

A New Meaning for “Dead Air” — Digital Death in the Media Age

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Germany’s most influential newsmagazine, *Der Spiegel*, reports that a new television channel there will concentrate 24/7 on issues related to death, dying, aging, and mourning. This may be the inevitable result of Europe’s secularization, and on this score America may not be far behind.

As the magazine reports:

Cooking shows are a dime a dozen on television these days. Home improvement shows hit the big time in the 1990s. Property shows are huge in Britain. Relationships and weddings have likewise become popular prime-time fodder. But the one event that faces every human on Earth has never had its own television channel.

Until now.

Starting this autumn in Germany, EosTV — a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week television channel devoted exclusively to aging, dying and mourning — will hit the airwaves. Viewers will be served up documentaries about cemeteries, shows about changing funeral culture, and helpful tips about finding a retirement home or nursing care. Should you be looking to install a stair lift in your home, EosTV will be the place to find information about that too. Death and dying, in other words, right in your living room.

EosTV may well fill an information void in German society. As the population ages and life expectancy lengthens, new issues, needs, and concerns arise. There are millions of viewers who are, no doubt, looking for information on chairlifts, health care options, and other information directed toward an older audience.

With the aging of the baby boomers now a major social concern, the rise of such channels is probably inevitable. Still, there is something unsettling about the idea.

After all, Germany documented 150,000 more deaths than births last year. A society that shifts its attention from birth to death has experienced something more significant than a new television channel.

Those behind the project point to changes in burial and funeral practices, including the development of generation-term burial plots and video obituaries:

In addition, says Kerstin Gernig, spokeswoman for the National Association of Funeral Homes, there has also been a recent shift in the way people approach death and burial. More people are taking advantage of anonymous burials, for example. Forest cemeteries are likewise becoming more popular, as are Internet graveyards. And the church no longer plays such a large role in the death industry.

“We want to take a look at the changing nature of mourning and death in the Internet, pictures and movies,” Gernig

told SPIEGEL ONLINE in reference to the new death channel.

A focus on death is, to some extent, a part of human existence. But there is a big difference between the medieval concern with death as the doorway to judgment and eternity and the more contemporary concern with death as a final life experience. That medieval approach was formed and framed by Christianity, and death was understood as a reminder that sinners will face the judgment of God. Life was understood as a preparation for eternity and individuals worried about whether they would spend eternity in heaven or in hell. Portraits of the era often featured a human skull in the foreground, a reminder that life is but a vapor. But that skull was not a symbol of morbid fascination with death but was instead a symbol of our temporality — *memento mori*.

In our postmodern times, death takes on a very different meaning. With no clear understanding of the meaning of either life or death framing human existence, room is left for a developing fascination with how death can be transformed into a new phase of life — now complete with its own 24/7 television channel.

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