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3 "Adapt or Die"

The funeral trade show as a site of institutional anxiety

Luke van Ryn, Bjorn Nansen and Martin Gibbs

Introduction

> Funeral directors shot themselves in the foot over cremation, and cemeteries got splattered with the blood.
>
> (US funeral director)

As a wave of technological innovation washes over the bow of the funeral business, industry conventions and trade shows provide a space for directors to share ideas, for innovators to court gatekeepers and for the broader industry to refine its self-identity. This chapter attempts to understand the tensions between the discourse of "disruptive technology" as practiced by contemporary start-ups, and the funeral industry's self-identity. It positions the industry convention and trade show as a key space where the industry both rehearses anxiety about its future and presents solutions from influencers and pundits.

We draw on participant observation at trade shows in the United States, as well as semi-structured interviews with industry experts from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. These interviews were subject to a discourse analysis in line with the "pragmatic sociology of critique" framework, which focuses on the justifications that social actors give for their actions.

Through attention to the debates that circulate around several technological innovations in the field, we outline the challenge that they bring to the contemporary funeral industry: to replace "dynasty"-style businesses with more meritocratic enterprise, to let go of tradition in favour of consumer preferences and to comply with the demands of and for new technologies. In doing so we contribute to the understanding of the contemporary funeral industry, the troubled introduction of new technologies into a profession, and changes in the ethical drive of contemporary capitalism.

Literature: Innovation in the funeral industry

The economic and social centre of the funeral industry is the funeral home, either independently owned or as part of a larger corporation. Service

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Corporation International is one such multinational firm, which has taken over a number of Australian funeral homes (Cottle & Keys, 2004). Family-owned businesses tend not to vary their practices from one generation to the next (McIlwain, 2005), and the industry is characterised as quite risk averse (Wenzel, 2015; interview with industry consultant; interview with funeral director). George Sanders (2012, p. 269) highlights the ongoing tension between small independent funeral home operators and large corporate funeral conglomerates. As we shall see, these different business models are built on different conceptions of value, and construct different ideas of how capitalism ought to relate to death.

The tension between caring and profit-seeking motives in the funeral industry has long been noted (Mitford, 1963). In response, funeral homes have developed a strong moral discourse around the work that they do. In Sanders's (2012) account, funeral industry workers position themselves as moral entrepreneurs working to preserve an important social benefit. The difficulty of decision-making around death means that funeral directors are a key "cultural intermediary" (Maguire & Matthews, 2012) between new products and consumers (See also Howarth, 1992; Hyland & Morse, 1995; van Ryn et al., 2019). Put differently, funeral directors are often an "obligatory passage point" (Callon, 1986) which the bereaved must negotiate with after the death of a loved one. However, as we shall see, technological threats to this central position are one of the challenges constructed and worked through in the space of the industry convention.

A source of inspiration to many of the speakers, exhibitors and attendees at these industry conventions is the management discourse of "disruptive innovation" or, as it has seeped into culture more generally, "disruption". This discourse originates in the work of Clayton Christensen (1997), who noted that new technologies, while often inferior to "incumbents", nevertheless unseat dominant players by offering lower costs or different values. One of his key examples is hard disk storage (especially the 5.25-inch hard disk: see Danneels, 2004, p. 251), which has now been superseded by cloud storage and software-as-a-service. We see this play out very explicitly in the funeral industry, as online streaming video services such as Tukios overtake the production of physical media on VHS or DVD. In a study of the German funeral industry's response to technological disruption, management scholar Matthias Wenzel (2015) found that funeral directors preferred innovations that did not challenge the industry's underlying assumptions. For example, funeral directors responded to the disruption wrought by the Internet by advertising their homes' reputation, a reaction that was compatible with their existing self-identity (Wenzel, 2015, pp. 280–1). We have elsewhere argued that the funeral industry's attitudes to social media exemplify its selective incorporation of—and resistance to—innovation in other domains (Nansen et al., 2017). While the definition, applicability and predictive value of the theory of disruptive innovation are widely debated (Yu & Hang, 2010), we see below the force of this discourse as a moral and emotional driver at the conventions we attended.

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Methods: The expo as a site for ethnographic research

The research has involved an interdisciplinary team undertaking participant observation at funeral industry conventions held in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom between 2014 and 2016, key informant interviews with representatives of the funeral industry and funeral technology start-ups, as well as analysis of trade publications and products.

As part of our ethnographic fieldwork in the funeral industry, we attended industry conferences and trade expositions in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. These included the 2014 Australian Funeral Expo in Sydney; the 2015 National Funeral Exhibition in Stoneleigh, Warwickshire; and the 2015 and 2016 International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association trade shows in San Antonio and New Orleans respectively. These expos are spaces for displaying and promoting innovation in the death industry; they showcase services and products as their vendors imagine them, but also provide a space of friction where tradition and innovation rub up against each other. At these expos we attended keynote lectures, perused the exhibition hall and spoke to exhibitors and attendees about changes in the industry, technological innovation and the values that underpin work in the contemporary funeral industry. We also convened a roundtable conversation with recognised funeral business leaders on "the future of the industry".

At these trade shows, new products must pass through funeral directors, who have historically operated as gatekeepers, and so they must demonstrate sensitivity to an industry that has historically been resistant to change and that struggles to maintain a balance between care and commerce (Sanders, 2012). These events also provide an opportunity for funeral directors to come together, socialise, support each other, showcase their work and discover the innovations of others. Here, professionals debate privately and in public the opportunities and threats posed by new technologies, social changes and macroeconomic forces. Importantly, these conversations are *performing* possible futures, discursively bringing into being the conditions described (Butler, 2010). For us as academic researchers in this field, the trade shows provide a window onto how funeral directors and entrepreneurs imagine themselves and their future, not only in terms of a local community service but also as part of a global industry.

To interpret the transcripts of interviews and our field notes, we drew on the methods of the pragmatic sociology of critique. This model of sociology concerns itself with the practices of actors in everyday life, and the way that they justify themselves in response to critique (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Importantly, critique is seen as a practice that is available to actors themselves, not researchers alone. This framework has been seen in Pascale Trompette's (2013) study of the French funerary marketplace. Some explanation of the theoretical concerns of this school of thought is appropriate here.

In *On Justification* (2006 [1991]), Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot present an analysis of a large corpus of texts which points to six common

9781138315327_pi-194.indd 39 06-Apr-19 12:24:51 PM

principles by means of which actors justify themselves. These are the *inspired*, *domestic*, *civic*, *fame*, *market* and *industrial* "polities", or "orders of worth" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, pp. 83–123). The *inspired polity* is the world of saints, artists and the insane, who are great when they are "odd, wonderful and emotional". The important techniques in this city are "to dream, to imagine, to rebel" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 370). The domestic city emphasises kinship and tradition. Relevant actors are "chiefs, bosses, or even relatives" and are valued when they are "distinguished, straightforward, faithful" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 370). The city of renown (or fame) contains a model of justice based upon reputation. The chief actors in this city are "stars, opinion leaders, journalists" and are worthy when "famous, recognized, successful, convincing". The market world is a model justice based upon competition between actors, who are deemed worthy when they have become wealthy. The industrial world, in turn, values "experts", and its successful actors are valued when they are "efficient, productive, operational" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 373).

The relative weight accorded to these worlds of justification changes greatly over time, and from place to place. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005b), Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello chart a shift in the driving ethics of capitalism from domestic and market values to industrial and network-based (or "projective") values (p. 24). Capitalism needs an ethical component because it is theoretically insatiable, in contrast with people who are satiable and therefore need some sort of justification for working and consuming more than strictly necessary (7–8). Examples of these ethical drives include the ideas that work is a good in itself (cf. Weber, 2001, p. 26), "consumer activism" or pushing "sharable" content to one's followers (Jodi Dean's "communicative capitalism": Dean, 2005). The most prominent repository of ideas about the spirit of capitalism, they write, is management and self-help literature (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005b, p. 14). In their analysis they discover and outline a seventh, "projective" or "connexionist", city, which is built upon the principles of networking:

> Life is conceived as a series of projects, all the more valuable when different from one another. What is relevant is to be always pursuing some sort of activity, never to be without a project, without ideas, to be always looking forward to, and preparing for, something along with other persons whose encounter is the result of being always driven by the impulse of activity.
>
> (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005a, p. 169)

The benefit of this conceptual approach for the present chapter is that it is able to treat industry and academic sources in the same language, using a single model. Through this "pragmatic sociology of critique" model we are able to account for changes in the funeral industry, the ethical values that drive actors' engagement with the industry and the justificatory repertoires by which our informants critically evaluated themselves and others. As will be seen later in

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this chapter, the experts we encountered often drew on management and self-help discourses to make arguments about the state of the funeral industry, their authority for diagnosing change and the remedies they propose.

Analysis

In the analysis that follows, we present an account of the anxieties that are expressed, constructed and soothed at these industry expos. We begin with the technological innovations that are most often identified as the threat to the industry. We then explore the funeral expo as a space of *problematisation*, in which the industry constructs the challenges facing it, tests norms and evaluates new products. Finally, we cover the changing discourses of justification and *values* that drive the work of funeral professionals, influencers and entrepreneurs.

Disruptive technology

Many of the discussions we had at these expos focussed on technological innovation as a disruptive force in the industry. This disruption was presented both in the negative sense of a threat to the industry's established ways of doing business, and in the positive sense of an opportunity to bring the industry into the future. Keynote speakers challenged directors as individuals to take the risks necessary to adapt and thrive in this new climate. There were many stalls at the expo devoted to incorporating new technological advances into established funeral industry practices and traditions. Virtual reality ~~plot~~ tools for selling plots, drone-mapping of cemeteries and cloud-based memorial and tribute video creation are a few examples. Each of these highlights technologies in search of a use, expanding their reach from one domain into another.

Funeral homes have historically been low-technology spaces. In the arrangement room itself, many funeral homes emphasise working on paper, and shun screens. Directors argue that the sobriety and intimacy of the situation requires as few barriers as possible between the customer and the director, and that desktop, laptop or tablet screen would impose on this relationship (interview with US funeral director). Another funeral home employs a two-stage process, in which the arranger takes notes on paper that are later transcribed into a database, but will gradually shift to a direct entry. In contrast, some funeral homes emphasise the presence of screens as a distinct advantage over analogue arrangements. Brad Rex described in his 2015 keynote how "screen-ful" arrangement rooms allow the funeral home to present many options in an efficient manner, without the clutter of many binders full of product information sheets. This change has led to increasing upsell rates and satisfaction rates among customers of his funeral homes. There was little said about the qualitative changes to the customer experience, however.

Three technologies exemplify this kind of technological innovation: mobile devices (smartphones and tablets), online arrangements and direct cremation.

9781138315327_pi-194.indd 41 06-Apr-19 12:24:51 PM

These innovations threaten the intermediary role of the funeral director in different ways, and each contributed to the discourse of disruption on display at the expos.

Mobile devices

Mobile phones and high-speed wireless Internet are ubiquitous tools that we rely on in ~~general~~ life, and this applies to the funeral industry too. Mobile phones have become the instinctive first stop for asking and answering all questions, even those related to death:

> Even when death occurs, we can think about it differently, but we start right here [on a mobile phone]. We're googling funeral homes, cemeteries . . . we don't even know what we're asking.
>
> (US funeral director)

Word of mouth, as well as online reputation through services like Yelp, becomes more important than traditional public advertisements like billboards:

> Unless your website is already convertible to work on a phone . . . You are going to be missing the generation that makes the decisions.
>
> (US funeral director)

Another attendee emphasised that a strong online presence is an essential part of operating in the contemporary funeral industry:

> However you get positioned on the Web, however you position yourself digitally, that's who you are.
>
> (US funeral director)

This sense of a business identity constituted in branding differs sharply from an older identity bound up in family businesses, heritage and sobriety. In the terms of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), values drawn from the world of fame (e.g. reputation) seem to be taking precedence over domestic values (e.g. patrimony).

A generational shift towards "millennial" consumers (those coming of age since 2000) is also noted among directors and consultants at these expos. Having up-to-date technology is almost a requirement of doing business with millennials:

> A 2 foot by 3 foot poster board is just not acceptable. You've got to have an application that somebody could take an iPhone or an iPad and walk somebody out to the garden, or sit at home and be able to show them a digital 360-degree view of the development area. Without it, you are behind.
>
> (US funeral director)

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This tension was felt in discussions of new technology as a threat to the industry, or, on the contrary, as a distraction from the true business of the funeral industry.

> Technology has to be in service of something. When I hear about the mapping technology, I say: in our company, when somebody comes into a location, we don't send them out on a treasure hunt with a piece of paper or a phone.
>
> (US funeral director)

For this director, the convenience and efficiency of virtual cemetery tours is offset by the lost opportunity to speak to (and sell to) a client face-to-face.

Online arranging

Online arranging is a way of catering to those seeking a low-cost, no-frills funeral. One director who operates an online arrangement service observed that many customers had completed the online checkout process even before phoning the funeral home. This online service now represents 30 per cent of the home's business:

> In reality that there's a segment of the population that doesn't want to talk to a funeral home. They feel more comfortable and less threatened with that power.
>
> (US funeral director)

This online arrangement tool required very little work from the business, but attracted customers who would otherwise not visit the funeral home. There is therefore a paradoxical quality to online technologies: They present efficiencies not only to the funeral director but also the customer who may short-cut the involvement of a funeral director.

The possibility of mainstream online arranging is very real; indeed, one attendee had built such a website.

> Here's a website where you can make a complete funeral on the web, burial, cremation, on your phone. In 25 years, we all know that everybody will be doing it like this. The only question is whether this website is too early.
>
> (US funeral director)

This director described his site as "taking the knife out of your own back", that is: Turning efficient online tools for arrangement into an asset. This phrase is telling for its connotations of treachery.

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Direct cremation

The business of direct cremation—whereby a body is collected from the home or hospital, cremated and returned as cremated remains several weeks later, without the services of a funeral director—is a focus of critical attention from the industry. By historically positioning cremation as a poorer choice, the funeral industry has largely missed out on this market. Online sources and word of mouth have enabled families to choose direct cremation, and organise memorial services or events without a funeral home as an intermediary, although perhaps with the assistance of an event planner (UK celebrant). Informants discussed this challenge not only in terms of missing out on a sale but also in terms of pastoral care: families risk missing out on a meaningful means of remembering their loved one. As one attendee put it:

> We are now in a position where families believe that cremation means that you tuck [the deceased] under your arm and you leave.
>
> (US funeral director)

In conversations about direct cremation, directors often refer to some innate human need for memorialisation. They therefore justify their services not in terms of utility or value but rather in servicing something fundamentally human: an essential rather than optional component of death. Other attendees spoke of their experiences working with clients who had imagined a no-frills cremation, but when offered a memorial service readily accepted. The funeral director spoke of this as a "win-win" situation: The funeral home was able to extract some profit from the situation, and the client experienced a memorial celebration that they may otherwise have missed out on. Here we see very clearly directors working to balance profit-seeking and interpersonal care in the industry, and the compromises between market and civic values. As we will see below, other industry discourses shift their value proposition in the other direction: from services to *experiences*.

Digital technologies offer efficiency and economies of scale for service providers and consumers alike, yet the "race to the bottom" through cutting costs can only be a superficial benefit (US funeral director). For exhibitors at these trade shows, it was important to demonstrate how their offerings benefited directors first and consumers second.

The expo: Where innovation and tradition rub up against each other

The funeral expo is the predominant site for businesses to create and maintain relationships with funeral directors (and funeral homes), which remain—though for how much longer we cannot say—key market intermediaries (Maguire & Matthews, 2012). The decisions made by funeral directors to engage with a new product often determine its success or failure. New

PROOF

businesses attending these expos attempt to lure a traditionally conservative industry to engage with products designed for an increasingly media-savvy generation of consumers and the "death styles" (Davies & Rumble, 2012) they bring with them. We also saw several products on display that potentially unseat the funeral director as a gatekeeper or "obligatory passage point" (Callon, 1986, pp. 205–6)

New products that risk erasing gatekeepers

At these expos we encountered many technologies and businesses with the intentional or accidental potential to disrupt the intermediary role of the funeral director. At the Australian funeral expo, we encountered Funeral Studio, a business that offers funeral directors an automated sales and arrangement tool. This tool allows the bereaved to perform the bulk of the funeral arrangement and memorialisation from their own home, without the physical presence of a funeral professional, in much the same way as contemporary online travel agencies operate. We have also seen sales services like Cemetery360, which allows funeral directors to take potential clients on a virtual tour of any number of cemetery plots. Plotbox is another company offering complete cemetery management software, including 3D mapping, inventory and sales tools. More explicitly than most other companies at these trade shows, Plotbox draws on the contemporary "start-up" aesthetics (*.io* rather than *.com* domain name), business models (funded by venture capital, see "Plotbox" 2016), software-as-a-service architecture (run through "clouds" like Amazon Web Services) and "projective" values of disruptive businesses like Dropbox.

Expertise

Critical to this sense that the Internet is disrupting and reconfiguring the traditional intermediary relationship funeral directors have with customers are key figures who shape this discourse in trade press, online media channels and public presentations. This important new form of expertise in the industry comes from technology evangelists, who simultaneously construct a discourse of threatening new technologies and present themselves as a solution in the form of consultancies and software platforms. FuneralOne is such a service, which offers website design, memorials and video tributes for funeral homes. CEO Joe Joachim gave a keynote lecture at the 2016 International Cemetery, Crematorium and Funeral Association (ICCFA) convention entitled "Adapt or Die", which compared the funeral industry to a cruise ship that is slow to change direction and somewhat lacking in navigation. Disrupt Media, a social media management firm for the funeral industry, was also a strong presence at the convention. CEO and "Lead Disruptor" Ryan Thogmartin covered the convention on a variety of social media platforms: Disrupt Media's own channels, YouTube and the Connecting Directors Facebook page. The

PROOF

updates from these channels frequently offer damning diagnoses of "mainstream" funeral operators and free tips for "beating the competition" as a sample of the company's insights (see, for example, "How Many Owners Are Killing Their Funeral Home's Future").

Many of the pundits giving keynotes at these conventions have come to the funeral industry from other professions, and seek to translate insights from other fields to this one. In this way they potentially undermine the industry's sense of particularity and treat this business like any other. In curating these speakers, industry bodies like the ICCFA value particular forms of expertise over others. In particular, the dynastic, tradition-based family business is challenged to "pivot" to meet contemporary demands of personalisation, flexibility and efficiency.

Big data and algorithmic knowledge exemplified this technological expertise. Many of the data entry and analysis tools on display at the convention promised to streamline paperwork, improve invoicing and help funeral directors make meaning from the data that they collect:

> Our whole thing is about that amazing experience where you type in very little data and you go wow how does it know that? . . . People are amazed when a computer knows stuff about them but then at the same time they don't want computers to know things about them.
>
> (Australian funeral industry innovator)

This entrepreneur's obituary platform generates biographical narratives based upon historical events that occurred during the lifetime of the deceased, with the occasionally ironic effect of describing a "remarkable" life consisting of no more than witnessing events such as the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. This kind of "algorithmic cruelty" (Lambert, Nansen, & Arnold, 2017) is exemplary of the risks of automated innovations in the funeral sphere.

From value to values

A consistent theme throughout the conference keynotes and the roundtable conversation we hosted was a need to connect with consumers around shared *values*. It was here that the need for funeral professionals to *justify themselves* (in terms of both their usefulness as intermediaries and funeral rites as a social good) was clearest. This ethical turn in the industry especially emerges in contrast to direct cremation, which is the least expensive option for bodily disposal in the United States. Given the difficulty of competing with such an efficient and impersonal service in terms of *value for money*, professionals seek to justify their services and expenses in terms of creating "experiences" (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) or building "relationships". In his lecture at the convention Joe Joachim, CEO of FuneralOne, urged his audience to find their reason for working in the field and to use these values to steer their business. This narrative emphasises personal passion and *inspiration* as key to success: In his

PROOF

account, businesses fail when they are impersonal corporations with no sense of purpose.

While new technologies can create efficiencies for funeral home operators, they need to have some larger *meaning* for consumers:

> Do they create something of importance, or do they all just shake n' bake? That is the real question that needs to be addressed with technology.
>
> (US Funeral director)

We see this search for larger values in the growing "green funeral" business, in calls to take risks and find one's passion, with the result that funeral professionals may struggle to keep up with the changing discourses.

Green consumerism on the rise

Several attendees mentioned an increasing concern among their customers and staff for environmental welfare and the role that it played in their business:

> The problem is environmental and ethical in the world today of disposition.
>
> (European funeral industry entrepreneur)

The innovator quoted above positioned his product in a similar way to the ethical branding of agricultural food science more generally: posing (disposing of, or feeding) the billions-strong global population as requiring a single solution, and presenting a particular technology as the single solution to that problem.

This "green" order of worth was prominent both on the expo showroom floor and in our discussions with funeral professionals. The ICCFA convention has for several years conducted a "green funeral" stream, reflecting the importance of *green consumers* (Micheletti, 2003) as a lucrative customer base, *nature* as a rhetorical resource (Thévenot, Moody, & Lafaye, 2000) for the commemorative imaginary, and *environmental sustainability* as a condition of continuing capitalist enterprise on this planet (Peet & Watts, 1996). The US Green Burial Council presented a series of lectures on environmental issues at the 2016 expo in New Orleans. These talks were generally structured around green consumers as a market niche, unorthodox body preparations risking "unwanted surprises", and opportunities for environmental and financial outcomes to complement each other. One director noted that customers are increasingly demanding more textured grasses in his cemeteries, rather than the more homogeneous "manicured" look. These grasses also require much less watering, weeding and maintenance than more traditional grasses, which also helps his company's bottom line. For this director, taking action on environmental sustainability also makes good business sense.

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Reluctance to experiment

A theme across interviews and observations is a tension between existing practices and challenges to the status quo. This appears in frustrated entrepreneurs' accounts of the conservatism of the funeral industry, but also in the "Adapt or Die" discourse of opinion leaders (sarcastically referred to as "thinkfluencers"; see Castaldo, 2016) in the industry.

> Creativity and innovation is making a shitload of mistakes, and design is the ability to select which ones get through to the final take. Funeral directors are not necessarily placed for using their business as test case for innovation.
>
> (Australian funeral industry entrepreneur)

This highlights the tension between "blowing shit up" (Cindy Gallop, ICCFA 2015 keynote) and shepherding consumers through difficult decisions, especially when the luxury of "the good death" is denied (Bloch & Parry, 1982; Bradbury, 1996).

One entrepreneur told us: "I have worked in a variety of industries and have to say that funeral directors are the most stubborn, stuck-in-the-mud bunch I have ever met". In our interviews and observations four main reasons for this conservatism emerged: the "career longevity" of funeral professionals (one funeral home reported an average staff tenure of 20 years); the age of clients; the infrequency of purchases; and the difficulty of decisions surrounding a death (cf. Gentry, Kennedy, Paul, & Hill, 1995).

From adaptation to exhaustion: The pitfalls of flexibility

The changes in what might be termed the spirit of funereal capitalism also make demands upon funeral workers. An important component of the "adapt or die" mentality we have seen constructed at these expos is that professionals are continually educating and training themselves in new technologies, practices and values. One attendee spoke to their difficulty with this ongoing revolution:

> Here we are, trying to slowly but surely embrace the experience economy, and taking our funereal experiences and our cemetery experiences to the next level, and now all of a sudden we're wrapping our arms around this whole next evolution in our economy, which is the connection economy.
>
> (US funeral director)

"Teething pains" are by no means unique to this funeral director. The feeling of trying to keep up with the changing attitude to business and value is symptomatic of larger shifts in the workforce. Employees in a wide array of domains are increasingly encouraged to see themselves as entrepreneurs and

PROOF

to take responsibility for their development and career growth as a series of short-term and flexible projects (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005b, pp. 104–6; Rose, 1999, p. 145).

Conclusion

As technological innovation threatens to upset established businesses and practices in the funeral industry, conventions and expositions are a key site for researching how entrepreneurs, funeral professionals and opinion leaders position themselves in relation to each other. During our visits to these sites, we encounter new products seeking approval from industry gatekeepers, at the same time as we find technologies threatening to circumvent those very intermediaries. We hear a curated array of outside experts performatively address attendees in terms of new economic realities. We see pricing pressures in the funeral market send the industry scrambling for pluralistic values on which to base their offerings to the public. As the funeral business undergoes a critical period of transition, industry research is well positioned to understand the discourses it produces, to itself, about itself.

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