OBITUARIZING MICHAEL JACKSON:
SUBJECT FORMATION THROUGH MATERIAL CULTURAL BRANDING

by
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Abstract

Historically, obituaries were created as news items and published in print media with the intentions of informing an audience of public hangings or similar sensational deaths. Over the years, obituaries changed in form to become a way of publicly notifying audiences of one’s life upon their death, focusing more on biography and familial structure than sensation. However, with advancements in communicative mediums, including the increased popularity and easy accessibility of the Internet, traditional understandings of the term ‘obituary’ are challenged to include all forms of media publications that draw on elements of sensation and biography. The combination of this new, inclusive definition and the increasing popularity and advancement of technological mediums has republicized deceased celebrities as marketable and profitable brands that rely on subject formation through media and participatory fandom. However, the branding of celebrated, deceased figures through processes of social subjectification often remains embedded within cultural texts. As a result, audiences are often unaware of their ability to shift or influence identities of the deceased, and their fandom becomes the target of alternative messages embedded in sites of obituarization. By applying Marshall McLuhan’s theory of technology as an extension of human consciousness in addition to Roland Barthes’ theory of mythologisation when examining Michael Jackson’s 2009 death, this thesis explains how the subject formation of deceased individuals becomes so powerful and globalized that their death becomes a positive and beneficial occurrence with regards to the profitability and marketability of their brand. Therefore, the subject formation of celebrated, deceased figures is a fragile process that is altering how North Americans mediate the culture surrounding death and dying.

Keywords: obituary; media; popular culture; subject formation; communicative mediums
Dearest Grams,
Because of you I will always believe in
the ‘A’ and not settle for the ‘B’.
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Chapter One

Introduction – Understanding the Subject Formation of the Deceased

Introduction

Since 1969 when Kubler-Ross published *On Death and Dying*, sociologists and other researchers have steadily examined death – the process of dying, the cultural and historical differences and similarities of death rituals, the fear of death, causes and preventative measures, etc. Death is a popular research topic largely because it is associated with the unknown; with unexplored territory and the continuously asked question of ‘what happens after we die?’. While there may not be a concrete answer to what happens, spiritually or imaginatively, after one dies, there is a semi-fixed answer regarding what happens publicly and the steps that are most often taken following one’s death in a North American context (Moller 1996). However, due to advancements in technology, the culture surrounding death and dying is changing to allow for new communicative mediums, and these changes can further influence the normalized public reaction to death. A variety of technological, communicative mediums are broadcasting celebrity deaths more so than ever, and the topics of death and dying are becoming less taboo. As a result, celebrated deceased subjects are being globally popularised as entertaining, marketable and profitable brands through processes of obituarization on the Internet, on television and film, and through multiple forms of print media.

Processes of obituarization are the public’s published reactions to a death. Resulting from advancements in communications and media which have allowed more people the chance to create and publish obituaries than traditional forms of print media, obituarization becomes the influential process of identity construction for the deceased. Public audiences are increasingly engaging with communicative mediums and are
becoming agents of subject formation through their involvement in the shaping and shifting of one’s public identity (Pearson 2010). It is through processes of obituarization that deceased subjects are framed as popular and consumable products; thus, obituarization can be read as the social and cultural branding of deceased entities. It is on this topic that I will base my Master’s thesis as a way to contribute to the literature on death and dying, while simultaneously adding to the semiological examination of mass-culture. While subject formation is studied quite frequently within sociological literature, the subject formation of celebrated deceased figures is largely ignored as socially and culturally relevant sites of analysis.

This thesis will combine theoretical approaches put forth by both Marshall McLuhan (2003) and Roland Barthes (1973) on topics of media and the language of mass-culture, in amalgamation with examples of recent forms of obituaries published about the 2009 death of the highly popularized celebrity, Michael Jackson. More specifically, by combining McLuhan’s theories of technology as an extension of human consciousness and his discussion surrounding the advancement of communicative mediums with Barthes theory that the embedded messages within cultural texts are a language of myth, the obituaries surrounding Jackson’s death can be read as having multiple meanings and purposes. It is through these findings that participatory fandom (Pearson 2010) is examined as a critical component of subject formation via media, further representing the role of technology in constructing identities of the deceased.

Research Goals

The goals of my research are to expand current limiting discussion of obituaries in the twenty-first century, and to challenge the notion that obituaries are solely structured
and specific death announcements broadcast in print media. In addition, by examining the changing role of obituaries, my goals include closely examining processes of post-mortem subject formation through media, and the resulting impact that processes of obituarization have on mass-culture and the social and cultural branding of the deceased. More specifically, I aim to examine the combination of ‘obituary-like’ processes and examples of celebrity deaths to further theoretical literature surrounding semiology and the language and power of mass media on a person’s life (even post-mortem). In order to meet these goals, this research will analyze a variety of mediums that broadcast new forms of obituaries, such as memorials, montages, tributes, and fan groups, which flooded mainstream media after the death of Michael Jackson in 2009.

*Research Questions*

This thesis will focus on research questions surrounding three main terms: obituarization, subject formation and branding. More specifically, I will question how advancements in communicative mediums have allowed for a more publicised reaction to death through processes of obituarization; how these processes influence the subject formation of the deceased in ways that are often conflicting and continuously shifting; and how subject formation can be understood as the social and cultural branding of deceased celebrities as consumable products instead of human subjects. These questions, in combination with my research goals, will allow for an in-depth examination of subject formation through mass-media, and its corresponding influence on the culture surrounding death and dying in North America.
Chapter Overview

All chapters of this thesis combine to answer the above research questions and to critically analyze new age theories of obituaries and subject formation. In Chapter Two, a review of existing literature provides a brief look at what has already been written about obituaries and other alternative forms of death announcements, in addition to the ways in which subject formation plays a role in constructing identities of the deceased. This review highlights the importance of research on death and dying, while demonstrating the need for current research as a way to update existing academic literature on the topic. In addition, this chapter discusses the power of media involvement in processes associated with death rituals, while also discussing how media popularizes death (and therefore the celebration of a life once lived) as a global form of entertainment. In addition, Chapter Two highlights the theoretical basis of this thesis by focusing on ideas put forth by both McLuhan and Barthes. McLuhan introduces the power of communicative mediums, and he demonstrates how forms of media are agents of change in our experience of the world. On the other hand, Barthes approaches the hidden language of media; the mythological and symbolic messages being represented through media, and he does so in such a way as to challenge audiences to look more critically at all public texts. Chapter Two examines both theories but in combination with one another to demonstrate their cohesive ability to transform the ways that death announcements are being understood, and consequently being controlled and manipulated through media as a form of entertainment.

Chapter Three provides concrete examples of the rise and popularity of ‘obituary-like’ processes as powerful tools of subject formation by highlighting detailed, published reactions to the death of Jackson. By looking at the multiple ways in which Jackson’s death was announced by a variety of sources, including televised news broadcasters and
Internet bloggers, this chapter demonstrates how there can be multiple and often conflicting identities formed about social subjects. In addition, by looking at examples of how fans engaged with the death of Jackson through internet tribute sites, montages, homemade videos, etc., this chapter further demonstrates how processes of obituarization can take place more or less directly and often unknowingly due to the traditional, limited definition of death announcements.

In order to put the examples of celebrity death in context with the argument that many published reactions to a death can be read as processes of obituarization and branding, Chapter Four focuses on the theoretical understandings of Jackson’s death. This chapter critically engages with theories put forth by McLuhan and Barthes and provides an in-depth look at obituaries regarding semiological representations and the fluidity of styles in the media, a public’s ability to construct deceased individuals as social subjects, and the ways in which they can be characterized and branded as marketable and consumable products. Furthermore, Chapter Four examines the importance of this research in understanding death rituals as social processes that are popularized through participatory fandom and communicative mediums. Chapter Four acts as a conclusion to this thesis by summarizing the main arguments, highlighting and connecting themes, and presenting the findings of the research. In addition, this chapter addresses features such as limitations and benefits, opportunities for future research, and the generalizability of the research. It is this chapter that unites the entire body of work in a way that presents a cohesive research study that is a necessary contribution to the literature surrounding death and dying in the twenty-first century.
Chapter Two

Theoretical Framework and Methodology – Cultural Practices, Subject Formation and Advancements in Media Technology

Introduction – Why Obituaries?

This chapter examines how obituaries directly and increasingly influence cultural practices, especially the construction of social subjectivities through various technological mediums of cultural communication. By reviewing existing literature on the culture of death and dying, in combination with literature about the influence that technology has on popular culture, this chapter explores the significance of obituaries and subject formation within a North American context. Furthermore, this literature review makes the link between media studies and semiology as an in-depth method of cultural analysis needed to better understand the formation of social subjectivities after death. More specifically, this chapter looks at how obituaries are changing in both form and purpose with the increased availability and accessibility of participatory technological mediums. For example, the Internet not only allows for the global postings of obituaries by traditional means, such as in online newspapers, but it also allows for a variety of popular texts to take on ‘obituary-like’ qualities. Therefore, this chapter examines how obituaries are multipurpose, cultural texts that subjectify the deceased through technological means, in a way that makes the culture of death and dying a popular source of news, entertainment, and participatory creativity.

This chapter begins by describing the culture of death and dying as an academic site of analysis, and by addressing past research on obituaries within the North American context. This information provides an overview of the significance of studying death rituals from a multidisciplinary standpoint, while highlighting the fluidity of the term
'obituary' when examining death rituals. More specifically, work put forth by Kubler-Ross (1969), Thomas (2008), Moller (1998), Noys (2005), Starck (2006), Philips (2007), Selsdon (1996), Fowler (2007a; 2007b), and others will be examined to show how obituaries and the culture of death and dying have changed through modern times. All of these authors have added to the academic discussion of the culture of death and dying in one way or another, yet their work still leaves room for further research on the role that technological advancements have played in the creation of new forms of death announcements. After I provide a review of existing literature on the culture of death and dying, I examine the ways in which new forms of obituaries contribute to the subjectification of the deceased.

Furthermore, this chapter will introduce media studies as an area of technological and communicative advancement. This literature review of media studies will focus on the theories of Marshall McLuhan (2003) and Roland Barthes (1973). Specifically I will examine McLuhan’s communicative mediums in combination with Barthes’ semiology and mythology. I will introduce and review how mass media can broadcast a specific intended message while simultaneously being read or understood to have numerous other meanings. By combining McLuhan and Barthes I not only examine the significance of the technological mediums used in the publishing of obituaries, but I also examine the significance of engaging with the content. For example, I will demonstrate how a new style (and definition) of obituary can portray alternative messages both in form and content, in addition to its primary purpose of announcing a death. By doing so, I will demonstrate how technological advancements are creating new communicative mediums that allow obituaries to be broadcast on a wider scale, which makes possible the public subjectification of deceased individuals. Finally, this chapter will provide a detailed
account of the methodology that will be used to complete this research. This section of the chapter will discuss how I examine the material, what content I focus on specifically, and what is useful in examining the larger social and cultural implications of obituaries. This chapter will also lead in to Chapter Three, and detail how this research will be articulated throughout the rest of the thesis.

**Celebrity Deaths as Casual Topics of Discussion**

In North America there is a normalized understanding of death and dying that is most often based on notions of death being a ‘natural part of life’, yet still a sad and tragic occurrence (Noys 2005). However, there are also aspects of death popularized by the ‘abnormality’ and the ‘unnaturalness’ of dying that become part of a larger cultural understanding of death (Petrucelli 2009). This ‘abnormalness’ is often associated with unexpected or untimely deaths, and the many ways in which the public reacts to the news, for example, when a celebrity dies at a young age due to an overdose, accident or disease, or when googling ‘Michal Jackson’s death’ and finding out that there are over 46 million websites about the topic. Why does the death of a celebrity garner global attention, a rise in sales of their existing products, and a surge in “R.I.P [fill in the name of the dead celebrity]” Facebook statuses? In short, why do we, as North Americans, care about the deaths of well-known figures, and how is this information representative of larger thematic and cultural understandings of the deceased?

These questions challenge the taken-for-granted and seemingly invisible existence of a North American culture of death. Whereas death as a topic of casual discussion may be understood as taboo in some circumstances (as will be discussed later in this chapter) (Berridge 2002; Rando 1987), the aforementioned questions draw attention to times when
death is quite visible and popular (Dollimore 1998). More specifically, the questions
demonstrate how the examination of celebrity death representations via technological
mediums can provide an informative site of analysis regarding the subjectification of
deceased individuals. Cultural studies theorist James Thomas (2008:362) asks “what
recent, highly publicized celebrity deaths and the press reaction to them tell us about the
state of our media, their preoccupations and the celebrity culture that they help to create?”
This question not only expresses how the examination of celebrity deaths can teach us
about specific societies, but it also lists a few areas of study which are also influenced by
the culture of death – media studies and popular culture (Thomas 2008; Cooper 2005).
Whereas Thomas’ (2008) research focused on public reactions to the death of Princess
Diana, my research will take this a step farther to examine how all celebrity deaths and
the public’s reaction to them are representative of a larger culture surrounding death and
dying.

Not only can the public’s reactions to celebrity deaths convey messages about ‘the
state of our media’, but it can also communicate broader understandings of the culture of
death and dying, the influence of technological mediums, and their combined impact on
the fluidity of the term ‘obituary’. Therefore, the culture of death and dying is a
significant site of analysis when trying to understand the larger North American
population, and the ways in which they respond to death via obituary-like
announcements. More specifically, this research will focus on celebrity death since it is a
significant topic of popular culture that can provide numerous relatable examples
(Petrucelli 2009). In Chapter Three, examples will be analyzed in much more detail with
a focus on the 2009 death of Michael Jackson. By examining how people responded to his
death and the ways in which technology allowed new forms of obituaries and
subjectivities of him as a deceased individual, we can better understand the social implications of obituaries surrounding the culture of death and dying through the case of Jackson.

**A Culture of Death and Dying**

Currently, there is much debate surrounding the culture of death arising from differing views on and about the topic. While these debates may be controversial, they represent the need for more research on the culture of death and dying while highlighting areas of significance that I will examine within my research. While some scholars (Berridge 2002; Rando 1987) argue that death is no longer a taboo topic of discussion among North American populations, others such as Dollimore (1998:126) think that such broad claims, “fail both to deal with the complex ways in which death is invisible and highly visible in modern culture”. Therefore, there is a need to continuously explore the culture of death and dying, and to also update relating literature regarding changing technologies and norms associated with the culture of death and dying. Instead of avoiding topics that may be thought of as ‘taboo’ or unimportant due to ‘invisibility’, it is crucial to understand why these topics are characterized as they are, and how these characterizations are representative of larger social implications (Dollimore 1998). In addition, it is also crucial to examine when death is visible, and how this visibility is often associated with media coverage of the deaths of well-known figures (Dollimore 1998, Petrucelli 2009).

Updating literature on the culture surrounding death and dying will help to distinguish when death is made most visible and when it is ignored or hidden and for what reasons. As Noys (1995:3) stated, “in modern culture death is not simply invisible or taboo but bound up with new structures that expose us to death”. As will be discussed
later in this chapter, technological advancements can be considered “new structures” that are increasingly responsible for the publicity of death, and the increase in attention that is given to deceased individuals. In addition, these “new structures” have greatly influenced many areas of the culture of death and dying by allowing for new forms of death announcements to be broadcast on a global scale. Therefore, not only do existing structures combine with new technologies to mediate a growth of the culture surrounding death and dying, but they play with notions of (in)visibility and the public acknowledgement of death.

In order to examine the growth and globalization of the culture surrounding death and dying, it is also important to understand how this field, as a topic of discussion, arose in a North American context. The author of On Death and Dying, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969), has been very influential to my research due to her writing about the actual dying patient instead of solely focusing on the scientific and medical reasons why someone may be dying, as has traditionally been the case. By shifting one’s research to the patients and to those who were nearing death, Kubler-Ross was able to address concerns that had often been ignored within an academic community. As a result, Kubler-Ross’ work is highly significant to my research because even though she was part of the psycho-medical field, an unexpected effect of her work has been an opening up of the processes of death and dying as topics of popular discussion.

Kubler-Ross demonstrated how widespread the culture of death and dying is, and made public the idea that there can be medical and social implications of death. In addition, her work suggested that by better understanding the social implications of death, researchers can gain a better understanding of existing structures and elements that influence larger understandings of death and the subjectification of the deceased. Time
Archives (2009) stated that her book had “brought death out of the darkness” by publishing research on “[w]hat the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families”, and I would add that she also helped demonstrate what social and cultural implications the dead and dying have on larger issues of societal organization and understanding. What is important about Kubler-Ross’ research with regards to my own is not if the stages of grief she wrote about are concrete and academically sound, but that she raises many issues for the future examination of the culture surrounding death and dying (1969).

In addition, Stevenson (1987:155) suggested that it is necessary to examine “death in a context of open communication”. Whereas Stevenson suggested that this is beneficial for physician-patient relationships, his message is also relevant in discussing death openly in a North American society. Since death, and therefore the culture surrounding death, will inevitably affect everyone at some point or another (be it the death of a family member or friend, or even one’s personal understanding of dying), there is a need for the general public to understand the social implications of death. Instead of only discussing the topic of death in an area that is often limited to a discussion of ‘appropriate’ content and most often at the hands of medical personnel, the opening up of conversation on the culture of death and dying can allow for a better understanding of North American social and cultural practices.

Similarly, other researchers have made possible the acceptance of death and dying as academic topics of discussion. Noys (2005) clarifies that reasons for studying the topics are not to dismiss death as a finalizing process by praising or challenging religious, scientific or cultural beliefs; but instead, he highlights the social influence that death has over entire populations of people. It is necessary to study the numerous understandings
and widespread reactions to death because it “touches on nearly every aspect of a culture, running through it in various ways, and when we try to analyse death we find ourselves faced with a ‘huge archive’” (Noys 2005:10). Therefore, death and the presupposed act of dying are sociologically very significant, and as a result, the culture of death and dying becomes an integral part of social organization and understanding (Moller 1996).

Moller (1996:79) captured the essence of the numerous social implications of death and dying when he suggested that funerals, and similar death rituals, “are an embodiment and a reflection of social life in a given time, place, and culture”. He continued to say that “[i]n this way, the patterns of living in a given societal context give rise to particular patterns of funeral customs, and the funeral customs of a given era reflect and uphold the styles of life” (Moller 1996:79). In that sense, obituaries can be looked at in the same way since they also demonstrate how social reactions to death are changing in connection with the changing standard of living. For example, as technological advancements in communications and media become more widespread and accessible elements of North American society, such as the commonality of computers with internet access, obituaries have also been changing in form and meaning. Not only do death rituals and customs reflect certain ways and styles of life, but they have the authority to influence how deceased individuals are socially subjectified as will be discussed later in the chapter. Both Moller’s (1996) and Noys’ (2005) work help to show how there is a need to understand representations of the deceased, as a necessary part of understanding relevant North American social and cultural practices.
**The Fluidity of the term ‘Obituary’**

Information for obituary content can come from many sources, and therefore obituaries are not necessarily realistic depictions of the deceased. As Seale (1998:138) discusses with regards to an authentic voice of the dying and departed, “some accounts will be closer to the truth than others”. As a result, there is no guarantee that the deceased individual will be represented and socially subjectified in a way that they would find truthful or accurate (as will be further demonstrated in Chapter Three by examining the varying and conflicting ways in which Michael Jackson was represented upon his death). Seale (1998) continues to suggest that the only authentic voice of the deceased is the voice that comes directly from the dying beforehand. However, even this can be problematic as upon their ‘death beds’, people often resort to hyper sensationalized descriptions of their lives (Seale 1998). In addition, their close family members may be too psychologically impacted by one’s death to provide a factual description (Field 1995 as cited in Seale 1998). Furthermore, notions of the ‘truthfulness’ of obituaries are further problematized due to the increase in technological advancements and the increased participation in processes of obituarization by outside sources.

Technological advancements in communications and media have allowed more people the chance to create and publish obituaries than ever before. For purposes of clarification, the process of creating obituaries for deceased individuals will be referred to as ‘obituarising’, a term that becomes highly significant when examining who creates obituaries and for what reasons. Even if people did not know the deceased person, such as a celebrity who they have only experienced through popular forms of media, they have the opportunity to create their own obituary for that person and to weigh in on the deceased person’s life and character. Therefore, obituaries cannot be understood as
truthful and necessarily factual accounts of one’s life. Instead, there is a need to examine them more theoretically with regards to the ways that they are created, what other purposes they serve, and how they can broadcast meanings in a way that socially subjectifies deceased individuals. This process of obituarising about the deceased is best understood as a form of ‘obituarization’, which is an encompassing term used to describe the many processes of obituarising and the roles that obituaries play in the culture surrounding death and dying.

Historically speaking, obituaries originated not as small announcements about the death of family members and friends, but instead as a way to update the public about “serial pillages”, “witches being tortured and burnt”, and other “latest set[s] of executions” (Starck 2006:3). In short, they were articles of relevant news, often sensationalized for entertainment purposes. However, since the 1580’s when these news items started to appear in print, obituaries have changed much in form to become defined as “appraisal[s] of a life in the form of a brief biography – published in a newspaper, magazine or journal” (Starck 2006:5). According to Fowler (2007a; 2007b), there is a constant need to update literature on the role that obituaries play in given societies, such as in North America, as they often create finalized images of the deceased through processes of subjectification. This ‘last say’ type of power gives obituaries an authoritative voice regarding deceased individuals (Fowler 2007a), which is further problematized given that anyone can publish obituaries about the deceased. While authors such as Starck (2006), Philips (2007) and Selsdon (1996) have published mainly quantitative, empirical articles about the historical changing forms of obituaries and the many styles of ‘traditional’ obituaries, there is no existing research about the role that technology plays in reshaping these death announcements and consequently their
changing influence on the representations of the deceased. While my research will help to fill this void, there is still a need to examine the fluidity of the term ‘obituary’ in order to accurately represent the shifting definitions.

There is a need to embrace a more inclusive definition of ‘obituary’ so that it still encompasses brief biographies, but also returns to its original definition of sensationalized news stories about death. If the term obituary is understood to represent both of these characteristics – biography and sensation – the term becomes much more fluid and inclusive. For example, the term obituary is no longer restrained to print media such as newspapers and magazines, but instead can be recognized as any media publication or text that broadcasts the death (and the life once lived) of an individual. As a result, the term ‘obituary’ can include but is not limited to public memorials, montages, tributes, news reports, and even tattoos and baby names as will be further discussed in Chapter Three. While these texts may not be recognized as traditional forms of death announcements, technological advancements in communications and media allow for them to become globalized representations of meanings – including meaning associated with biography and sensation.

Furthermore, new forms of obituaries can be broadcast by any media source and can be created by anyone who has access to technology. For example, these obituaries can be created by mainstream broadcasting agencies or individual fans, in addition to any other individual or group who wishes to make a textual statement about a deceased individual. According to this new definition of obituary, the announcements forge a participatory relationship between the producer of the text and the technology used to make it public (Pearson 2010; Jenkins 2006). Not only are the producers of the text
obituarising about a deceased individual, but they can easily broadcast their obituary for public viewing.

**Participation, McLuhan and Media Studies**

There is a participatory and creative element to obituaries, stemming from existing relationships between the producers, the textual forms, the technologies used to publish the texts, and the consumers. All of these relationships work together to broadcast a specific message regarding a deceased subject that is available for public reading. Therefore, obituaries, as created cultural texts, allow for a multitude of possibilities regarding form, shape and content, revolutionizing traditional understandings of obituaries. Instead of having the basic forms of obituaries as published in newspapers and written by families or newspaper employees, new technologies have made the creation of obituaries possible from a variety of publishers and formats. For example, communications analyst Pearson (2010) explores how the digital era allows for a new type of participatory fandom; one that is based on the easiness of the expression of emotion (or distaste) as the media industry transforms. Anyone with access to technology such as the internet has the opportunity to weigh in on a topic, and to make their views available to a public. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, it is through this easy accessibility of processes of obituarization that conflicting views on and about a deceased individual can arise. This literature can be used in this analysis to help explain who creates obituaries, and if they are indeed becoming more popularized forms of participatory creativity that can shift existing identities of the deceased.

Jenkins (2006) suggests that in this day and age, almost anyone can be considered a ‘published author’. He explains that “in just a few clicks one can publish a weblog post,
submit a photo or upload a video”, thus also making it quite easy for an individual to become involved in the subjectification of a public figure. Therefore, upon the death of a well-known figure many people, including fans, have the opportunity to publish cultural texts that frame the deceased individual as a social subject. Depending on the recognition of these do-it-yourself obituaries, the significance and purpose of the ‘published’ texts may vary. For example, as previously mentioned, the reaction to Jackson’s death will be examined in detail in Chapter Three, as a way to demonstrate how there are many forms of media that can be used to broadcast an obituary instantly on a global scale. Not all of these publications may go mainstream (most of the 46 million webpages discussing Michael Jackson’s death are not) yet many publications are widely accessible, and can therefore influence how the deceased individual is subjectified. Therefore, my research will also examine how a producer can directly contribute to the broader area of death and dying, and how they may directly and unknowingly contribute to the culture surrounding death and dying as well.

It is here where McLuhan’s theory of communicative mediums becomes integral to my research, as he conceptualizes how the participatory nature of technology can influence how media texts (such as obituaries) are produced. McLuhan (2003:85-86) states that,

In this electric age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness. That is what is meant when we say that we daily know more and more about man. We mean that we can translate more and more of ourselves into other forms of expression that exceed ourselves. Man is a form of expression...

More specifically, McLuhan argues that not only are we participating in cultural production when we engage with technology, but we become so entwined with it that technology becomes an extension of ourselves. For example, the internet can be used to
publish obituaries but what is significant about this process is not the wonders of the internet in and of itself, but how it takes on ideas from the human mind and extends them into another form of being. In this sense, not only are producers of online obituaries participating within the workings of technology, but they are simultaneously part of technology. At the same time, technology becomes part of the producers – an outlet of expression and an extension of consciousness. Therefore, my research applies McLuhan’s theory of technology as an extension of humanness, including our death, in relation to media studies, to demonstrate how intertwined humans and technology are within the culture surrounding death and dying. McLuhan’s work helps to explain why new forms of obituaries are significant, and how their construction is as equally as important as their content.

The process of creating technological extensions of human beings can be better understood by examining McLuhan’s (2003) definition of media, and subsequently the importance of media studies within my research. McLuhan (2003) suggests that media can be defined as a term that accompanies all aspects of textual information that are published in some form. He continues to describe media as,

agents of change in our experience of the world, in our interaction with each other, in our use of our physical sense – the senses that media extend. They must be studied for their effects, because the constant and inevitable interplay among media obscures those effects and hampers our ability to use media effectively (McLuhan 2003:xv).

Therefore, while media is primarily considered a form of communication, it must also be understood as an extension of consciousness and of human interaction if we, as producers and consumers, are ‘to use media effectively’. Paying particular attention to the culture surrounding death and dying, ‘using media effectively’ would involve examining how media represents and how it simultaneously is a form of human thought and
understanding, so much so that it can influence social subjectivities and cultural understandings.

More specifically, McLuhan (2003:xiv) discusses how mediums, forms of media that are also an “extension of the human body or the mind”, can just as easily represent larger themes and messages as the intended media content. McLuhan’s (2003) work on the ‘extensions of the human mind’ is important for my research as he speaks to the power and multiple purposes of technological mediums. For example, as will be discussed later in more detail, many Jackson fans uploaded homemade video montages to YouTube upon his death. While the montages themselves portray a message about Jackson, his biography and his untimely death, the medium (the homemade video) is also significant and can be representative of larger meanings. More specifically, the medium can represent fandom, participatory power and personal expression of thoughts and feelings, and it can do so in a way that makes these messages more globalized. When applying McLuhan’s (2003) theory of technological extension to the given medium, the content can be understood as having less impact then the medium itself. Therefore, McLuhan’s theory is highly significant when studying how technology has influenced a cultural death ritual that is so widely known, such as the process of creating and publishing obituaries.

As a result, media studies becomes an encompassing term that not only “helps advance research and education in media analysis and critical thinking” (Clayton 2010), but it also involves a detailed examination of the types of media, and therefore the technological advancement and creation of new forms of mediums. While previous researchers have applied McLuhan’s work as a way to understand how it affects communication among humans on a global scale (Gane & Beer 2009, Burnett 1997), my
research will examine how humans use technology to communicate the social subjectivities of deceased individuals. Therefore, not only is content important when analyzing obituaries, but our ability to create and publish forms of obituaries via new technologies is highly significant in its own right.

**Myth, Barthes and Social Subjectivities**

Whereas McLuhan focused on the importance of technology and mediums within media studies, Barthes supplements the discussion with an alternate, although equally as important, theory. Barthes suggests that cultural texts must be examined as forms of language in which myth is the main system of communication. According to Barthes, myth includes the associated meanings of a text which appear natural; however, he also explains that myth is highly complex and can challenge all aspects of truth and naturalness. In a sense, myth is a play on words because while it does represent the hidden meanings of a text it is still associated with traditional understandings of the term. For example, the dictionary definition of ‘myth’ is “any invented story, idea, or concept” (Dictionary.com 2010), and in Barthes’ theory myth is just that: the meanings that people find through their own interpretations of a cultural text. However, it is these findings that challenge what is ‘natural’ of a given text, as there becomes an uncountable number of possible ways to appropriate the text. Therefore, who is to say what the ‘truth’ is and what is in fact ‘natural’?

When Barthes (1973:129) states that “myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing; it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion”, he speaks to the importance of critical examination of myth as a constant variable within texts. Barthes theory of myth helps us to examine the myths at play in all cultural texts in order to
understand how they influence larger cultural understandings of something, such as a death, an obituary or another form of death announcement. His theory is appropriate to this study of obituaries as he suggests that myth can be found in all texts, and he exemplifies this through his own analysis of mythologies present in ‘The World of Wrestling’, ‘The Romans in Films’, ‘Soap-powders and Detergents’, and ‘Toys’, just to list a few areas of his research (Barthes 1973). Other authors have applied Barthes theory of myth to numerous topics such as television, HIV/AIDS and journalistic objectivity (see Porter 2008, Mufune 2005, Vobic 2008), further proving Barthes point that all cultural texts can be examined for the underlying myths at play, despite the wide array and seeming banality of topics.

Furthermore, Barthes applies Saussure’s idea of semiology as a ‘science of signs’ to his work, and heightens it to new levels of analysis. Barthes (1973:9) suggests that texts must be semiologically analyzed as a way to “account in detail for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal norm”, meaning that texts must be examined critically to challenge any normalized, taken-for-granted forms of communication that are present. Barthes (1972:111) applied Saussure’s idea to his own analysis, stating that it allows myth to be studied as a “semiological system”. Therefore, myth becomes better understood as a form of communication within a larger science of understanding; the study of signs. Not only does semiology legitimize myth by giving it a ‘home’, but it also speaks to the larger aspects of significance within a text: method and language. Barthes (1972:111-112) explains that,

Semiology is a science of forms, since it studies significations apart from their content. I should like to say one word about the necessity and the limits of such a formal science. The necessity is that which applies in the case of any exact language... all criticism must consent to the ascesis, to the artifice of analysis; and in analysis, it must match method and language.
Therefore, all aspects of a cultural text must be analyzed using Barthes’ (1972) theory of myth, as both medium and language become significant. What Barthes adds to semiology – the study of signs that was already established by Saussure and Levi-Strauss – is that signs are ordered by myth or culturally dominant ways of making sense of signs. Signs do not appear by chance.

In the case of textual analysis, Barthes’ myth can be linked to McLuhan’s medium is the message and technology as an extension of consciousness as they all examine the methods by which a text is created. However, Barthes also looks at the language of the content (actual texts, pictures, slogans, songs, etc.) and more importantly, the mythologies that are hidden yet silently communicated within the mediums. By analyzing obituaries at a more critical level and in a way that examines more than the basic content consisting of a death announcement, I can explore forms and significations that may challenge the ‘naturalness’ of the text. More specifically, I can apply Barthes theory of myth and semiology to examine the ways in which alternative messages in obituaries may influence larger cultural understandings of death and dying and social subjectivities of the deceased.

For example, there were multiple styles of obituaries that were released electronically regarding Jackson’s death, and they often differed in both form and content. Whereas McLuhan’s theory helps to distinguish who created these forms and the many representations of meaning from new technological mediums used when publishing obituaries, Barthes mythologisation allows us to look more specifically at their embedded meanings which often go undetected. It is through applying Barthes theory as a form of analysis that obituaries can be examined as messages that create the conflicting identities of Jackson (as this is a controversial topic that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter
Three), in terms of how a publisher wants him to be publicly branded. This process of branding the deceased individual as a social subject with varying identities becomes highly important since the ways in which a person is represented can play into the ‘last say’ effect of obituaries, as previously mentioned (Fowler 2007a). Therefore, an examination of mythologies can provide a better understanding of how deceased individuals are subjectified, and the social and cultural implications of recognizing a person in such a public way.

The Method of Textual Analysis

The critical reading of a variety of texts can be a personal and subjective process, yet it is necessary to provide some sort of methodology to, if nothing else, act as a guide so one does not go off track during the analysis of the aforementioned obituaries. As stated by Barthes (1973:11) who recalled his own time spent reflecting on topics suggested by current events, “I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which, in my view is hidden there”. Therefore, I will turn to his work as a way to frame my own analysis of cultural texts and the ‘ideological abuse which is hidden’ within them, so that I, too, can look for meanings that are so often ignored or assumed as ‘natural’. Barthes’ (1972:12) explains that when he wrote his twenty-eight essays about the mythologies present in topics of current events in the 1950s, he did not force meaning but instead looked for the “insistence and repetition” of meaning. Therefore, by focusing on Michael Jackson as a case study, I will employ latent content analyses of multiple forms of obituaries as presented through technological mediums, as a way to examine texts for repetitive meanings and understandings.
Latent content analysis “involves a systematic analysis of texts” and examines “whether cultural meanings... have changed over time” (Esterberg 2002:171). By centering my research on the latent content analysis of obituaries, I will investigate the underlying meanings of the material. More specifically, my proposed research will use qualitative in-depth latent content analysis and a critical review of the language present and methods/mediums used in publishing the texts, to challenge traditional understandings of obituaries as only death announcements (Barthes 1972; McLuhan 2003). Through this process I will develop terms of reference, such as themes that relate to technological advancements and the fluidity of the terms obituary and obituarising; myth and the existence of hidden meanings; and the creation of social subjectivities of the deceased through branding. These terms of reference will be applied to the examination of obituaries as representative of larger understandings surrounding the culture of death and dying. As demonstrated by the literature review of past research on obituaries, there is a strong need to move beyond simply categorizing and analyzing obituaries at a quantitative level (see Starck 2006, Philips 2007 and Selsdon 1996) to deconstruct obituaries as influential cultural texts.

My research will use unobtrusive qualitative measures to examine obituaries as published through mainstream forms of media during the years 2009 and 2010, often referring to well-known celebrity deaths from previous generations as a form of reaffirmation. More specifically, I will look at media representations that have not always been understood as forms of obituaries due to the traditional understanding of the texts as death announcements that were solely published in newspapers and magazines (Starck 2006). Thus, I will examine media representations as any media publication or text that broadcasts the death (and the life once lived) of an individual, despite the various forms
they may take. As a result, I will examine at least one obituary as represented by each of the following mediums regarding the death of Michael Jackson: video montages, news reports, blogs, facebook groups, televised memorials, online memorials, movies, reviews, jokes, tattoos, memorabilia, and magazines, in addition to examining a selection of traditional forms of obituaries as published in online newspapers.

By examining the various forms of obituaries about the same deceased subject, I can apply McLuhan’s (2003) and Barthes’ (1973:12) theories to search for meaning as represented by “insistence and repetition” in both the form and content of the texts. I have chosen to focus my research on Jackson as a deceased subject for two reasons. First, he is a globally recognizable and newsworthy figure and second, due to his controversial and public lifestyle there is a vast amount of material regarding his death (Taraborrelli 2009). Whereas obituaries published about Jackson’s death will be my primary source of data, I will also use the public’s published reactions to these obituaries as additional support for my analysis.

According to Esterberg (2002:124), popular forms of media “are useful for understanding how groups of people are represented in public discourse or what norms and ideals for behaviour exist in a particular time and place” (Esterberg 2002:124). While the significance and influence of media has been praised for its contributions to academic research, there have been few studies that specifically concentrated on the media’s impact on obituaries (Fowler 2007a, 2007b; Starck 2006). My research will fill a gap in the literature with an in-depth examination of Jackson obituaries as cultural texts that represent larger issues surrounding the culture of death and dying, while also speaking to notions of subject formation and branding within mass-media. Obituaries, as
parts of normalized death rituals in a North American context, are vast and varied while simultaneously being socially significant.

Summary

As an academic topic of analysis, the social implications of death and dying have not always been considered as an influential part of society (Kubler-Ross 1969; Noys 1995; Stevenson 1987). However, by reviewing existing literature on the history of the culture of death and dying and the changing forms of obituaries as mediated by technological advancements (Starck 2006; Philips 2007; Selsdon 1996), I have suggested that death rituals are important and influential areas of study with regards to media studies, mythologies, and social subjectivities of the deceased. By applying McLuhan’s (2003) communicative mediums in combination with Barthes’ (1972) semiology and myth to the topic of obituaries broadcasting Jackson’s death, I will introduce and review how media can broadcast a specific message while simultaneously being understood to have numerous other meanings within the content and form of medium.
Chapter Three

Case Study – Popular Culture Mediation in the Subject Formation of Michael Jackson

Introduction – Meeting Michael through Media

Since Michael Jackson’s unexpected death on June 25th, 2009 at the age of fifty, he has arguably become more infamous than ever before (Taraborrelli 2009). While this is a broad claim due to his very successful career in music, it speaks to the significance of celebrity death, and to the social implications of dying (literally and figuratively) in the public eye. Jackson, who first became a known public figure through his role as the lead singer in his family’s band The Jackson 5, went on to become an international superstar often titled and globally recognized as the King of Pop, MJ or simply Michael (Taraborrelli 2009; People Tribute 2009; The Official Michael Jackson Site 2009). During the 1980s and 1990s, Jackson continued to make headlines for his flourishing career in music, with some of his songs (such as Thriller) and accompanying videos being cited as changing the music industry forever (Taraborrelli 2009; Mercer 1994).

However, along with his globally recognized fame, Jackson was also a prominent figure in the media due to rumours and controversies about his lifestyle and changing appearance which prompted the nickname Wacko Jacko (Taraborrelli 2009). People Magazine (2009), one of the more credited popular culture North American magazines that has reported on the lives of celebrities since 1974, echoed the sound of Jackson’s fans (and dissenters) worldwide when they ran a cover story asking, “[i]s this guy weird or what?”. Jackson started to be known as ‘weird’ due to his changing skin colour and his use of extensive plastic surgery (Anomalies Unlimited 2002-2004), and he became widely identified as ‘dangerous’ due to his many friendships with children that were
pathologized by two accusations of child molestation (Taraborrelli 2009). Despite his attempts to avoid publicity and the fact that he tried to keep his children from the media spotlight, Jackson lived his life in front of cameras, whether it be at his own will\(^1\) or at the hands of eager paparazzi searching for the next story about *Wacko Jacko* (Taraborrelli 2009).

It is because of the publicity and controversy surrounding his talent and lifestyle that Jackson has become a globally recognized public figure, both before and after his death. Even though Jackson died of cardiac arrest as the result of an accidental prescription drug overdose\(^2\), he is still very much ‘alive’ in the media (Taraborrelli 2009; Deutsch 2010; MSNBC 2009). Technological advancements in communications have allowed a public audience, mainly anyone with access to the Internet or television content control, to socially subjectify Jackson by publishing texts of their memories and feelings about his death in the media. This cultural shift to recognize deceased individuals through a variety of public texts and media, instead of solely within formal obituaries as printed in newspapers, can be identified as a new form of obituarising in which anyone can take part. Therefore, obituaries can take on numerous forms and styles, and these become very telling of the ways in which the culture surrounding death and dying is changing due to technological advancements.

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\(^1\) While Jackson often stated that he preferred his privacy, he still sat down for numerous public interviews trying to ‘clean up’ his image. One of his most well-known interviews was with Oprah Winfrey on February 10\(^{th}\), 1993, when he gave her a tour of his estate, Neverland Ranch (see www.AllMichaelJackson.com, 2010 for a synopsis of the interview).

\(^2\) The cause of Jackson’s death is still a very controversial topic as his cardiologist, Dr. Conrad Murray, has recently been charged with involuntary manslaughter, yet the Jackson family is still attempting to have him charged with murder as new evidence becomes available (ie. that Jackson’s heart was still beating when he arrived at the hospital and that Murray withheld vital information about the drugs that *he* had administered to Jackson) (see Deutsch 2010).
As a result of the changing culture of death and dying, the way that we subjectify deceased individuals is also being altered. As exemplified by the case of Jackson, while he is physically deceased, his image is still very much alive and socially subjectified through media. His name and his image are still parts of mass-media, and it is predicted that his fans will forever consume and appropriate anything to do with the Michael Jackson brand (Silberman 2007), including his death. In this sense, Jackson becomes similar to the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll, Elvis Presley, whose brand continues to grow and profit thirty three years after his death (The Official Site of the King of Rock ‘N’ Roll 2010). According to Seth Silberman (2007:417), Michael Jackson became a “marketed product that parades as a man we think we all know because he has grown up on the stage, in front of documenting cameras”. Even though he tried to live his life in private, Jackson’s career and earnings were only further enhanced and popularized due to the many publicized controversies surrounding his life (Taraborrelli 2009). Therefore, why would his death be any different? Not only was his death untimely making it newsworthy and shocking, but the controversies and rumours about his death (Was it murder!? Was it suicide?!?) gave rise to the many varying obituaries that were created and made public about Jackson. Simply stated, despite if you loved him or hated him, you knew he died and you most likely had an opinion on the matter. This chapter will argue how the expression of opinions on his death can be read as a form of obituarising celebrated deceased subjectivities and in new ways as a result of technological advancements in the fields of communications and mass-media. More specifically, this chapter will demonstrate how Jackson is obituarised in both positive and negative ways, continuously and fluidly labelling him as a hero, a musician, a father, as enigmatic, as problematic, and as a dangerous predator. By recognizing these conflicting and continuously changing
identities as they are present in processes of obituarization, we can better understand the branding power associated with obituarising and the many forms of obituarization that so often go unnoticed.

Given that both Jackson’s life and death were newsworthy and controversial his case becomes an interesting and informative site of analysis when examining the subject formation of deceased celebrities. We will examine the numerous ways in which Jackson’s death was announced and/or recognized within popular culture, and how the various ways can be grouped under the newly defined term obituary and by the means of their publication. By looking at all forms of texts about Jackson’s death that are publicly available for consumption and critique, this chapter will demonstrate the similarities amongst them and how they all speak, on varying levels, to obituarization as a participatory form of entertainment and as a tool for product branding. A latent content analysis of these obituaries will allow for an in-depth examination of the underlying meanings of the material, and a better understanding of the consequential affects that obituaries have on the ways in which deceased individuals are socially subjectified and mythologized.

For purposes of clarity and organization, I will be grouping new forms of obituaries under three main headers: Internet, Television/Film and Magazines/Newspapers. Each of these groups will have sub-categories based on the primary form of the text, as presented by their specific medium. The Internet category will include blogs, fan groups, video montages, online memorials, jokes, tattoos, costumes, jewellery, and baby names. Furthermore, the Television/Film category will concentrate on the recently released movie “Michael Jackson’s This Is It” (Ortega 2009), in addition to Jackson’s filmed memorial. Finally, I will briefly look at more traditional
forms of obituaries as published in print media and grouped under the header *Magazines/Newspapers*, highlighting the ways in which even traditional forms of obituaries are changing as a result of technological advancements in communications and media. By examining the multitude of identities that these mediums use to describe Jackson and his death, we can better understand how obituaries are popular forms of death announcements that can influence a public’s understanding of the deceased.

**Internet**

When focusing on technological advancements of communications and media, the Internet can be understood as a relatively new phenomenon that allows anyone with access a means of publishing texts to a public audience (Pearson 2010). While not all texts published on the Internet become globally recognized or as popular as others, they are nonetheless officially published via a form of mainstream media (Pearson 2010). The Internet becomes an integral site of information in the analysis of new forms of obituaries, as there are so many distinct and individual mediums that can be used to make one’s message public. For example, the popular video upload site YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) has over 29,000 videos that have been uploaded about ‘Michael Jackson’s death’, making it a key site of obituarising. Similarly, celebrity gossip blogging sites such as The Thirty Mile Zone ([www.tmz.com](http://www.tmz.com)) (which is credited with having made the first public announcement of Jackson’s death) and Perez Hilton ([www.perezhilton.com](http://www.perezhilton.com)) continue to revisit and blog about Jackson’s death as they follow and have been following funeral plans, lawsuits regarding his untimely demise, and anything that may be relevant to his biography. Furthermore, fans and dissenters alike of Jackson have also taken to the web to broadcast their unique forms of obituaries about
Jackson through Facebook (www.facebook.com) and in a variety of independent websites that are both similar and different. These sites are similar in that they all announce or recall the death of Jackson, yet can vary in opinion, appearance and meaning, and the ways in which they subjectify Jackson. Therefore, by reviewing the many ways in which Jackson is being obituarised on the Internet, meaning the ways in which people write about and comment on his death, one can better understand how obituaries are very public and vastly distributed, and how they are changing the ways that North Americans understand the culture surrounding death and dying. In addition, by reviewing the ways that Jackson is obituarised one can also examine the many ways in which he has been socially constructed as a subject in death, and how the varying messages about Jackson speak to a larger understanding of social subjectivity in North America.

Celebrity Entertainment Websites and Blogs

Celebrity gossip site and the accompanying television show The Thirty Mile Zone, or more often referred to as TMZ (2010) and www.tmz.com, first broke the news of Jackson’s death on June 25th, 2009, after informing the public earlier in the day that he had suffered a heart attack. According to a British journalist from the Guardian, Stephen Brook (2009), “TMZ did this at lightning speed. Jackson died at 2:26pm, LA time. At 2:44pm, TMZ informed the world of his death”. While the question still remains as to how TMZ found out about this information so quickly, with other agencies suggesting that they have inside sources at all hospitals and that it is an invasion of privacy (see Sussman 2009), it was their announcement that started a chain of public response to and obituarising about Jackson’s death. With easily accessible technologies, information can travel quickly and the Internet makes the publishing of news stories quicker than in the
past. In addition, the Internet is more efficiently able to globalize news than the previously relied upon scheduled and televised news reports.

Not only did TMZ announce the death of Jackson, but they quickly turned his death into a sensational report that followed and broadcast his funeral plans while simultaneously highlighting the highs and lows of his life, and airing fellow celebrity’s responses to his death. It was through TMZ’s initial broadcast of his death that Jackson began to be branded as an idol, an accomplished musician and as a globalized star, and more specifically as a person’s whose death should be discussed as a topic of popular culture. As seen in Figure 1, TMZ created a banner that was at the top of any news story that they published about Jackson. The banner simply read, “R.I.P. Michael Jackson 1958-2009” with a small picture of a teenaged Jackson on the left side. Despite what story TMZ may have been running at any given time about Jackson, that banner communicated that he was dead in the same way that obituaries do, by stating the ‘who’ – Michael Jackson; the ‘when’ – 1958 to 2009; and the ‘what’ – R.I.P., representing that he had indeed died. Similar to traditional forms of obituaries as published in newspapers, TMZ did not report the ‘how’ or ‘why’ in the banner, yet since the story was sensational and shocking you could find out about it in other parts of the site, as you find in a newspaper that carries an obituary about a shocking or sensational death. Also, TMZ, like other media outlets, would want to keep the ‘how’ and ‘why’ a mystery so people would continue to visit and explore the site.
Figure 1: Celebrity entertainment news website, TMZ, broadcasts a ‘R.I.P. Michael Jackson’ banner that provides their audience with a quick link to all posts related to Jackson’s death (TMZ 2010).

Through processes of obituarization, including the Jackson headline banner, TMZ branded Jackson as an idol and as an accomplished musician; as somebody who will be and should be missed. Given that while Jackson was alive TMZ had reported on controversies surrounding his lifestyle quite frequently and negatively, their sudden change of opinion was based on their own goals and services, highlighting the importance of branding in processes of subjectification after death. The news of Jackson’s death was sure to bring in much attention to the site, especially since TMZ were the ones to first publicize the death of Jackson, so they obituarised about Jackson in a way that would satisfy their personal audience while simultaneously publicising their primary product or service – their celebrity entertainment and news website.

Referring back to the new, more inclusive definition of the term obituary as a popular culture medium that combines biography and sensation when talking about the deceased, it becomes evident that TMZ was definitely leading the way in obituarising Jackson. They started first by scooping other agencies and stations with news of his death,
and they were prepared to keep the fans up to date with a few clicks of a button. By clicking on the R.I.P. banner, TMZ’s audience was able to link directly to all stories in chronological order that the site had posted about Jackson over the years, and to link to news about other celebrities and their public reactions to Jackson’s death. In addition, TMZ’s audience was and still is able to comment on TMZ’s reports and many chose to leave condolences and express their shock and grief over the loss of Jackson. As will be discussed throughout the chapter, such technological advancements have not only made the announcements of deaths more efficient, but they have also played a role in creating a participatory element in obituarization; one that encourages people to broadcast their feelings and opinions about a death to the public, directly contributing to that celebrity’s public subjectivity.

Similarly to TMZ, other celebrity entertainment sites also obituarised Jackson, taking the announcement of his death and the republicising and reporting on his controversial lifestyle further than traditional forms of obituaries, and turning it into a sensational production. Celebrity entertainment blogger, Perez Hilton (2010), who receives approximately eight million hits daily on his site www.perezhilton.com, instantly expressed his condolences to Jackson’s children, Prince, Paris and Blanket. By focusing on Jackson’s role as a father, Hilton obituarised about Jackson in a way that would keep the story alive, even after the shock of Jackson’s death had worn off. Whereas TMZ did not immediately question the fate of the children, Hilton (2010) blogged that Jackson’s death was “[s]uch a sad loss, especially for his three young children”, and he continued to follow not only Jackson’s death but the consequential affects that his demise may have on his children.
Figure 2: Celebrity gossip blogger, Perez Hilton, posts YouTube videos that were uploaded of Jackson’s children playing, laughing and appearing to be having a good time (Hilton 2010).

Most recently, on May 12, 2010, almost a year after Jackson’s death, Hilton continued to comment on the lives of Jackson’s children. Now celebrities in their own right due to their infamous father, Hilton (2010) aired some homemade uploaded YouTube videos of Jackson’s children and stated that “[i]t’s heartwarming to see that they’re just being normal kids having fun!” (see Figure 2). By focusing on his children and how they appear to be “normal kids”, Hilton is identifying Jackson as a good father and as a positive influence on his children’s lives, which was a sentiment that was widely opposed when Jackson was alive. When examining Jackson’s role as a father, he was often criticized and considered to be an ‘unfit parent’, so it is only through processes of obituarization, and assumingly Hilton’s goal to keep his website popular and continuously newsworthy, that Jackson is finally subjectified as a good parent.
Hilton, while blogging different content than TMZ but still on the same subject matter, announced Jackson’s death in his own way and as a result he highlighted the numerous ways in which somebody’s death can be announced and reported on while still basing those reports on elements of obituarization. In this sense, Hilton exemplifies the independent obituary movement, channelling his own thoughts or ideas on and about Jackson’s death to the public. Despite the reasoning behind his publicised obituarising, whether it is for self gain and publicity or if it is an honest reaction to a death, Hilton does not rely on any formal definitions of obituaries when publishing his announcement of and reaction to Jackson’s death. Whereas TMZ is more of a networked agency and therefore reported more facts than opinion, Hilton aired a seemingly emotional response to Jackson’s death. However, both reports relied on the positive subjectification of and mythologization of Jackson to guide their obituarising while simultaneously drawing attention to their offered products.

Obituarization becomes a form of branding that works to not only publicise a message about one’s death and the type of person that they were, but to also draw attention to the medium being used and subsequent messages that are being broadcast. For example, by branding Jackson as a good person, TMZ and Hilton draw on the widely understood notions of the culture surrounding death and dying in a North American context, which are based on the idea that untimely deaths are sad and tragic for everyone involved. Therefore, by focusing on Jackson as a celebrated deceased subject and by doing so in a way that brands Jackson as a positive figure (even though previously both TMZ and Hilton had published controversial and negative stories about Jackson), they avoid attracting any negative attention to their personal sites; thus, not risking losing
business or offending their audiences by challenging widely accepted cultural standards associated with death and dying.

Hilton’s apparent emotional response to Jackson’s death can be read as a wider representation of the participatory element of similar obituarising by millions. While Hilton’s feelings and opinions on Jackson’s death became highly popularised and sensationalized due to his already large fan base, all internet users had an equal opportunity to obituarise Jackson in a similar manner. For example, The Oprah Winfrey Show (2009) turned to Oprah’s website to publish her response to Jackson’s death, as did others such as BlacKosity Magazine writer RealisM (2009) who turned to his blog and Jasmyne Conner (MJFC 2009), the president of Michael Jackson’s fan club that existed before his death, in addition to numerous fans worldwide. While all of their obituaries did not necessarily become as popular and frequently visited as that of Hilton’s or TMZ’s, they still obituarised Jackson in a similar manner that worked to subjectify him as a positive and heroic figure such as an accomplished musician, a good father and an interesting person. By drawing attention to Jackson’s biography and by incorporating dramatic sensation into their obituaries about Jackson (for example, Jasmyne Conner wrote an open letter to Jackson tearfully claiming “I Love You, Michael”), individuals could simultaneously express their reactions to Jackson’s death while constructing him as a celebrated deceased individual and while highlighting their personal websites. By drawing on the traditional understandings of obituaries while incorporating new mediums, Jackson’s audiences become the producers of new forms of obituaries that are made public due to the easy accessibility of the Internet.
Facebook: ‘Becoming a Fan’ and ‘Liking’ Groups

As more people became aware of Jackson’s death, a variety of mediums were being used by individuals throughout the world to express their feelings on the matter. Unlike TMZ or Hilton, people who did not have regular blogging sites or fan bases could not rely on their own celebrity statuses or well-known reputations to popularize their published responses to Jackson’s death. Instead, a grassroots response to his death was organized on the popular social networking site, Facebook, as fans immediately began to create celebratory groups in honour of his contribution to popular culture given his demise. It was through Facebook groups (2009a; 2009b) that fans with similar opinions about Jackson could unite and broadcast their reactions to his death in ways that often highlighted certain aspects of his identity. More specifically, one person would create a group on Facebook3, such as one group titled “RIP Michael Jackson” (Facebook 2009b) that now has over 53,000 members, and many fans would unite through this site to express their grief and sadness over Jackson’s death. This group, emblazoned with a red, oval, framed picture of Jackson and stamped with a small red rose and the letters ‘R.I.P.’ (see Figure 3) is a public site in which anyone with a Facebook account can join by simply clicking the “become a fan” or “like” links4. Without necessarily recognizing the significance of ‘liking’ or ‘becoming a fan’, Facebook users obituarise Jackson through their membership to the specific group even if they do not post comments or pictures in response to Jackson’s demise. This site obituarises Jackson not only through its being and

3 All www.facebook.com users can create ‘groups’ on the site by following a few simple steps. Groups are free of charge to create and other members can either be invited to join (if the group’s status is set to ‘private’) or they can click ‘Like’ or ‘Become a Fan’ to become a member of a public group. All groups dedicated to or about Michael Jackson that I came across in my research were public and equally available to all www.facebook.com users.
4 Since Jackson’s death, Facebook has changed the “Become a Fan” link to a “Like” link. Both links serve the same function by broadcasting to one’s Facebook community that they have joined specific groups.
purpose of announcing his death, but it too includes biography, sensation and public reaction in a way that shifts his social identity as a celebrated deceased subject.

**Figure 3:** One of the many ‘R.I.P. Michael Jackson’ Facebook fan groups uses this picture to symbolize the meaning of their group and their sadness over his death (Facebook 2009b)

In the case of the R.I.P. Michael Jackson fan groups, sensation and biography are controlled by the fans who post comments about and pictures of Jackson that not only highlight certain moments of his life and brand him as an idol, but also draw attention to his global fan base and musical accomplishments. For example, Haydar from Iraq posted “Michael the world will miss you forever”, Ioanna from Greece posted “Million times we’ve cried... If love alone could have saved u.... u NEVER would have died....!R.I.P MJ... miss ya! love ya!”, and Regina from the United States commented “Michael Jackson you will always be missed by your fans” (Facebook 2009b). While these are only a few examples of the thousands of posts from this one site, they highlight how fans are uniting and broadcasting similar messages via this popular social networking site. Not
only is Jackson being positively obituarised and honoured in this case, but his image is simultaneously being broadcast to other Facebook users; thus, further broadcasting his death and socially framing him as a celebrated deceased subjectivity. It is through these popularized processes of obituarization that Jackson is being branded as a consumable and marketable product of entertainment.

However, due to the easy accessibility of the Internet and the right to freedom of speech, other groups on Facebook highlight Jackson’s death in a different and more negative manner. Instead of branding Jackson as a talented musician or good father like the “R.I.P. Michael Jackson” group, other groups focused on his controversial past. Therefore, while still announcing his death and including characteristics of both biography and sensation, groups such as “I Am Glad Michael Jackson is Dead!” (Facebook 2009a) are also being created as a way to obituarise about Jackson and to voice an alternate public’s opinion. This group, while having a significantly less fan base with only 307 members, obituarises Jackson in a way that still brands him as a celebrated and marketable social subject, but focuses more on his enigmatic, problematic and dangerous life history. For example, Tijs from Belgium posted “woohoo finally rid of him” and Max from the United States shared his opinion, stating that “[i]t seems not even we haters can have a spot to express our glee that the walking pile of human waste is dead? Go back to your mourning pages and leave us alone! I’ve hated MJ all my life and I still hate him!” in response to Jackson’s fans who were bombarding the site with messages of distaste for the group (Facebook 2009a). By obituarising Jackson in a negative way and in such a public space as Facebook, Jackson’s dissenters are feeding the process of mythologization surrounding his death and his identity. Even if they are ‘glad that he is dead’, the members of this group are still engaging with Jackson as a social
subject, and the corresponding Jackson brand, in ways that further broadcast his celebrity status while engaging in processes of obituarization and identification.

Despite one’s opinion on Jackson’s death, Facebook has empowered all of Jackson’s audiences the opportunity to publish their opinions to a public space, and has enabled them to do so in a way that continuously subjectifies him as a deceased individual through media that can be read as obituarization. It is through this public obituarising about Jackson that he is further constructed to have conflicting and varying identities. However, all of these identities further promote Jackson as a celebrated deceased subjectivity; somebody who was newsworthy and entertaining and whose death influenced not only popular culture, but also the culture surrounding death and dying in North America.

*Your Voice on YouTube*

In addition to celebrity entertainment websites and fan groups, YouTube quickly became one of the most frequently used mediums to broadcast messages about Jackson’s death. Even within this one medium consisting of uploaded videos, the public’s reaction to Jackson’s death varied and was highlighted in a variety of ways that often constructed conflicting identities of Jackson. To post a video to YouTube, a site that is self-described as “the largest worldwide video-sharing community”, one must create an account which is free of charge, and then they are able to upload almost any video as long as it does not go against the terms of service (ie. no hate speech or nudity). Therefore, YouTube is extremely accessible and many of Jackson’s fans turned to the site to express their feelings and opinions of Jackson’s death and to watch other people’s tributes about him. For example, a video of Jackson performing his hit song *Billie Jean* was uploaded under
the title “R.I.P Michael Jackson-Billie Jean [Live] R.I.P” and has had over 2,218,193 views (YouTube User - fortunahool 2009). While this upload was of an existing video, the simple act of adding R.I.P. to the title and the fact it was uploaded by a fan gives it characteristics of an obituary. Its purpose is not only to broadcast the concert, but to also highlight the fact that Jackson had died and that his fans were not going to forget about his music, talent or sensational life story. Consequently, by posting Jackson’s existing music on YouTube, it becomes republicised and he becomes branded as a celebrity figure, an idol and as a talented musician. In the case of YouTube videos that further broadcast his music, Jackson is being mythologized as a larger than life persona and as somebody who will continue to ‘live’ through his music and be kept ‘alive’ by his loyal and large fan base. This process of republicising his work is significant as it is free advertisement for the Jackson brand, and works to promote the positive identification of Jackson.

Furthermore, other YouTube videos took the forms of video montages or recordings of individuals expressing their feelings, and while these videos differ in content and appearance, they are similar in the way that they announce Jackson’s death, draw on his biography, and sensationalize his story and image. For example, a video titled “RIP Michael Jackson Died 1958 2009 King of Pop” streamed together varying images of Jackson in concert to one of his songs, *Man in the Mirror* (YouTube User – tijdnoolnl 2009). This YouTube user not only put together pictures of Jackson, but they did so in a way that acted as a timeline of his career and a biography of his life. By posting pictures of Jackson throughout his life to his own music, this video further brands him as an entertainer and as a talented musician, and also as a family man who started his career by performing in the family band and eventually having children of his own. However, while
this YouTube user created a video montage that was positive and showed highlighted moments of Jackson’s career, other montages were created to poke fun at his changing appearance and often criticized his extensive use of plastic surgery and the lightening of his skin colour (YouTube User – People 2009). In these videos, Jackson was negatively identified as an enigmatic and problematic person, and the epitome of the ‘Wacko Jacko’ persona that was so often drawn upon in popular media before his death. Therefore, while YouTube is a popular site of obituarization, it is still a non-sanctioned site that allows an array of opinions and videos to be broadcast on a global scale. As a result, YouTube turns the obituarization and continuous reappropriation of Jackson’s identity into a popular source of entertainment.

One fan specifically took to YouTube to express his distaste about how on “twitter, myspace, facebook, everywhere I turn, people are making a joke about him being a child molester, or making jokes about his nose”, posting a video titled “R.I.P. MICHAEL JACKSON – DON’T JUDGE” (YouTube User – theoriginaltyler 2009). This YouTube user works to challenge the negative identities that surrounded Jackson as a public figure (and still do in some cases), and attempts to rebrand Jackson in a more positive way that highlights his career rather than the controversies that were publicised throughout his lifetime. By posting a video specifically for this purpose, this YouTube user is directly engaging with the participatory element of obituarization, and unlike the majority of videos that simply praised or criticised Jackson, this video discussed his multiple identities directly. By drawing attention to the negative identities of Jackson as a dangerous predator and as a problematic and enigmatic person, and by attempting to explain why those identities were not appropriate for Jackson, this YouTube user was
able to brand Jackson as a good person and as somebody worthy of idolization that has simply been misunderstood by the media in the past.

Instead of relying on photos or songs to express his feelings and opinions about Jackson’s death, this fan decided to broadcast his own voice and has now had over 100,000 views of his posted video. While this is a substantial numbers of views, it does not make this specific video any more significant than other videos that have only been viewed a few times. Instead, YouTube as a site of obituarization becomes highly significant because it allows the public an opportunity to become empowered to upload and publish their own styles of obituaries on the Internet, and to shift the identities with which Jackson is so often branded. Therefore, not only is Jackson’s death sensationalized and made public, but he is socially subjectified in various and often conflicting ways as a deceased individual through YouTube and uploaded videos. Due to the continuous shifting identities associated with Jackson as publicised through YouTube, his life and death both become mythological and subjective, with confliction being at the base of the multiple ways he is branded and obituarised.

Based on the earlier redefined definition of obituary, it becomes evident that YouTube videos are a popular site for the obituarization of Jackson. More specifically, factors such as the easy accessibility and popularity of YouTube become major contributors to the changing identities that are associated with Jackson. Furthermore, the vast amount of videos on Jackson’s death demonstrate how YouTube is a widely used form of media that is able to influence one’s understanding of the culture surrounding death and dying and the varying ways in which people obituarise about the deceased. For those who may not have many other options regarding personal sites of obituarization,
YouTube, similar to Facebook, gives everyone the chance to weigh in on both the life and death of Jackson and to publicise their message through a popular medium.

*Independent Websites that Encourage Obituarization*

Other sites broadcast more direct approaches to obituarising Jackson than the previous examples, and they are significant in the branding of Jackson as a social and cultural icon. One of the main sites that obituarises Jackson is The Official Michael Jackson webpage (2009). The creators of this page, Jackson’s family and previously hired personnel (hereby referred to as his ‘camp’), rely on the death of Jackson to attract a larger audience to the site where they continue to market and sell Jackson’s music and memorabilia. In addition to further marketing Jackson’s musical career and branding him as an extraordinary musician and icon in the process (for example, the site hosts a list of all the awards Jackson had won or was ever nominated for), the site hosts a link titled “Memories”. By clicking on the link, fans are directed to a new page with a header that says “HIS MUSIC WILL LIVE FOREVER” (see figure 4). This page is a space specifically designed for people to come and express their memories of Jackson and their feelings and opinions about his death. Jackson’s camp markets this page, which encourages people to fill out their name, email address, a title of their post, and a small comment section about their memories of Jackson, with the slogan “One Michael Jackson. One Million Tributes. Help us reach our goal of one million tributes for the King of Pop”, drawing on his uniqueness and his influence on popular culture (The Official Michael Jackson Site 2009). By encouraging fans to supply their information and responses to Jackson’s death on the site, they are not only gathering valuable contact information that could be used in future marketing campaigns, but Jackson’s camp is also
republicising his musical career while branding Jackson in a positive and extraordinary way.

**Figure 4:** ‘The Official Michael Jackson’ website encourages fans to publish their memories of Jackson with a goal of receiving one million tributes (The Official Michael Jackson Site 2009).

In addition to his role as a musician, other links on the site are used to further brand Jackson as a father, a philanthropist, a superstar, and as an icon. Through The Official Michael Jackson Site, including images, songs, links, articles, and the memory page, Jackson is constructed as an obituarised mythological subject; as a brand that can be quite profitable when marketed in a way that makes fans feel like consuming materials related to Jackson is an appropriate response to his death. In this sense, Jackson becomes socially subjectified as larger than life not only by his fans’ comments but also by the site itself. He becomes framed as an idol that will always be alive and ‘with’ his fans, despite his death and physical absence. Furthermore, obituarising Jackson on this site is highly
accessible as the fill-in-the-blank style ‘Memories’ page is simplistic in form and is textually encouraging. Jackson’s camp wants you to obituarise him; the fact that they have a goal of one million memories that they are trying to reach is a form of encouragement and directly demonstrates how the culture surrounding death and dying is changing. Instead of one’s death being a hidden or taboo topic (Berridge 2002; Rando 1987), it is now not uncommon for a death to be celebrated and widely discussed. It is through this celebration that deceased subjects, such as Jackson, have their identities reappropriated and broadcast for them and on a globalized scale. Therefore, Jackson’s official site draws on the changing culture surrounding death and dying by incorporating obituarization into their media marketing of the Michal Jackson brand. As a result, the site can be read as a text created to sell his products and to broadcast his name, further subjectifying Jackson as a deceased subject who is kept ‘alive’ through the Jackson brand and its followers.

Other sites attempt to create similar pages to the memory page described above, but their intentions are made more clear as they charge a fee to people who wish to post about Jackson’s death and to “send a [virtual] gift” in his honour (Michael Jackson’s Angels 2009). A site designed by fans proclaiming to be Michael Jackson’s Angels, they give Jackson’s audience the opportunity to light a virtual candle in his honour (this is free of charge), or to send him virtual gifts such as angels, menorahs, red or white roses, or teddy bears, at a fee of one dollar per gift (payable by Credit Card or PayPal) (see Figure 5). This gift then shows up as a small icon on the website, with the fan’s name underneath the picture of whatever gift they chose to ‘send’ Jackson. By marketing Jackson’s death as a tragedy and by encouraging fans to participate in the obituarization of Jackson through their site, Jackson’s Angels are branding him as an icon. More specifically, this
site appears to give Jackson a God-like identity, clarified by their name and choice of pictures on the site, yet it relies on the death of Jackson to turn a profit. By charging people to send virtual gifts, something that can be done free of charge on other sites, Jackson’s Angels are using Jackson’s death and the popularity of his brand post-mortem to market and sell their own products.

![Figure 5: A website, ‘Michael Jackson’s Angels’, is created so fans can send Jackson virtual gifts (Michael Jackson’s Angels 2009).](image)

While it is common to have people pay newspapers to print obituaries of family members and friends in the media, celebrity deaths are most often reported free of charge as ways to draw readers to the newspaper (Johnson 2006; Fowler 2007a). However, since this site is not an official Jackson site and is designed by fans, it becomes questionable as to who is profiting from the sale of the virtual gifts (the site does not list any contact information or explanation as to where the money is going). Unlike newspapers that use the news of a celebrity’s death to draw in consumers to the rest of their offered product
(Starck 2006), this site solely focuses on obituarising Jackson and becomes an obituary in itself through its purpose and offered service. Created only after his death, this site relies on Jackson’s large fan base and popular brand name for monetary gain, and offers little more than a small icon in exchange. While fans may be drawn to the online community honouring Jackson as offered through this site and therefore may not mind paying the fee, it is still questionable as The Official Michael Jackson Site (2009) (in addition to numerous other sites, including Facebook and YouTube) offers a much larger online community free of charge. This site demonstrates how the culture surrounding death and dying is becoming more marketable, especially as the Internet continues to offer Jackson’s audience the opportunity to participate in his obituarization through a wide array of mediums. Therefore, while this site positively identifies Jackson as a musician and idolized individual, it is the marketable Jackson brand that further pathologizes Jackson as a mythological subject.

Websites that give Jackson’s audiences the opportunity to share their feelings or to light a candle in his memory draw on the participatory aspect of obituaries as made possible by new technologies (Pearson 2010). Not only can Jackson’s audience comment on existing sites, but they can also create their own page dedicated to obituarising Jackson. Given that websites are a medium that can be created at such low cost and without much labour due to technological advancements in communications and media (such as the availability of free host sites and fill-in-the-blank templates), there are also numerous independent sites that obituarise Jackson in unique and less direct ways.
Odd Styles of Obituarising

By obituarising Jackson in unique styles as made possible by technological advancements and the corresponding efficiency of the Internet, Jackson’s audiences socially subjectify him in various ways that draw on different aspects of his identity. For example, Jackson is often identified as an accomplished musician, a celebrity figure, an idol, and a corresponding marketable brand. Likewise, Jackson is also identified in more negative ways that often frame him as a child molester, a fragile figure, an odd parent and as a ‘weirdo’, as previously mentioned. As will be demonstrated by existing sites that highlight jokes, tattoos, costumes and the rise in Jackson related baby names, new mediums allow obituarization to occur without the producer necessarily knowing that they are obituarising or that they are contributing to the culture and consumable markets surrounding death and dying. Similarly, the producers of these texts often frame Jackson’s identity to be either positive or negative, and by not recognizing their involvement in processes of obituarization, the social subjectivities of the deceased can unknowingly be affected. For example, a funny joke about Jackson that may have been written ‘just to be funny’ becomes more significant and powerful with regards to the ways in which he is socially subjectified than may be recognized by the ‘joker’. Therefore, jokes, since they are often negative or controversial, can subjectify the deceased in a way that may not be a realistic depiction of the given individuals. In this sense, realizing the new ways in which people obituarise and the role that technological advancements play in redefining obituaries becomes critical in understanding how social subjectivities of the deceased are created and are continuously shifting.

In addition, independent websites become important areas of analysis as they often host other mediums within their site. For example, Funny and Jokes (2009), a
website boasting “unforgettably stupid humor”, is first and foremost a website. However, within the site, it hosts jokes as the main medium of obituarising Jackson. While they premise the jokes with a small disclaimer stating that “if you’re just here to complain about MJ related humor because of his death, you’d probably be better off finding a site dedicated to his memory and greatness... not a humor website” (Funny and Jokes 2009), they are still unknowingly contributing to his memory and the media sensation surrounding his death. By posting jokes that draw on Jackson’s biography and the sensational and controversial aspects of his life and death, these jokes become popular cultural texts that obituarise Jackson in their own terms. While jokes may not be considered traditional forms of obituaries, they are nonetheless popular cultural texts that socially subjectify individuals on a frequent basis, and therefore they must be examined as socially significant and influential sites of obituarization.

Figure 6: A website, ‘Funny and Jokes’ posts jokes about Jackson that offend a lot of people. They post a small disclaimer to avoid criticism (Funny and Jokes 2009).
The jokes, despite being created simply for humour value, often socially subjectify Jackson in a way that further pathologizes his involvement with children and his status as a weird or odd individual. For example, one joke states that “[a]t the autopsy they found children’s underwear strapped to Michael Jackson’s upper arm. According to his doctors it is just a patch, he’s been trying to quit for awhile” (Funny and Jokes 2009). This joke draws on the controversial lawsuits that accused Jackson of molesting children and depict Jackson as a dangerous predator; thus, socially subjectifying Jackson in a negative way (see Figure 6). Therefore, as a deceased individual Jackson’s subjectivity is continuously being constructed for him. Unlike living celebrities that have some agency in regard to the ways that they are socially subjectified, Jackson does not have an opportunity to voice his opinion about the many ways that he is described; thus, the public becomes the agent of subject formation. Whether Jackson is discussed positively or negatively, he is socially subjectified in a way that is uncontainable and fluid, and all obituaries of Jackson have the power to shift the ways in which an audience understands him as a social subject. Mediums that are not traditionally understood as obituaries, such as jokes, are increasingly made public due to technological advancements and can be read as cultural texts and popular forms of death announcements that have previously gone unnoticed as mediums of obituarization.

Jokes about deceased celebrities are not uncommon. Upon Patrick Swayze’s 2009 death, people joked that he must have wanted to be cremated since “nobody puts Swayze in the coffin”, identifying him as an actor and by drawing on his role in the hit film Dirty Dancing and his line “nobody puts Baby in the corner” (Daily Comedy 2009). Furthermore, jokes about Elvis Presley’s demise are constantly being updated and reappropriated to suit the times, such as the joke that plays on the overly reported and
supposed ‘sightings of Elvis’ and Jackson’s similarities to him: “The two ‘Kings’ of the music world both struggled with the burden of superstardom, both shocked fans with erratic behaviour, and both were spotted yesterday leaving a 7-Eleven” (Daily Comedy 2009). By updating jokes about Presley so that they are relevant to current discussions of popular culture, Presley is being obituarised in a way that republicises his career and brands him as a celebrated and marketable figure. The constant updating of material demonstrates how deceased celebrities can have staying power as popular products and forms of entertainment. While the jokes may seem innocent and irrelevant, they are highly significant in shifting one’s understanding of the ways in which deceased individuals are continuously publicly subjectified and obituarised.

Similar to Funny and Jokes which highlights one medium (jokes) within another medium (websites), the Internet is being used to highlight tattoos, costumes, and baby names, all with a focus on Jackson and his death. Matt Stopera (2009), a writer for the website Buzzfeed that works to broadcast entertainment news on a global scale, published an interesting article that showed tattoos as a popular culture medium used to obituarise Jackson. While tattoos are not a new creative outlet, in this case the Internet broadcasts tattoos of Jackson or in Jackson’s honour that would not normally be made public on such a global scale. Therefore, tattoos become a newly recognized medium of obituarization made possible by technological advancements in communications and media. Buzzfeed posted “16 Bad Michael Jackson Tattoos” and gave their audience the opportunity to comment on the tattoos and to upload their own images (Stopera 2009). By uploading pictures of their own tattoos or by commenting on others, Jackson’s audiences are demonstrating their recognition as to the obituarization and identification effects of these forms of media. As seen in Figures 7-10, tattoos can obituarise in the same way as
websites, fan groups and jokes. The tattoos focus on biography through pictures of Jackson and the dates of his birth and death. In addition, the media sensation surrounding Jackson’s death is highlighted by the quotes about his death (i.e. Figure 7 shows a tattoo that says “Born to amuse, to inspire, to delight. Here one day. Gone one night”) and through the meanings associated with the texts.

**Figure 7:** A tattoo of Jackson that reads “Born to amuse, to inspire, to delight. Here one day, gone one night” (Stopera 2009).

**Figure 8:** A tattoo of Jackson’s signature and the years of his birth and death (Stopera 2009).
Figure 9: A tattoo of Jackson, his initials and the years of his birth and death (Stopera 2009).

Besides Buzzfeed’s discussion as to the quality of the tattoos that indicates parody, is the fact that these tattoos have become public texts that are available for and subjected to a public’s reading. The ways in which these tattoos obituarise Jackson, ways that can vary depending on one’s reading of the tattoos, subjectify him as a deceased individual and as a celebrated figure. While Figures 7-9 subjectify Jackson in an idolized manner that highlights his accomplished musical career and celebrity status, like other mediums there are also tattoos that represent alternative understandings and subjectivities of Jackson. For example, Figure 10 not only further pathologizes Jackson’s accused involvement with children and identifies Jackson as a dangerous child molester, but it also depicts Jackson in his recognizable stage-wear to draw on notions of the public’s understanding of Jackson as a celebrity. Therefore, not only are tattoos significant as
cultural texts, but the images they depict can also obituarise Jackson in ways that shifts his social identity, often in more than one way.

Figure 10: A tattoo of Jackson touching a small boy’s crotch while wearing his infamous rhinestone glove (Stopera 2009).

Since tattoos are a form of semi-permanent expression that is often used to represent one’s feelings about a deceased subjectivity, they become significant sites of analysis when examining how people are obituarised. Furthermore, tattoos can be read as important cultural texts surrounding the culture of death and dying that have largely been ignored within North American academia and popular culture. However, it is not uncommon for audiences to turn to tattoos as a form of expressing their feelings about a deceased celebrity, as exemplified by tattoos of Marilyn Monroe (2009) and others. On the official Marilyn Monroe website there is a link dedicated to ‘Tattoos’ that directs fans to a page where people have uploaded pictures and YouTube videos of their own tattoos. Not only do fans obituarise Monroe via the tattooing of images, but also through the
tattooing of quotes by Monroe (such as “Well behaved women rarely make history” in Figure 11 and “If you can’t handle me at my worst, than you sure as hell don’t deserve me at my best” in Figure 12). Due to technological advancements in media and communications, mediums that are not new forms of expression are becoming more globally recognized and publicized; thus, redefining the significance of tattoos as semi-permanent popular cultural mediums, and their power to shift social subjectivities of the deceased.

Figure 11: A tattoo of Marilyn Monroe and her quote “Well behaved women rarely make history” (Marilyn Monroe 2009).
Figure 12: A tattoo of Marilyn Monroe surrounded by drug paraphernalia and her quote “… if you can’t handle me at my worst then you sure as hell don’t deserve me at my best” (Marilyn Monroe 2009).

Furthermore, the Internet is being used to sell Jackson related products and memorabilia, and these popular cultural materials obituarise Jackson by drawing on different aspects of his biography and by sensationalizing Jackson as a marketed and celebrated deceased subjectivity. For example, costumes (both for Halloween and impersonating purposes) have been created to represent Jackson during different stages of his life, and these costumes can be read as cultural mediums used to obituarise the life of Jackson (Michael Jackson Costumes 2009) (see Figures 13-16). Due to Jackson’s changing appearance, something that is often criticized in the media (Anomalies Unlimited 2002-2004), there are numerous costumes that all differ in appearance and present Jackson differently depending on the point in his career. Instead of criticising Jackson’s appearance, as many media outlets did before his death, costume websites
actually market his changing appearance positively since they can earn a larger profit by selling more than one style of costume. Therefore, not only is Jackson being identified as a powerful brand, hence the company turning his look into their primary product, but his appearance is being reappropriated as a positive aspect of his identity.

Figure 13: A costume of Jackson that draws on his image from his ‘Thriller’ music video (Michael Jackson Costumes 2009).
**Figure 14:** A costume of Jackson that draws on his image from his ‘Billie Jean’ music video (Michael Jackson Costumes 2009).

**Figure 15:** A costume of Jackson that draws on his image from his ‘Beat It’ music video (Michael Jackson Costumes 2009).
According to the Michael Jackson Costumes (2009) website, Jackson can “live on this Halloween”, further demonstrating how costumes and other popular culture texts about Jackson profit by keeping his memory and persona alive. Furthermore, this site that sells solely Jackson-related costumes explains that “[w]ithout a doubt, the kids and adults alike will be searching for their Thriller-wear this year. Not only for the loss of the King of Pop, to honor him and to show their solidarity as die-hard fans, but to be able to dress like him and all his glitter-rock glory”. Therefore, these costumes obituarise and cash in on Jackson by sensationalizing his ‘rock glory’ and accomplished musical career, and also by focusing on his biography and shifting appearance. By branding the costumes as products for Jackson’s ‘die-hard’ fans, the site is calling to Jackson’s audiences in a way that makes them seem less like of a Jackson fan if they do not purchase a costume, further
proving that the culture and market surrounding death and dying is changing and is becoming largely based on the marketable branding of identities.

Whereas Figures 13-16 depict Jackson and his image in a positive light and represent Jackson at various points throughout his career, other sites create costumes to target alternative audiences which may obituarise Jackson differently than through the Michael Jackson Costumes (2009) website. By marketing Jackson in a variety of ways, his brand becomes more popular and his identity is continuously shifted to positively market specific products. For example, Jackson costumes are marketed towards all age groups, not only teens and adults who may have experienced his music at the height of his career. Children, who might not even know anything about Jackson or his career, and babies who are too young to understand Jackson’s popularity, are also given the opportunity to dress up as Jackson due to the creation and sale of “Baby Michael Jackson Costume”, “Toddler Michael Jackson Thriller Costume Jacket” and “Child’s Michael Jackson Thriller Costume Jacket” (Brands on Sale 2009) (see Figure 17 and 18). Whereas Jackson has often been identified as a dangerous child molester through the media, the costume websites work to shift that identity so that they can reach a larger target audience. By constructing their site in a way that brands Jackson as an idol instead of focusing on controversial aspects of his biography, the sites positively obituarise Jackson in the way that is most profitable for their business. Furthermore, the fact that consumers of all ages will be wearing these costumes suggests that obituarising can be done at any age, and similarly to the discussion of jokes and tattoos, Jackson’s audiences can obituarise him unknowingly and less directly than in traditional print forms of media. In this sense, costumes become a movable and marketable way to announce Jackson’s death and his idolized biography, acting as a transportable form of obituarization and branding.
On a similar note, Jackson jewellery and memorabilia is also created and sold to Internet users worldwide (Ice Forever 2009; Turknott 2009). By purchasing and wearing jewellery that is adorned with images of Jackson or mass produced copies of his signature (see Figure 19), fans are obituarising Jackson by honouring his life and sensationalizing his identity. Jewellery gives Jackson’s fans the opportunity to carry their memories of him with them daily and to publicly announce their fandom, and it further subjectifies Jackson in a way that makes him seem very much ‘alive’ and idolized. Therefore, wearing jewellery with his picture on it obituarises Jackson in the same transportable way that the costumes do, while simultaneously identifying him in a positive manner.

Figure 17: A youth-sized costume of Jackson that draws on his image from his ‘Thriller’ music video (Brands on Sale 2009).
**Figure 18:** An infant-sized costume of Jackson that draws on his image from his ‘Thriller’ music video (Brands on Sale 2009).

**Figure 19:** Jackson memorabilia that is being sold after his death (Ice Forever 2009).
 Websites hosting discussions about Jackson but with no material to sell or images to display can also act as sites of obituarization. For example, on Yahoo Answers (2009) which is a section of the popular Internet search engine website Yahoo that gives users the opportunity to pose a question to the larger Internet environment, a user asks “Would you name your baby after Michael Jackson?”. Other users who were registered with Yahoo, a site that is easily accessible and free of charge, answered quite positively stating that while it may be a bit much to name your child Michael Jackson, the name Michael or the name Jackson would individually be a nice way to honour him. In this sense, Jackson is being subjectified as an idol and as a hero; somebody worthy of honour and remembrance. Therefore, not only does the website become an obituary for Jackson, a site that discusses both elements of biography and sensation, but the process of naming a child after him becomes a form of obituarization in itself. Despite if people actually do name their children after Jackson the discussion surrounding the possibility of doing so is significant as it brands Jackson as an extraordinary yet deceased social subject. Obituarization, with regards to Yahoo Answers, becomes possible through the simple act of posing the question about the deceased celebrity and experiencing an audience’s reaction to it in a public forum.

 Similar to other mediums though, there was one Yahoo Answers (2009) user who stated that it would be in “poor form to name your babies after a child molester”, therefore framing Jackson as a negative deceased subjectivity and further pathologizing his identity as a dangerous child predator. This further shows that when obituarising about deceased individuals, there is no one way to do so and it is not necessary that all obituaries read in the same way. In addition, this medium of asking questions to a public audience and awaiting their answers is a direct representation of the participatory element
of obituaries, as this discussion is purposeful and only arose after his death. This discussion of his biography plays on social and cultural understandings of Jackson as a recognized subjectivity, and similar to other popular culture mediums, this form of obituarization can shift an audience’s understanding of Jackson. What is unique about this form of obituary is that it simultaneously broadcasts the debate surrounding Jackson’s identity, with some users focusing on his accomplished musical career and others focusing on controversial issues, such as the accusations of child molestation and his changing appearance. By examining both positive and negative identities on one page and by posting responses to questions, Jackson’s audience directly participates in the construction of Jackson as a social and cultural subject. In addition, this webpage also shows how the culture surrounding death and dying is expanding to include public discussion on and about the topic which is made more widely available due to the Internet.

As exemplified by discussions of the Internet and the many ways in which it has changed the culture surrounding death and dying in North America, technological advancements in media and communications make it possible to better understand various mediums as processes of obituarization. Furthermore, technological advancements also demonstrate how social subjectivities of the deceased are fluid and constantly shifting depending on the ways that deceased individuals are obituarised and identified within those obituaries. The Internet makes it possible for mediums that are not necessarily new to be redefined as they become publicized and globalized; possibly receiving more attention than they normally would from a public audience. Therefore, mediums that are broadcast on the Internet are highlighted as cultural texts that can be understood to have characteristics of obituaries, and while these may differ in appearance and opinion, they
still draw on aspects of biography and sensation to communicate about deceased individuals. Therefore, the Internet is a primary site of obituarization, and it empowers a mass audience to obituarise about Jackson. Furthermore, although the remainder of this chapter will discuss Television/Film and Magazines/Newspapers, it is critical to understand that the Internet also overlaps into these categories and continues to play a role in the obituarization and branding of Jackson through different media and mediums.

_**Television/Film**_

Even before Jackson’s death, he had appeared on numerous television shows, most often as a subject in his own music videos, sitting down for interviews or on stage or in the audience at award shows (Taraborrelli 2009; TMZ 2010; Hilton 2010). His controversial lifestyle, relationship status and changing appearance were also the main subjects of many entertainment television shows (Taraborrelli 2009), such as Entertainment Tonight and TMZ (2010). In addition, Jackson starred in the 1978 film, *The Wiz*, a take on the classic *Wizard of Oz* where he played the role of ‘Scarecrow’ (Taraborrelli 2009). Furthermore, Jackson was a spokesperson for the Pepsi Corporation in the 1980’s when he appeared in commercials worldwide, and he was well-known and popularized for his friendships with fellow celebrities, Diana Ross and Elizabeth Taylor (Taraborrelli 2009). However, after Jackson’s death, his role in the media was altered and Jackson began to be represented differently through popular culture mediums. While he was still a celebrated subject, he was subjectified in different ways depending on one’s reaction to the mediums used for processes of obituarization. For example, Jackson’s memorial was broadcast live on television, not only as a way to honour his life but to also publicly mourn his death and to engage again with his sensational lifestyle. As will be
discussed throughout this section, Jackson’s memorial can be understood as a primary site of obituarization and as a crucial attempt to market and brand Jackson as a positive subjectivity. His memorial, planned and created by concert promoters AEG Live, was designed to highlight the many talents of Jackson and to publicly broadcast and subjectify Jackson as an idolized and globally recognized musician, friend, father and son (American Media Inc. 2010a).

Furthermore, soon after his memorial, Jackson’s camp in combination with director Kenny Ortega (2009) released a film entitled “Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” that received globalized recognition and critique. This film, which is composed of rehearsal footage from April to June 2009 in preparation for Jackson’s upcoming concerts was created to highlight his accomplished music career and to popularise the Jackson brand upon his death. However, while Jackson’s music was popularised by the film with the soundtrack breaking expected sales, his audiences were split regarding the quality of the film and its portrayal of Jackson (Rotten Tomatoes 2009; Metacritic 2009). As will be exemplified by the public’s reaction to and ratings of the film as discussed on Internet movie review sites and within online newspapers, Jackson’s identity was largely influenced by the film as it gave his fans a firsthand look at the life of Jackson and his role in the production of his concerts. By examining televised and filmed mediums that focus on obituarising deceased subjectivities, one can better understand how technology is directly and often unnoticeably linked to broader understandings of the culture surrounding death and dying in twenty-first century North America, and how media is directly involved in the subject formation of deceased individuals.
Jackson’s Memorial as a Form of Obituarization

Publicizing one’s memorial through broadcast media is a relatively new phenomenon that is often reserved for well-known deceased subjects, such as Jackson, fellow musician James Brown, politicians or other celebrated personalities (MSNBC 2009). In addition, increasingly military personnel who die in the line of duty also have their funerals or memorials broadcast; an action that further reiterates a national rhetoric of pride and unity (Chiari, Hatlie & Prince 2010). However, when a recognizable yet controversial figure dies, such as Jackson, there can be mixed feelings about the death that do not necessarily represent a national rhetoric or universal understanding, and this can further influence the identification and branding of the deceased individuals. Despite mixed feelings about his death or his controversial lifestyle, Jackson’s memorial was widely viewed and aired on multiple television channels, live Internet streaming sites and fans were updated via radio stations and newspapers throughout the day (MSNBC 2009). Jackson’s memorial was a groundbreaking event in North American popular culture history, largely due to the extensive media coverage it received and the sensationalism surrounding its occurrence and Jackson’s untimely death.

Jackson’s memorial was not only planned and scheduled to air on numerous television stations worldwide, but it was also designed to identify Jackson as an entertainer, father, friend, and son, in a way that further positively sensationalized his life and death (MSNBC 2009b; American Media Inc. 2010a). The memorial was designed to highlight Jackson as a positive celebrated subjectivity who would be missed, in addition to republicising his music and the Jackson brand on a global scale. Similar to his songs and concerts, his memorial was planned and marketed in specialised ways that relied on the popularity of the Jackson brand and the loyalty of his fans. Scheduled to air on July
7th, 2009, Jackson’s memorial was held at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, California; a venue designed to broadcast major sporting events or concerts and that can seat approximately 20,000 guests⁵ (The Staples Center 2010) (see Figure 20). Unlike closed memorials that are aired publicly but still reserve seating solely for family and friends of the deceased, such as those memorials often aired in honour of fallen soldiers (Chiari et al. 2010), Jackson’s memorial was a massive multi-media production that further exemplified his celebrity status, and as a result, fans needed tickets if they wished to attend.

Figure 20: A seating chart of ‘The Staples Center’ where Jackson’s memorial was held (The Staples Center 2010).

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⁵ The seating can vary from 18,000 to over 20,000 depending on the event being held. Jackson’s memorial was considered a concert since there were numerous performers and 17,500 tickets were distributed via a lottery system. Furthermore, hundreds to thousands of Jackson’s friends, family members and acquaintances were allowed admission without tickets (The Staple Center 2010).
Tickets were not sold via an entertainment facility or website\textsuperscript{6} or given out solely to acquaintances, but instead were distributed free of charge through the use of an online lottery. However, there was money to be made. The lottery became more than a chance of luck, and it led to ticket scalping and to tickets being sold on Ebay\textsuperscript{7}, literally to the highest bidder. In addition, the ticket lottery for Jackson’s memorial also further sensationalized the event and also acted as a form of obituarization and marketing (see Figures 21-23). It called forth Jackson’s audiences to become involved within the culture surrounding his death, giving them the opportunity to vie for a chance to be at his memorial and to say ‘goodbye’ to Jackson in person, while continuously identifying Jackson as an idolized and globalised celebrity. Obtaining a ticket to the memorial meant more than the opportunity to attend, but it gave fans a chance to personally participate in Jackson’s obituarization alongside his family members and close friends. In this sense, obituarization is occurring through the mythologization and sensationalism surrounding his memorial and his death, and the process of obituarization is further branding Jackson in a positive way due to the extensive media coverage surrounding the event. Fans wanted the opportunity to participate in and to be present during an event that would not only subjectify Jackson as an idol, musician, father, and friend, but would obituarise Jackson through a televised and globalised medium.

\textsuperscript{6} There are facilities and Internet sites dedicated to selling tickets for large public events. For example, Ticketmaster (www.ticketmaster.com) is a site that regularly sells tickets to other events at the Staples Center.

\textsuperscript{7} Ebay is an auction website where individuals can post an item that they wish to sell on the Internet. Other Ebay users who signed up for a free membership can then bid on the item and the item is sold to the highest bidder (www.ebay.com).
**Figure 21:** An advertisement for the ticket lottery that was held for Jackson’s memorial (The Staples Center 2010).
Your registration for your chance to attend the Michael Jackson Public Memorial Service has been received. If your application is successful, you will receive an email on Sunday, July 5, 2009 after 11:00 a.m. Pacific Time with your exclusive unique code and instructions on how to obtain your two free tickets to attend the Public Memorial Service.

A valid ticket will be required to enter the STAPLES Center and L.A. LIVE area on Tuesday, July 6, 2009.

The tickets will be distributed for either the public memorial service in STAPLES Center or a live television broadcast in the adjacent Nokia Theatre.

Please add info@staplescenter.com to your address book to ensure successful email delivery.

**Figure 22:** A notification that was sent to fans after they registered for the ticket lottery (The Staples Center 2010).
Figure 23: The email that fans were sent if they did not win tickets through the ticket lottery (The Staples Center 2010).

According to MSNBC (2009b), a television network with accompanying website, “more than 1.6 million fans registered for tickets to Michael Jackson’s memorial service over the two-day registration period” where they had to go on the Internet to The Staples Center (2010) website and fill out a free application. As a result of the lottery being located on their site, The Staples Center received extensive free advertising for their other concerts and events, profiting from Jackson’s death and the popularity of his brand and large fan base. The lottery system worked by drawing 8,750 names at random, and then each person whose name was drawn would receive two tickets and wristbands (see Figures 21-22). Consequently, those whose names were not drawn were sent emails
saying that “hundreds of thousands registered, but only a few can be in attendance”, a process that further highlighted the celebrated status of Jackson (see Figure 23). By limiting the amount of people who could attend the memorial and by the choice to host a ticket lottery in the first place, Jackson becomes further branded as a superstar and as somebody worthy of idolization. However, fans had conflicting opinions about the memorial. According to a discussion about the lottery on the TMZ (2010) website from three days before the scheduled event, Jackson’s audience had mixed feelings about the memorial and the fact that the lottery system was changed so people from anywhere in the world could apply.

One fan, Charly, commented that “Michael Jackson belonged to the world, it is only fair that people from every country, from every corner of the world, are represented, allowed to pay their respects” (TMZ 2010). Another person, Stalkarazzi, exclaimed that the memorial was “[n]ot a smart move in my opinion. We already have millions of Americans applying for the ticket lottery. And, many have no intentions or means of going. They simply hope they win so they will have two tickets to keep as souvenirs” (TMZ 2010). While both Charly’s and Stalkarazzi’s statements identified Jackson as a global star and popular social subject, they still disagreed on the globalization of the ticket lottery. By referring to Jackson as an object that “belonged to the world”, Charly directly focused on the Jackson brand, and indirectly broadcast that Jackson’s physical presence is not necessary given that his brand is already so vast and widely known (TMZ 2010). To Charly, the small chance of getting a ticket outweighed any controversy surrounding the lottery, whereas Stalkarazzi focused more on the memorial as any other event, and not one focusing on Jackson’s death. Other people who left comments on the TMZ website focused on the cost of hosting such a large memorial, with debates
surrounding who should pay for the venues and increased security needed for the event⁸. More specifically, these informal debates questioned whether it should be the city of Los Angeles or Jackson’s family that would handle the one million dollar cost of the memorial, often unnoticeably questioning the roles of American taxpayers and their direct involvement in the changing culture surrounding death and dying in the United States (Economic Times 2010). Discussion surrounding the estimated cost of Jackson’s memorial led to public discussions and debates surrounding the possibility of new, normalized death practices. People questioned how often these large scale memorials would take place and if they were becoming the norm within the North American culture surrounding death and dying, at least in cities such as Los Angeles that are widely associated with entertainment and celebrity figures (Economic Times 2010). Whereas many other mediums used Jackson’s death to earn a profit, this discussion surrounding the cost of the memorial highlighted the ways in which obituarization can also cost money and require financial planning and assistance. There was much controversy surrounding Jackson’s financial situation both before and after his death, and as a result, the discussion of the cost of his memorial often identified him as a fragile figure whose controversial lifestyle was the result his poor financial management (TMZ 2010). Therefore, while the high cost of the memorial sensationalised Jackson’s celebrity status on the one hand, it also republicized controversial aspects from his past that could influence one’s understanding of Jackson’s identity as a social subject.

On the morning of the memorial, there was no shortage of fans outside the Staples Center, and the Nokia Theatre (located nearby) was needed to house the overflow

⁸ The city of Los Angeles covered the costs of Jackson’s memorial; however, Jackson’s camp and event organizers AEG donated a combined 1.3 million US dollars to Los Angeles in June 2010 to help with costs (see Economic Times 2010).
of people. According to MSNBC (2009b), an estimated 700,000 people flooded the streets surrounding the venues throughout the day on July 7, 2009, wearing Jackson memorabilia, signing walls adorned with his image, dancing to his music, and crying because of his death (see Figures 24-28). The sensationalism surrounding Jackson’s death was present and broadcast by multiple mediums, including memorabilia, the airing of music, the discussion of memories, signs, jewellery, souvenirs from his past concerts, etc, all of which framed him as a social and celebrated subject whose brand was as vast as his fan base. Jackson’s fans did not limit their obituarization just because they may not have won or applied for tickets. Instead, fans took to the streets outside The Staple Center in Los Angeles and in numerous major cities around the world to participate in recognizing both Jackson’s life and death. This act of obituarising Jackson on the streets outside his memorial and around the world further constructed Jackson as a globalized superstar; an idol whose death was broadcast as a tragic experience for his fans and a loss for popular culture in general. The participatory fandom outside of the memorial is easily comparable to obituarising Jackson on the Internet; fans are still given the opportunity to address his life and death, and while not everyone’s reaction may be made globalised through mainstream media, some people’s opinions were made more visible than others depending on how they chose to obituarise Jackson and if it was televised or not. By taking to the streets to pay homage to Jackson, participants were empowered to obituarise a celebrated deceased entity on their own terms, and the large representation of his fan base further constructed a positive social subjectivity for Jackson.
Figure 24: Walls that were set up outside of Jackson’s memorial for his fans to sign (MSNBC 2009b).

Figure 25: A fan standing outside Jackson’s memorial. This fan brought signs and Jackson memorabilia with him to the event to demonstrate his fandom (MSNBC 2009b).
**Figure 26:** A view of the crowds outside of Jackson’s memorial service (MSNBC 2009b).

**Figure 27:** A view of the crowds outside of Jackson’s memorial service (MSNBC 2009b).
In addition, by televising Jackson’s memorial, people were able to watch and obituarise Jackson from a secondary location, such as on television or an Internet streaming site at a house or workplace. As a result, numerous people were empowered to privately obituarise Jackson in a way that they saw fit, based on their reading of the memorial as a popular social and cultural medium. Alternatively, people who were designated speakers or performers at the event obituarised Jackson publicly and in a way that they individually wanted to do so. As a result of their primary roles within the memorial their messages were instantly part of mainstream media, and they directly influenced the identity of Jackson is a positive way. Additionally, many speakers and performers were celebrities in their own rights (including music sensations such as Usher, Mariah Carey, Lionel Richie, Stevie Wonder, and Jennifer Hudson) and their presence

Figure 28: A view of the crowds outside of Jackson’s memorial service (MSNBC 2009b).
further sensationalized the memorial as a groundbreaking popular culture event and further recognized Jackson as a popular and influential musician (MSNBC 2009b). Their messages became globalised due to the live television broadcast of the event, in addition to the easy transferability of televised data to Internet data. As a result, those who watched the memorial from a secondary location had the opportunity to be influenced by what they were witnessing, including the ways that other people obituarised and branded Jackson. Due to the publicity of Jackson’s memorial, he was subjectified and obituarised globally and the memorial in itself became known as a significant popular culture event; an event that signified the changing culture of death and dying due to technological advancements in communications and media.

A few sections of the multi-hour memorial were picked up by additional media outlets and were drawn upon as key moments of the memorial and highly influential moments in the positive identification of Jackson as a globalised idol, musician, son, father, and friend. The representations of these moments became significant in the social subjectification of Jackson as a deceased celebrity for multiple reasons. Primarily, the key moments often involved people who were credited with being close to Jackson, including statements made by Jackson’s family members and close friends. For example, one of the most popular clips from the memorial involved Jackson’s twelve-year old daughter, Paris, and when she spoke publicly about her father for the first time since his death (American Media Inc. 2010a, 2010b; Hilton 2010; MSNBC 2009b; TMZ 2010) (see Figure 29). Surrounded by her aunts and uncles on the main stage at the Staples Center, Paris tearfully exclaimed, “I just wanted to say... ever since I was born...Daddy has been the best father you could ever imagine. And I just wanted to say I love him – so much” (American Media Inc. 2010a:69) (see Figure 30). Paris’ statement was singlehandedly
one of the most powerful sources of obituarization about Jackson because she countered the widespread doubt of Jackson as a decent father and family member, while unknowingly sensationalizing Jackson’s death by representing how much he will be missed by his children. While it appeared to be a devastating moment for Paris, it became a powerful moment with regards to the social subjectification of her father in which he was finally framed in a positive way as a dedicated father.

Figure 29: A picture of Jackson’s children at his memorial (MSNBC 2009b).

In addition, other popular moments from the memorial further subjectified Jackson as a great father and entertainer; and as an all around good and positive person. For example, the founder of Motown Records, Berry Gordy, made the broad claim that “I think he is simply the greatest entertainer that ever lived”, drawing on Jackson’s musical and chorographical talent and charisma (American Media Inc. 2010a:71). In addition, throughout the day Reverend Al Sharpton, a friend of Jackson’s who was giving the eulogy, obituarised Jackson in a way that challenged any negative pathologies about him
as a child molester or ‘weirdo’ (American Media Inc. 2010a). Speaking directly to Jackson’s three children, he stated that “[t]here wasn’t nothing strange about your daddy... it was strange what your daddy had to deal with!”, a statement that brought the crowd to its feet with approval and agreement (MSNBC 2010). Those who watched the memorial were subjected to continuous positive messages and praise about Jackson, and each message further branded Jackson as a good father, brother, son, friend, musician, dancer, and humanitarian. Therefore, Jackson’s memorial was a primary site of obituarization that not only positively influenced Jackson’s subjectivity on a personal front to those who were in attendance, but it had the power to shift Jackson’s subjectivity for those who were watching from a secondary location as well.

Exemplified by the sheer volume of fans and people wanting tickets and obituarising him, Jackson’s memorial was crucial in shaping the way that he was framed as a deceased subjectivity. Since the memorial was a massive, globalised, multi-media production created for the purposes of republicising the Jackson brand while simultaneously identifying Jackson as a social subject who has contributed positively to the world, his memorial was deemed a success by his camp and event promoters, AEG (MSNBC 2009b). His memorial utilized new technologies made possible by the Internet, such as ticket lotteries, and combined them with televised mediums to create a spectacle focused on obituarising Jackson. The event used sensationalism and positive aspects of Jackson’s biography to announce and finalise his death publicly and globally in a way that was profitable and popular. The memorial hosted many performers and speakers that obituarised Jackson on their own terms but through similar messages, and through Jackson’s televised memorial, he was subjectified in a way that bettered his image and recognized his death as a global tragedy.

85
Before Jackson’s death, he was preparing to headline fifty concerts that would have commenced July 13, 2009, just two weeks after his unexpected death (see Figure 30) (MSNBC 2009a). These concerts, grouped under the title “Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” had sold out seating in record breaking time, and news of the ticket sales were already republicising Jackson as a popular brand and accomplished musician (MSNBC 2009a). The concerts were advertised as the last shows that Jackson would ever perform (assumingly because of retirement), and therefore they were instantly popularized on a global scale. Upon the news of Jackson’s death there were public discussions, mainly aired on television and numerous Internet sites, questioning what would happen to the concerts, more specifically, whether or not they would be cancelled (Hilton 2010; TMZ 2010). Promoters considered turning the shows into Jackson tribute concerts headlined by other musicians; however, after much deliberation, Jackson’s camp and director Kenny Ortega (2009) decided to work with Sony Entertainment to create a “Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” film. Media rumours suggested that Jackson’s estate could not afford to lose the thirty million dollars that Jackson had received in advance for the concerts, and that the film was a way to profit from the death of Jackson and the existing advertisements for his ‘This Is It’ concert series, further relying on the popularity of the Jackson brand and highlighting the marketable aspects of obituarization (TMZ 2010).
Figure 30: A picture of Jackson from when he announced that he would be scheduling a concert series of thirty performances (MSNBC 2009a).

The film was comprised of clips from concert rehearsals and numerous interviews with dancers recounting their “amazing experiences” working with Jackson (Ortega 2009). These clips were streamed together in combination with Jackson’s most popular music to create a finalized production that highlighted his many positive identities, mainly his role in influencing the dancers through his career to pursue their own dreams, and his groundbreaking role in the music industry. These clips ignored any negative controversies surrounding Jackson and focused solely on praising his talent, dedication and deserved celebrity status. Therefore, through its design the film was able to broadcast a more positive image of Jackson on a globalised scale. Due to existing controversy as to whether Jackson would be physically and emotionally capable of performing thirty shows
(this controversy was most often based on his ‘frail’ looking appearance), this film was a way to broadcast that he was a healthy and hardworking idol and musician (Ortega 2009). Partially related to the quick production and release of the film and also the extensive media coverage and republication of the Jackson brand, the film was extremely successful (Murray 2009; E!Online 2009). An accompanying soundtrack was sold worldwide, the film received globalised press coverage, and it popularised Jackson’s death in a way that made it seem marketable and entertaining (E!Online 2009). As will be discussed throughout this section, television and film have contributed to obituarising Jackson by highlighting and sensationalizing his death and life story and by marketing his biography worldwide to Jackson’s fans and popular culture consumers. Demonstrated by the globalised success, worldwide recognition and reviews of the film, “Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” becomes a key site of obituarization that largely influences how he is subjectified as a celebrated deceased entity.

“Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” was created, marketed and broadcast via theatres and then direct sales at an incredibly rapid rate9 (Murray 2009). Whereas other films have scripts, budget restraints and filming dates, Jackson’s film was easily constructed due to existing rehearsal footage and Sony’s direct access to highly trained technical staff and the needed equipment. The availability of the footage allowed the film to be released soon after his death, and therefore it received extensive coverage due to the recent popularity and marketability of Jackson as a consumable brand. The sensation surrounding Jackson’s

9 Both Sony Pictures Entertainment and Sony Music Entertainment announced on August 10, 2009, less than two months after Jackson’s death, that there would be a mainstream film created and published about the deceased musician, highlighting his concert series titled “This Is It”. Less than two weeks after announcing the film, Sony Entertainment announced that it would be available in North American theatres for two weeks only9 starting October 28, 2009 and that Jackson’s fans could pre-purchase tickets in late September of that year.
life story that was continuously present in the media, and that was created by the numerous announcements and advertisements for the film, was a form of obituarization in itself. Media coverage of the film drew on the intensified elements of sensation that had been associated with Jackson all of his life and especially since his death, and made the news of Jackson’s demise more globalised, popularised and publicised while simultaneously branding it as a form of entertainment. Jackson’s audiences who were subject to these announcements both online and on television (in addition to print media, billboards, etc.) were not only empowered to read them as cultural texts and as obituaries, but they were also subjected to numerous messages about the fluidity of Jackson’s identity. In this sense, Jackson was mythologized as a social subject who was kept ‘alive’ by technology and the continuous restructuring of his identity as a consumable brand resulting from new uses of media that can be read as processes of obituarization.

More specifically, the advertisements for “Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” created an image of Jackson that challenged previous reports that he was too unhealthy for or incapable of performing. Advertisements featured a silhouette of Jackson that was filled with a collage of images from the film (see Figure 31) (Murray 2009). In the advertisements, Jackson’s arms are raised above his head with the title of the film resting in between them, as if Jackson himself was showcasing the film. While friends of Jackson’s have suggested that he would not have supported the release of such a film given that he considered himself a perfectionist and did not like people to see his unfinished work, the advertisements acted as a way to challenge those ideas and to make Jackson seem supportive and central in the ‘This Is It’ marketing campaign (Taraborrelli 2009). Highlighting the sensationalism surrounding Jackson’s career and lifestyle, the advertisements for the film (and later the cover for DVD and CD cases) branded Jackson
as an idol and accomplished musician (Ortega 2009). Due to the numerous advertisements and the intensified media sensation surrounding the film, it exceeded estimated ticket sales and “...rung up $200 million in worldwide ticket receipts” (E!Online 2009), therefore republicising the Jackson brand as an extremely marketable product\(^\text{10}\). The fact that the film was such a commercial success demonstrated how well-known Jackson was around the world and how he was an accomplished, globalised celebrity. Furthermore, the film reintroduced Jackson as a popular culture icon so even people who were not fans of his music or who were too young to fully understand his awarded influence on the music industry were encouraged to consume his republicised brand.

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The republicising of the Jackson brand has led to the current production of a Michael Jackson video game and the possibility of a future biographic motion picture (MSNBC 2009b).

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\(^\text{10}\) The republicising of the Jackson brand has led to the current production of a Michael Jackson video game and the possibility of a future biographic motion picture (MSNBC 2009b).
While it is not uncommon to make mainstream films about celebrated deceased subjectivities (for example, there are existing movies about deceased musicians Ray Charles and Johnny Cash that frame them both as talented musicians despite some controversial obstacles that they had to overcome), the content of “Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” provided a personal look at Jackson as himself rather than an actor playing the part (Ortega 2009). Since there have been so many stories publicised about Jackson for entertainment value throughout his lifetime with nobody ever really knowing which one’s were true or not, this first-hand footage became a primary resource and consequently a rare look inside Jackson’s professional life. Therefore, the reality of the footage became highly significant in the identification of Jackson, as clarified by the public’s reaction to the film. The majority of people who viewed the film and chose to review it did so in a way that highlighted its ability to positively identify Jackson and to challenge negative pathologies about him that had so often been published by mainstream media (Rotten Tomatoes 2009; Metacritic 2009). For example, famed film critic, Roger Ebert (2009), reviewed the film content in a way that reads as an obituary which sensationalizes a life once lived while simultaneously drawing on specific moments of the film that positively subjectified Jackson as an idol, a professional and as a good person. He stated that,

It's a portrait of Michael Jackson that belies all the rumors that he would have been too weak to tour. That shows not the slightest trace of a spoiled prima donna. That benefits from the limited number of cameras by allowing us to experience his work in something closer to realistic time, instead of fracturing it into quick cuts. That provides both a good idea of what the final concert would have looked like, and a portrait of the artist at work.

Never raising his voice, never showing anger, always soft-spoken and courteous to his cast and crew, Michael with his director, Kenny Ortega, micro-manages the production. He corrects timing, refines cues, talks about details of music and dance.
Seeing him always from a distance, I thought of him as the instrument of his producing operation. Here we see that he was the auteur of his shows (Ebert 2009).

Ebert’s (2009) review highlights the ways in which Jackson was subjectified in the film, but also challenges ‘the rumours’ and controversies that were so often used to construct negative identities of Jackson as an enigmatic and problematic person. It is the obituarization of Jackson that resulted from the film that made challenging negative pathologies possible. If Jackson were still alive, he may not have had such a globally distributed and widely viewed publication that worked to subjectify him so positively. However, “Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” became more than just a film about a musician; it became the final primary production of Jackson as Jackson, therefore providing the audience with elements of sensation and biography that republicized Jackson as a celebrated brand.

In addition to the previous comments, Ebert captured the irony of titling the concert series ‘This Is It’, a name that Jackson gave his tour to highlight his final musical performances, and not his final days as a living entity. Ebert (2009) wrote that,

“This is it,” Michael Jackson told his fans in London, announcing his forthcoming concert tour. "This is the final curtain call." The curtain fell sooner than expected. What is left is this extraordinary documentary, nothing at all like what I was expecting to see. Here is not a sick and drugged man forcing himself through grueling rehearsals, but a spirit embodied by music. Michael Jackson was something else... This Is It.

Ebert’s review of the film was positive; he praised Jackson, Ortega and Sony, and he wrote about how Jackson will be a missed and celebrated talent, unknowingly publishing a review that read more as a personal obituary for Jackson. Whereas Ebert has a large fan base and often has his reviews printed on film cases and in other publications, Jackson’s
audience who saw the film all had the chance to review it, and due to new technologies could publish their opinions on numerous public forums.

Movie reviews are easily accessed and publishable on the Internet, and occasionally in newspapers around the world, and these reviews rely directly on participation from audiences. For purposes of analysis on Jackson’s death and therefore the obituarization of Jackson, popular movie rating and review sites Rotten Tomatoes (2009) and Metacritic (2009) will be examined with a focus on “Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” (Ortega 2009). In addition, reviews will be examined from a number of mainstream newspapers to help demonstrate how Jackson is understood and socially subjectified differently and continuously based on one’s personal reading and decoding of a cultural text. According to Rotten Tomatoes (2009), the film is 81% fresh, a rating that symbolizes that the film has been positively reviewed by 81% of critics (note: in comparison, it could also be referred to as 19% rotten). As listed on the site, a total of 173 people have rated Jackson’s film (a rating consists of a comment and labelling a film either ‘fresh’ or ‘rotten’ depending on one’s opinion of the film as positive or negative). One reviewer, Bruce Bennett who also listed that he works for a newspaper called the Spectrum in St. George, Utah, described the film to be “[a]s breathtaking as it is heartbreaking”, referring to the sadness that is Jackson’s death (Rotten Tomatoes 2009). By focusing on the heartbreaking aspect of the film, Bennett is further identifying Jackson as someone who is worthy of being missed. Similarly, other reviewers positively reviewed the movie stating that the film was “... a pretty amazing labour of love... a DVD that anyone interested in music, live shows and the creative process should see” and that “[b]ecause the show was designed to be a nostalgic wrap-up of the highlights of Jackson’s career, This Is It works very appropriately as a eulogy” (Rotten Tomatoes 2009). In the
positive sense, Jackson’s Rotten Tomatoes audience largely agreed that the film was a memorable way to highlight the life and death of someone who was very clearly labelled as an accomplished entertainer and as a deserving idol through the comments of his fans and critics. Furthermore, Rotten Tomatoes benefitted from the release of the film as it drew a large crowd to its site and, similar to The Official Michael Jackson Site, was easily able to gather a list of contact information for many of Jackson’s fans who have reviewed the film on their site.

However, similar to other mediums of obituarization, the film was also reviewed negatively, most often in ways that pathologized Jackson as a problematic and enigmatic person. For example, Cole Smithey who is self described as “the smartest film critic in the world” (www.colesmithey.com as cited on Rotten Tomatoes 2009) described “Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” as “[a] piecemeal attempt at putting a bow in Michael Jackson’s overblown and bankrupt career, this clinical behind-the-scenes collage of the rehearsal process for MJ’s doomed London performance schedule is more propaganda than documentary”, a statement that four other viewers debated about. Smithey relies on existing negative identities of Jackson to aide in the wider understanding of his comments. For example, if one was not aware of controversy surrounding Jackson’s financial situation or rumours about the state of his health, they may not recognize how the reviewer drew on existing understandings of Jackson to brand him in a negative way. Similarly, on Metacritic (2009), a movie review site that allows movie viewers to rate films from 1 to 100 (with 100 being the best score), “Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” has an average score of 67. Reviewers have posted ratings and comments ranging from 100, “[an] extraordinary documentary”, to 0, “[t]his movie was a shameful money grab... do not waste your time and money on this movie” and “[t]his man was a pedophile”
(Metacritic 2009). While movies are subjective in themselves, with audience members often having mixed feelings about the popular culture mediums, what is significant is the large amount of opposing reviews about the film that further demonstrates how Jackson’s identity is continuously in a state of flux. Even when a film is created with the goal of broadcasting a specific identity, such as Jackson as an accomplished and talented musician, audiences have the ability to alter larger understandings by creating reviews that can be read as processes of obituarization.

Stephen Silver, a movie critic from The Trend newspaper in Philadelphia who regularly reviews films on Rotten Tomatoes (2009), described Jackson’s film as “[a] deeply creepy and disturbing exercise, in which we’re exposed to footage that was likely never meant to see the light of day, featuring a performer who at the time was, literally, days away from death”. What is interesting about Silver’s review is that unlike some of the other comments that focused on the quality of the film or one’s opinion of Jackson’s lifestyle, Silver directly focused on Jackson as a deceased subjectivity. So often reviews of the film focused on keeping Jackson ‘alive’ as an entertainer via positive praise and remembrance; however, Silver focused on Jackson as a deceased individual, an idea that made it difficult for him to read the film as anything other than disturbing. His reaction is based on normalized processes of grief and mourning related to the death of an idol or a person who someone feels a close connection to, as already popularised by the culture surrounding death and dying in a North American context (Noys 2005). However, the lack of reviews focusing on Jackson as a deceased individual further demonstrates how the culture surrounding death and dying is changing, and how new media is being used to reinvent and republicise social subjects in ways that brand them as products of entertainment.
Television and film, and the corresponding relationship that these forms of media have with other outlets, obituarise Jackson as a deceased celebrated subjectivity by drawing on his shifting identities and then broadcasting them on a more globalised scale that republicises the deceased individual as a consumable brand. Advancements in technology make the broadcasting of these elements more efficient and more plentiful; Jackson’s death was not only reported on one station or through one medium, but his death made immediate headlined news around the world and continued to draw attention with the production of an extravagant and televised memorial and a personal, multi-media film. When examining how Jackson was obituarised and continuously subjectified due to advancements in communications and media that influence the culture surrounding death and dying, both his memorial and film become key sites of analysis as they enabled Jackson’s camp to plan how they would like Jackson to be identified. In addition, similarly to their participation on the Internet with regards to Jackson’s death, his audience becomes empowered to and capable of participating within these mediums by reviewing, critiquing and publicly commenting about their understandings of a given cultural text. While technology is increasingly becoming involved in the culture of death and dying as demonstrated on the Internet and television, print media is also changing due to technological advancements and the republicising of celebrated deceased subjectivities as popular culture brands, as will be discussed in the next section.

**Magazines/Newspapers**

Upon Jackson’s death, newspapers around the world featured his obituary as breaking news and featured articles. The presence of print obituaries about celebrated deceased subjectivities demonstrates that even with advancements in communications and
media, there are still obituaries that can be characterized under the traditional definition consisting of “appraisal[s] of a life in the form of a brief biography – published in a newspaper, magazine or journal” (Starck 2006:5). These print obituaries, which could be considered more ‘traditional’ than obituaries that are published via technological mediums such as Internet and television, are still changing though, in a way that focuses on the popularity of identifying deceased celebrities as consumable brands and forms of entertainment. These changes will be addressed as significant areas of analysis within this section, in addition to a discussion about how obituarization within print media is expanding to include a wider array of media sources. Celebrity entertainment magazines have profited from focusing on and broadcasting sensational life stories, and now, with the increase in technology and available information, other magazines are branching out and profiting off the sensational stories of celebrated deceased subjectivities as well (MJ Covers 2003-2009). Magazines that would normally have little or nothing to do with celebrity lifestyles have been altered to reflect the changing culture of death and dying in North America (Theroux 2009).

Trendy News in Traditional Formats

Print media published numerous articles, write-ups, biographies and stories about the death of Jackson, including some publications that specifically published obituaries in their original and identified format (MJ Covers 2009). The obituaries, while traditionally identified and written to fulfill the purpose of announcing a death and a consequential life once lived, varied in length and content, but worked to honour the man who was known as Michael Jackson. The Los Angeles Times obituarised about Jackson in a way that identified him as an idolized, deceased subjectivity, therefore in a large write-up rather
than a short obituary as reserved for ‘average’ citizens (Boucher & Woo 2009). The Los Angeles Times, similar to numerous other large newspaper publications in worldwide, ran its obituary on June 26, 2009, and used the article to explain Jackson’s interesting yet controversial life. Acting as a timeline of his career, the Los Angeles Times titled its obituary, written by Geoff Boucher and Elaine Woo (2009), “Michael Jackson’s Life was Infused with Fantasy and Tragedy”, and included the subtitle “He owned a statue of Marilyn [Monroe], studied [Charlie] Chaplin and married Elvis’ [Presley] daughter. It seemed the perennial man-child would cease to exist if the applause ever stopped”. While the format of the obituary was traditional and similar to past deceased celebrities or iconic figures, it was also unique and representative of the changing culture surrounding death and dying in that it touched on many of the negative issues that pathologized Jackson as an unhealthy, enigmatic and problematic person.

Instead of writing a purely positive depiction of Jackson’s life within his obituary, as is traditionally the case in North American newspapers (Fowler 2007a, 2007b; Starck 2006), the Los Angeles Times and numerous other printed publications shed light on Jackson’s complete biography, including the sensationalism surrounding his controversial lifestyle (Boucher & Woo 2009). By airing both positive and negative aspects of Jackson’s biography, his audience is given the opportunity to compare conflicting identities of Jackson within the text. Similarly, The Guardian, a British Newspaper famous for its in-depth obituaries about celebrated deceased subjects, wrote about Jackson’s rocky and often abusive relationship with his father and rumours that Jackson had a “cosmetic surgery fixation”, in addition to describing his accomplished career as a musician and his loyal fan base (Sullivan 2009). While obituaries published in newspapers appear as traditionally formatted death announcements, content within the
publications are changing to reflect the more lenient discussion of celebrated deceased subjectivities and the multiple identities that all highlight the popularity and vast discussions surrounding the individual. By discussing all aspects of one’s life, newspapers are able to attract a larger crowd of both one’s fans and dissenters, further profiting from the branding of the specific celebrity. Similar write-ups were made about Heath Ledger (Bergen 2008) who died young after a rumoured addiction to painkillers and sleeping pills and Brittany Murphy (Gilbey 2009) whose untimely death was fuelled with controversy as her husband died unexpectedly only a few months later. Unlike traditional understandings of obituaries, these printed texts rely on the controversy surrounding deceased celebrities as it provides their publications with entertaining and popular stories that will help draw attention to their primary product.

In the sense that the above mentioned printed obituaries subjectify the deceased individual both positively and negatively depending on one’s reading of the detailed biographies, printed obituaries become similar to other mediums (for example, Facebook and tattoos) that can unknowingly influence one’s understanding of Jackson. While the person creating and publishing the obituary may not intend on shifting the identity of the deceased, the way that they write the obituary and describe the deceased individual can still be read as a popular culture text that has the power to shift the ways that a person is understood, subjectified and remembered after death. In addition, other print media, such as books and biographies, that broadcast the life story of a celebrated deceased subjectivity can also influence how that person is identified and understood. Upon the death of Jackson there were multiple biographies (Taraborrelli 2009), magazines (MJ Covers 2003-2009), timelines (MSNBC 2009a) and tribute books (People Tributes 2009) created and published with the intentions of highlighting the life of Jackson and profiting.
from his demise and well-known brand name. When obituarising about a deceased individual, even if traditional obituary formats are used, there is no guarantee that the person will be subjectified in a concrete way. Instead, print media further reiterates how fluid the identities of the deceased are and how there is a need to critically examine how cultural texts use those identities as marketable forms of entertainment and advertisements for their specific products.

*Blurring the Boundaries when Announcing Death*

As the culture surrounding death and dying in North America is changing and becoming increasingly more involved in the obituarization of celebrated deceased subjectivities, print media is including processes of obituarization within their products more so than ever, and has proven to rely on the publicity of existing celebrity brands to increase profits. For example, there are numerous magazines that are publishing issues pertaining solely to celebrated deceased subjectivities or that focus on paying tribute to the deceased individuals on a more in-depth level than previously reported in traditional forms of obituaries (American Media Inc. 2009a, 2009b). For example, Jackson has been the focus of numerous magazines that have chosen to pay tribute to him as an accomplished musician and globalized, idolized star, even if they have focused on controversial issues surrounding Jackson in the past or if they normally do not discuss celebrity lifestyles. These publications include *Time*, a magazine that normally reports on political news stories; *TV Guide*; *People*; and *Entertainment Weekly*; in addition to magazines such as *Farewell* that focused on all deceased celebrities from 2009 (American Media Inc. 2009a, 2009b; MJ Covers 2009) (see Figures 32-34). Furthermore, there have been magazines independently created such as *Remembering Michael* that was published
on the one year anniversary of his death, and Michael Jackson: Exclusive Collector’s Edition, that sole purpose is to profit from Jackson’s death while engaging with the changing and newfound popularity of the culture surrounding death and dying in North America (American Media Inc. 2009a, 2009b).

Figure 32: A Rolling Stone magazine cover featuring ‘Michael Jackson 1958-2009’ (MJ Covers 2003-2009).

Figure 34: A People Special Edition magazine cover featuring ‘The Talent and Tragedy: Michael Jackson 1958-2009’.

The multiplicity of these publications further demonstrate how the culture surrounding death and dying is transcending boundaries, and instead of deceased individuals being discussed solely within newspapers and traditional formats, they are becoming increasingly popularised sources of news and entertainment in all areas of print media. By broadcasting the deaths of such celebrated identities, such as that of Jackson who has a large fan base and a corresponding consumable and profitable brand, print media is republicising their products and additional content as well. As a result of new technology, sales of print media have been declining at a rapid rate (Fowler 2007); however, by introducing new elements to obituaries that appeal to large audiences and by drawing on the conflicting identities of Jackson, print media publications can draw in consumers to the rest of their content and can therefore profit from the deaths of celebrities.
All printed publications regarding Jackson’s death can be read as forms of obituarization if they include biographical recap and sensationalism regarding the deceased individual. For example, Architectural Digest: The International Magazine of Design (Theroux 2009) published a magazine in November 2009 that featured Jackson on the cover and a small article about him inside (see Figure 35). While this magazine did not spend a lot of time detailing the biography of Jackson or other celebrities for that matter, it used the popularity of Jackson’s death to attract consumers to the rest of their offered product. The article created a sensational element by discussing Jackson’s unique style regarding home furnishings and it gave a detailed description of his large and extravagant estate, Neverland Ranch. The fact that Jackson’s brand was extremely popular and profitable so soon after his death made any information about him a marketable commodity and Architectural Digest: The International Magazine of Design (Theroux 2009) picked up on this as marketing tool for their product despite how relatable the subject matter was to their primary topic of architecture. Therefore, by combining pictures of Jackson in his home with a discussion about the unsure future of Neverland Ranch, Architectural Digest: The International Magazine of Design was able to profit from the Jackson brand while simultaneously appealing to his large audience (Theroux 2009). Whereas the magazine in itself becomes a form of obituarization, a medium used to announce his death, the content, even though it was quite different than content found in other obituaries, is also significant and becomes representative of the many ways in which publications about Jackson can unknowingly broadcast obituaries about his death. Whereas Architectural Digest: The International Magazine of Design may not be similar in content to popular celebrity entertainment magazines, it did blur
traditional boundaries associated with the previously taboo nature of death and the mediums used to discuss celebrated deceased subjectivities.

**Figure 35:** An *Architectural Digest: The International Magazine of Design* Collector’s Edition magazine cover featuring ‘Michael Jackson’s Private Kingdom’ (Theroux 2009).

Any newspaper or magazine, including those that are not celebrity entertainment publications, can obituarise about deceased celebrated individuals in a way that challenges previous understandings of the culture surrounding death and dying. By examining how Jackson is being written about after his death, one can better understand how obituarization influences the social subjectivities of the deceased. Instead of being identified in a concrete way or based solely on one write-up and the opinion of one person, Jackson, as a celebrated deceased subjectivity, is continuously being reappropriated and identified differently within popular culture. His shifting identities and the corresponding branding of his popularity makes Jackson’s death a marketable and
profitable topic of discussion, and because of that, his death is being broadcast in a variety of mediums that do not necessarily have a history of obituarization. In addition, even when obituarised through the traditional format of print media, Jackson’s death exemplifies the changing culture surrounding death and dying, and the need to better understand the fluidity of the term obituary.

Summary

By examining Michael Jackson as a recently deceased and celebrated subjectivity, one can better understand how death is becoming an accepted and globalized topic of discussion in twenty-first century North American popular culture. As exemplified by the case of Jackson and as will be analyzed in more detail in Chapter Four, processes of obituarization are present in multiple mediums as a result of advancements in communications and media. Instead of death announcements relying heavily on one medium, such as newspapers that are credited with being the traditional and primary site of obituarization, multiple mediums broadcast the deaths of celebrated subjectivities in a way that makes death seemingly entertaining, popular and profitable. In addition, by not limiting sites of obituarization, audiences are empowered to participate first-hand in processes of obituarization. As a result of the participatory element of obituarization, the identities of deceased social subjects are continuously being reappropriated and are subject to change depending on the individual readings of a text by a public audience.

As demonstrated by the presence of Jackson related discussions and pictures within a multitude of mediums and forms of media, there is not one correct way to obituarise about a deceased individual but instead there are an unlimited number of possibilities. Obituarization becomes an ongoing, never-ending process that is based on
the continuous, shifting identities of the deceased, in addition to the continuous interpretation of cultural texts regarding one’s death by the public. Mediums can host more than one site of obituarization within them, and as a result, processes of obituarization often go unnoticed. In order to better understand how popular culture consumers have important roles in the construction of deceased identities, it is critical that processes of obituarization be further explored with a focus on the mediums being used and the role of branding within them. By examining the case of Jackson, one can better understand how the culture surrounding death and dying is changing in ways that allow for outside sources to profit from the deaths of well-known celebrities and their corresponding popular brands. Furthermore, by examining processes of obituarization, people can become more aware of their own involvement within the culture surrounding death and dying, and can become more aware of their ability to socially subjectify a deceased individual either positively or negatively. This awareness can be crucial in understanding how deceased individuals are the central element of a popular social movement to alter the way that North American’s understand the culture surrounding death and dying, and how this culture is increasingly based on popularity, entertainment and branding.
Chapter Four

Conclusion – The Significance of Mythology and Mediums in the Branding of Deceased Celebrities as Consumable Social Subjects

Introduction – Challenging Normalized Understandings

Advancements in communications and media are challenging normalized understandings of subject formation in a North American context. The rising popularity and seeming normality of the Internet’s role in the creation of popular culture, in addition to the wide array of new mediums and the increasing accessibility of media coverage from television, radio and print sources, has led to a restructuring of the culture surrounding death and dying. More specifically, celebrity death is becoming redefined as a form of entertainment that is based on the republicising and branding of that celebrity’s sensational biography. As demonstrated by mass media’s reaction to Michael Jackson’s death, deceased individuals are being popularised and subjectified on a global scale due to the media’s ability to broadcast the death of celebrities as marketable, consumable and profitable news sources. Furthermore, this process of branding can be read as obituarization because it relies on notions of biography, sensation and public reaction to highlight the death of an individual in some way through cultural material and media. As will be discussed throughout this chapter, a critical examination of subject formation through media explores the ideology and power associated with specific mediums and their corresponding influence on shifting identities of the deceased.

Furthermore, the popularity and power of subject formation through media questions the existence of larger relationships that exist between humans and technology. By engaging with McLuhan’s theory of technology as an extension of human consciousness, and the many ways that Jackson was obituarised as a result of
advancements in communications, we can better understand how technology becomes an extension of human consciousness. In addition, the participatory aspects of subject formation through media, such as the production and consumption of published obituaries, further explore how audiences become powerful agents of change in one’s experience of the world and specifically their understandings of the deceased. It is through the collection and larger representation of these understandings that the deceased subject is formed as a consumable brand, and that the social subject can continue to ‘live’ on in popular culture despite their physical absence.

Furthermore, while an in-depth examination of technological subject formation as an extension of human consciousness is necessary when examining the changing culture surrounding death and dying and how it can affect the identities of the deceased, it is also significant in identifying how technological mediums are broadcasting specific and often embedded meanings as forms of cultural texts and language. Barthes theory of myth supplements the cultural material discussion of subject formation with a more in-depth examination of processes of obituarization. The application of his theory challenges any normalized, taken-for-granted forms of communication that have the power to shift existing identities of the deceased and to broadcast these messages on a more globalized scale. By applying Barthes discussion of mythologisation to the examination of subject formation through media and more specifically through processes of obituarization, it becomes possible to challenge the aspects of truth and naturalness, including the apparent naturalness of mourning and grieving an idolized figure, such as Jackson, in a public space.

McLuhan and Barthes both examine the methods by which a text is created. By combining McLuhan’s theory of technology as an extension of human consciousness and
Barthes’ theory of myth as a constant variable within popular culture, including technology and the mediums used for obituarization, it becomes possible to identify how audiences are largely responding to celebrity death as a consumable, profitable and entertaining topic. In addition, as will be discussed later, these audiences become agents of subject formation through their participation in the production and consumption of obituaries. As a result and as demonstrated by the analysis of obituaries about Jackson through the media covered in the previous chapter, deceased celebrated figures can be recalled differently through various mediums, and the identifications of deceased subjects can alter the ways in which they are branded and remembered post-mortem.

*Participation, McLuhan and Communicative Mediums*

When the news of Jackson’s death was first broadcast at 2:44pm on June 25th, 2009 by the celebrity entertainment website, TMZ (2010), people immediately started responding to that news through forms of electronic media. It was through a large audience’s participation in broadcasting the news of his death and airing their apparent feelings about his death that publicized Jackson as a prominent social brand. Due to the fact that he was already well-known and often present in the media as a result of his controversial lifestyle (MSNBC 2009a; Hilton 2010; TMZ 2010), Jackson’s death was instantly a newsworthy story and attracted much attention worldwide. While news agencies did follow the story of his death quite closely (MSNBC 2009b), it was his fans that turned to the Internet to form memorial groups, to express their sadness and to broadcast their opinions about his death in a variety of public spaces and through various mediums. In this sense, Jackson’s fans were engaging in a form of participatory fandom; one based on their engagement with the social subject and the publicity of their
fan/subject relationship (Pearson 2010; Jenkins 2006). Their actions varied and while some fans created more elaborate groups than others or aired public reactions that were viewed more than others, their fandom was still publicized through their technological obituarization of Jackson. While the sincerity of one’s fandom is subject to appropriation as will be discussed in more detail with a focus on Barthes’ theory of myth, McLuhan’s theory of communicative mediums becomes significant with regards to the changing culture of death and dying, and the widespread popularity of participating in the acknowledgement of celebrity deaths through technological mediums.

According to McLuhan’s (2003) theory of technology as an extension of human consciousness and in relation to fandom, it is technology that participates equally in the subjectification process and in the public consciousness of death. Technology allows for new forms of expression, and it changes who we think we are and how we mediate the world around us by enabling different responses to death and the publication and consumption of obituarization. This is evident in the extensive number of and forms of obituaries created for Jackson by fans, and demonstrates how humans mediate their feelings and thoughts with technology. Therefore, the technology of obituary relates to McLuhan’s extension of human consciousness because it is only with technology that thought can be transformed into seemingly personal responses to and understandings of death, in addition to forms of cultural texts. By applying McLuhan’s theories of communicative mediums and technology as an extension of human consciousness to the cultural material discussion of subject formation through processes of obituarization, we can see how the technology is implicated with subject formation.

As demonstrated by the multiple mediums used to express the death of Jackson, including but not limited to blogs, Facebook groups, YouTube videos, ‘memory’ pages,
costumes, jokes, tattoos, baby names, memorials, film reviews, newspapers, etc.,

obituaries are no longer limited to print media such as newspapers. Instead, advancements
in communications and electronic media have made it possible for everyone to broadcast
messages about any death in a public space as long as they have access to the Internet,
and it is celebrity deaths that receive the most attention through media. However, all
attention given to deceased celebrities is not positive, and this further ratifies that
obituaries can shift identities of the deceased, whatever the nature of the media attention.

For example, groups that were formed in celebration of Jackson’s death, such as the ‘I
Am Glad Michael Jackson is Dead!’ Facebook (2009a) group, participated equally in the
obituarization of Jackson as those that were based on a group’s sadness about his demise
(Facebook 2009b). In both senses, technology makes fandom much more public,
accessible and affordable (it is not necessary to purchase products about the celebrity).

Fandom also becomes redefined to represent wider audiences of the deceased, and not
only those who would traditionally be described or self-identify as fans who idolize the
subject. Instead, fandom becomes a term that represents all public reaction to a celebrity
(dead or alive) and the corresponding publicity that they receive as a celebrated subject.

In the case of Jackson, his publicity was further fuelled by his controversial
lifestyle (Taraborrelli 2009). While there is much debate surrounding Jackson’s lifestyle
that existed long before his death, it becomes the main source of his publicity after death
as well. Debate about his identity sparked a large public reaction to his death, and
consequently, worked to further broadcast his sensational life story through multiple
media. For example, if Jackson’s life was not so controversial, there would not have
been as much public discussion about him. More specifically, mediums such as jokes
would not have had as much topic matter to focus on, such as his accusations of child
molestation that pathologized Jackson as a dangerous and problematic person. Therefore, while Jackson had an extensive fan base that praised his involvement in popular culture, his popularity in the media post-mortem was also influenced and promoted by his dissenters as well. It is this participatory and inclusive nature of technology that influences how media texts, such as obituaries, are produced, and how social subjects are further identified and branded.

Death is no longer a taboo topic in North America but instead it is a normalized topic of popular discussion that is widely publicised through mediums of technological expression (Berridge 2002; Rando 1987). If technology is an extension of human consciousness as theorized by McLuhan, than one’s death can also be understood as an extension of human consciousness through technology. Instead of a subject being ‘dead’ upon their demise, technology is allowing a subject to be branded and republicized through technological expressions and the easy accessibility of communicative mediums; thus, social subjects are kept ‘alive’ through the continuous media broadcasting of their lives, and the continuous shifting of their identities that result from a public’s reading and publication of cultural texts about their lives. For example, the discussion surrounding Jackson’s death has been published through a variety of mediums that will continue to be broadcast. As demonstrated by the selling of Jackson’s costumes and memorabilia, in addition to his official page offering updates on Jackson related products and forms of entertainment, his physical presence is not necessary for the success of the Jackson brand. In the case of the Jackson brand, Jackson’s death has been profitable and he is now more popular than ever before (E!Online 2009; Taraborrelli 2009). Jackson’s brand is continuing to profit from the widespread republication of his image, and more products are being created in order for his camp to continuously bank on the popularity of his death
(The Official Michael Jackson Site 2009). In addition, other businesses and organizations, such as Michael Jackson’s Angels (2009), have recognized the marketability of his death and have created services that will keep his image very much alive while still enabling their business to profit from the marketability of the Jackson brand.

While death has previously been understood as a tragic occurrence and a taboo topic of discussion, advancements in communicative mediums have made technological expression of grief a seemingly natural reaction to death. Not only do technological expressions about one’s death brand the subject in a way that makes them marketable, consumable and profitable, but they republicise the subject in a way that makes them very much ‘alive’. This awakening of their identities despite their physical presence challenges normalized understanding of the culture surrounding death and dying, and encourages audiences to become involved in the continuous obituarization of deceased celebrities through technological expressions of thought that can be read as extensions of human consciousness. McLuhan’s theory of communicative mediums has demonstrated how technology enables Jackson to be kept ‘alive’ as a popular social subject, whose popularity will continue to flourish due to his debatable and controversial life story. As long as his identity is in a constant state of flux, which will continue to be the case since there are so many multiple identities associated with Jackson, he will continue to be a ‘living’ subject within popular culture. Therefore, advancements in technology and communicative mediums are extending life post-mortem, and celebrated figures will continue to thrive as consumable brands.
Myth, Barthes and Subject Formation

Barthes (1973) describes myth as the associated meanings of a text which appear natural; however, he also explains that myth is highly complex and can challenge all aspects of truth and naturalness. When examining a public’s published reaction to the death of a celebrated figure and the corresponding influence that their fandom has on the subject formation of that individual, it is critical to look beyond the given meanings of a text and to search for embedded messages. Barthes suggests that cultural texts, such as obituaries that are published via technological mediums, are forms of language in which myth is the main mode of communication. More specifically, given the multiple and often conflicting identities associated with Jackson, myth can be understood as one’s personal understanding of meaning associated with a text about him. Barthes theory suggests that although a person may think that their published reactions and wider understandings of Jackson are genuine and personal, they are actually engaging with a broad-based set of meanings of ideology or myth that are embedded and most often unnoticeable within cultural texts. For example, when looking at obituaries that describe or frame Jackson differently, such as one’s that identify him as a positive and idolized figure and one’s that focus on negative aspects of his life and his controversial biography, fans are subjected to varying opinions about him that can unknowingly influence their wider understandings of Jackson as a social subject.

Fans are subjected to multiple identities and different debates surrounding Jackson’s life through numerous mediums. As demonstrated by the in-depth examination of processes of obituarization about Jackson’s death, there are numerous mediums that may focus on his role as an accomplished musician, an idol, and a father, such as his memorial and film (MSNBC 2009b, Ortega 2009), while other mediums, such as jokes
broadcast depictions of Jackson as an enigmatic and problematic person. These conflicting depictions of Jackson are part of the same myth and embedded within cultural texts. The comparison of conflicting identities can be simultaneous or separate, but despite what medium one is analyzing they will come across as conflicting identities of Jackson as they look at the embedded and alternative meanings of cultural texts. Therefore, the myth of Jackson is his debatable image and the existing confictions about his identity that are continuously broadcast through media; the varying identities associated with Jackson that challenge his fans to continuously question who he was to them, and who he will continue to be in the future. It is this myth that created the Jackson brand, and that will continue to republicise Jackson as a living and culturally significant subject through media broadcasts that subjectify him differently.

When viewing any published response to Jackson’s death, the naturalness and truthfulness of its intended message can and should be challenged to account for any alternative or embedded messages that can unknowingly influence one’s understanding of the deceased (Barthes 1973). Whereas formal obituaries have traditionally been used to express the life and death of deceased individuals, most often as tools used to broadcast an upcoming funeral or burial, new forms of obituaries can be multi-purposeful. For example, since obituaries are published via a variety of mediums that are made public through technological media, it is possible that sadness, mourning and grief as expressed by a deceased figure’s audience could be strategically placed advertisements for a secondary service or product as offered through that medium. For example, on The Official Michael Jackson Site (2009) that encourages people to discuss their memories of Jackson, there are also links and advertisements for his available music and merchandise. Furthermore, by encouraging fans to fill out their contact information when they submit
their memory of Jackson, the site is simultaneously gathering contact information that can be useful in future marketing campaigns. Whereas the site may appear to be a genuine portrayal of their grief over Jackson’s death, the application of Barthes theory of mythologisation allows us to look more specifically at embedded messages and strategic marketing techniques that may normally go unnoticed. These marketing techniques focus on the myth of Jackson and his shifting and conflicting identities, but works to challenge them and to highlight Jackson as an idol through the extensive marketing of his products. In this case, the multiple forms of obituarization as described in Chapter Three can be read as processes of republicising the Jackson brand, and possibly other brands and services as well. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Barthes (1973:12) based his findings on the “insistence and repetition” of meaning found in texts. In that sense, a major theme that arose through the analysis of Jackson related obituaries was the subtle display of advertisements and product branding, further demonstrating the marketability of celebrity deaths.

The website created by a group that boasts that they are ‘Michael Jackson’s Angels’ draws on notions of sadness and grief that are so often associated with a death, especially the deaths of people who are given idolized depictions within the media. The group appears to be a sincere attempt to identify Jackson as a globalized star, yet they are also profiting from Jackson’s death and his large fan base by selling virtual gifts that are ‘sent to Jackson’ through the Internet world. By charging a fee for virtual gifts and without posting any contact information as to where that money is going, this group appears to be relying on Jackson’s death to create a profit for their business. Therefore, the truthfulness of their grief and sadness becomes questionable and loses value as to their sincerity. While perhaps they are Jackson’s fans, by charging a fee for their services they
are demonstrating that profit is also a key goal of their site that has gone unnoticed by thousands of Jackson’s fans who have paid the fee. Mediums that simultaneously highlight Jackson’s death and alternative messages, be it advertisement for other products or services that they offer (such as celebrity entertainment on TMZ and Perez Hilton sites) or for monetary gain, demonstrate a strong understanding of the regained power of Jackson’s brand upon his demise. Furthermore, the existence of websites such as Michael Jackson’s Angels and multiple costume and jewellery sites selling Jackson related memorabilia are evidence of how complicit expressions of emotion have become with consumerism, and how sites similar to these rely the participation of fans and their engagement with their offered products and services, including those that may be embedded within the text.

In addition, it is not necessary that mediums are used to positively obituarise Jackson to attract audiences to their other products and services due to the fact that there is an alternative audience that prefers negative representations of Jackson. Jackson’s fans who identify him as an idolized subject often engage in debates with outlets that highlight negative representations of Jackson and try to convince them that Jackson is indeed a ‘good’ person. For example, Funny and Jokes (2009), the website that posted jokes about Jackson as a child molester, received so much backlash after Jackson’s death that they had to post a disclaimer. However, their choice to leave the jokes as public cultural texts posted on their site can be understood as a strategic plan to attract a larger audience to their site. Therefore, while obituarising Jackson in a way that is controversial, Funny and Jokes (2009) are also using the popularity of the Jackson brand to earn a profit, and relying on the mythologisation of Jackson as a recognizable although debatable subject to broadcast embedded messages of advertisement. In addition, as discussed in Chapter
Three, all identities associated with any given text further work to construct Jackson as an ‘undead’ subject. He is continuously kept ‘alive’ through media’s involvement in the branding of cultural texts associated with his demise, and in this sense, Jackson’s death can be read as a process of mythologisation in itself.

Jackson’s death has created a more globalized understanding of Jackson as a consumable and marketable brand. While some audiences have realized this and relied on Jackson’s death to promote their products and services, Jackson’s death in itself is a myth. While he is no longer physically present as a celebrity, he is more popular than ever before and he is still being marketed as if he was alive. For example, the “Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’” (Ortega 2009) film was released on DVD in January of this year, Jackson’s camp is releasing music from his library under the guise of greatest hit compositions, video games are being created so fans can learn Jackson’s dance moves at home, and there are a variety of published books and other forms of memorabilia being sold to broadcast his image (MSNBC 2009b, TMZ 2010, Hilton 2010). Therefore, the numerous announcements of Jackson’s physical death and apparent sadness (or celebration) over his demise, can be alternatively read as processes of mythologisation that further frames Jackson as a representation of our need for a celebrated figure and a popular form of entertainment. His death has been beneficial to the larger brand associated with his image, and as a result, every cultural text about Jackson can be read as myth. Given his history as a social subject, mass media reacted to his death in a way that was popular and profitable, and framed Jackson to have conflicting identities in order to broadcast his death to larger audiences.
While untimely deaths have traditionally been understood as tragedies, and even though Jackson’s camp marketed his death as a sad occurrence via a highly publicised memorial and a film that featured videos of Jackson just days before his death, the media’s reaction to Jackson’s death can be re-examined as a marketable and profitable experience. Even though fans expressed grief over Jackson’s death and his family experienced a personal loss, Jackson has been continuously subjectified through new forms of obituarization, and simply stated, his death has turned Jackson into a highly popularised topic of discussion and product for consumption. As a result, fans are still able to consume the Jackson brand, including new products that are being marketed despite the lack of Jackson’s physical presence. Furthermore, Jackson’s family is working to rebrand Jackson in a way that erases negative pathologies of him while simultaneously profiting from his demise. Obituaries about Jackson have highlighted numerous identities that have surrounded Jackson throughout his lifetime, including identities that represent conflicting depictions of Jackson as either a positive or negative person, yet either way, he is still popular and his brand is still profiting from his death. Not only are they earning cash through existing products, but they are marketing new Jackson products to further cash in on his immense popularity and marketability. Whether fans love him or despise him, the fact that they still turn to technological mediums to express an opinion on his death metaphorically keeps him ‘alive’ and present within mass-media. In this sense, Jackson’s death can be read as a positive occurrence for the Jackson brand because he will continuously be popularised and idolized through the marketing of consumable products and services.
Limitations of this Research

One limitation of this research is the questionability of Jackson’s staying power; can a deceased celebrity continue to stay popular solely from media subjectification and branding? As demonstrated by the continued profitability of other deceased celebrities such as Elvis Presley (The Official King of Rock ‘N’ Roll 2010) and Marilyn Monroe (2009), people-as-brands can continue to be marketable and profitable post-mortem. Furthermore, similar to Presley and Monroe, Jackson experienced an untimely death that was publicly filled with debates surrounding his alleged drug use. It is through the conflicting and controversial broadcasts about Jackson that makes his case such an interesting and continuously debatable topic of discussion amongst popular cultural texts and this bodes well for the staying power of the Jackson brand.

Continuous advancements in communicative mediums and new forms of media make the constant popularity of deceased individuals possible as they encourage participatory fandom and exemplify the primary role that technology plays in obituarization. In addition to the participation of Jackson’s fans in the construction of his multiple identities, it is the technology that also participates in the subjectification of deceased individuals. Without technology, the reactions to Jackson’s death could not be mediated in the same globalized and popularised ways; thus, limiting the re-emergence and branding of Jackson. Therefore, it is through the continued encouragement of fandom and fan/subject relationships in relation to technology that subjects are marketed as consumable brands. While Jackson’s camp may take the task of marketing of Jackson on themselves with future products or services, it is new and more accessible technologies that also encourage fans to continuously obituarise Jackson, further demonstrating the power of fandom within processes of branding. For example, recently it was the one year
anniversary of Jackson’s death and there were numerous products broadcast in Jackson’s memory. In addition, television shows interviewed his family members, books and magazines were published about his life, vigils were held in his honour, and Jackson was rebranded on a global scale due to the reoccurrence of fandom obituarization. Jackson will continue to stay popular within mass-media through the continuous obituarization of him as a deceased subject and the republicising of his corresponding brand, and each anniversary of his death will further encourage fans to obituarise about and consume products related to Jackson.

Also, Jackson’s brand will benefit from the new found popularity of his children within the media. Similarly to how Hilton (2010) discussed his sadness over the children’s loss of their parent and has continued to update his audience on their lives, other forms of media will do this as well (and in some cases they already are) as a way to continuously republicise Jackson’s sensational biography and his corresponding brand. Since Jackson has proven to have a large and globalized fan base, media outlets will continue to update his fans as a way to attract attention to their offered products, even if this means relying on his children as sources of entertainment. Therefore, the subjectification of Jackson as a popular social subject becomes entwined with his marketability and media’s awareness of his fan base. Due to the fact that Jackson’s death can be understood as positive occurrence with regards to his marketability, he will not be forgotten. As a result of advancements in communications and media, Jackson’s brand will be eternalized.
**Generalizability**

While certain aspects of this research can be generalized to include all well-known celebrities, meaning that technological processes of obituarization about other celebrated deceased figures can occur and result in the republicising of their corresponding brands, there is no guarantee that other celebrities will have such a large public response to their deaths as Jackson did. Jackson’s case is unique since he was a celebrated subject from such an early age and through a variety of performance arts (including his roles as a musician, a dancer, an actor, a spokesperson, etc.). His numerous roles as an entertainer, in addition to his controversial and public lifestyle, made Jackson extensively popularised through mass-media; thus, increasing his globalised fan base (despite their varying opinions of Jackson). Therefore, while certain aspects of this research are generalizable, for example, elements of participatory fandom, obituarization, subject formation, and branding, there is no guarantee that the response to someone else’s death will be as large or as numerous. This is best exemplified by the fact that model and actress Farrah Fawcett died on the same day and year as Jackson, yet her death received much less publicity (TMZ 2010, Hilton 2010). Therefore, this research is not widely generalizable to all celebrated figures, but could be applied to examine similar occurrences of subject formation of the deceased through processes of obituarization.

**Opportunities for Future Research**

The culture surrounding death and dying is fluid; unlike the medical and scientific texts that were historically used to understand processes associated with death, the social and cultural implications of the dead and dying are fluid and continuously changing. Therefore, there is a need to continue to research new processes of obituarization and any
various responses to death that are published as a result of communicative technology. More specifically, this work could be narrowed down to focus solely on one medium and its critical engagement in the subject formation of the deceased. Alternatively, this work could be narrowed down to focus on specific target groups who produce and/or consume obituaries that vary by age, location or socioeconomic status. I would be interested in pursuing an in-depth examination of processes of obituarization engaged in by children and youth. Similar to many other producers of obituaries, children and youth may be unaware of their involvement in the culture surrounding death and dying more so than other age groups, and therefore their influence on the subject formation of the deceased could be significant in a different way. Since children and youth are large consumers of new forms of technology and North American popular culture, they become incredibly important and often ignored agents of change in subject formation.

I am also interested in challenging the term ‘celebrity’ and examining the multiple types of celebrities as branded through media. It would be interesting to compare how not all celebrities are as popular as others, and not also celebrities fall under traditional understandings of the label. There has been little research comparing the multitude of celebrities and how they are branded and subjectified through media differently depending on their well-known status (ie. ‘Michael Jackson – controversial music sensation’ in comparison to ‘Barack Obama – groundbreaking politician’ or ‘Reality television star – temporary celebrity status’). This future research could be linked to obituarization as well, comparing how celebrities are obituarised differently yet through similar mediums.
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