Deconstructing Immortality?
Identity Work and the Death of David Bowie in Digital Media

Re-thinking (Im)mortality in the Digital Age

Knowing of one’s mortality means at the same time knowing of the possibility of immortality ... To be aware of mortality means to imagine immortality; to dream of immortality; to work towards immortality. (Bauman, 1997, p. 153, original emphasis)

In this article, I elaborate on Zygmunt Bauman’s (1992a, 1992b) ideas on death and immortality in the framework of the present-day networked modes of being and identity work carried out in digital media (cf. Papacharissi, 2011). I examine the ways in which individuals perform their networked identities in practices of the digital ritualisation of death in digital media, in which immortality is produced as a liquid. Throughout history, death, as an inevitable fact of biological life, has forced individuals and communities to reflect on life’s finitude. The deaths of others and thoughts of one’s own death often awaken strong emotions, such as a fear of destruction. On the other hand, thinking about death can also inspire thoughts about the meaning of life. One manifestation of this can be found in the deaths of martyrs and heroes (see Campbell, 1968/2008). It has been said that death serves as a frame of relation for life. Death steers us to look into and reminisce about the past. In this manner, death links us—the generations that are still alive—to a chain: a continuum of past, present and future (cf. Mitchell, 2007). Today, we live in a world in which the relationship between the living and the dead is carried out in digitally
saturated contexts. In this condition, digital media technology provides the stage for this interaction and it links the individual with multiple audiences (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 304).

In his seminal work on death in late modern society, Zygmunt Bauman (1992a, 1992b) claims that contemporary society has become obsessed with immortality. From Bauman’s (1992a, p. 164) perspective, while modern societies are mainly concerned with ‘deconstructing death’ and putting death into the backstage of modern life, late modern, digitally saturated societies are preoccupied with ‘deconstructing immortality’. The desire to deconstruct immortality does not, however, downplay its societal significance. Instead, Bauman (1992b) sees immortality as being always shaped by the fantasies and aspirations of a given society and its individual members. Hence, immortality can be conceptualised as a kind of utopia that motivates societies and provides them with meaning for life in the shadow of death (see also Jacobsen & Kearl, 2014, pp. 303–304). In Bauman’s (1992a) vocabulary, deconstructing immortality takes place in a ‘liquid’ condition. This means that the present perception of immortality is fluid, highly individualised, media-saturated and embedded in the current pleasure-oriented consumerist attitude towards life in advanced capitalism. Following Bauman’s insights into the idea of ‘liquid immortality’, sociologists Jacobsen and Kearl (2014) explain:

Whereas previously, belonging to the select group of chosen ones – the great men of history, nobilities and writers – would guarantee symbolic immortality in the shape of collective recollection in posterity, today, bidding for immorality has become public property and been thoroughly democratized – from Hollywood celebrities, sports start and reality TV participants to ordinary people with their thousands of posted ‘selfies’ on Instagram of Facebook, everybody is now laying claiming to their 15 minutes of fame and to being ‘noticed’. (p. 304)

In line with Bauman (1992a, 1992b), Jacobsen and Kearl (2014) provide a critical interpretation of the current condition. As immortalisation becomes ‘public property’, overpopulation occurs. In other words, ‘When everybody suddenly aspires to become immortal, nobody will achieve it since our limited collective attention cannot cater for the endless amount of aspiration for fame, remembrance or notoriety’ (Jacobsen & Kearl, 2014, p. 304). This social and cultural immortality overload may transform the very idea of immortality from something that belongs to the category
of ‘eternity’ into ‘this-worldliness’: that is, a part of the time-consuming life work of everyday life in late modern society. Immortality is a movement from the ‘great beyond’ toward something that happens here and now and demands immediate satisfaction (Jacobsen & Kearl, 2014, p. 304).

In this article, I am particularly interested in examining the practices of performing networked identities in the digital ritualisation of death in digital media, in which immortality, I argue, is produced as a liquid. In my empirical analysis, I focus on the death and related immortalisation of the iconic cultural figure, singer-songwriter and artist David Bowie (1947–2016). Although the deaths of many popular cultural icons, musicians, actors, artists and celebrities, such as Michael Jackson, Leonard Cohen, Amy Winehouse, Whitney Houston and Robin Williams, have raised considerable ritual public interest in digital media in recent years, I argue that the death of David Bowie has special relevance in the attempt to understand the production of immortality in the present digital age.

Bowie was an icon and an artist who attempted to escape categorisation of any kind (cf. Sumiala, 2018). When he died from liver cancer on 10 January 2016 in his New York City apartment, the news immediately broke worldwide and caused massive ritual public mourning and commemoration in both mainstream and social media. Bowie had lived his life in the public limelight and had given the global audience an ‘endless amount of aspiration for fame, remembrance’ and ‘notoriety’ (cf. Jacobsen & Kearl, 2014, p. 304). For many, Bowie seemed immortal even before he died. On Mashable, a media outlet that calls itself ‘a leading media company for the Connected Generation and the voice of digital culture’ (Wikipedia, 2017), addressed Bowie’s immortality explicitly, as follows:

David Bowie seemed immortal; that’s one of the most common reactions to his passing. People are surprised to find that they just hadn't considered the possibility that this man, this icon, the ultimate changeling, might one day no longer be with us.

That feature of his personality has been with us from the beginning. To a child growing up in England in the 1970s, Bowie was already immortal. Had I been told back then his fame was only as old as the decade, I would have laughed a withering laugh. Bowie was our Mount Rushmore, except with more faces, and all of them painted in technicolor.
Even then, Bowie was impossibly distant, a strange thin god of pain and poetry. He was a prophet from the future, a modern-day Pan that the grown-ups had no hope of controlling. He could show up anywhere at any time — on any child's bedroom wall, on any radio, on a BBC documentary (*Cracked Actor*, a classic of the genre) (Taylor, 11 January 2016).

In the case of David Bowie, the sound of these lines is not exceptional; rather, it reflects the tone of many of the comments circulating in digital media after Bowie's death. Based on my close reading of the digital media materials, I wish to identify two special features of identity negotiation in the ritual practice of Bowie’s immortalisation: i) the practices through which Bowie’s identity was performed as highly extraordinary (and, hence, worthy of immortalisation) and ii) the practices that re-invented new identities in the post-mortem social relationship between Bowie and his global audience. These two features go hand-in-hand and are difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish in the ritual practices of mourning and commemoration that followed Bowie’s death. The empirical material for this analysis was collected as part of an ongoing digital ethnographic work conducted across a variety of digital media platforms, including YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, as well as online mainstream media outlets, such as BBC and CNN. The most intense period of digital fieldwork occurred between June and August 2016. In the empirical analysis, I place special emphasis on the representations of those repetitive online symbolic practices of mourning and commemorating Bowie and provide an ethnographic description of the symbols, visuals and discourses applied in these practices. In conclusion, I reflect on my empirical observations through the lens of Bauman’s idea of immortality and suggest how Bowie’s death contributes to deconstructing immortality as a new identity in the present digital age.

**Social Life and Death on the Web**

Death sociologist Glennys Howarth (2007) reminds us that ‘relationships between the living and the dead and how the dead are remembered depend upon cultural representations of mortality in each society’ (p. 19). In line with many scholars working in the field of death online (see e.g. Gotvid & Refslund Christensen, 2015; Lagerkvist, 2017), I argue that the web or digital media (including, in this analysis, both online mainstream media and social networking sites) is
profundely shaping the ways in which death and related immortalisation are constructed in today’s society and how individuals negotiate and perform their identities in relation to death in these frameworks. Jacobsen and Kearl (2014, p. 304) have already pointed to a tendency to make immortality ‘public property’, as today’s digital media invites ‘Hollywood celebrities’ and ordinary people posting ‘selfies’ alike to make themselves immortal. Furthermore, many scholars of digital culture (e.g. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; van Dijck, 2013; Meikle, 2016; Papacharissi, 2011; Turkle 2012) maintain that these types of social activities need to be understood within their underlying larger framework of cultural, economic and technological dynamics.

Zizi Papacharissi’s (2011) work on digital social activities underlines what she calls networked sociality. In her thinking, in digital media, a networked self is communicated across multiplied audiences seeking, first and foremost, social opportunities for expression and connection. In Papacharissi’s (2011) analysis of networked social activities cannot, thus, be discussed without understanding the complex interplay between the identity work of selves and audiences and the sense of place reflectivity associated with it. Papacharissi (2011) argues:

Networked and remixed sociabilities emerge and are practiced over multiplied place and audiences, that do not necessarily collapse one’s sense of place, but afford, but afford sense of place reflexively. A sense of place is formed in response to the particular sense of self, or in response to the identity performance constructed upon that place. This presents the modus operandi for the networked self, and the context of newer patterns of sociability and routes to sociality that merge. (p. 317)

In the case of death, this means that both mortality and immortality, as social constructions, are always produced as outcomes of performances of networked selves (e.g. in mourning) that are carried out in certain digital spaces and aim to be communicated to and shared with digitally multiplied and dispersed audiences.

Another important point relevant for our understanding of immortality in the digital age is made by José van Dijck (2013), who writes about digital sociality as the culture of connectivity. Her idea of connectivity refers to the organisation of social life via digital networks, platforms and applications that invite us to create and maintain social bonds via sharing, posting, liking and
following people’s media representations and online presences. In line with Papacharissi (2011), van Dijck (2013) stresses the networked nature of this digital communication. In addition, she reminds us that these networks are never created out of thin air, but are economically motivated and technologically coded human connections, designed around algorithmic logics and principles rooted in the measurable value of popularity. Van Dijck (2013) states:

From the technological inscription of online sociality we derive that connectivity is a quantifiable value, also known as the popularity principle: the more contact you have and make, the more valuable you become, because more people think you are popular and hence want to connect with you. (p. 13)

van Dijck’s (2013) idea, thus, implies, that the contemporary culture of connectivity is deeply driven by the logic of competition over recognition, visibility and attention. Consequently, death and immortalisation, like any other socially constructed aspects of life, become the subjects of such rivalry and struggle. In this competition, different actors (or networked selves) and platforms have diverse competences and resources to ‘make death public property’ in digital media. According to Jacobsen (2016), this tendency imposes what he calls ‘spectacular death’ as perhaps the most prominent type of death in the digital age. The spectacular as an entity may be associated with many things, such as the grand and exceptional qualities of the deceased, extraordinary ways of dying (e.g. violence, war, catastrophe, rare illness) and the amount of attention given to death in digital media by the public (e.g. global mourning). Based on these two ideas of networked sociality and the culture of connectivity, we can assume that the more spectacular a death in digital media, the more likely it is to invite immortalisation and related new identities between the living and the dead.

Rituals of Immortality

Immortalisation cannot take place without ritualised practice. One of the most prominent ways of thinking about a death ritual is to categorise it as a rite of passage or a life crisis ritual (see e.g. Bell, 1997; van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969). The works of van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) are particularly influential in this tradition of thought. Whereas van Gennep (1960) emphasises ritual as a process rather than a representation, Turner (1969) examines ritual as a transformative

The powerful argument that he [Turner] began was that processes observable in ritual action—especially those that are creative, generative, and innovative—are constantly repeated (regardless of whether or not they are recognised as being ritual) in the contexts of major moments of social and political change. Furthermore, they often dramatically appear at transformative moments. (p. 38)

When considering immortalisation within a Turnerian framework, we may approach death rituals as transformative cultural and social practices with the potential to create new meanings and enable new types of relationships with the deceased as he is moved into a new category of social life: immortality. In helping to reorganise the social relations between the living and the dead, death rituals can create new identities around death and related social life (see Davies, 2002; Metcalf & Huntington, 1997).

In digital media, death rituals are best understood as repetitive communicative practices through which media professionals, celebrities and other well-known public figures, as well as ordinary media users, symbolically pay tribute and commemorate the lives of the deceased. These practices typically consist of posting, sharing and tweeting images, symbols and phrases of commemoration and practices of bringing flowers, candles, stuffed animals and notes of condolences to public and virtual places and sharing these images and messages in various digital media platforms. Makeshift memorials can be created in symbolic sites in both physical and virtual contexts. Images of these sites can then begin to circulate in digital media, creating new connections and networks of digital mourning. In addition, Facebook memory sites can be established, and YouTube videos of mourning and tribute can be produced and circulated. Usually, such videos consist of media pieces (e.g. clips of the life of the deceased), combined with stories of the deceased's influence and meaning to the person who made the video. These ritual practices are characterised by their tendency to converge and remix in both mainstream and social media contexts (Sumiala, 2013).
In the following, I will demonstrate how the popular music icon David Bowie was made ritually immortal in digital media. I provide an ethnographic thick description of the media-based social production of his extraordinary identity (and thus, immortalisation) and post-mortem reinvention in relation to his public. Bowie’s immortalisation had already begun in pre-digital media at the end of 1960s, in the early days of his celebrity. It gained a new layer after every turn in his career and was crystallised by his tragic death. Hence, the digital media story of Bowie’s immortalisation traces the changing relationship between the public and one of their heroes, performed during a certain temporality and associated with certain material representations and their ritualised performance in digital media.

**The Ritual Construction of Bowie’s Life in His Death**

The news of David Bowie’s (born David Robert Jones) death was a shock to the world, since Bowie had kept his illness hidden from the public eye. The British popular culture icon and artist died at the age of 69 in his New York City apartment on 10 January 2016. He had suffered from liver cancer for 18 months. Bowie published his last album, *Blackstar*, on his birthday, 8 January, only two days before his death. Tony Visconti, the album’s co-producer publicly described *Blackstar* on Facebook as Bowie’s swan song—a ‘parting gift’ for his fans before his death:

> He always did what he wanted to do. And he wanted to do it his way and he wanted to do it the best way. His death was no different from his life — a work of art. He made Blackstar for us, his parting gift. I knew for a year this was the way it would be. I wasn’t, however, prepared for it. He was an extraordinary man, full of love and life. He will always be with us. For now, it is appropriate to cry (Visconti, 11, January, 2016).

The public life of David Bowie, which lasted five decades, can be traced back to South London, Brixton, where he was born and raised. It is said that Bowie formed his first band in 1962 at the age of 15. His first successful record, *Space Oddity*, made a top-five spot on the UK Singles Chart in 1969. In the 1970s, he invented a flamboyant and androgynous alter ego, Ziggy Stardurst, and his glam-rock album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972) won him
extensive popularity in the UK and worldwide. It is no surprise that in the ritualisation of Bowie’s death, Brixton played an important role. It became a ‘local’ centre for mourning, where people gathered in the streets to pay tribute to Bowie. In the tributes, people sang his famous songs together, shared memories of Bowie’s life, exchanged stories about his meaning with the other mourners and, of course, toasted his memory. YouTube videos of the Brixton mourning scene suggest that many people were highly emotional and moved by Bowie’s death. The stories, pictures and videos of the Brixton street tributes circulated in the media, giving a local twist to the global commemoration. One of the key sites of the public pilgrimage to Brixton was a mural of Bowie painted in 2013, to which people began to bring flowers, records and notes.

The digital ritual practices followed typical patterns of rituals of mourning and grief carried out in the media (cf. Sumiala, 2013). Spontaneous makeshift memorials were created in other places on Bowie’s home street in Soho in Manhattan, New York; outside his former residence in Berlin; and, of course, in Brixton, as was already mentioned. Fans brought flowers to lay by his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Los Angeles, and in Milan, fans organised a flash mob—a spontaneous performance in a public space—to honour his legacy.

Furthermore, ordinary people posted YouTube videos with titles like Rest in Peace, RIP and Tribute. Facebook and Twitter circulated messages, images, posts and tweets of people sharing their emotions of sadness, respect and honour. World celebrities and contemporary pop and rock music icons, such as Elton John, Bruce Springsteen and Madonna, paid tribute to Bowie in their tours. In addition, several leading world politicians offered statements, with David Cameron, the British Prime Minister at the time, calling Bowie a genius (The Guardian, 11, January, 2016). Among the tributes of other professional groups, those of NASA astronauts were given special attention in the public mourning and commemoration process. In particular, NASA’s tweet ‘The stars look very different today’ was interpreted as a direct reference to Bowie’s iconic album Space Oddity (Cofield, 2016).

Bowie’s alter ego Ziggy Stardust was also a character that lived and died in the public eye. After ‘killing’ Ziggy on stage, Bowie changed his musical style and visual appearance and re-invented himself. In the 1970s, Bowie lived in Berlin Germany and was strongly influenced by the local music and art scene. During his Berlin years (1976–1979), Bowie produced three albums (Low in
In 1977, *Heroes* in 1977, *Lodger* in 1979), commonly called the ‘Berlin trilogy’. The years in Berlin associated Bowie with the divided city and the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. This connection was revitalised following his death, as the German Foreign Office famously tweeted: ‘Good-bye, David Bowie. You are now among #Heroes. Thank you for helping to bring down the #wall’ (German Foreign Office, 2016).

In his later career, Bowie experimented with several musical styles ranging from pop music to jazz ambient and avant garde, renewing his visual image again and again. One of his enormously popular successes was the duet single ‘Under Pressure’, which he produced together with Queen and Freddie Mercury in 1981. His most popular billboard hit was a 1983 song called ‘Let’s Dance’. In 1985, Bowie published the globally successful duet cover ‘Dancing in the Street’ together with Rolling Stones’ Mick Jagger.

In addition to singing and song writing, Bowie also experimented with other areas of popular culture and art. Over the course of his life, he acted in theatre, films and TV series. Bowie played, for example, Pontius Pilate in Martin Scorsese’s film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988); FBI officer Phillip Jeffries in David Lynch’s post-modern classic *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992); and Andy Warhol in *Basquiat*, a documentary film about the life of Jean-Michel Basquiat (1996). His co-actresses include such iconic movie stars as Marlene Dietrich and Catherine Deneuve. Bowie was also known as a painter, designer, fashion model and art collector. In a special memorial broadcast paying tribute to Bowie’s life, BBC described him as an artist ‘hard to pin down’. Although not all Bowie’s experiments were artistic successes or money-making hits, in his public memorialisation, his innovativeness was highly appreciated, regardless of professional failures.

Bowie’s personal life was profoundly part of his professional career and public life. His eyes, which were injured in a childhood accident, added to Bowie’s physical charisma, and his slim and flexible body and profile gave him an appearance that was easy to change and play with. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the flamboyancy and androgyny of his alter ego Ziggy Stardust gave him a transgressive sex appeal. Bowie loved to play with queer associations and gender ambiguity. Media stories about Bowie’s rakish private life with female and male lovers, drugs and self-indulgent spending made him an extravagant icon of popular culture. In the ritualisation surrounding Bowie’s death,
many people throughout the world showed their admiration and respect for Bowie’s fearless desire to challenge and re-invent gender roles and masculinity in his public persona. He was quoted as saying: ‘It’s true—I am a bisexual. But I can’t deny that I’ve used that fact very well. I suppose it’s the best thing that ever happened to me’ (The Sun, 2016). Bowie was married twice and had two children. The digital media archives are filled with images of Bowie and his first wife, Mary Angela Barnet (Angie), whom Bowie married in 1970. A play with gender roles and a celebration of androgynous identities is visibly explicit in this imaginary. In 1992, Bowie married American-Somali model Iman, a celebrity figure herself, with whom he stayed until the end of his life. The images of Iman and Bowie portray them as a couple living a spectacular, excessive celebrity life, in which gender and ethnic differences are overtaken by mixed and blended gender performances.

As an artist and star, Bowie was already highly respected during his lifetime. He enjoyed a global popularity that transcended generations and social, cultural and economic backgrounds. In the public and ritual response to Bowie’s death, he is shown to be admired by not only ordinary people, but also other popular global culture figures. Bowie was offered a knighthood in 2003, but he turned it down. One of the indicators of his status as part of the establishment in British popular culture was an exhibition held in London in the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2013. The hugely popular exhibition represented Bowie’s life and style retrospectively, portraying him as a world-class rock star, an icon, an artist and a businessman who had made millions manufacturing his life into a phenomenal spectacle of sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll.

Bowie’s last public appearance in concert was in the United States in 2006, when he was recovering from a heart attack. Bowie spent his last ten years mostly in his Manhattan home with his wife Iman and their daughter Lexia. Though he slowed down his life on stage, Bowie continued producing music until his death.

**Immortalisation of Bowie’s Exceptionality**

The ritual narrative of Bowie’s exceptionality was repeated in digital media across numerous platforms by countless actors, including both professionals and ordinary media users, immediately after news of his death hit the world. In line with van Dijck’s (2013) idea of a culture of
connectivity, Bowie’s popularity was quantified not only by the number of actors and media platforms activated to commemorate and mourn over his death, but also by the cultural and social prestige of those actors and platforms. The participation of global news media platforms like BBC and CNN; institutions like NASA and the German Foreign Office; public officials like the British Prime Minister; and numerous global pop icons like Elton John, Bruce Springsteen and Madonna in Bowie’s public mourning and commemoration signalled that Bowie’s global significance reached far beyond his area of expertise as a musician. In addition, countless ordinary media users and Bowie fans recorded their loss and longing for this extraordinary man. Bowie’s exceptionality was, thus, quantified by the entire spectrum of society, from those with high status to ordinary individuals, resulting in an incredibly large reach across digital media.

Also important was Bowie’s own role in scripting his identity as an immortal during his lifetime. Bowie’s career got a boost from the media hype around the first landing of a man on the moon in 1969. In modern society, the moon landing was one of the most iconic moments in the (media) history of modern life. Millions of people watched on television as astronaut Neil Armstrong placed his foot on the moon and famously stated: ‘That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.’ Bowie associated this futuristic, progressive human endeavour to conquer outer space with the popular cultural mythology of sexual transgression and breaking the norms of petite bourgeois society. In so doing, he crafted himself into a man from space who landed among ordinary suburban people and showed them ‘how to be alive’, as put by BBC’s art editor Will Compertz in the BBC Bowie memorial broadcast Sound and Vision. Compertz reflected, ‘he was able to reflect the world against us and not only to make sense for us, but to guide us,’ and concluded that ‘we have lost a crucial guide in our lives’(BBC, 2016). The rhetoric that Bowie himself cultivated and the rhetoric used to talk about him post-mortem was lavish, to say the least. Bowie and his commemorators positioned him as a visionary who did something very extraordinary not only for popular culture, but for all humanity. In the words of BBC 6 Music DJ Lauren Laverne, Bowie and his generation showed future generations ‘what it is to be adult in the modern world’. In the public ritualisation of his death, Bowie was elevated far beyond ordinary humanity, just as his image and music formed a transcendent connection between worldly carnal pleasures and futuristic and transgressive visions of life.
Perhaps the most striking aspect of the public ritualisation surrounding Bowie’s death and related immortalisation is the transcripted death art of his last album, *Blackstar*, published only two days before his passing (see e.g. Rogers, 2016). The name of the album, the release date and the lyrics and music videos, particularly of the songs Blackstar and Lazarus, are filled with mythical and symbolic language associated with mortality, dying, ritual performance, transcendence and afterlife. Symbols like skulls, winding cloths, candles, ritual dances, black stars, figures on crosses, coffins, skeletons, corpses and astronauts, play with the fine line between life and death. The Blackstar and Lazarus songs bring together elements of various religious and popular cultural traditions, combining them creatively to draw free associations with Bowie’s own art work and other (popular) cultural sources. One aspect of this manufacturing of Bowie’s death is the vivid media discussion surrounding the meaning and ‘authentic’ interpretation of the lyrics and videos of his final album. This ongoing global exegesis created new videos, posts and stories around Bowie and enhanced his significance and immortality in digital media.

In sum, Bowie’s exceptionality and, thus, identity as an immortal were produced through the profound mixture of professional, vernacular, spontaneous and highly scripted digital practices activated in the networked sociality created around his public mourning and commemoration (cf. Papacharizzi, 2011). In the ritualisation surrounding Bowie’s death, high culture, low culture, art and popular culture combined, creating a strange concoction of commoditized and commercial appearance. It was this manufactured stardom, the immense spectacle of David Bowie’s life, that became transformed in the digitalised rituals surrounding his death. As journalist Jude Rodgers put it in *The Guardian*’s news story on the death art in the album Blackstar, his immortalisation created ‘A new career in a new town for Bowie indeed, online, in the stars, everywhere, always’ (Rogers, 2016).

In this immortalisation, Bowie’s identity was described as extraordinary, visionary, innovative and transcendent. In the ritual tributes, such as the tribute ceremony given at the BRIT Awards in 2016, Bowie was honoured with a flow of superlatives. In her speech, musician Annie Lennox called Bowie a ‘cutting edge artistic genius’, saying that after his death, life could never be quite the same again. This ritual tribute positioned Bowie at the very heart of the collective inner psyche of the British. Lennox reminded her audience how Bowie took people out of their ordinary suburban lives, expanded their horizons and made their lives ‘Technicolor’. She called Bowie an
ultimate iconoclast of his age, arguing that he pushed ‘the limits of his space shifting persona’ (The BRIT Awards, 2016). Bowie was depicted as a unique global rock star, singer, songwriter, actor and artist who had constantly re-invented himself both on- and off-stage. This narrative, repeated endlessly across various digital networks by countless actors such as global celebrities, public figures and fans, pushed Bowie towards immortality. In these actives of networked sociability he was given an identity as an imperishable individual, high above any ordinary mortal.

**Post-Mortem Relationships in Digital Media**

When analysing Bowie’s immortalisation in digital media within the framework of maintaining post-mortem relationships with the deceased, special emphasis needs to be given to Bowie’s musical and artistic work. In digital media, the networked sociality between the immortal Bowie and his public, as well as among members of his public, drew heavily on the commenting, sharing, posting and circulating of Bowie’s music, pictures and video clips, complemented by comments in which people discussed Bowie’s personal significance for them. To use the words of pop musician Annie Lennox at the 2016 BRIT Tribute to Bowie, ‘The legacy of his extraordinary sound and vision will beloved and revered for as long as the earth still spins’ (The BRIT Awards, 2016). will be loved and revered for as long as the earth still spins’. In the Brixton celebration tribute to Bowie’s death, people gathered on the streets of Brixton, Bowie’s childhood neighbourhood, to show respect to the ‘Brixton boy’, as he was called in a public billboard. The crowds brought flowers and candles to the site of the Bowie mural and sang his music together. In a YouTube video called *What David Bowie Meant To You | BOWIE BRIXTON TRIBUTE PARTY* (The Hook, 2016), people shared their thoughts about Bowie’s significance in their lives. As one young male interviewee put it: ‘Today we lost a true artist. Somebody that people to be themselves, and not what other people expect them to be’. In another comment by a female interviewee, Bowie’s meaning was crystallised as follows: ‘He meant to me, that you... if you feel like outsider, you can be exactly that. You can be whoever the hell you want to be’. The YouTube video clip ends with people happily imagining what Bowie might be doing ‘right now’, as people throw parties to pay tribute. Collectively, they answered that he was ‘having fun’ (The Hook, 2016).

Through this networked sociality, Bowie became immortal, remaining in this world through his music, lifestyle(s) and artistic legacy. In both his life and his death, Bowie was and is able to bring
together people of all types, whether part of global popular music industry and celebrity or ordinary people gathering on the streets of Brixton and on digital platforms. Bowie’s death was made public property by popular demand on both a local and a global scale. On Facebook, YouTube and many other digital platforms, such as the David Bowie-Forever memorial site, these post-mortem relationships continue as people continue to post about Bowie and his meaning to them. Annual commemorations intensify around the anniversary of his death in January. Through digital references to Bowie’s life and music, users of digital media perform their networked selves and look for connections with other like-minded people. In this networked sociality, keeping Bowie alive through his music and art gives identity and meaning to those who are still alive (see Mitchell, 2007).

**Digital Media and the Deconstruction of Immortality?**

In this article, I have examined the production of immortality and related identities in the framework of the contemporary digital age. Drawing on Bauman’s theoretical work on liquid (im)mortality, I have approached immortality as a fluid, profoundly media-related practice, deeply embedded in our identity work in networked socialites and cultures of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013; Papacharissi, 2011). As performances of networked sociality, the actions of mourning over, paying tribute and commemorating the deceased (in this case, Bowie) allow those who are still alive to create and maintain new types of identities and social bonds with the deceased. In other words, the individual who has passed away is ‘kept alive’ through people posting, sharing and tweeting memories across different digital platforms. In the case of a popular music icon like Bowie, these memories often have to do with the deceased’s music, public performance and art. By maintaining this type of post-mortem relationship with Bowie, those posting, tweeting, sharing and circulating his music and artwork create networked performances of themselves as individuals for whose identity work Bowie matters. This ritualisation of Bowie’s immortality, therefore, not only gives Bowie a new identity as imperishable and, thus, invisible individual, but also functions as a social practice to create a sense of belonging and togetherness among like-minded individuals who wish to become connected via digital networks.

As an expression of the culture of connectivity, Bowie’s immortality in digital media follows the logic of quantified popularity. Bowie’s immense popularity during his lifetime accurately
predicted his popularity in death. The significance of Bowie’s death and his value as an immortal (worthy of immortalisation) was, thus, enforced by the digital and economic logic driven by big numbers. In simple terms, the more digital hits and shares associated with a person’s death, the more socially significant the person was during his life. In this sense, Bowie’s immortalisation can be seen as a self-enforcing social activity. Also relevant in this context is Bowie’s own self-promotional role as part of his identity work as an artist and popular cultural icon (cf. Davis, 2013). In his music, art and public life and career, the idea of exceptionality—the push to be something beyond the ordinary—was one of Bowie’s underlining themes. Although rebellious, taboo-breaking and transgressive, Bowie’s exceptionality was also highly produced, manufactured and profitable. His fame arrived in a space shuttle and reached its climax in his final album, Blackstar, full of symbols of his immortality and trans-Earthly experiences (cf. Hesmondhalgh, 2017).

Finally, we must ask, how is the story of Bowie’s immortalisation a story of the deconstruction of immortality, as suggested by Bauman (1992)? Is it not, instead, a massive intensification of immortalisation in the present digital condition? The answer is yes, and it is exactly this escalation of immortalisation that takes us to its deconstruction. As discussed at the beginning of this article, in today’s digital age, the ritual production of immortality is subject to a constant struggle over identity work, recognition, visibility and attention. When everybody has a chance (at least in theory) to make him/herself immortal, there is a danger that no one will achieve this status. In economic terms, immortalisation, as pointed out by Jacobsen and Kearl (2014, p. 304), will become overcrowded and suffer from inflation. This will put pressure on the immortalisation market, which will demand higher input for equal rewards. In death, as in life, popular cultural figures like Bowie must distinguish themselves from the very contemporary tendency to popularise, democratise and, perhaps, banalise immortalisation. The immortalisation rituals of the production of exceptionality and post-mortem relationships can be interpreted against this underlying cultural logic of the digital age. Furthermore, this condition demands ongoing work on behalf of those committed to the ritual. This type of immortality can easily be characterised as deconstructed. It is fluid, profoundly media-saturated and deeply embedded in our present-day networked consumer culture and self-presentation (Bauman, 1997). Watching David Bowie perform on YouTube allows us to tell ourselves that death is only a temporal matter—not only for Bowie, but also for us. It carries a fantasy in which our own immortality is only a click away and can be reached in our online social networks. Who could resist such mighty identity?
References


