women than men in the manager and higher-grade intellectual occupation category (31.9% of women vs. 43.8% of men). What then needs to be considered is how the variables correlate with the effective impact that each them has. The regression model allows us to relativize the weight of the sex variable compared to the professional and socio-occupational variable, which also has a structuring effect.

Thanks to the dissemination process (focused on the Paradis Blanc website, Facebook tribute pages, etc.), the latest version of the survey has made it possible to correct for other socio-occupational variables. As the stream of responses came in, a sharp drop in the profiles of Bac+5 / Bac+6 and over was recorded, together with a

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[53] The Université de Technologie de Compiègne: 373 unique visitors; the Eneid project website (http://eneid.univ-paris3.fr): 148 unique visitors.

[54] Although we do not have precise statistics on the visits to websites such as Toujours là or Comitam Obsèques, we understand from our interviews with their developers that their public mainly comprises women.

[55] The survey went through three versions, involving slight variations in light of free-text comments from Web users.

[56] Results as at 6 April 2016.

rise in the profiles of Bac+3 and under. Similarly, the high rate of responses from managers and higher-grade intellectual occupations (34.51% of the 678 respondents as at 14 April 2016, across all survey versions) and students (18.58% of the 678 respondents as at 14 April 2016, across all survey versions) decreased compared to the rates obtained with first two versions of the survey. This corresponded to a rise in lower-grade, white-collar workers (15.63%) and jobseekers or people with no professional activity (11.5% of the 678 respondents as at 14 April 2016). Finally, the high rate of agnostic or atheist respondents combined (55.60% of the 678 respondents as at 14 April 2016, across all survey versions) also tended to decline in favour of Catholic and Protestant Christians. The biases identified in our survey are partly but not wholly due to the way the survey was administered. As the data analysis has shown, these biases are in fact embedded in the structure of questionnaire itself and in the way that the respondents interpret the questions. For example, when the Web users are questioned on their visits to memorial websites, the proposed answer "Never" may mean that "I know the page but I never visit it" or " I know of no page in memory of a deceased person close to me"… For people who visit and/or actually post on online pages, the reply is less ambiguous but nonetheless raises the question of whether the respondent has experienced the death of one or more people in his or her entourage. If so, does (s)he follow the same practice for all the deceased persons in this entourage? Which deceased person is (s)he explicitly referring to when (s)he describes his or her online mortuary practices? The fact that there is no indication of the cause of deceased's death, or details on the funeral and related rituals… truncates the analysis of highly important information. For the researcher, the treatment of these data may sometimes reveal responses that seem highly dissonant to the person conducting the survey but certainly meaningful to the respondent. We well know the extent to which question formulation can give rise to very diverse repertoires of interpretation, which means that it is vital to adopt as neutral a style as possible (de Singly, 2014, p. 32). The meaning of a question also relates to the "linguistic marketplace" (Bourdieu, 1982) in the sense that the social conditions for acquiring, producing and deploying language vary depending on considerations such as the speaker's social class and gender (ibid.).

Viewed from this angle, certain divergences between the questions asked and the answers given can be better understood. In fact, 35% of the 80 respondents who reported that they had not experienced a case of loss – as at 14 April 2016, across all survey versions – went on to reply against all logic that looking at photographs had been part of their mourning process (answers range between "a lot" and "not really").

Is this distortion due to the fact that the precision of the questions helps to jog the respondent's memory? In answering the question on how mourning was dealt with,[57] is the person referring to a situation that concerned him indirectly via some-

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[57] First, the following question on mourning was asked: "You have been affected by one or more deaths in recent years, involving… Several possible answers". The following choices were proposed: "Spouse, partner", "Family member", "Friend", "Other", "No death". Later, the following question was asked: "Which practices would you say accompanied your mourning…" and the following choices were proposed on a scale of 1 to 6 ("A lot" through to "Not at all"): "Visiting online spaces (social networking sites, virtual cemeteries, blogs, fo-

one close or does it involve a deceased person that he had not thought of earlier? It could also be that the word "mourning" also conveyed other meanings encompassing the idea of a separation at the level of geography, time or sentiments, etc.

Similarly, the respondents' free-form comments suggest a possible confusion in their understanding of the questions on mourning practices and the treatment of data: "Several ambiguous questions (particularly, the questions ending with 'deeply affected you' [*vous ont marqué*]); if we have experienced several deaths, the questions lead us to mix them up. The mixing of mourning practices and online mourning practices is confusing: it seems to me that it would be better to identify the online practices and ask contextual questions about these, once the respondent has stated that he has them (version 2 of the sampling frame. Man, aged 47, Bac+6, university academic, Haute-Garonne). The thoughts expressed by this respondent bring to mind the insolvable difficulty mentioned earlier regarding the preparation of the questionnaire. They also illustrate the real statistical complexities of our research subject and the overriding need for a qualitative approach here.

3.2. *The quantitative approach: its limitations and the need to venture into the qualitative sphere*

A reading of this paper could suggest that our questionnaire has numerous limitations given the imperfections of its construction and treatment. As the usual reproach from advocates of qualitative methods claims, this could flatten data and "cause some observations to be lost, and break up and compartmentalize, on the basis of certain criteria, aspects of situations, people and groups that should be seen as wholes, and perceived and described as such" (Desrosières, 2008 p. 144). Does this mean that we should concur with the view that there is a dichotomy between these two research methods? On the contrary, the relevance of bridging the divide between quantitative and qualitative methods in social sciences research, rather than nonsensically opposing them, has long been recognised (Bryman, 1984; Passeron, 1995; Abbott, 2001, 2004; Desrosières, 2008; Lemercier & Ollivier, 2011). These two methods are not in opposition in the sense that they constitute sources that are scientifically unequal; they are simply ways of "formatting" knowledge that do not depend on the same "economies" of worth (Thévenot, 2006) and epistemologies.

In any event, given the methodological limits of a quantitative approach and the introspective questions – sometimes seen as too prying – required by a survey on death and digital practices, we had no choice but to integrate a qualitative step into

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rums…)", "Looking at photos, videos or listening to music", "Visiting graves, columbaria, places where ashes are scattered…", "Keeping a funerary urn (if cremated)", "Keeping objects (letters, jewellery…)", Keeping digitial traces (emails, text messages…)", "Other". Thus, when respondents had replied "No death", it was not expected that they would answer the questions on mourning practices.

our survey in order to contextualise the data, understand the meanings given to online mourning practices and grasp the depth of these. This involved using a "case thinking" approach to explain "a situation, reconstruct the circumstances – the contexts – and thus reinsert them into a narrative, which is called on to give reasons for the specific configuration that makes a case out of a singularity" (Passeron & Revel, 2005, p. 37-22). The case study and statistics, or in other words two heterogeneous ways of *building the whole* (Desrosières, 2008, p. 144), are thus both adequately equipped to construct "sociological reasoning" (Passeron, 1995) in order to interpret the social sphere and go beyond the methodological obstacles or limits inherent to the two types of survey – qualitative and quantitative.

These two methods were accompanied by "quali-quantative" data (Lucas, 2013), produced using the IRaMuTeQ[58] software package, which allowed us to carry out a quasi-hybrid textual analysis combining the quantitative and qualitative. We prepared a sample of profiles extracted from the postings in order to analyse them. The sample was drawn from all of the people that we had contacted via the Paradis Blanc website with a view to sending them the questionnaire and then, in a second step, interviewing them. We selected "Premium" profiles, which had many more tributes compared to the traditional profiles (126 on average for Premium accounts *vs*. 8 on average for non-Premium accounts). By isolating keywords in these postings, we were able to understand how and how often the mourners express themselves on this type of site, as well as the provenance of these posts. This analysis revealed that these spaces for grieving brought together communities of mourners – i.e. the posts did not come only from close family and friends, but also from the website's "members" who often shared a similar grief – and kept the deceased "alive" by perpetuating their existence and identity. These intentions are particularly visible in the large number of postings that mix different registers of discourse, combining statements found in everyday conversation (such as "hello", "mum", "good night to you"), poetry, proverbs, tributes, intimate dialogue… Among these diverse posts, the mother[59] of a male child who died aged 22 months talks to her son in the present tense to show him her love, while apologising for not being with him, as if the child were physically present: "GOOd evening my angel mummy is very busy at the moment but I always have a big thought for you my son my star the days pass weeks go by months and nothing makes a difference there is still this emptiness in my heart you who is missing deeply from my life loveu mummy"[60] (mother of the deceased, 9 July 2015).

Another case in point is that of a memorial[61] created by a daughter whose mother died at the age of 61. This profile also mixes different registers of mostly intimate discourse, but the main posters on the memorial are the descendants, daughters and

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[58]IRaMuTeQ is a free/open-source software package for the statistical analysis of corpus text and lexical data tables. It is based on the R statistics software and the Python language. We thank Sara Houmair for extracting the data for the purposes of our research.

[59] www.paradisblanc.com/santiago-fernandez

[60] http://www.paradisblanc.com/santiago-fernandez/hommages/page-7. Last consulted 20 April 16.

[61] www.paradisblanc.com/angeline-talleux. Last consulted 20 April 16.

granddaughters, in line with the rhythms (anniversary dates, end-of-year celebrations…) and forms of expression symptomatic of the mourner's distress: "Mum, without you I'm lost, we did everything together, doing errands, preparing end-of-year festivities and the shops" (daughter of the deceased, November 2012).

This data extraction method is the only one that allows us to extract these online tributes, which belong mostly to the intimate sphere and private conversations: "It's not ok Dad this evening I'm destroyed, I just quarrelled with mum again, she doesn't understand that I'm 16 that I'm young and want to enjoy myself. And in addition to that I just learnt that Hugo doubt my feelings but I love him more than everything dad you know that, shit dad I'm in tears I'm not fine I'm not even able to make him happy dad help me give me a sign I'm fed up dad I'm cracking up, come back to me to console me tell me you love me and that you're here close to me… Help me...." (Memorial for Mathieu Gosselin,[62] by Justine Gosselin, 12 September 2015).

Although this hybrid method using "quali-quantitative" data (Lucas, 2013) cannot replace an in-depth interview, it does provide data that are inaccessible through a questionnaire or interview. However, this very time-consuming activity, which involves extracting and classifying data manually, implies taking many methodological precautions. Moreover, it needs to be kept in mind that the production of these data also depends on role of the socio-digital platforms in shaping their form and contextualisation. As a result, these data only make sense when they are discussed in a monograph study that makes it possible to understand the singularity of the cases and their ramifications (Burawoy, 2003), as well as deconstruct the functions and categories that help define how these online data are constructed.

Conclusion

Studying a subject related to death raises difficulties that, in the present case, are observable throughout all of the research phases, both in the quantitative and qualitative parts of the survey. The obstacles that hindered their progress are not shrinking in number. Although the second campaign of qualitative interviews is set to take over from the statistical questionnaires for those respondents who have agreed to a meeting, this approach seems to raise another challenge for us. Of the 678 respondents in the three sampling frames, 215 people had mentioned in their email the possibility of an interview and 67 of these were contacted. Only 15 users however replied and only 6 interviews have been conducted so far. While this attrition rate is likely due to the emotional nature of the research subject and possibly to the time gap between participation in the questionnaire and the steps taken to meet the respondents, it sets us a new challenge – nonetheless relativized by several comments from Web users: "I'm ready to share my story.… It helps me a lot to talk about this experience. I congratulate you for choosing this research subject and wish you every success" (women, hospital nurse, aged 36, Burkina Faso, 31 March 2016); "This questionnaire is interesting because apart from the fact that it allows data collection it allows the person replying to ask themselves questions. I spent a lot of effort to

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[62] http://www.paradisblanc.com/mathieu-gosselin/hommages. Last consulted 20 April 16.

trying to mourn my mother, I didn't realise that I could also as of now start organising my own departure for my children, especially as I'm bringing them up alone and if I die there won't be any obvious solution…" (woman, aged 47, teaching researcher and physicist, Lyon); "This survey is very good, a little comforting" (woman, age not given, Bac+2, hairdresser, Jura); "thank you for this questionnaire; it is in itself a balm for our hearts wounded by these bereavements that we are unable get over" (woman, aged 55, doctor-gynaecologist, lives in Algeria).

In addition to the benefits that interviews can bring to respondents – which is a dimension sometimes overlooked in the methodological literature –, the second qualitative interview campaign will remove a number of the questionnaire's limitations, as for instance, the impossibility of linking mourning practices and memorial rituals with a specific individual. It will broaden the analytical scope of the survey, currently confined to identifying correspondences between practices and traditional socio-demographic characteristics (age, sex, occupation, socio-occupational categories, etc.), by introducing other factors outside of these conventional albeit still relevant categories. This could involve taking into account the circumstances of the death, the mourner's social universe and its intrinsic hierarchies and discordances, as well as the relationship with the deceased person(s) relative to their social background. All of these factors invite us to follow a "case-study" approach (Passeron et al., 2005) and thus reconstitute the linkages between how individuals handle the future both of their own digital traces and those of their entourage and the related mourning (or other) practices.

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