

Revisiting funeral recordings during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK

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Abstract

Especially when travel and gatherings were restricted during the Covid-19 pandemic, filming and live-streaming enabled more people to connect with funerals than could attend in person. Filming has also created another less well considered possibility: of revisiting a funeral via a recording. This Viewpoint outlines a range of experiences and opinions about this practice. We suggest careful attention is needed to both its development and its implications for bereavement care in diverse circumstances.

Keywords: *funerals, Covid-19, recording, digital, mourning*

Implications for practice

- When filming funerals for livestreaming or for distribution in recorded form, be aware that some people may wish to watch them more than once, and seek comfort from doing this. Consult, where appropriate, regarding what should be included and/or excluded from recordings.
- If offering funeral recordings anticipate that some people may have (strongly) negative reactions to the prospect of revisiting a funeral recording, just as others may find it a useful option.
- Avoid making unwarranted general claims to the effect that watching funeral recordings is therapeutic. Further research is needed to investigate whether, how and why it can be beneficial or harmful for different people.

Introduction

In September 2020, six months after the first UK Coronavirus ‘lockdown,’ BBC News (Thorpe, 2020) published a video ‘I used to film weddings but now I film funerals’ in which videographer Ian Wilkinson describes live-streaming and recording funerals for ‘relatives who can’t be there’. Covid-19 pandemic restrictions on attendance saw funeral filming boom in the UK, with outputs from smartphone videos, crematorium cameras and professional film-makers shared on a range of platforms. But filming funerals also creates a curious possibility of revisiting someone’s funeral via a recording.

As Covid-19 pandemic innovations settle, it seems important to explore people’s experiences and evaluations of engaging with funeral recordings. As part of this project we conducted 67 interviews with a diverse UK sample of bereaved individuals, funeral directors, and funeral celebrants and officiants. This paper illustrates participants’ opinions of, and encounters with, funeral recordings, and particularly of revisiting funerals at which they were also present. It bolsters previous notes about this potential affordance (Burrell & Selman, 2020; Cann *et al.*, 2020; Pitsillides & Wallace, 2021).

Participants’ appraisals of whether, why and how to revisit funeral recordings were personal and varied. While some considered it a positive opportunity, others were more uncertain or averse, deeming re-experiencing funerals morbid and unhelpful. We consider these different perspectives in turn before making suggestions for future practice and research.

‘Quite a comfort’ – more positive views

Funeral director Shirley described a bereaved mother who found it ‘nice’ to watch her child’s funeral again:

‘... because you don’t see everyone that’s there and [...] it gives you the opportunity to see it from a different angle. She found that a great comfort’.

Another funeral director, Donna, had employed a videographer to record her mother’s funeral service

several years previously. She also took in details she had missed and found it ‘quite a comfort’ to watch the edited recording:

‘[T]hat church was packed and people [were] standing outside. And it was only when you watch the video afterwards that you realise who was there... [you] don’t take in everything that’s going on... on the day because... you’re upset, you’re fixed on what you’re doing, and you’re focused on the coffin.’

In light of her own positive experience, and to enable relatives overseas to engage with funerals, Donna advocated recordings during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Bereaved participants who had revisited funerals echoed these positive views. Having live-streamed her father’s funeral service during the Covid-19 pandemic, Cynthia uploaded an edited copy to YouTube, and watched it several times. She suggested that revisiting the funeral allowed her to express her emotions more freely:

‘I get comfort from watching it – I mean the night of the service when you get home, I just kind of wanted just to go to bed, and I sat, and I watched it on repeat four or five times and I had a good cry finally. And I’ve watched it several times since... It sounds odd, but we’ve all said this – it was a nice service. It really was.’

Humanist celebrant Rosa also suggested that people encounter different emotional spaces when revisiting funerals via recordings than when they are at funerals in person, suggesting that for some a different ‘frame of mind’ can facilitate better appreciation of the event:

‘They let you download a recording so [people] can watch it again at their leisure. Sometimes months and months later, I’ll get someone saying... “I just watched the funeral and I just wanted to tell you how lovely it was. At the time I didn’t really appreciate it because I wasn’t in the frame of mind to be able to deal with it.”’

Zara bought a recording of her mother’s funeral. Like others, she appreciated more fully the details of what was said and done:

‘There’s so many things in it that when I was at the funeral I probably didn’t notice; it’s shot from the back and my eldest son... put his arm around me... I noticed it during the funeral but to actually watch it back is quite poignant to be able to see that [and] watch my brother make his speech again – I find it quite beautiful to listen... I’m definitely glad I have a copy.’

‘That could be quite morbid’ – mixed and more negative views

Although Zara recounted positive experiences of watching the recording, she also said she now had to be in quite a ‘dark place’ to revisit it:

‘I haven’t watched it for a while... I have to go to quite a dark place now if I ever feel the need to watch it but in the days after the funeral, probably for a good couple of months I really struggled sleeping and I’d wake up very early and come down and watch it.’

Alongside mixed emotions, she also recognised that revisiting a funeral might be considered ‘morbid’ or ‘odd’:

‘[The recording was] available for playback for 28 days after, [and] – this might sound a bit odd – but I then purchased a copy... I have watched it back again; call me morbid... I don’t think any of the siblings have... Again, so morbid, but I would watch it again when the time’s right... I’d rather have it than never be able to watch it again.’

Cynthia similarly noted that repeatedly revisiting a funeral recording might ‘sound odd’ to others, and Donna acknowledged that some bereaved people to whom she suggested recording a funeral felt ‘a bit funny’ about this unfamiliar option.

Kevin expected it to be some time before he might feel ready to revisit his wife’s funeral, fearing it ‘would just be too painful... just too emotional for me... I may well look at it, but it’s probably going to be months away.’

Ruth similarly noted that some people who watched the recording of her husband’s funeral had needed to ‘work up the courage’ to do so. Like Kevin, they wanted to feel relatively robust because they anticipated that watching would be difficult.

This invites questions about the different emotional demands of being given a time to attend a funeral or watch it livestreaming, and having to choose when to watch a recording.

Deborah, a humanist celebrant whose mother died during the Covid-19 pandemic, further questioned the value of ‘going back over’ funerals which would normally only be experienced once:

‘There was a timeframe, once we had been sent this recording... of two days or something and then it would be deleted... and I chose not to extend it because I thought under normal circumstances you go to a funeral once, it’s not something you go back [over]... so I let it go.’

After his mother-in-law’s funeral, Matthew was clear that he:

‘... would not want to go back and watch it again. I think... particularly for bereaved partners... that could be quite morbid and not help them move on.’

‘It was just not good’ – variability of recordings

The differences of opinion illustrated above related to the participants’ scope to appreciate details of what had taken place: of course, this depends upon such details being included in filming, and rendered audible and visible in helpful ways. More broadly, the characteristics of recordings affected people’s experiences of revisiting funerals.

Following his mother’s funeral, Calum was pleased that:

‘...things like the quality of the music and all that comes across so well... it’s not just a video camera in the corner... the production of it is good.’

By contrast, Cameron described a friend’s funeral at which she:

‘...couldn’t hear a thing people said. It was very, very disappointing... it was on Zoom and people hadn’t switched off their speakerphones – it was just not good.’

Given the significance of these aspects of quality, it is unsurprising that Pitsillides and Wallace (2021,

p66) observed increasing professionalisation in funeral filming.

However, questions about what is recorded and how are perhaps more contested and in need of careful consideration than is sometimes acknowledged. In our study, protestant minister Edith spoke highly of those who:

‘... think about the camera placement so that the camera will focus on where the coffin is placed and where I am... If you do see any of the bereaved, it’s just the back of their heads ... [they don’t] show [their] faces unless they have requested that... so it’s actually been done pretty sensitively.’

By contrast, Cathy described the recording of her aunt’s funeral as ‘ghastly’, in part because ‘the only people you could see were the back views of your ageing cousins’. For Edith, restricting the images of mourners to the backs of their heads reflected sensitivity (and perhaps legal concerns about personal data protection and ethical concerns about portrayals of personal grief), but for Cathy it gave a dramatically limited viewpoint.

Celebrant Peter was unequivocal about the importance of capturing ‘the things you want to remember’ such as corteges, musicians, and people ‘coming out to mark their respect in the street, stopping for the hearse and bowing’ rather than only the service (what he called the ‘mechanical end to the day’). The filming of this would, however, add to logistical demands and (likely) costs.

‘Without a doubt that’s here to stay’ – looking to the future

Like Pitsillides and Wallace (2021, p67) our interviewees expected funeral live-streaming and recording to continue, as Shirley asserted:

‘...without a doubt that’s here to stay. Because there will always be people that can’t make it.’

to a funeral in person.

The possibility of revisiting funeral recordings, however, evokes mixed opinions. One apparently obvious and simple way forward is, as Spiritualist minister Ben suggested, to make it an option:

people can watch a recording later ‘if they want to’. However, the commercial value that some may derive from selling recordings and the emotional complexity of the situation, together with what is being offered, raise questions about the ethics of modes of persuasion and senses of pressure and obligation that may be generated with the offer of the option. This may be especially problematic if recordings are offered or discussed as potentially therapeutic. The benefits and harms are currently under-examined and will plausibly vary depending on the circumstances of the funeral and mourner as well as what is included (or not) in the recording. Implications for grief are perhaps key among the outcomes that merit further exploration. Does revisiting a funeral problematically prevent people from ‘moving on’ (as Matthew implied) and/or could it help people to continue their relationship with someone who died in a way that the continuing and transforming bonds paradigms suggest can be healthy (Stroebe *et al*, 2010; Bell *et al*, 2015)? If the latter, greater understanding of the effects of revisiting funerals might help alleviate the ambivalence of people who are inclined to revisit funerals but fear being considered ‘morbid’ or ‘abnormal’ (see Maddrell, 2013, p506).

Attention should also be paid to how practices of revisiting funerals vary and evolve. Celebrant Richard, for example, raised questions about appropriate behaviour when engaging with virtual funerals:

‘What happens, whether people tune in at the time of the funeral? Do they catch up because they’re abroad? What do they wear?... they make a cup of tea, is that okay?... Do they do it on [their] phone?’

We also note that several participants mentioned plans to gather and revisit filmed funerals, but none described doing this.

As funeral filming develops in the UK and beyond, it will be important to study and reflect on the implications of revisiting funerals and whether and how it can contribute to good bereavement care.

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