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REPRESENTATION OF DEATH CULTURE IN THE ESTONIAN PRESS

Death is an omnipresent part of daily life, and evokes both personal and public reactions. In contemporary mediated society we might have less personal experience of grief, but we get daily information about the death from the (news) media.

On the one hand, the orientation on youth, health, happiness, success, strength, and growth marks death as failure, loss or error, not as a normal ending to all that lives. This situation is described as lack of death culture as it was known before the era of antibiotics and chemical weapons. On the other hand, death actually appears regularly in a variety of forms in the mass media. However, the way journalism covers death and grief is influenced by a specific discourse of journalism: mediated information is selected, framed, and presented in a certain conventional form.

The aim of the present study is to analyse the representation of death in Estonian daily newspapers in 2010. In order to map the wide spectrum of death coverage in our everyday news, a flow a seven-scale analysis model was created. The model is on the one hand based on news factors and newsworthiness, on the other hand its aim is to capture the specific nature of death: inevitable, unexpected, final, violent, etc.

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Introduction

Death is an omnipresent part of daily life and evokes both personal and public reactions. In the news media, themes of death and remembrance are woven together in hard news, features, pictures and obituaries. Traditionally transport and industrial accidents (with multiple victims), murder cases, as well as major natural disasters and war news are considered newsworthy because the role of the news is not to mirror the world but to highlight problems and extraordinary situations. Journalistic coverage is different when reporting about the death of hundreds and thousands (in case of natural disasters, war or industrial accidents) or one person; nevertheless

this dimension is usually in correlation to geographical distance and proximity (Adams 1986).

Death imagery pushes journalists into the debate over whether, where and how they should publish images of death and corpses. Indeed, the issue of how to use images of death has never been entirely clarified. Although we do not focus, in this paper, on these dilemmas it should be taken into consideration that the Estonian media do not usually represent corpses in an identifiable way.

In national tragedies, such as accidents causing many injuries and deaths, natural disasters and the death of people representing the national elite, etc., the aspect of death and the subsequent mediated (public) mourning rituals are likely to become media events (Dayan & Katz 1992; Pantti & Sumiala 2009). Indeed, coverage of a funeral and public mourning can be so intensive that it interrupts everyday life and broadcasting programs (e.g. funeral of a president or mourning of Princess Diana). In addition to media event the journalism studies provide more or less elaborated concepts for different types of intensive coverage where the media plays a significant role in framing and social amplification of a certain event or topic: mediated scandal, media hype, *news waves* of smaller amplitude than media event (Paimre & Harro-Loit 2011). However, such death-related intensively reported cases should be analysed separately from the daily news flow that is the focus of the present research.

The general death-related media context is broad and varied, ranging from the individual (death of a hundred years old person) and private funerals to national and international news reports about the victims of wars, catastrophes, accidents and murders. These reportages represent cultural ideas about the many meanings of death but it is also valuable to notice what is not reported concerning the death-theme. Regardless of their specific topic and circumstances – natural disaster, workplace accident, murder or the natural passing of the elderly – the stories told about death in journalism are ultimately about grief. News stories of the dead are about the living far more so than about the dead (Kitch & Hume 2008, 187) and they focus in particular on the emotions of survivors (Walter et al. 1995).

The goal of this study is to analyse how Estonian daily newspapers represent *death* in everyday news flows and find the elements of death culture in the news stories. Consequently, we analyse neither the representation of grief and death-related rituals such as funerals, public mourning and commemoration nor the discussions about the cause and guilt concerning violent deaths, etc. We exclude obituaries as “it is widely accepted that the emphasis in obituary composition should be on capturing life rather than describing the death” (Starck 2007, 373).

In mapping the variety of ways that the media cover *death*, we aim to create a model for qualitative content analysis that helps to define the elements of death coverage in newspapers and enables seeing which parts of the death discourse are included or excluded. We propose a seven-dimensional model for analysis that

partly comes from theoretical news value theory and partly from studies concerning death coverage in news media. In order to test this model we conducted qualitative content analysis on three Estonian dailies and three of the most prominent weeklies over a six week period, on one day for each of the six weeks. Our research focused on news discourse that included news, editorials and columns, but did not take into consideration any of the other formats that are used in media; fictional genres, reviews and classified announcements were omitted.

Death-related daily news flow

Society's orientation on youth, health, happiness, success, strength and growth marks death as a failure, loss or error, not as a normal conclusion of all life. This situation has been described as a lack of death culture before the era of antibiotics and chemical weapons (Kübler-Ross 1969).

It has been widely debated whether death as an issue has been absent, marginalized or appears quite regularly in the media (Aries 1974; Traber 1992; Walter et al. 1995; Hanusch 2008). We would claim that while the processes inherent in dying and death appear relatively seldom in the news media, death-related items appear often in one or another news story.

An event or theme may be selected for reporting because it has certain qualities (news factors, newsworthiness). The amount of damage, the social status of people, the geographical and cultural distance between the events and the place where the recipients of the news story live, relevance and proximity of the event to the news audience's lives and experiences are all equally important (Allan 1999, 62 f.; Keppinger & Ehmig 2006, 27).

Dying as a closure is an important news factor, because it is relevant to all of us. As people naturally pay attention to things that are dangerous or threatening (Shoemaker 2006, 107), violent and unexpected death-related events are more likely to be selected for publication. In German and Australian newspapers, most frequent coverage of death in the foreign news sections was of violent death (Hanusch 2008, 345). It should be kept in mind that we conceptualize violence and therefore violent death differently depending on social, cultural and historical circumstances. For example without any feelings of compassion from people, an elderly woman could be burned to death at a witch trial several hundred years ago in Scandinavia (Höijer 2004, 516 f.).

Several studies stress the way the news media covers conflicts (war), and catastrophes have a significant impact on the public reaction. Wolfsfeld et al. (2005; 2008), for example, describe various techniques journalists use in order to raise the level of emotionalism associated with the conflict event: "close-ups of the wounded or dead, /.../ personalization of victims" (Wolfsfeld et al. 2008, 403). Elmasry (2009) demonstrates how certain framing mechanisms allow newspapers to construct the legitimation of killings for the public. In the context of emotionalism,

the about-to-die image freezes a particularly memorable moment in the process of death and thereby generates an emotional identification with the person facing impending death (Zelizer 2005, 34).

Portrayals of death and dying might serve symbolic functions of social typing and control. McGill et al. (2007) contend that in the instance of mainstream media ignoring a genocidal event (e.g. the massacre of the Anuak tribe by the Ethiopian military), the journalists do not fulfil their primary purpose of informing society. News organizations tend not to show photographs of human devastation on the “other” side, military casualties, wounded or captured soldiers, etc. (Zelizer 2005, 31). This raises the critical issue of whether or not journalists ought to accurately depict the horrors of the war, even if this would be offensive to the audience or the government (see e.g. Konstantinidou 2008; Silcock & Schwalbe 2008; Borah 2009). Arguments about our dead versus their dead; about civilian versus military dead; about showing the faces of the dead, etc., inevitably draw in news editors, media ombudsmen and readers (Zelizer 2005, 27).

Western journalism has usually less of a problem using words in news to verbally recount the stories of death in wartime, but it has many problems using news pictures showing those who have died (Zelizer 2005, 27). The mediation of visual images of corpses and the portrayal of dead people has raised continuing journalism ethics debates concerning the extent to which news media can reproduce images of corpses. Should the bodies be unrecognizable in order to show respect towards the dead and their families? This question should be discussed separately for visual and print media, since besides ethical issues there are many technical and technological issues: can the image be accessed again, what kind of information and attitudes are mediated through focus, background, colours, graphics, cut, etc. In our study, we focus primarily on verbal expressions of death and of death culture.

Another important aspect concerning the public privacy of the dead and death is related to the daily information people get about the death of strangers from the media. The mediated sharing of the stories of strangers’ deaths may be the more common death experience in modern culture than the personal experience of losing close family and loved ones (Kitch & Hume 2008, xvii).

Since everyone dies, whose death is worthy of media coverage? Death and funerals of influential people are usually intensively covered by national and international media. Mourning rituals, like other secular or religious rituals can be defined as a context for affirmation, negotiation and contestation of social bonds and authority (Pantti & Sumiala 2009, 122). This type of commemorative journalism reaffirms rather than informs (Kitch 2000) and the ritual of mourning is a symbolic moment that inspires reflection on societal norms, hopes and fears (Kitch 2003; Pantti & Sumiala 2009). This is true not only for political figures but also of popular cultural figures (Kitch 2000, 173). At the same time, research indicates that in instances of national tragedies changes occur in the representation of the general public with media presenting photographs of and quotes from victims, survivors and mourners (Kitch 2003, 220; Pantti & Sumiala 2009, 129).

By taking into consideration the variety of journalistic framing of death-related items (e.g. victims of natural and man-made disasters and accidents, the deaths of ‘enemy’ soldiers, post-event hospitalization reports of victims), we found that another important issue concerning death culture representations in media is linked to the time-scale of the process of dying, the eventuality and remembrance of the dead. Although news stories primarily focus on causes, the moment of death and grief, they also report on the eventuality of an earlier than expected death in the future by offering warnings and prescriptions in the context of health promotion, safety instructions, etc. In the context of ‘death in the future’, the focus is on avoiding or postponing an earlier than expected death. This form of death reportage implicitly addresses the fear of death that many people share by making death seem to be manageable. In the context of death that has already happened, the focus may be on the concrete incident or the circumstances of death. Equally the focus may be the person that died or on the broader meaning of situation (e.g. on traffic death seems more meaningful if it is put on the context of traffic safety in the country). If death has already taken place, news journalism may also seek out those responsible or guilty the event. In brief, time as a perspective influences both the ways of coverage and representation.

Death representation in newspapers: seven-scale analysis model

In order to map the wide spectrum of death coverage in our everyday news flow we created a seven-scale analysis model (Table 1). Although this model is based on news factors and newsworthiness theory our aim, parallel to news criteria, was to capture the specific nature of death (inevitable, unexpected, final, violent, etc.).

By coding all death-related articles according to the model we can provide an approximate map of the areas, which journalism covers more intensively and which areas the coverage is more subtle. Thus one news article could meet several categories. Each scale is divided into four categories: two extreme (A and B) categories at either end of the spectrum and two central categories at either side of the median. The seven scales are as follows:

1. Elaborated accounts that detail how or why an individual died (or is dying) and stories of death without details *versus* short reports about the dead or the cause of death without full identification of the dead; mentioning the death (e.g. death statistics as a background) or announcement of a death in ordinary news text.
2. Natural death *versus* violent death. On this scale the end of natural death is populated by old age and diseases, and the other end, violent death is populated by accidents and homicide. In this analysis it is relevant to detect whether the violent death has been justified or, on the contrary, tied to searching for the culprit. Mapping the intensity of violent death coverage in the media enables

asking to what extent in the context of violent death is the focus on death, the individual, guilt or punishment. Research, as previously mentioned, indicates that violent deaths dominate media coverage. Suicide constitutes a particular aspect of deaths (the coverage of which is subordinated to specific media ethical norms).

3. Possible death in the future, impending death, *versus* dying and death that has already happened. This scale indicates the hidden elements of death culture, e.g. understanding of what kind of death is 'acceptable' or when death is premature. Many lifestyle-based suggestions are made in order to prevent unwanted ways of dying. In some cases, statistics are interpreted in a way that frightens or warns the audience away from certain kinds of hazard or risk (e.g. being male, being obese, having certain socio-economical status, etc.). This kind of coverage indicates that both writers and readers feel that they have some power over death, if not over mortality. The actual moment of death creates a border in media coverage as it does in emotions: prior to death there is mostly willingness to prevent death and fear of loss, after death there is sadness, shock and often hope that something similar will not happen again (fear of death in the future). The closer death is to the present, the greater the intensity of emotions.
4. One death *versus* multiple deaths. The function of this scale is to identify the ways in which the number of casualties is covered in news flows.
5. Emotional and/or geographical proximity of death *versus* distance of death. Usually death that occurs closer gets more attention than death in distant places. But it depends on the variety of factors according to which national dailies report about large numbers of deaths (e.g. access and use of foreign sources, presence of national correspondents in conflict zones, etc.) The function of this scale in the present study is to map those deaths that happened in Estonia (as we studied national dailies) or those news which created emotionalism and pity towards the dead.
6. Historical (generations ago) deaths and deaths that happened years or months ago *versus* recent death (yesterday and today). In some cases death becomes the object of commemoration or even part of canonical history (e.g. anniversaries). The difference between the scale on 'impending and already happened death' and the present scale is that in this case news recalls and reassesses the past (symbolic) deaths. The function of this scale is to reflect how often news recalls 'historic deaths'.
7. Death of the prominent person *versus* death of an animal. The purpose of this scale is to show how the status of the dead influences news texts. At one extreme of the scale is the death of an influential person with the death of an animal or bird at the other extreme, and in between are locally famous people and the general public. The function of this scale is to map how the balance between the elite and the general public is represented concerning death-related news items.

Table 1. Scales and categories of the 7-scale model

	Extreme A	Median		Extreme B	
	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4	
Scale 1					
Detailed portrayal of death and/or the deceased individual	Identified dead person, detailed pictures, descriptions of the process of dying and/or its reasons	Identified deceased, some details of the situation; no pictures	Unidentified deceased	Deaths as part of statistics, no identification, no circumstances of death described, no visuals	Indirect mentioning
Scale 2					
Natural death	Death in old age without any factors that directly caused the death	Death in old age as a result of illness or life environment	Death caused by nature disasters or war; accidents	Death willingly caused by another human being	Violent death
Scale 3					
Impending death	Mortality, inevitability of death	Lifestyle choices that may postpone or induce death	Prevention of death in certain hazardous situations	Real casualty	Death that already took place
Scale 4					
One death	One individual died	Several individuals died (1–5)	Many individuals died (up to 100)	More than 100 individuals died	A great many deaths
Scale 5					
Death is emotionally or geographically very close	Death that is emotionally or geographically close	Death with the hint of closeness	Geographically distant, but reporting includes emotionalization	Europe and countries supposed to be culturally meaningful	Death is geographically distant, no emotionalization
Scale 6					
Death occurred long ago	Writings about casualties in history, ancient wars	Death occurred some time ago; new information concerning casualties; commemorative material	Analytical writings about casualties within several months; information about investigating or trials	Death occurred within the past few days	Recent death
Scale 7					
Death of a prominent and influential person	Death of a well-known but not influential person	Death of a locally well-known person	Death of ordinary people	Death of animals	Death of other than human

Method and sample

Our research examines how many newspaper news stories are related to death-items. We expect that death exposure is bigger in television, especially if we take fiction into consideration. But we specifically addressed the research

question to the ordinary daily news flow of the Estonian newspaper organizations (paper and online versions together) that are still major news producers (Balčytiene & Harro-Loit 2009, 521), which are the most suitable medium.

The first step of the study investigated Estonian newspapers during the period of six weeks (17 March – 20 April 2010) in order to minimize the influence of an individual event. Our sample included six issues of three most prominent dailies of Estonia (Postimees, Eesti Päevaleht and Õhtuleht), and one issue of three weeklies (Eesti Ekspress, Maaleht, Sirp). One day from every week was selected and coded, producing an aggregate of 21 newspaper issues and 85 articles. We catalogued all the depictions of death that occurred in any news item. In this study we did not need to identify the stories that would have a bigger impact, therefore the genre, the length and place of publishing of the article was unimportant.

Our research was conducted in the period that included the Easter week since we assumed that this prominent Christian festivity may indicate some coverage of death in the news media, and we did indeed find one article in Eesti Päevaleht (Why do I believe that?, EPL, 3 April 2010). Unexpectedly, our sample period included the tragic aircraft accident on 10 April 2010, which killed 96 prominent leaders of Poland. This had clear influence on the number of articles (see Table 2).

All the classified advertisements were excluded from the sample and the rest of the texts coded. As our purpose was to reveal death-related themes also in

Table 2. Sample of analysed national Estonian dailies

Day	Date	Names of coded papers	Number of coded articles
Monday	12 April	Postimees (PM)	13
		Eesti Päevaleht (EPL)	16
		Õhtuleht (ÕL)	6
Tuesday	20 April	Postimees (PM)	5
		Eesti Päevaleht (EPL)	1
		Õhtuleht (ÕL)	3
Wednesday	17 March	Postimees (PM)	2
		Eesti Päevaleht (EPL)	1
		Õhtuleht (ÕL)	5
Thursday	25 March	Postimees (PM)	3
		Eesti Päevaleht (EPL)	1
		Õhtuleht (ÕL)	4
		Eesti Ekspress	0
		Maaleht	1
Friday	9 April	Postimees (PM)	6
		Eesti Päevaleht (EPL)	0
		Õhtuleht (ÕL)	4
		Sirp	0
Saturday	3 April	Postimees (PM)	6
		Eesti Päevaleht (EPL)	2
		Õhtuleht (ÕL)	3
Total			82

Table 3. Example of coding according to the four categories of the 7-scale model

Article	Scale	Category	Description
Elton's ex-boyfriend threw himself under a car	Detailed versus indirect	2	Identified deceased, some details of the situation, no picture
	Natural vs violent death	4	Alleged suicide
	Impending versus happened death	4	Real casualty took place
	One death versus many	1	One individual died
	Proximity	3	Death is distant, but emotionalized during reporting
	Death long ago versus recent death	2	Death occurred some time ago
	Death of an influential person versus death of other than human	3	Death of member of the general public

underlying structures in media texts, we had to elaborate the categories as data was being collected. On the other hand, in order to employ the systematic nature of content analysis we combined the quantitative and the qualitative content analysis. Every text that mentioned death or was based on some event including death was investigated using the seven scales of the model. All the scales were described as a tension between two extremes and were divided into four categories. Depending on the event and text, we were able in most cases to make an instant decision on the coding. For example, the coding for the article "Elton's ex-boyfriend threw himself under a car" (ÕL, 17 March 2010) was as shown in Table 3. On some occasions the news text was very short or focused in a way that made the coding of all factors by categories impossible. Consequently, the aggregate of the categories does not exactly match the number of articles.

Results

Mapping general tendencies

To answer the research question of how death is represented in everyday news flow the major finding is that except for media events and a few other intensively covered items (involving a large number of casualties), the daily news does mention death but mostly writes about the accident, police action, feelings of relatives, etc. The news discourse only refers to the death of individual personas as a reminder of safety for the living.

Another important finding is that reportage of the deaths of influential people and the general public in Estonian news flows is almost equal. There is however a clear distinction in that the deaths of elite people are reported more intensively (a larger number of stories) while the overall number of the general public who are killed, die or are about to die is bigger (Fig. 1, Table 4).

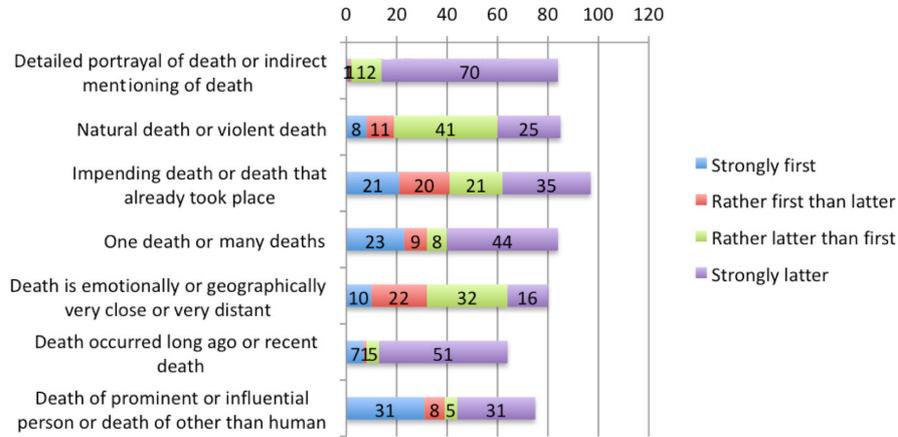


Fig. 1. Representation of death in Estonian dailies according to the extremes of the 7-scale model.

Table 4. Amount of articles representing death in sample of Estonian dailies

	Extreme A	Median			Extreme B
	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4	
Scale 1 Detailed portrayal of death	1	1	12	70	Indirect mentioning
Scale 2 Natural death	8	11	41	25	Violent death
Scale 3 Impending death	21	20	21	35	Death that already took place
Scale 4 One death	23	9	8	44	Many deaths
Scale 5 Death is emotionally or geographically very close	10	22	32	16	Death is geographically distant, no emotionalization
Scale 6 Death occurred long ago	7	1	5	51	Recent death
Scale 7 Death of prominent or influential person	31	8	5	31	Death of other than human

*Qualitative analysis: examples of representation of death in news stories**Detailed portrayal of death*

In Estonian newspapers death is seldom the major item. News reports tend to focus on collateral contexts rather than death or dying.

Explicit discussions on death are represented in two opinion articles. "Why do I believe this?" ("*Miks ma seda usun?*", EPL, 3 April 2010) is written by a foreign author who makes connections between the death of Jesus and the perception of death in the modern world. Two articles deal with death statistics "Death by accidents is decreasing, death by cancer is increasing" ("*Õnnetussurmade arv väheneb, vähisurmad sagedenevad*", PM, 9 April 2010) and "Last season one eighth of the population suffered from influenza" ("*Lõppeval hooajal põdes grippi kaheksandik elanikkonnast*", PM, 9 April 2010). The last article had the by-line of a short note that 21 people died because of influenza this year. Hence we can conclude that death statistics and religious way of thinking could make the topic of death as the primary angle of the story.

Violent death and natural death

Media, especially visual media enables the audience to witness the most violent way of dying: executions. For example, one widely reported execution that created a lot of debate in the mass media was Saddam Hussein's execution in 2006, because one witness used a mobile-phone to video the entire hanging process, which then surfaced on the Internet (Dimitrova & Lee 2009, 537, 543). In contrast to the explicit reporting practice of violent death in international media, our sample represented violent death in a variety of ways, sometimes (verbally) saying very little. If the person who is to be executed is a common criminal, then the execution itself is usually not the main angle of the story. Our sample includes a news story that mainly focuses on the question of capital punishment and the right to life as a possible absolute human right:

The international organisation of human rights, Amnesty International (AI) announced, according to Yle Uutiset that at the end of last week two people sentenced to death were secretly executed by the state of Belarus. /.../ The director of AI emphasised that "the death penalty is a final, cruel and inhuman punishment. It violates the right to life". No death penalties were carried out in Europe in the last year. Andrei Žuk and Vassili Juzepšuk were both convicted in 2009. The first committed an armed robbery, killing a man and a woman. The other was sentenced to death for killing six older women. Both petitioned for amnesty. The message that no mercy would be shown was given to the men only a few minutes prior to the execution (ÕL, 25 March 2010 p. 7, column World).

The example above shows, primarily, how the main focus of the story (capital punishment as a condemnable penalty, which no European country carries out, but Belarus does) dictates the death-related ideology in the story. That in turn is expressed in the choice of words. For example instead of the word *criminal* the expression *men sentenced to death* is used in this article. Also the word *execution*

is used while the murders committed by the felons are called by a gentler word *killing*. In addition, this example includes the violent death of a man and seven women, but these deaths are only mentioned as background facts. These dead people remain unidentified to the reader.

From the perspective of violent deaths it is important if the story focuses on the killing (including the circumstances and motives), the victim or the killer. For example, in *Postimees* (13 March 2010) a whole-page article was published with the headline “Soldiers in Afghanistan are not killing machines”. The article mentioned ‘death’ in only three sentences. The first: “So we have lost one man and another is recovering from life threatening wounds, one more got hit pretty bad.” In this statement, instead of the phrase “one man was killed” the wording “we have lost one man” is used. This indicates that the death is reported from the survivors’ point of view. The second sentence “Our soldiers are not detached murderers!” is positioned at end of the article and provides the answer to the problem announced at the beginning: “While on vacation I saw a large headline of an Estonian newspaper stating that soldiers who have been to Afghanistan become killing machines...” The third sentence “If a former or current serviceman does something stupid it doesn’t mean that the whole army is full of blood-thirsty murderers. There are far more man-killers on the Tallinn–Tartu road for example” (PM, 13 March 2010).

Although the headline denotes the fundamental discourse of “soldiers, war and killing, and death”, the majority of the story is dedicated to the variety of other problems, such as the soldiers’ mission against the nation state, social guarantees and pensions of soldiers, public opinion about the mission of Estonian soldiers in Afghanistan, etc. As the author of the story is a lieutenant in the Estonian army, the article clearly represents the war and the army’s ideology towards death, although it is not explicitly expressed.

Three weeks later the tabloid daily *Õhtuleht* published an editorial in response to *Postimees*’ article (of 13 March 2010), which was titled “Estonian sniper gives no warning nor shows any mercy”.

When an Estonian lieutenant was made to write for the paper that Estonian soldiers are no killing machines, the brave sniper Üllar, who is afraid to publish his last name, avers to the contrary – their philosophy is said to be: no warning, no mercy. Any personal killing experience the sergeant wisely refuses to confirm. In the interest of truth the army should, in addition to our fallen troops, also publish the numbers of enemies destroyed (ÕL, 9 April 2010).

Comparing these two passages from the two articles it becomes clear that the selection of words and expressions is not occasional. The two ideologies concerning death are contrasted but without any dialogue. The discourse of death and killing in war is put together with the debate concerning the mission in Afghanistan, hence the fundamental questions such as: is killing enemies the same as killing civilians? How should soldiers think about life and death in a war situation? These and other similar issues remain superficial and are tackled only briefly.

These three examples illustrate the important substance of news discourse concerning violent death: the discourse of legitimate (e.g. enforcement of death sentence, killing the enemy at war) or illegal death (murder) are represented in complex contexts and consequently the fundamental questions are marginalised rather than discussed. The presence of different discourses becomes most visible via the analysis on vocabulary. The news concerning violent deaths is highly intertextual: news are interpreted from foreign newspapers, there are several references to the previous news and discussions in these news.

Our sample also included the violent deaths of animals, but we shall handle these deaths in a sub-section that discusses the 'status of the dead'.

According to Figure 1, natural deaths were less represented than the opposite extreme of violent deaths. Natural death was covered in a few articles that were rather distant like "The Actor of 'Dynasty', Cazenove died", or targeted to preventing a future death ("Men swoop to see cardiologists") or originated from statistics. It remains debatable whether death as a result of disease counts as a natural death, as we coded it, or should chronic diseases be looked separately from epidemic infections.

Impending death or death that has already occurred

News discourses mostly deal with casualties that took place in the near past: within the last few days or weeks. However, our sample included many articles that were oriented towards the future. After the fact of death is announced, the writer's attention quickly turns to future. The long analytical article, "Between life and death" (Maaleht, 25 March 2010), analyses the effect of euthanasia on society from the legal point of view, while also mentioning the financial consequences of ageing on society. This article belongs to the news discourse but needs some context. In March 2010 there was a discussion in Estonia about the need to raise the retirement age from 63 years to 65 or 67 years. One article in our sample ("You had better die on time", PM, 25 March 2010) goes one step further, using possible death in the future as a tool of manipulation. Raising the retirement age seems to the author (Harri Taliga, leader of Estonian trade unions) so extreme that he seems to suggest dying before one becomes a burden on society's limited resources. Taliga characterizes this suggestion as an example of extreme political cynicism, which should "in the more developed countries lead to the political suicide, but got almost no attention here". Manipulation with the 'right time' of death indicates hidden elements of death culture, but the link to the culture of life is even more evident: any individual is entitled to live until the natural limits, while economic limits are experienced as unnatural and violent.

Some deaths that actually took place are used in the news media as warnings: what to do to prevent death in the deep waters or on weak ice ("Police warn people from going onto the ice", EPL, 3 April 2010; "Water may swallow the hiker on carelessly prepared trip", EPL, 20 April 2010). Even statistical data is used as a warning or caution, reflecting the belief that humans have significant power over death.

One and many dead

The most common news that notifies us of the death of hundreds and even thousands of people is foreign news from a conflict area. For example the news story “Power in Kyrgyzstan changed” (“*Võim Kõrgõstanis vahetus*”, ÕL, 9 April 2010) includes the following sentence: “Preliminary reports indicate 75 killed and over a thousand wounded in riots.” Further news text is about the decisions and activities of politicians of Kyrgyzstan. Hence, the number of the dead designates here the seriousness of the event, not the end of life of individuals. In other words – emotionalization is entirely missing in this death-related news story.

Although the next example represents an impending and future death, the example illustrates how the topic of extinction (dying out) could be presented in a short news story. The short news story with the headline “The Russians will die out?” (“*Venelased surevad välja?*”, ÕL, 25 March 2010) predominantly focuses on statistics about the average lifetime of the Russian population and particularly the problem of men dying too young. The overstated headline brings to the agenda the topic of fading or slow death of a whole nation by using a few numbers from statistics.

Death of a single person (except the death of a President) was reported mainly in short news. One article entitled “Colleague: ‘He believed that he will recover’” (“*Kolleeg: “Ta uskus kindlalt, et saab terveks”*”, ÕL, 3 April 2010) provides a short news about the death (as a consequence of severe illness) of a young man who became known in Estonian media as a participant in a reality show. The news is illustrated by the photo of the deceased, and his death is presented as unfair and unexpected. Other one-person death news are also presented as short announcements without specific details. The newsworthiness basically comes from the status of the person or the cause of death (e.g. fire accident).

Proximate and distant deaths

The proximity of death is rather difficult to detect in the globalized world. People can be equally touched by casualties that happen in their immediate surroundings, but also in cases when someone with whom they are emotionally related dies in a distant location. This, however, is more relevant for the reception of news than in our research. However, in the process of selecting and producing news, acute emotionalization takes place: either or both the writer and editor try to find elements that may bring an event closer to the potential reader. For example, two articles on 12 April, two days after the air crash, were devoted to the aircraft used by the Polish leaders. The title in *Õhtuleht* asked “Did Lech Walesa visit Tartu with the same aircraft?” – the location of Tartu was used as an element to bring the tragedy even closer to Estonian readers. Postimees states that “The Estonian president has travelled on the crashed aircraft”. The title brings the dangers of air travelling even closer and possibly increases the shock.

Death that is experienced closely often raises many questions that seek not only to attach blame (“Russian investigators blame the pilot”, PM, 12 April), but also try to find a meaning (“God, why did you let that happen?” on the front page of *ÕL*, 12 April).

Historical death or recent death

Commemorations of deaths that happened a long time ago are often used in the news discourse as a historical context that helps to interpret the current event by evoking the collective memory, adding new evidence, revising a once-agreed-upon past or imparting lessons and values. Nostalgia, analogies and values are key aspects of historical references (Winfield et al. 2002, 289) and in reporting some death cases newspapers build up analogies using memory politics, as well as emotional and implicit connections.

When newspapers were reporting the death of the President of Poland and 95 other people from Poland’s political and military elite, the connection to Katyn massacre was represented explicitly as this extract in an opinion story reveals:

In the spring of 1940, NKVD murdered over 20 000 Polish war prisoners in the woods of Katyn, ca 20 km from the town of Smolensk. Among them were Polish intellectuals, engineers, policemen and over 8000 Polish officers. The systematic eradication of the Polish elite took place. On Saturday morning, two days ago, the plane of the president of Poland Lech Kaczynski crashed near the Smolensk airport. In addition to the president, the plane carried his wife, several politicians and virtually the whole Polish army command, members of the church, historians. /.../ History repeats itself... In a cruel and tragic form. The symbolism of the event is terrible (EPL, 12 April 2010).

Historical parallels provide connections to the place and status of the victims, and several articles discussed the meaning of this tragedy to the Polish state. For example, the article entitled “Even commemorating the mass murder of Katyn brings death” (EPL, 12 April 2010) includes this sentence: “Even in the year 2008, some Kremlin-sympathizing newspapers tried /.../ to claim that the massacre of Katyn was carried out by the Germans.” The political interpretation of the Katyn massacre is dominant.

The intensive coverage (the plane crash tragedy became a media event) of the death of the President of Poland provided space for bringing the topic closer to the Estonian audience. The media turned to past events and published news like: “The Estonian President had also flown in the plane that crashed” (“*Alla kukkunud lennukiga on reisinud ka Eesti president*”, PM, 12 April 2010); “Lech Walesa visited Tartu in the crashed plane?” (“*Lech Walesa käis alla kukkunud lennukiga Tartus?*”, *ÕL*, 12 April 2010). The news media actualized the events of 1994 (the President of Estonia flying in the same plane to Poland) and 2008 (Lech Walesa’s visit to Tartu) without any straightforward connection to the catastrophe. The article concerning Walesa landing at Tartu was illustrated with photomontage about the wreckage of the aircraft and the current photographs of Walesa. This could illustrate the variety of ways history could be used in intensive coverage of important death stories.

Status of the dead person

As the death of the Polish president was already examined in previous sections, it should also be noted that the death and funeral rituals of influential people might become a media event, which interrupts the routine of broadcast programs and news flow.

Media also covers the death of people who were considered newsworthy because of another odd aspect other than influence. For example, “The worlds shortest man died during a TV-show recording in Rome” (“*Maailma lühim mees suri Roomas telešõu lindistusel*”, ÕL, 17 March 2010). Although the larger part of the story covers the activities of the Guinness Book of World Records concerning the world’s shortest man, there is a short paragraph telling of the man’s death at the end of the article:

During the recording the dwarf suddenly felt a strong pain in his chest. The TV-producers took him to a nearby clinic, but unfortunately the doctors could not save He Pingping’s life. Preliminary reports claim that the little man’s heart gave out. It is possible that the health problem was caused by a bad habit. Namely, the world’s shortest man was a passionate smoker (ÕL, 17.03.2010).

Even though death is stressed in the headlines, the paragraph on the death is a laconic narrative and forms only a small part of the news story. The death provides a reason to talk about the Guinness Book of World Records (the shortest man and the woman with the world’s longest legs). It is important that the future consequences of the death are also covered, a new candidate for the position of the world’s shortest man has already been found.

As mentioned before, the death of members of the general public is only covered in the case of an extraordinary aspect. Fire accidents that cause death are usually newsworthy items in Estonian media: “One person died in a house fire on Saaremaa” (“*Saaremaal hukkus eile elamupõlengus inimene*”, EPL, 12 April 2010).

The fire that claimed a human life started at 8.35 am in a house with a mansard floor, in Torgu parish, Laadla village. A 90 year old man who was woken by the fire escaped from the house, his son who had a physical disability perished. The house had a working smoke alarm.

Concerning the representation of death attitudes to the death the implicit attitude (underlined sentence) in this news story could be that children should not die before their parents.

In our sample three news stories were about the death of animals. The article “Shocking find – owner disposed of dead puppies in a garbage container” (ÕL, 25 March 2010) is unusual as this is illustrated with a photo of the corpses of dead puppies. This is the only photo that contains images of corpses in our sample. In this article the discussion concerning the death culture is explicit:

Valner (director of Estonian Animal Protection Society – authors) says that unfortunately it is quite common in our culture to throw dead animals into the garbage bin. It shows the attitude towards the animal – it is a thing that, when expired, can be thrown away.

The news story also contains a discussion of reasons why the owner did so (frozen ground and lots of snow) and why putting the corpses of animals into

garbage bins is prohibited by the laws about disease control and ethics. The article presents details and discussion without mitigation. Normative framing is dominant, what is prohibited and what should be done.

A slightly similar article is entitled “Homeless dogs kill many roe-deer” (“*Hulkurkoerad murravad massiliselt metskitsi*”, EPL, 25 March 2010). Part of the article covers instructions about what people should do when they find corpses of animals. This article also includes the discourse of legal and illegal killing of animals.

The third article on the death of animals is about some swans which starved to death (“*Mere äärest leitud luiki tabas näljasurm*”, EPL, 17 March 2010). This article was slightly different as people are blamed for trapping the swans in one location when they feed them. Swans are a species of migratory birds; therefore people should not feed them, although the environmental office cannot prohibit this activity.

Hence, the status of the person is important but the death of animals is also represented quite intensively.

Conclusions

Mainly on the basis of academic studies on the subject of covering death-related subjects, we created a seven-scale model. This enables us to analyse the variety of aspects of death-related news reporting that is usually left unnoticed: the complexity of discourses in death-related news texts, lack of absorption, relatively intensive coverage of war-related deaths and deaths of animals. Meanwhile, lexical analysis indicates that even if the aspect of death is handled superficially in most news stories, the text represents the existing attitudes and relates to the ‘major discourses’ on related topics and dilemmas.

Three major conclusions should be emphasised when we sum up the results of the present study, since they relate to the nature of the news discourse and therefore might have long-term consequences on how the public perceives death.

1. In the majority of reported cases death-related reporting is more focused on the influence that death has on the living. There seems to be a silent acceptance of death as an end of every life: death is the main angle of the story only if there is an aspect, which is either particularly frightening or ambiguous.
2. As there are hardly any in-depth or explicit discussions concerning death culture the news discourses still represent the existing (and conflicting) views concerning violent deaths, the impending death of a single person or of the whole nation. The everyday news flow incorporates small elements of the whole spectrum concerning the various aspects of death.
3. The representation of death culture in Estonian newspapers is mainly influenced by the news values – the most humane and emotional aspect of death culture like the process of mourning, funeral rituals, expressing condolences, etc. are usually missing or well hidden.

The seven-scale model enables to provide a more complex 'map' of death-related issues in mass media than one may notice while following, for example, the daily television programme. The content of television programming also includes fictional films, in which (violent) death is often represented differently from the way the news discourse constructs death and death-related issues. The need to distinguish the news media and traditional journalistic content from fictional entertainment and virtual obituaries, virtual mourning and other Internet-related communications, is therefore essential. Secondly, the news discourse constructs death and death-related issues in many configurations, so it would be difficult to grasp the whole spectrum in the daily news flow. The seven-scale analysis model is one possibility of mapping the multidimensionality of the discourse. It is the question of further (qualitative) analysis how these different dimensions are related to the existing death culture outside the news discourse.

As a result of this study, one phenomenon of news journalism constructing the death-discourse appeared: moral and existential death-related topics are sometimes represented by a few sentences in a short news story (e.g. death penalty) or mentioned amongst other political issues (is the soldier a murderer in war?). The Estonian news media handles death as an event and consequently the coverage is occasionally rather instrumental. On the one hand this comes from the intertextual nature of journalism: one news-story is linked or refers to other texts (meetings, speeches, protocols, traditions, books, conversations, etc.) where the morals and existential aspects of death might get more attention. On the other hand it should be always taken into consideration that the news value and other news processing methods influence the construction of any topic, on which the media report. Nevertheless, it would also be reasonable to take into consideration that to some extent the everyday news flow reflects the perception of death-related issues in culture, particularly the aspect of absent discourses.

The present research allows us to underline some features of Estonian public perception of death. First, the secular nature of Estonian society is well reflected in media's representation of the death issue. Death is perceived as a defect or misery (and part of this comes from the nature of the newsworthiness), or it is only mentioned and not given a meaning. Secondly, by taking into consideration the time-scale of death-related news, we can conclude that the representation of death is primarily oriented to its recent nature, while the time-distant reflection of death is presented.

Acknowledgements

The research was supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence of Cultural Theory) and by the Estonian Ministry of Education on Research (project SF018002s07).

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Halliki Harro-Loit ja Kadri Ugur

SURMAKULTUURI REPRESENTATSIOON EESTI AJALEHTEDES

Resüme

Infoühiskonnas võivad inimesed kogeda surma ja leinaga seotut, omamata nende teemade osas isiklikku kogemust. Ühelt poolt esitatakse noorust, tervist, õnne, edu ja jõudu eksponeerivas tänapäeva kultuuris surmadiskursust kaotuse ning vea tonaalsuses, aga mitte kui elu normaalset lõppemist. Teisalt esitab massimeedia surma pidevalt erinevas formaadis ja erineval viisil: uudisajakirjanduses, filmides, nii faktidele kui fantaasiale tuginedes. Surma teema käsitlemine ajakirjanduslikus meedias on mõjutatud uudiste diskursuse spetsiifikast: info selekteerimisest vastavalt kanali spetsiifikale ja uudisväärtusele, selle raamistamisest ning muudest konventsioonidest. Käesoleva uurimuse eesmärgiks on analüüsida surma teema representatsiooni 2010. aasta kevade Eesti ajalehtedes ja esitada seitsmeskaalaline mudel, mis võimaldab nähtavaks muuta ajakirjandusliku surmadiskursuse erinevaid aspekte. Mudeli eesmärk on sünteesida uudisfaktorite teoreetiline käsitlus surma erisuguste aspektidega.