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The glocalization of death in the digital age: traits and limits

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This perspective article explores the interplay between death and glocalization in digitally saturated societies. The central question driving our perspective is how societal responses to death reflect and inform the process of glocalization within the context of increasing digital connectivity. In this study, we discuss that societal response to death provides a unique perspective on how global digital trends intersect with deep-seated beliefs and traditions in glocalization dynamics. Thus, the main section of the article (Section 3) examines the traits and limitations of digital glocalization in mortality contexts, revealing its multifaceted nature: digital glocalization is relational, post-metaphysical, naturally occurring, and a boundary solution to crises. Constraints in glocal forging in the context of bereavement include interpersonal challenges, social alienation, evolving local customs, religious considerations, and timing issues. Our perspective, informed by brief ethnographic insights from contemporary Romania, highlights the fusion of ancient customs, digital tools, and religious beliefs in shaping distinctive responses to death in digitally enriched environments. Ultimately, this study concludes that death serves as a catalyst for glocalization, harmonizing local traditions and digital advancements in navigating the complexities of life and loss in the digital age, portraying death as the great “glocalizer.”

KEYWORDS

death, digital, glocalization, glocal studies, global studies, cultural studies

1 Introduction

Exploring how societies respond to death provides a unique perspective on glocalization in digitally saturated societies. It highlights the intricate interplay between global digital influences and local traditions as individuals and communities navigate these dynamics in an online–offline continuum (Lagerkvist, 2022, p. 19–48). Our study explores how societal responses to death both reflect and drive the process of glocalization in an era of increasing digital connectivity and technological advancement. Thus, our central thesis posits that scholars can deepen their understanding of the complex phenomenon of glocalization by exploring how societies navigate death and loss, which is a universal yet deeply ingrained experience.

With approximately two-thirds of the global population connected to the Internet (Chayko, 2018; Statista, 2024), the sociocultural and affective implications of death in digital environments are universally experienced (Pitsillides et al., 2013; Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie, 2020; Toplean, 2023b).

Nothing is more unavoidable than death and the Internet. However, both are more deeply embedded in local contexts, subject to customization and meaningful participation. They are both, therefore, glocal—rooted in innermost beliefs, vulnerabilities, and desires while attuned to global socioeconomic and political concerns (Boyd, 2005; Arnold et al., 2018; Axford, 2022; Roudometof, 2023; Toplean, 2023a).

Existential fears of personal and collective annihilation highlight the importance of cultural resilience in coping with crises (Appadurai, 2000; Head, 2016; Hoggett, 2019; Walter, 2020, 2022; Pyszczynski et al., 2021; Toplean, 2022). Terror management theory provides empirical evidence of human tendency to rely on culturally sustainable beliefs to buffer existential anxiety (Kellehear, 1984, 2007; Bauman, 1992; Appadurai, 2006; Castells, 2012; Solomon et al., 2015; Walter, 2020; Axford, 2021).

This study is, thus, motivated by two reasons, i.e., analytical and existential. Analytically, technological development challenges theorists to understand how permanent connectivity impacts one's *cultural understanding of reality*. By emphasizing the Internet as the most social ICT (Information and Communication Technology), we stress the importance of addressing *relationship dynamics* across digital and non-digital lifeworlds. Intellectually, the concepts of "local" and "global" are increasingly challenging: cybernetic life may erode a traditional sense of time, grounding, and depth while enhancing a sense of intensity, immediacy, and continuity. Existentially, this study prompts us to consider *the existential significance of linking human vulnerability with glocal reflexivity*, which is the capacity to reflect critically and react emotionally to local and global demands in crises.

Section 2 will define and briefly discuss some theoretical challenges and key concepts (glocalization, digital glocalization, death, and digital death). Section 3 will analyze digital glocalization's traits (3.1) and constraints (3.2), using brief examples from contemporary Romania. A concluding section summarizes the central argument and makes research suggestions.

2 Concepts and theoretical challenges

Glocalization as an idea and experience involves the interplay between local and global dynamics. Emerging in the 1990s within business and academic fields (Edgington and Hayter, 2012; Roudometof, 2015), it has developed within the broader discourse on globalization (Robertson, 1992, 1994, 1995; Pieterse, 1995; Beck, 1999, 2002a,b; Axford, 2013; Drori et al., 2013; Roudometof, 2016a; Khondker, 2019). A fundamental paradigmatic shift occurred when glocalization was analytically separated from globalization, focusing on the global/local exchange flow as the central epistemic element (Roudometof, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016a,b, 2019; Roudometof and Dessi, 2022). In current times, glocalization is a significant research focus across various fields (Pieterse, 2000; Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007; Gobo, 2011; Khondker, 2019; Dessi and Sedda, 2020; Robertson, 2020; Axford, 2022; Dessi, 2022; Roudometof and Dessi, 2022). Among many definitions of glocalization, Victor Roudometof's retains meta-analytic efficiency: glocalization is the "refraction of globalization through the local" (Roudometof, 2016b, p. 79).

Digital glocalization is inherently present in media and communication, highlighted by their equally obvious globalizing and vernacular tendencies (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen, 1998; Drori, 2007; Hepp, 2015). Especially the rise of participatory technologies exemplifies digital glocalization, underscoring the *actual* uses of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Chayko, 2002, 2018; Zhao, 2003; Boyd, 2005; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Roudometof, 2023). Personalized media

enable endlessly *variable sociotechnical relationships* (Turkle, 1995; Chayko, 2018). Such "electronic proximity" (Dertouzos, 1998) transforms our understanding of relationships, deepening the impact of integrated technologies on our existence in ungraspable ways (Mann, 2001; Turkle, 2007; Peters, 2015; Macrury and Yates, 2016). Sociomental bonds formed online are transient, elusive, and unfixable, with no place or end (Wertheim, 1999; Chayko, 2002). Glocal synthesis processes create structures from specific, unique user interactions, leading to "new forms of glocal hybridity" (Roudometof, 2023, p. 6). However, in cyberspace, hybridization often fails to capture the nuanced interplay between situated subjectivities and "non-subjective affective forces of flow" (Lagerkvist, 2022: 38; Harju, 2024). Thus, traditional metaphors such as McLuhan's global village (McLuhan, 1964) and Castells (1996, 1997, 1998)'s network society are becoming outdated. Modern media-technological arrangements are decentralized and ethereal, expanding into clouds, streams, and swarms (Chun, 2017; Han, 2017; Othold, 2020; Jansson, 2022). These "aerial topologies" sometimes renew one's sense of geographical grounding, leading to unexpected digital divides and new localisms (Brandtzæg et al., 2011; Axford, 2021). Overall, digital glocalization refers to the complex interactions between technology, culture, and human experience, emphasizing the way global influences intersect with local contexts to create interconnected yet hardly graspable socio-technical landscapes.

Death is fundamentally a social experience with medical aspects, not the other way around (Seale, 1998; Kellehear, 2007). Ariès (1974, 1981) suggested that each era and society has dominant structures for transitioning from life to death, although these views may be somewhat simplified. Robert Kastenbaum introduced the 'death system' as "the interpersonal, sociophysical, and symbolic network, through which an individual's relationship to mortality is mediated by (...) society" (Kastenbaum, 2018, p. 105). Death systems are marked by inertia and ambivalence emerging in a woven fabric of sociohistorical contingencies: institutions, expertise, practices, rules, expectations, and beliefs, all reflecting society's deepest historical and ideological concerns, spiritual beliefs, demographic changes, and socioeconomic priorities (Ariès, 1974; Hofstede, 2001; Walter, 2017, 2020; Jacobsen, 2021b).

Advances in public health and living standards have clearly improved mortality rates globally over the past three centuries (Elias, 1978; Kellehear, 2007; Walter, 2020; Davenport, 2021). However, through ICTs and increased mobility, ideologies about death and diseases spread equally efficiently, resulting in a "globalized mixture of wealth and poverty, long and short life expectancies" (Kellehear, 2007, p. 7). Prophylactic and curative procedures equally depend on healthcare systems and local worldviews (Hofstede, 2001; Toplean, 2018), with global pandemic measures producing diverse local responses (Repo and Richter, 2022; Toplean, 2024a).

Since the 1990s, glocalization has been acknowledged in death studies but rarely articulated conceptually (Walter, 1990, 1993, 2005, 2010; Long, 2004; Kellehear, 2007). Walter (2012) explored national differences in funeral practices and emphasized the importance of glocal studies "to get to grips with specifically national variations" (Walter, personal communication, February 5, 2024). Addressing global flows, Walter noted that modern practices of death and grieving are influenced by culture, environment,

economic (in)stability, and national history to create diversity (Walter, 2020, p. ix). However, using Western models to analyze non-Western death practices can seriously obscure local contexts (Toplean, 2023b, 2024a). Thanatology often reflects Anglo-Saxon practices rooted in psychotherapeutic models of grief and individual wellbeing, which may not be relevant in more collectivist societies (Feifel, 1959; Becker, 1973; Ariès, 1981; Freud, 1984; Elias, 1985; Mellor and Shilling, 1993; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Gobo, 2011).

Twentieth-century trends in dealing with death included professionalization, medicalization, rationalization, and tabooization (Gorer, 1955; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Illich, 1975, 1976; Elias, 1985; Bauman, 1992; Walter, 1994; Kellehear, 2016). They were later followed by countertrends: relocating death to public and family spaces, de-medicalization, spiritualization, and, finally, spectacularization through mainstream and, more recently, digital media (Doka, 2003; Jacobsen, 2016, 2021b; Toplean, 2018; Sumiala, 2021; Savin-Baden, 2022).

Death and ICTs intersect in many ways, with uncontrollable technological advancements equally fueling digital anxiety and hopes for digital immortality (Bollmer, 2013; Zuboff, 2019). Sumiala and Jacobsen (2024) characterize **digital death** as the newest form of spectacular death, with ever-accelerated re-mediation, re-ritualization, commercialization, and commodification, enhancing *death's simulated reality effect* (Baudrillard, 1994). Digital technologies impact *all death-related interactions*: with the living (robotic caretakers, live-streamed funerals, and grief networks), the dead (digital memorialization and digital afterlife industries), dedicated spaces (digitized cemeteries and digital graveyards), and one's legacy (digital assets and memorialization solutions) (Kasket, 2012, 2019; Cann, 2013, 2014; Walter, 2017; Kneese, 2023; Recuber, 2023; Sumiala and Jacobsen, 2024). Stokes (2021), among others, explored how digital technologies foster sociotechnical relationships with the deceased, creating simulated realities through digital resurrection and chatbots, thereby wholly transforming our imaginary relationship with death and the dead.

Approximately 55 million people die yearly worldwide (Jacobsen, 2021a, p. 152; Walter, 2020, p. ix), and no two attitudes toward death are alike, each being influenced, as with anything human, by imagination (Appadurai, 1990; Walter, 2020, p. 255; Sumiala and Jacobsen, 2024). Cyber-imagination massively affects our view of mortality (Huberman, 2021; Hurtado, 2022, 2023); however, practical realities set crucial boundaries: bereaved individuals need physical comfort, while the dying need assistance with basic necessities such as food, help with their daily tasks, and care for their pets. These basic needs cannot be fulfilled through digital solutions (Gawande, 2014; Walter, 2017).

3 Traits and constraints of digital glocalization

Death is a constant reminder of our inescapable decay. While historians of medieval *Danse Macabre* view death as the great homogenizer (Daniell, 1997), we propose death as the great “glocalizer.” Unlike other aspects of social life, such as trade or music, responses to death exhibit greater inertia, remaining deeply

rooted as nearly ineradicable cultural and existential phenomena (Toplean, 2018, 2021). Death anxiety, often overlooked as a social force, magnifies the challenges posed by globalization and ICTs, which is particularly evident in the lived realities of illness, dying, and death. Below, we delve into these characteristics and constraints of digital glocalization in relation to death, drawing upon brief ethnographic glimpses from contemporary Romania.

3.1 Traits of digital glocalization

Using modal logic, mathematician Andrei Vieru asserts that “adequate responses to crises are always boundary solutions” (McKinsey and Tarski, 1944; Toplean, 2024a, p. 351). We propose that glocalization functions as an actively contoured form of globalization, inherently involving **boundary solutions** (Toplean, 2024a, p. 351). This is particularly evident in death contexts, where innovations are adopted only when affordable, comprehensible, and effective. Death ways are not mere collections of attributes but existentially and socially legitimized constellations of ideas and practices with *shielding qualities* (Berger, 1967; Berger and Luckmann, 1967).

For instance, in rural Romania, the community's response to a shocking selficide incident exemplifies this meaningful glocal dynamic: the local community's reaction integrated ancient magical beliefs rooted in a pre-Christian cosmological framework, which was discreetly deliberated within closed WhatsApp groups to uphold the privacy of the affected family. This example illustrates the intricate blend of archaic beliefs, digital etiquette, and mildly creative religious practices, demonstrating how glocalization can refract global online behaviors and selfie trends through deep-rooted local fears and superstitions. The community found a uniquely adequate response to a dangerous problem—a “boundary solution”—where local norms and modern technology come together to address grave social issues (Toplean, 2024a).

In addition to serving as a boundary solution, another essential trait of digital glocalization in the context of dying and loss is its **relational nature**. All meaningful social worlds hinge on functional relationships (Schütz and Luckmann, 1973; Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Donati, 2022, p. 40). While some dying and bereaved individuals rely on professional help, most depend on families and communities for support (Kellehear, 2005; Borgstrom, 2015; Borgstrom and Walter, 2015; Woodthorpe, 2017; Rosa, 2019; Toplean, 2023b). In this context, families dispersed around the globe spontaneously seek glocal solutions to remain connected with their vulnerable members. Organizing live-streamed meetings and utilizing camera monitoring and other digital tools foster a unique mode of consciousness (Axford, 2016), *ensuring a continuous presence of distant loved ones*. However, the dying may lack the luxury or desire to engage with technology while heavily relying on in-person relationships (Hourizi et al., 2011; Walter et al., 2012; Brubaker et al., 2019). Among first-generation Romanian migrants, “dying abroad” can be profoundly alienating (Toplean, 2018, 2024b). In these scenarios, the concept of navigating life “between two worlds” (Walter, 2017, p. 41) transcends technical affordances; it prioritizes maintaining *enduring ties to their communities of origin*. What may appear as resistance to electronic

systems often signifies *an effort to prevent relational alienation*. We posit that digital glocal phenomena exhibit strong relational attributes, fostering a *functional relational culture that bridges digital and physical realms*. This cultural dynamic emphasizes the importance of maintaining meaningful connections amid global and technological pressures, anchoring individuals in a network of supportive, tangible relationships.

Digital glocalization also suggests intertwining the physical and virtual realms, fundamentally altering our understanding and interaction with reality. Scientific and cyber-imagination enabled us to create, experience, and inhabit immaterial worlds, navigating what can be termed a “mental arena” (Wertheim, 1999, p. 233; Kim, 2001). The dissolution of boundaries between real and virtual realities (Howarth, 2000; Walter, 2017; Toplean, 2024b) led to the emergence of a new research area known as “digital afterlife” (Lagerkvist, 2018; Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie, 2020; Sisto, 2020; Harju, 2024). Digital technologies, such as AI chatbots that recreate the deceased and enable users to communicate with them, reshape our phenomenological experience of reality. Digital ghosts evoke complex emotional responses that traditional metaphysical views cannot fully address (Bollmer, 2013; Cann, 2014; Stokes, 2021; Savin-Baden, 2022). Within this context, sociomental spatiality becomes less about physical geography and more about *spiritual* and *affective topologies* (Slaby et al., 2019; Schuetze, 2021; Epstein, 2024; Harju, 2024). By converging vertical and horizontal axes, digital glocalization shifts focus from dislocation to *non-locality*, enabling transcendence into the digital lifeworld. This convergence creates complex new spaces and interactions that foster a “**post-metaphysical**” landscape, encouraging us to reconsider our understanding of life, death, and existence beyond the traditional metaphysical boundaries.

Finally, we propose that digital glocalization **primarily occurs naturally** in the context of death. While the Internet exposes users to a vast array of death-related information, not all of it catalyzes change (Walter, 2017). Institutional practices surrounding death, such as technological procedures, preservation, disposal, and burial, resist top-down digital impositions. Instead, they evolve organically from grassroots initiatives. For instance, in rural Romanian communities, local priests align closely with community wishes, acknowledging the community as the true keeper of tradition and the prime initiator of change. This grassroots approach highlights that digital and non-digital glocalization reflect a *community’s creative and collaborative potential* while revealing its *sociocultural limits*. The natural evolution of local practices highlights the importance of shared volition and interpersonal imagination in fostering meaningful, self-limiting glocalization.

3.2 Limits of digital glocalization

During crises, the critical importance of meaningful, resonant interpersonal relationships becomes evident as individuals strive to stabilize uncontrollable situations (Rosa, 2019). However, attitudes toward sociality vary from country to country: what may seem like social isolation in collective cultures can signify autonomy in individualistic ones (Walter, 2017). Similarly, digital communication can carry different connotations based on cultural

contexts. For example, in Romania, online grief groups may evoke anxiety over privacy and trustworthiness. While Western individuals may perceive them as “intimate strangers” (Zhao, 2004), Internet users in post-communist countries often view them as “ill-intended spies” (Toplean, 2023b). These **interpersonal challenges**, rooted in cultural skepticism and values, often become significant barriers to digital glocalization.

Many withdraw from social media in times of grief, and the dying may disconnect from digital and non-digital social worlds. In Romania, the landscape of digital technologies is fraught with conflicting practices and ambivalence. This tension has deepened in recent years, particularly during the ongoing Ukrainian war and following the global COVID-19 pandemic (Toplean, 2023b). These crises have heightened Romanians’ structural distrust of institutional responses to crises and skepticism toward digital solutions (Toplean, 2021). The inability to reconcile global impacts with local meanings often results in individuals navigating *irreconcilable* worlds, rather than supple *glocal spaces* (Toplean, 2018, 2023a, p. 7). When both digital and non-digital glocalization fail, this disjunction leads to **alienation** and **social anomie** (Toplean, 2021).

When learning online about global threats, individuals may **rediscover the local** as tangible, alive, and safe: ‘the old neighborhood’ (community, religion, and culture) is re-invested emotionally, softening anxieties and bolstering self-esteem (Solomon et al., 2015; Friedman, 2018; Toplean, 2023b, p. 14). Orthodox Christian Facebook groups and religious influencers actively promote Romanian neo-traditional approaches (Toplean, 2023b). Reinventing the local via digital technologies often prioritizes *offline geographies* over digital glocalization. Fear of alienation in a too-complex world drives counter-digital trends and **new localisms** that limit and filter global pressures while gaining local, populist sociopolitical support (Axford, 2021; Pyszczynski et al., 2021).

Religious constraints further limit the permeation of digital glocalization, especially in Orthodox Christian countries. Romania’s contemporary death culture is heterogenous yet religiously oriented, with these social forms largely unchallenged by technological advancements (Toplean, 2015, 2018, 2023b; Rotar, 2021; Lemeni, 2022). While believers utilize social media to organize their faith communities, digital technologies alone do not drive significant shifts in religious perceptions; instead, they serve to confirm existing beliefs (Walter, 2017; Toplean, 2023b). For instance, chatbot-mediated resurrection is gaining traction in China amid limited communal grieving options, highlighting the intersection of technology and deep-seated relational/religious needs. Digital innovatory practices raise concerns in countries where unmediated religious rites are still highly valued (Lemeni, 2022, p. 462; Toplean, 2023b; Zhou, 2024). Consequently, while digital glocalization may offer new dimensions to traditional practices, it remains inevitably constrained by local religious beliefs.

Finally, the global spectacle of digital death is never-ending and ever-growing. While connectivity inundates us with knowledge about death, concrete *know-how* falters amid rapid change and real-life crises (Toplean, 2024b). Intense digital exposure to death resources does not necessarily indicate glocalization; the integration of digital death into physical reality *hinges*

critically on timing. Its interaction with “real” time and space varies with personal perceptions and geographic, economic, and sociocultural factors (Walter, 2017, p. 96). Time is scarce for the elderly and the dying. In these moments, tangible immediacy trumps digital connectivity—sometimes, a 1-h flight provides more comfort and assurance than a 2-h FaceTime call. This poignant reality underscores **significant temporal constraints** on digital glocalization, highlighting that the digital cannot wholly replace the tangible presence so crucial in end-of-life situations.

4 Conclusion

This perspective article advocates for recognizing the interplay between digital glocalization and the social dynamics of death. Our central thesis is that death, a universal yet deeply localized experience, provides a unique perspective for understanding glocalization in digitally saturated societies.

After setting the stage and exploring the main concepts and theoretical frameworks (Introduction and Section 2), we identified key traits of digital glocalization, such as it being a boundary solution, relational, post-metaphysical, and naturally occurring. These traits illustrate how digital and physical realms merge to create unique, resonant responses to death.

Furthermore, we examined the constraints of digital glocalization, highlighting how temporal pressures, interpersonal dynamics, religious sensitivities, countertrends, and societal alienation pose barriers to glocal forging. These constraints underline the challenges of integrating digital practices with traditional norms, especially in end-of-life scenarios.

We used brief ethnographic insights from contemporary Romania to illustrate our perspective. We suggest that increased ethnographic sensitivity is needed to capture lived realities and to understand the nuanced ways in which digital glocalization manifests in crises, when meaningful, resonant connections bridge individuals’ experiences across digital and non-digital life worlds.

In conclusion, let us not overlook death as an unparalleled catalyst for individual and collective agendas—the great “glocalizer.”

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Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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