

Suicide, social media and newsroom taboos: How
new media are changing the way suicides are
reported

By

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Abstract

Almost 4,000 Canadians kill themselves annually but few suicides merit news coverage because of long-standing newsroom policies and attitudes. These policies are shaped by recommendations from mental health professionals who say the publicity around one suicide can trigger copycat acts. Social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook provide new venues for journalists to learn about suicides and glean personal details of the deceased. A review of the media coverage of the suicides of Rehtaeh Parsons, Amanda Todd and Jamie Hubley shows that information published on social media influenced how journalists reported on these deaths. Through interviews with journalists and mental health professionals, this thesis examines changing societal attitudes to mental health and suicide and implications for media coverage. It concludes that social media is changing the reporting of suicides and that guidelines meant to influence such reporting remain important to help deter copycat acts, provided they respect journalistic integrity.

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I wandered into the *Toronto Star* newsroom as an awestruck summer student almost 30 years ago. I'm still a little awestruck. The *Star* has given me the opportunity to travel city streets, across borders, indeed around the world, talking to people and telling their stories. I'm grateful.

Most of all, thanks to son David, daughter Alison and my wife Lori, who have tolerated the unpredictable life of a journalist. Too many dinners, days off and other family events have been interrupted by news and they have patiently endured them all. My career as a journalist and recent time as a university student would not have been possible without their support.

Finally, this thesis deals with the topic of suicide and contagion, the idea that publicity around one suicide can serve as a trigger for suicidal thoughts in vulnerable

individuals. As noted, such triggers can include details about the method of death or personal details about the deceased. I am sensitive to such concerns and have attempted to avoid the publication of graphic details that I didn't feel were important to the arguments at hand. That said, the topic of this thesis has inevitably meant that some suicides are described in detail, some graphically, in the pages that follow. If you or someone you know needs assistance, the Distress Centres of Toronto are available to help at 416-408-4357. Additional resources can be found at suicideprevention.ca.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Robin Williams

On 11 August 2014, traditional media outlets in the San Francisco area took to social media to break tragic news: “BREAKING: Gifted comic and actor Robin Williams has died, apparently by suicide, per @MarinSheriff. <http://bit.ly/1mDQf3c> @sfgate,” tweeted *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Henry Lee (Lee “Breaking”).

Minutes later, Lee posted an update: “Robin Williams, 63, last seen alive last night at Tiburon home. Presumed cause of death ‘suicide due to asphyxia’,” (Lee “Robin Williams”). Lee also posted a copy of the news release from the Marin County Sheriff’s Office confirming the news. San Francisco television station KRON tweeted: “BREAKING: Actor Robin Williams dead at 63 in Tiburon home, possible suicide” (KRON).

The death of the high-profile actor, who had suffered from depression, sparked a social media firestorm as media outlets jumped on the story. News of Williams’ death was quickly followed by an outpouring of grief and tributes on Facebook and Twitter as fellow celebrities and fans offered their condolences. Hollywood heavyweights announced their upset and shock. Actor Steve Martin tweeted: “I could not be more stunned by the loss of Robin Williams, mensch, great talent, acting partner, genuine soul” (Martin). On Twitter, Anna Kendrick said, “O Captain! My Captain! Rise up and hear the bells. Rise up, for you the flag is flung, for you the bugle trills” (Kendrick). Several Twitter commentators noted the contrast between Williams’ public comic persona and his private struggle with depression. One example was the tweet from Khushbusundar (khushsundar): “So ironical...a man

who kept us in splits with his sense of comedy was under severe depression...will miss the great #RobinWilliams.”

New York Times journalist Jonathan Mahler would later note how in the minutes after Williams’ death, fans and celebrities created an “electronic scrapbook of his life in real time” with their online tributes:

When beloved celebrities died in an earlier era, we rushed home and gathered around our television sets. Now we stare at our smartphones on the street, reading posts, watching clips, maybe even sharing a memory or emotion of our own. In the age of social media, everyone is an obituary writer (Mahler).

In addition to the social media comments and online news stories about William’s death and his acting, the suicide quickly sparked an online discourse about mental health issues and suicide. Washington radio station WTOP tweeted, “These are medical illnesses ... not character flaws. They must be treated, often very seriously.” *Globe and Mail* health reporter André Picard tweeted, “Depressed? Need help? Here is a list of #suicide prevention resources across Canada” (Picard, “Depressed”). His tweet provided a link to a *CTV News* story that listed contacts for mental health agencies. *USA Today* tweeted, “Suicide kills more Americans per year than homicide, car accidents, AIDS or prostate cancer” (USA Today Health) and linked to a story on the *USA Today* website that examined the issue of suicide and mental illness. The story quoted mental health experts saying that Williams’ death “speaks to the power of psychiatric illness” (Weintraub and Kelly). It noted that an average of 108 people die by suicide each day in the United States and that it yearly claims more lives than murders and car accidents. Yet the theme of the article stressed that suicidal thinking is a temporary state of mind and that the underlying factors, usually mental illness, can be treated. Such content showed the potential

benefits of the social media reaction to Williams' death as the on-line community, including media outlets, engaged in a broader, spontaneous discussion about mental health and illness, depression and suicide and made efforts to reach out to those who may have been left vulnerable by the death.

In the span of just a few hours, the fast-moving story had evolved from news of the death to a flood of reaction and analysis – all on a topic that is not consistently in the public spotlight. The suicides of celebrities, like Williams or grunge rocker Kurt Cobain in 1994, naturally attract media attention because of the high profile and popularity of the deceased. In contrast, almost 4,000 Canadians take their lives every year, according to Statistics Canada.¹ But very few of these deaths make it into the news pages. The research shows this is due to several factors, such as the reluctance of authorities like transit agencies and police forces to provide confirmation of when suicides occur. Another factor is newsroom attitudes and policies that have restricted suicide coverage to only high-profile deaths. This is in part due to the contagion concerns expressed by mental health professionals that the publicity given to one suicide may prompt other vulnerable individuals to take their own lives. Those concerns in turn have led to the creation of guidelines by mental health organizations to help shape media reporting of suicides and mitigate potential risks. The research for this thesis shows that journalists hold a range of attitudes towards the concerns around contagion. Some journalists are unaware of the concerns and the guidelines. Other journalists debate – even dismiss – the science behind some of the contagion research. Yet mental health professionals insist the risk to vulnerable people is real.

¹ Statistics on suicides in Canada compiled by Statistics Canada and available at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/hlth66a-eng.htm>

The concerns are primarily centred on two areas. The first is detailed reporting of the method of the death, which they say can result in copycat deaths. The second is that people reading an account of a suicide may identify with the victim and thus may see suicide as a solution to their own problems (Colman; Hatcher). Concerns about contagion are heightened with the suicide of a celebrity. Such deaths generate the very kind of publicity those in the mental health field say contributes to contagion – the media coverage is high-profile and sustained, leading to days of headlines in newspapers and on television newscasts. Wasserman’s research has pointed to a “significant” relationship between a celebrity suicide and subsequent suicides (Wasserman 434). He attributed this to two potential factors. One was the highly publicized nature of such a death. The second was that celebrities might possess certain social characteristics that cause individuals to identify with them, “and their suicides increase the probability that these individuals commit suicide” (Wasserman 434).

In the wake of Williams’ death, some on social media clearly worried about the contagion effect of the publicity. Samaritans, a suicide prevention organization active in the United Kingdom and Ireland, tweeted: “Very sad to hear about #RobinWilliams. Our thoughts are with his family. Anyone affected by this can contact Samaritans: 08457 909090” (Samaritans, “Very sad”). Mind, a mental health charity operating in England and Wales, tweeted to its 118,000 followers: “We know suicidal feelings can be terrifying, there is support available. Do read and share our info. #RobinWilliams” (Mind). The tweet included a link to the charity’s website where there was a discussion about suicidal feelings and contacts for assistance.

The concerns about potential copycat suicides were dramatically heightened by the revelations made by Lt. Keith Boyd, of the Marin County Sheriff's Office, during a news conference on 12 August 2014 to provide more details about the circumstances of Williams' death. Boyd, who also serves as the assistant chief deputy coroner, described how Williams' personal assistant found the body. Reading first from a prepared statement, Boyd said that Williams was found in a "seated position, unresponsive, and with a belt secured around his neck with the other end of the belt wedged between the closed closet door and door frame" (Boyd). Boyd told how Williams had also been found with other wounds:

The inside of Mr. Williams' left wrist had several acute superficial transverse cuts. A pocket knife with a closed blade was located in close proximity to Mr. Williams. The pocket knife was examined and dry red material was located on the blade which appeared consistent to dried blood (Boyd).

Boyd said the preliminary assessment was that the cause of death was "asphyxia due to hanging." He also said the investigation revealed that Williams had been seeking treatment for depression. Responding to reporters' questions, Boyd repeated his detailed description of how Williams had taken his life.

The news conference received extensive coverage by television networks. In Canada, *CTV* and *CBC* carried it live on their news channels. The networks used their Twitter feeds to publicize the live coverage. The websites of the *Toronto Star* and *canoe.ca*, belonging to Quebecor Inc., embedded the Twitter feed of Megan Hansen, a journalist with the *Marin Independent Journal* newspaper in California, who was present at the news conference. Via Twitter, she provided running commentary on the news conference, including Boyd's description of how Williams had taken his life:

"He was suspended from the belt, which was wedged between the door and the door

frame,” Boyd said (Hansen). Her tweets detailed how Williams was found in the seated position and that his left wrist had several cuts. Other news outlets carried such details as well. Toronto’s *City News* tweeted, “Marin County Sheriff says #RobinWilliams found seated, cut marks on wrist. Found dead with belt around neck, other end of belt in door frame” (City News).

The level of detail made public was deeply worrying to mental health experts, who said such high-profile attention around the celebrity suicide was certain to lead to further suicides. “There will be an increase in suicides because this information – which is essentially how to commit suicide – is now in the public domain associated with Mr. William’s death,” said Dr. Simon Hatcher, a psychiatrist and vice-chair of research in the department of psychiatry at the University of Ottawa (qtd. in Kirkey). Says Ian Colman, associate professor, School of Epidemiology, Public Health and Preventive Medicine at the University of Ottawa, “When a method of suicide is reported, you are more likely to see subsequent suicide attempts using that exact same method that was reported. . . . People don’t need to know” (“personal interview”). At the time this thesis was written, there had not been any study completed examining whether suicide rates had been impacted by Williams’ suicide.

Many took to Twitter to express similar concerns about the amount of detail that was aired by Boyd and the fact that media outlets went public with those facts. U.S. academic Zeynep Tufekci, an assistant professor at the School of Information and Library Science at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, commented on Twitter that much of what was aired from the news conference ran counter to the guidelines for reporting on suicides published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention. “So far most media is doing everything CDC asks not to. Reporting method, presenting suicide as price for brilliance instead of depression” (Tufekci). *Los Angeles Times* reporter Matt Pearce tweeted, “The Robin Williams news conference is the greatest argument against live-tweeting” (Pearce).

1.2. Social media, suicide, contagion and concerns

The hours and days after Williams’ death highlighted the revolution that is transforming communications and underscored again how digital media is turning mainstream media on its head. The explosion of on-line information is changing not only journalistic practice but also the very premise of mainstream media. Media outlets were once the “gatekeepers” of a community’s news and information, thanks to a professional staff of journalists and infrastructure – a newsroom, printing plant, television studio – to distribute their stories, a costly investment that stood as a barrier to others to easily take up the venture. The advent of new communications technology has meant that mainstream media outlets are no longer the sole source of information. Today, a citizen on a street corner can reach the masses with no need for costly infrastructure. With just a smartphone, that person can post comments, photos and video from the scene of breaking news just as quickly as a journalist. “New media technologies challenge one of the most fundamental ‘truths’ in journalism: that the journalist is the one who determines what the public knows about the world” (Rottwilm 13).

Social media employs technology to allow networking through the creation and sharing of user-generated content (Luxton, June and Fairall S195). Sites such as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Tumblr have transformed traditional

methods of communication by allowing the “instantaneous and interactive” sharing of information by individuals, organizations and governments (Luxton et al. S195).

While the various hosting sites have rules in place to control the content of information to some degree, social media is not subject to the same guidelines or editorial rules that dictate the reporting done by mainstream news outlets.

Social media is also transforming the way journalists report on the world around them, from the halls of power to the frontlines of war, from disaster zones to election campaigns. Twitter has been called the most useful tool for journalists since the invention of the telephone (Bell). This digital transformation is also changing how the media cover suicides.

Once a taboo topic for society and journalists (English, “We need”), suicide is now emerging from the shadows with some nudging from social media. Sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube offer reporters new venues to glean information about suicides that had previously been either hard to get or off-limits altogether, making it difficult to tell the stories of such deaths. This is because social media bypasses official channels, such as police, which have been reluctant to provide details about suicides, as will be discussed later in the thesis. Indeed, as noted, social media also bypasses traditional media, which have been the gatekeepers of information to a community. Social media can provide journalists with information such as simple notification that a suicide has occurred to the ability to find friends of the deceased, read suicide notes, even see an individual’s despair detailed in their own words through on-line posts. As a result, social media stands to challenge the institutional barriers and attitudes that have so far discouraged reporting of suicide.

Newsroom values and policies have meant that the reporting of suicides has largely been restricted to public figures who took their lives, people who killed themselves in public or cases of murder-suicide. But sites such as Facebook and Twitter now bring to light the stories of private individuals who have taken their lives – and whose suicides likely would have otherwise remained private. This new availability of information calls into question the validity and relevance of the health profession’s long-standing guidelines, in place for more than two decades,² meant to influence the reporting of suicides by mainstream media and minimize risk. One guide that has found acceptance in Canadian newsrooms is *Mindset*. Produced by the Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma, it is meant as a primer on reporting on mental health, to improve the media’s literacy on the topic, which in turn it is hoped will lead to better reporting and thus help improve societal attitudes and understanding more broadly. It also contains guidelines to assist reporters who are writing on suicides. Written by journalists for journalists, its suggestions are pragmatic and respect journalistic integrity and newsgathering practices. On the day Williams took his life, Picard took to Twitter to remind journalists about the *Mindset* guidelines: “Journos: Covering Robin Williams presser? Review @Mindset_Guide guidelines for writing about #suicide” (Picard, “Journos”). He included a link to the online *Mindset* guidelines.

² In 1989, the U.S.-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention convened a workshop to discuss concerns about media and suicide and develop recommendations for journalists on how they should report suicides to minimize contagion. Other organizations, such as the Canadian Psychiatric Association, have since developed their own guidelines for journalists. Details of the CDC workshop and recommendations can be found here: <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00031539.htm>

Yet while traditional news outlets – newspapers, television and radio stations and their online offerings – are being urged by mental health professionals to show restraint in their reporting of suicides, such as withholding the details of the method of death, that information and more, such as photos of the deceased, can sometimes be found on social media sites. The Law Commission in New Zealand explored the impact of social media as it weighed changes to that country’s legal restrictions against publicizing suicides. It noted that new media and mobile communications were adding to the challenges of trying to control or influence how and when information about a suicide is made public (Law Commission 33), adding that, “social media appears to run unchecked” (36). But the Law Commission also noted the symbiotic relationship that has emerged between mainstream media and social media, with content from one medium spilling into the other. “There is a significant level of ‘convergence’ between mainstream media and new media, with mainstream media using new media as a source of information for its reports and conversely providing links to further information on new media sites” (Law Commission 15).

The fast-moving pace of information on social media carries risks when traditional media try to keep up, especially on sensitive topics such as this one when editorial standards and the health profession guidelines on reporting on suicides can get lost in the haste to publish.

This thesis will examine the guidelines, with the view that some of them are overly prescriptive and out of step with journalistic practice (Lonsdale, “personal interview”). Interviews with journalists confirm research that adherence to the voluntary guidelines is inconsistent (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer; Tatum, Canetto

and Slater), with journalists either unaware of the contagion concerns or unwilling to accept outside influences on their reporting, especially recommendations that fail to consider the professional imperatives that drive a reporter's work habits.

1.3. Research question and methodology

In this thesis, I assess the impact of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter on the coverage of suicides by a number of traditional media outlets in Canada – primarily newspapers but also radio and television. The thesis examined the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*, chosen because they are large circulation newspapers. I also reviewed coverage in the *Ottawa Citizen*, the *Halifax Chronicle Herald* and *Vancouver Sun*, all chosen because of their reporting on individual suicides. I seek to answer several questions: are social media sites changing the way suicides are covered and if so, how? With the onset of the Internet and social networking sites, are the guidelines offered by mental health organizations to influence how suicides are reported still relevant and valid? Finally, what ethical concerns confront journalists in this new era, such as writing about suicide notes that are found on the Internet?

To answer these questions, I undertook research on several fronts. I examined professional practices in four newsrooms and interviewed three journalists for their experiences in covering suicides and their assessments of the impact of the social media age. I also interviewed three editors with experience overseeing coverage and newsroom standards. I interviewed three mental health professionals, chosen for their expertise on suicide, to discuss their perspectives on the theory of contagion and their concerns about media coverage of suicides. This study also draws extensively on

academic literature on the topic of suicide, contagion and the media. I assess how media reporting of suicide has evolved, from historical coverage to contemporary times. Drawing on the archives of the *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail* – chosen because historical copies of these newspapers have been digitized dating back to the late 1800s – I show how the newspapers routinely covered suicides in the early 1900s, giving front-page treatment to graphic stories on suicides. Later in the century, suicide coverage diminished from the pages of both papers as the practice of journalism in general became more professional and sensational reporting of crime and death give way to more objective coverage. In the 1970s, researchers began to theorize about suicide contagion and the impact of media coverage. These findings expressed concern about the publicity given to a suicide, which added to societal pressures to downplay attention to such deaths.

However in recent years, such attitudes have been changing. There is growing encouragement from mental health groups, backed by public awareness campaigns, to openly discuss issues of mental illness and depression. With this change has also come a new openness to discuss suicides, spurred in some cases by the families of those who took their lives, like Ottawa teenagers Jamie Hubley and Daron Richardson. While this thesis is primarily focused on the potential influence of social media on how suicides are reported, it situates this development against a broader – and evolving – discussion of how media report on suicides in contemporary society.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the issues and an overview of the contagion concerns. Chapter 2 examines the research around suicide contagion and the guidelines proposed by mental health groups to influence reporting of suicides in

order to mitigate risk. I assess the guidelines and conclude that while broadly similar in their recommendations, some are overly prescriptive and out of step with journalistic practice. Some journalists argue that the concerns about contagion expressed by mental health professionals have had a chilling effect that has served to keep the issue of suicide in the shadows (Lonsdale). Chapter 3 assesses the historical media coverage of suicides, examines the news values that determine the “newsworthiness” of suicides and reviews contemporary coverage. Chapter 4 examines how a suicide is often a “private death” because of the reluctance of authorities, such as the police, to provide details on such deaths. The chapter then examines how social media is pulling back the curtain on suicides and analyzes several cases of deaths by suicide when social media provided a means for journalists to write about them. Chapter 5 addresses changing societal attitudes to mental health, newsroom attitudes and the potential benefits of writing about suicide and raising public awareness. Chapter 6 reviews the interaction between traditional media and social media. It discusses contemporary newsroom attitudes to reporting on suicides, the influence of social media and what guidelines should be in place to help influence this reporting. The conclusion offers a summary of the findings and makes recommendations to assist journalists as they navigate the changes introduced by social media and the potential impact on suicide coverage.

Chapter 2. Contagion and cautions

2.1. The research on suicide contagion

The concern around suicide contagion – that the publicity around one suicide can act as a trigger for subsequent suicides – has been the subject of extensive study and mental health professionals (Colman; Kutcher; Hatcher) say the evidence points to a real risk that stories about suicide can trigger further deaths. The theory is predicated on the “fundamental” assumption that within society there are vulnerable, suicidal individuals who may be pushed “over the edge” by stories on suicide (Stack). Stories on suicide can plant the idea in the minds of vulnerable people, says Hatcher.

One of the things you see clinically when you see a lot of suicidal people, certainly from their point of view it’s a very sensible thing to do because they’ve run out of options and talking about suicide gives them an option to do something to solve the problem (Hatcher).

While anecdotal fears existed for many decades, sociologist David Phillips says his 1974 study was the first to “systematically and empirically demonstrate that suggestion affects the national level of suicide” (Phillips 341). He called it the “Werther effect,” named after the character in J.W. Von Goethe's 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, who takes his own life in heartbreak over a lost love. Following the book’s publication, there were suicides across Europe that appeared to be inspired by the book. Some of those who died were found dressed in the same manner as Werther or a copy of the book was found at the scene of their death (Pirkis et al., “Media Guidelines”; World Health Organization, “A resource”). Concerned that the book was inspiring others to take their life, authorities banned the book in several jurisdictions, such as Italy (Phillips 340).

In his study, Phillips looked for correlation between suicides and media coverage of suicide. For his evaluation, he compared the number of suicides that occurred nationwide in the United States in the months that a story on suicide appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* against those months when no stories appeared (Phillips 341). In the period 1946-1968, he found there were 33 months with a front-page article on suicide and in 26 of those months, there was an increase in suicides (Phillips 342). He found that suicide levels were “considerably higher than expected in the month of the story and in the month thereafter (Phillips 343). From these findings, Phillips further rationalized that greater publicity given to a suicide led to a bigger increase in imitative behaviour and subsequent deaths. He found that in the month after a suicide story appeared on the front page of the *Times*, suicides rose by an average of 22. But when suicide stories were publicized in both the *Times* as well as the *New York Daily News* – suggesting greater publicity around the event – suicides rose by an average of 51 (Phillips 345).

Phillips’ work was seminal for its conclusion that media reporting on suicides can influence subsequent behaviour by other vulnerable individuals. A decade later, Wasserman would re-assess those conclusions. His research concluded that the contagion effects detailed by Phillips were less than stated as he explored the potential influence of other factors, such as economic conditions, on suicide rates. Wasserman’s work narrowed the scope of suicides likely to cause a copycat effect, finding that only the suicides of celebrities viewed as potential role models caused a subsequent increase in suicides (Wasserman 428).

Despite Wasserman's critique, Phillips' work stood as the foundation for the research that followed that further explored the relationship between media coverage of suicides and a potential contagion effect and in particular, the specific elements of a story that might serve as the catalyst for subsequent suicides. For example, other studies have examined the link between suicides and suicide coverage in television news (Bollen and Phillips); the impact of celebrity suicides (Cheng et al.); and, as discussed below, publicized methods of death (Ji et al.; Liu et al.). While much of that research points to some sort of linkage, factors such as age, gender, the kind of coverage (print vs. broadcast media) and the specific details in a story all introduce important variables that influence the contagion effect. Providing details about the method of death has been identified as especially problematic for fear that it provides vulnerable people with specific instructions on how to act on suicidal instincts (Samaritans, "Media Guidelines" 5). Another area of concern is providing the personal details and life story of the person who committed suicide. If vulnerable people see similarities between their own circumstances and those of the deceased, they too may consider suicide as an acceptable choice (Samaritans, "Leveson Inquiry" 12). Adolescents can be especially vulnerable to contagion. A 2013 study found that teenagers exposed to a student's suicide were more likely to consider suicide themselves, with the younger group, ages 12 and 13, most at risk (Swanson and Colman 875). Significantly, the suicidal thoughts did not depend on personally knowing the deceased; they were equally affected whether or not they knew the person who had taken their life: "Personally knowing the decedent did not predict suicidality outcomes. Thus, perhaps, any exposure to a peer's suicide is relevant,

regardless of the proximity to the decedent” (Colman and Swanson 876). That means the influencing word of a suicide could come from any source – a friend, social media and the mainstream media.

Gould et al. examined 48 suicide clusters in the United States, ranging from three to 11 deaths, along with the resulting media coverage, and compared that to coverage in communities in which there had been a single suicide of a similar-aged youth. The researchers reviewed newspaper coverage in the days between the first and second suicide in the cluster community (Gould et al. 34). The researchers chose the period between 1988 and 1996, before the era of social media. Their review found that the initial suicide in the cluster communities had received more newspaper coverage; the stories were given more prominence, either on the front page or accompanied by a picture, and the stories had more detail about the suicide (Gould et al. 38). This was taken as evidence by the researchers that newspaper coverage of suicide is “significantly” linked with the initiation of suicide clusters (Gould et al. 38). The researchers reiterated the concern highlighted by Swanson and Colman that young people are especially susceptible to suicidal contagion: “repeated, detailed, and explicit reporting on completed suicide might normalise suicide in the eyes of vulnerable young people, reducing their inhibitions against the modelled act” (Gould et al. 40). They cautioned that the causes of suicide are complex and that the influence of media coverage is just one factor: “if publicity around a suicide model does contribute to a suicide death, it invariably does so in concert with many other suicide risk factors” (Gould et al. 41). Still, the research of Gould et al. and Swanson

and Colman provides evidence suggesting journalists need to take extra care in writing about youth suicides.

In Canada, researchers found evidence that the suicide of a prominent Quebec broadcaster had a bearing on the subsequent suicides of other Quebec residents in the weeks after his death. Gaetan Girouard was a well-known and popular television broadcaster who hung himself in January, 1999. Tousignant et al. analyzed the coverage and found 98 stories in print media related to the suicide; half the stories were described as emotional with comments from family and colleagues; 26 articles were accompanied by pictures of family and friends, adding to the emotional impact. Fourteen articles mentioned the method of death; eleven cited a single reason for his death (Tousignant et al. 1921). The authors then looked at suicides in the wake of Girouard's death. In the month following his death, Quebec registered 155 suicides, the most logged in any month in the previous three years and the proportion of hangings rose by 18 per cent (Tousignant et al. 1922). Six suicides by hanging took place in Ste-Foy, the community where Girouard had killed himself, in the 38 days after his death (Tousignant et al. 1922), rapidly outpacing the 19 deaths that had occurred by hanging in the town in the previous three years. Researchers attribute a large number of these additional deaths to Girouard's high-profile suicide and the accompanying media coverage (1922). But Tousignant et al. went beyond the usual study of suicides and statistics and sought concrete evidence as to whether Girouard's death could be definitively linked to the deaths that followed. They analyzed coroner reports for deaths that occurred between 15 January 1999 to 6 February 1999 and there they found evidence that at least 10 suicides were directly influenced by

Girouard's death. These included a 40-year-old woman who had been watching television reports of Girouard's death "non-stop;" an issue of *Journal de Quebec* reporting Girouard's death was found at the site of a 16-year-old male's suicide; a 29-year-old man who had an issue of *Sept Jours* on Girouard's suicide in the garage where he hung himself; and a 54-year-old man who had listened with "keen interest" to the reports on Girouard's death (Tousignant et al. 1923). The study cautions that it was impossible to know whether these people would have taken their lives had Girouard not killed himself. But it is significant that evidence of Girouard's influence was found at several of the suicides. "The evidence indicates that the reports of Girouard's death had produced a high level of distress in these highly vulnerable persons before their suicide" (Tousignant et al. 1923). The authors say that Quebec's chief coroner was moved to write to the news media to request they stop their coverage of Girouard "because he was concerned by its negative impact" (Tousignant et al. 1925). The researchers concluded that while journalists have a right and obligation to report news, they should also "examine their responsibility to weigh the consequences of their reports on the most vulnerable members of our society. In this case, this was a matter of life and death" (Tousignant et al. 1926).

The death of Girouard and its aftermath would seem to offer compelling evidence that media coverage of suicides has some influence on vulnerable individuals. Yet other studies suggest the connection is tenuous and inconclusive. For example, the research into the contagion effect is marked by "conflicting results" and "inconsistent" findings, according to Stack (121). He reviewed 55 studies on the topic done between 1967 and 2001 and found that just over two-thirds of the findings he

analyzed “reported the absence of an imitative effect” (Stack 129). “As narrative reviews, these summaries of the research have not produced objective, quantified statistical data to support their subjective positions” (Stack 129). Pirkis and colleagues elaborated on those findings with a review of suicide-related items appearing in Australian media during the period 1 March 2000 and 28 February 2001 with data on suicides during the same period. Their analysis of the media coverage and the 2,341 suicides found the pattern to be indistinct³ (Pirkis et al., “The Relationship” 2878). However, it did conclude that multiple media reports were problematic (“The Relationship” 2881): “If there is a barrage of reporting on suicide, there is an increased likelihood of vulnerable individuals engaging in ‘copycat’ behaviours” (Pirkis et al., “The Relationship” 2882). It noted there is a need to be “vigilant” in the reporting of suicides, that the coverage should not romanticize or glamourize the act of suicide or provide details of the exact method of death (Pirkis et al., “The Relationship” 2885).

In 2010, Pirkis and Blood expanded an earlier review of research into the media and contagion, examining 97 studies on the topic. Forty-one studies examined the potential relationship between newspaper reports and actual suicidal behaviour and the “vast majority” suggest there is an association between the two, the Pirkis review found (Pirkis and Blood, “Suicide and the news” 3). The authors weighed the association based on the following criteria: consistency, strength, temporality,

³ 39 per cent of media stories were followed by an increase in male suicides, 25 per cent were followed by no change and 36 per cent of the stories were followed by a decrease. Similarly, 31 per cent of media stories were followed by an increase in female suicides, 43 per cent saw no change and 26 per cent were followed by a drop. (Pirkis et al., “The Relationship” 2885)

specificity, coherence (Pirkis and Blood, “Suicide and the news” 2). Their review found that 36 of the 41 studies, which assessed media coverage in the United States, Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Canada, showed “some evidence” that newspaper reports of suicide can have a negative effect (15). They concluded that, “irresponsible presentation of suicide in news and information media can influence copycat acts” (Pirkis and Blood, “Suicide and the news” 33):

The findings of the current review should not be interpreted as a call for censorship of the media: it is acknowledged that the media has a role to play in raising awareness of suicide as a public health issue. Rather the findings should be interpreted as an indication that media presentation of suicide should be done responsibly and balanced against the public’s ‘right to know’ in order to reduce the potential harm confirmed by the evidence (Pirkis and Blood, “Suicide and the news” 33).

Yet the authors also acknowledged the “key criticism” that can undermine much of the research that links media reports and subsequent suicides — many of the ecological studies fail to demonstrate that those who died by suicide had actually seen the media report believed to have caused the copycat act (Pirkis and Blood, “Suicide and” 15). That is partly due to the fact that suicide data is typically presented on a monthly basis, making it difficult to correlate the date of death with the date the media report appeared. While recent studies have used more precise data, many of these suffer the same potential shortfall by being unable to “demonstrate that those who took their lives after the story was presented actually saw the stimulus” (Pirkis and Blood, “Suicide and the news” 15). In other words, the studies cannot definitively conclude that the media report was the trigger for the suicide. This finding echoes an earlier caution from Pirkis et al. (“Media Guidelines”) that there is rarely an

assessment of how audiences, notably those at risk, “interpret, misinterpret, seek out, ignore, or resist media messages; and the context within which mediated information is received and acted upon is relatively unexplored” (Pirkis et al., “Media Guidelines” 83).

Research has shown a more conclusive link in at least one aspect of the media’s coverage of suicides and that is around the method of death. In 1998, a 38-year-old woman in Hong Kong took her life by burning charcoal in a sealed room in her apartment (Liu et al. 248). In the five years after this death, suicide by burning charcoal and other gas poisoning became the second most common method of suicide in Hong Kong⁴ (Liu et al. 250). The authors concluded that the media attention given to this new method of suicide, which was portrayed as a painless way to die, contributed to the increase in subsequent deaths by suicide using this method (Liu et al. 253). Based on this finding, Liu et al. said that “responsible reporting . . . (has) a key role in preventing such tragic deaths” (252). Ji et al. made a similar finding in their research into charcoal burning suicides in Korea after a prominent actor killed himself using this method in 2008. Because of his celebrity status his death was widely covered, along with publicity around the method of suicide (Ji et al. 1175). Suicides by charcoal burning numbered three a month before his death but rose sharply in the weeks after to a peak of 17 in the third week (1175). The authors say that the most relevant factor in the increase in charcoal-burning suicides was the media publicity (1176). As will be discussed in greater detail below, Etzersdorfer and Sonneck say that a change in how Austrian newspapers reported on subway suicide

⁴ Suicide by burning charcoal rose from 16 deaths or 3 per cent of all suicides in 1998 to 276 deaths in Hong Kong or 24 per cent in 2004 (Liu et al. 250).

deaths in Vienna produced a sharp drop in the number of such deaths, suggesting that detailing the method of death has an imitative effect. As noted earlier, Tousignant et al. were able to show that Gaetan Girouard's suicide by hanging was followed by a spate of similar suicides they attributed to the publicity around his death. Such findings highlight why mental health professionals consider media reporting around the method of suicide – particularly a novel method – especially troublesome and dangerous.

New Zealand went one step further than voluntary guidelines and opted for actual legislation to restrict the public release of details of individual suicides that occur in New Zealand. The restriction was first put into place in 1951, in part to respect the coroner's process. In July 2013, the country's Law Commission conducted a review of the law, motivated by concerns that the restrictions were not being observed or enforced and an uncertainty about whether it was even workable. The Law Commission noted the emergence of social media: "Technology has again stolen a march on the law. Social media has completely changed the modes of communication. A restriction that appears to have been framed essentially with mainstream media in mind is now inappropriate" (Law Commission 5). For their part, media in New Zealand complained that the existing ban flew in the face of practices elsewhere, inhibited free speech and that the evidence of contagion did not justify such sweeping restrictions (Hollings 139).

In a 28 March 2014 report titled, "Suicide Reporting," the Law Commission recommended that legal restrictions on the reporting of suicides in New Zealand be relaxed. The report said there was "distinct debate" around the exact circumstances

that can produce a contagion effect (Law Commission 5). However, after weighing the research, the commission concluded that only the evidence around the reporting on the method of death was persuasive enough to warrant legal restrictions (Law Commission 6). Therefore the commission recommended – and the government accepted – narrowed provisions that would only restrict the publishing of the method of suicide. It would also prevent a death being termed a suicide until the coroner has made a formal finding. Tellingly, the commission cited the emergence of social media and the Internet as justification for continuing some form of legal restriction on the public release of suicide details.

Mainstream media reports of a death would frequently draw on content available on social media, including hyperlinking to memorial pages or other social media content. Conversely, mainstream reports of the deaths would be linked or reproduced in social media discussion of a death. (Law Commission 36).

It is apparent that because of the many variables at play in the contagion effect – the details in the story, its placement, the prominence and frequency of the coverage and the characteristics of the audience – not every media item on suicide will prompt copycat deaths. But nor can the contagion effect be dismissed out of hand. Instead, evidence suggests that media should be cautious in how they report suicides.

2.2. Guidelines for journalists reporting on suicide

Though the connection between media coverage and suicide contagion is complex, the concerns have given rise to broad efforts to influence how journalists report on the topic and ensure coverage is “accurate, responsible and ethical,” according to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, “A resource” 5). The WHO says there is evidence that the media play a “significant” role

in suicide and its prevention because of the influence on vulnerable people and the role in educating society about suicide (World Health Organization, “A resource” 5). To help counter the contagion effect, efforts have been made to educate journalists about the possible dangers of suicide stories along with the development of guidelines to shape their coverage. The guidelines produced by organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization and Samaritans uniformly cite past research into contagion as justification for seeking to shape how journalists report on the topic. Indeed, in some countries, such guidelines are often incorporated into a broader suicide prevention strategy, reflecting a view that the media have a role in both reducing the contagion effect as well as shaping public attitudes towards suicide and mental health and reducing stigma. The World Health Organization, for example, has set a global goal of reducing suicides – which now total 800,000 a year worldwide – by 10 per cent by 2020 (World Health Organization, “A global” 7) and sees media guidelines that promote “responsible” reporting of suicide in print, broadcast and social media as a key part of the strategy to achieve that reduction (World Health Organization, “A global” 57). It says inappropriate media practices are those that “gratuitously cover celebrity suicides, report unusual methods of suicide or suicide clusters, show pictures or information about the method used, or normalize suicide as an acceptable response to crisis or adversity” (World Health Organization, “A global” 32). The World Health Organization’s guidelines encourage “caution” in reporting suicide since vulnerable individuals could be swayed by coverage that is “extensive, prominent, sensationalist and/or explicitly describes the method” (World Health Organization, “A resource” 5).

The guidelines produced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explain the rationale for its guidelines with this caution: “risk of additional suicides increases when the story explicitly describes the suicide method, uses dramatic/graphic headlines or images, and repeated/extensive coverage sensationalizes or glamorizes a death” (CDC). But the CDC also notes that covering suicide “carefully . . . can change public misperceptions and correct myths, which can encourage those who are vulnerable or at risk to seek help” (CDC). The guidelines provide journalists with a list of practical do’s and don’ts to avoid simplistic explanations for a suicide, provide readers with information on community resources to access help and avoid sensationalizing the act of suicide.

Samaritans says journalists writing on suicide have to balance the public interest and professional imperatives. “Suicide is a complex topic and presents a distinct set of challenges for the journalists who report on it. They have to balance a range of factors including what is in the public interest and the risk of encouraging imitative behavior” (Samaritans, “Media Guidelines” 5). It says its guidelines were produced following “extensive consultations” with journalists and says they are “in no way intended to limit press freedom” (Samaritans, “Media Guidelines” 5). On its website, it offers journalists broad guidelines for reporting on suicides along with fact sheets for specific media or circumstances, such as broadcast media and reporting on suicides that occur on railways.

Unlike jurisdictions such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States, Canada lacks a national suicide prevention strategy and also lacks a national set of guidelines to shape how suicides are reported. The Canadian Association for Suicide

Prevention (CASP) has set out what it would like to see in a national strategy, including an effort to develop media guidelines on the reporting of suicides, along with training to increase the knowledge and sensitivity of journalists on the topic (CASP 11). The association says a national strategy would seek to “improve the reporting and portrayal of suicidal behavior in all media” (CASP 11). In the absence of guidelines created as part of a national strategy, Canadian journalists in search of guidance can look to guidelines created by several Canadian organizations or look further afield to the advice offered by Samaritans, the World Health Organization or the CDC. The Canadian Psychiatric Association is one association that has stepped into the void, offering guidelines as well as a paper outlining the reasoning for the recommendations. Some of the association’s suggestions echo the recommendations made by other organizations – avoid details of the method of death, don’t use the word “suicide” in a headline, and convey alternatives to suicide, such as treatment (Nepon et al. 3). Yet the association offers some curious advice, such as recommending against “exciting” reporting, the publishing of photos of the deceased and repetitive or “excessive” coverage. The authors do not explain what they deem to be “exciting” reporting. All this dictates that if suicides are going to be reported, stories should be muted, downplayed and wrung free of any compelling detail. Such guidelines suggest they were written without the input of journalists for they run counter to what many reporters would see as the elements necessary to effectively tell a story, to describe the personalities involved and to truly convey the magnitude of the tragedy that is suicide. Picard, of the *Globe and Mail*, is critical of the CPA guidelines, saying they encourage journalists to “sweep uncomfortable details under

the carpet, to dehumanize the dead” (Picard, “Burying the”). The *Globe and Mail* itself is also dismissive of the CPA recommendations, declaring in a 2012 editorial the suggestions are “desperately out of date” and would “effectively shunt suicides to the corner of the cemetery” (Globe and Mail, “Teen suicide”): “Are those who take their own lives any less likely than, say, car accident victims or people with cancer, to have admirable qualities? Should their families and community be denied an accurate portrayal of who they were?” (Globe and Mail, “Teen suicide”).

In 2014, the Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma produced *Mindset*, a guide to assist journalists reporting on mental health issues and suicide. Forum president Cliff Lonsdale called it the “first comprehensive journalist-to-journalist guide to mental health reporting in Canada” and says this guide, “unlike some others,” was written from the perspective of journalists: “We were pressing for better reporting, not to undermine the principles of our craft” (Lonsdale, “Why a journalist’s words”). The guide seeks to improve reporting on mental health issues and break down stigmas. While other guidelines exist, produced by “well-meaning groups,” they often contain recommendations that run counter to journalistic practice. Because of that, Lonsdale says that journalists tend to view all the advice with suspicion: “Journalists read that and think, ‘they don’t know anything about our business’ . . . the result is that pretty good advice gets thrown out with bad advice,” (“personal interview”). Driving the creation of the *Mindset* guide was the concern that until guidelines were developed by the journalism community itself, “not a lot is going to change,” he said. In its introduction, *Mindset* says, “It’s not about self-censorship, or changing the definition of news. It’s about getting the facts right,

exploding myths and placing stories in proper perspective” (Mindset 9). *Mindset*’s chapter on suicide starts with a surprising premise – that suicides should be written about. Noting that some media outlets have newsroom policies to discourage reporting on suicides, *Mindset* baldly states, “this traditional taboo is now out of step with recommended practice” (Mindset 31). Its advice to journalists covering suicide includes the expected: don’t romanticize the act and don’t provide details about the method of death or jump to conclusions about the motivation. It also asks reporters to consider whether the death is newsworthy. But it also offers advice that runs counter to other guidelines. It tells journalists to write about suicide, noting, “the more taboo, the more the myth” (Mindset 31). And it urges journalists to note the suffering of family and survivors left behind to add a human dimension to the loss – and the coverage – that other guidelines suggest is inappropriate and even dangerous.

Pirkis et al. (“Media Guidelines”) assessed the guidelines issued by nine organizations in Australia, New Zealand, United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Hong Kong and Sri Lanka⁵ and noted the recommendations contained many common elements, including (84):

⁵ Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness, by Australia’s Department of Health and Ageing (2004); Suicide and the Media; The Reporting and Portrayal of Suicide in the Media, by New Zealand Ministry of Health (1999); Reporting on Suicide: Recommendations for the Media, by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2001); Media Guidelines, by the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (no date); Media Guidelines: Portrayal of Suicide, by Samaritans (2002); The Media and Suicide: Guidance for Journalists from Journalists, by MediaWise Trust (no date); Suicide and the Media: Recommendations on Suicide Reporting for Media Professionals, by Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Prevention (no date); Suicide Sensitive Journalism Handbook, by Centre for Policy Alternatives (2003); Preventing Suicide; A Resource for Media Professionals, by World Health Organization (2000).

- avoid sensationalizing or glamorizing suicide or giving it “undue” prominence, such as placing stories on newspaper front pages or making it the lead item on radio or television news reports
- avoid providing specific detail about the suicide
- recognize the importance of role models, such as the broad influence of well-known figures such as celebrities
- use a story on suicide to educate the public
- provide help to vulnerable members of the media audience, by noting community resources available to help.

All guidelines except the Canadian example urge journalists to consider the aftermath of a suicide and take into account the emotions of loved ones, who might be vulnerable. Three of the guidelines noted that journalists themselves could be emotionally vulnerable after reporting on a suicide (Pirkis et al., “Media Guidelines” 84).

2.3. Making a difference?

With the establishment of guidelines, the question is whether such efforts have had any influence on the reporting by journalists and correspondingly, the rate and methods of suicide. The work of Etzersdorfer and Sonneck is often cited as evidence that educating journalists and developing guidelines to influence their reporting on suicides can reduce the potential for copycat deaths. After the construction of a subway in Vienna in 1978, the new transit line became an increasingly common way for people to kill themselves, a method of death that was publicized by the local media in a “very dramatic and extensive way” (Etzersdorfer and Sonneck 68).

Concerned that the contagion effect was in fact responsible for the rising death toll, the Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention embarked on a campaign in 1987 to alert journalists to the possible consequences of their reporting. In the wake of that campaign, media reports “changed markedly and immediately” (69) as stories became more “moderate” and some suicides were not reported at all (70). After years of steadily increasing, the number of suicides and attempted suicides on the subway system dropped by 84 per cent after media reporting changed and stayed low for the ensuing years (70). The overall suicide rate in Vienna and the rest of Austria also slightly decreased, suggesting there was a net drop in the number of deaths and that vulnerable citizens had not simply chosen another method to take their life. “From our study, it can be concluded that it is possible to prevent imitative suicides by influencing the reports” (72).

In the United States, adherence to the guidelines appeared mixed in a study by Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer who analyzed reporting in the *New York Times* in 1990, 1995 and 1999. This period bracketed the 1994 release of guidelines to journalists for suicide reporting by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States. The researchers found that the number of stories about suicide went up during years examined and were given greater prominence in the newspaper (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer 1645). Suicide was noted as the cause of the death in the headline about 50 per cent of the time. The motivation for the suicide was suggested in two-thirds of the stories but it tended to be a life event rather than an underlying condition like depression (1646.) The findings prompted the authors to conclude that the 1994 CDC guidelines had not produced any change in how suicides

are covered in the U.S.

Tatum, Canetto and Slater updated that review with their own study that examined the effectiveness of new 2001 CDC guidelines. Their analysis was done on a broader scale by sampling daily regional papers and a national publication, *USA Today*, to assess stories published in 2002-2003. After evaluating 157 stories on suicides, they found: almost half mentioned suicide in the headline; 77 per cent included information on the method of suicide; and, just over half of these provided specific details (Tatum, Canetto and Slater 530). Thirty-nine stories were accompanied by images and of those, 29 were deemed to be “inappropriate” images, either pictures of the deceased or images of grieving friends and family. Only a small number – less than 5 per cent – had information about suicide risk factors and warning signs or listed community resources where a reader could seek help (Tatum, Canetto and Slater 531). From this assessment, the authors concluded that U.S. newspapers were not consistently following the CDC guidelines. (Tatum, Canetto and Slater 530). They said there were some promising elements – few stories were given prominent front-page coverage and fewer than 20 per cent were about celebrity suicides (although this could be the result of fewer celebrity suicides in the period studied rather than conscious editorial decisions). But they also caution that the stories contained troubling elements, such as detailing the methods of death and failing to give readers information about where they could get help (Tatum, Canetto and Slater 530). Because of this, they worried that the newspaper stories in the period studied “permitted vulnerable individuals to easily reproduce the media-reported suicide scenarios” (Tatum, Canetto and Slater 531). However, because there was no

corresponding study of suicide rates, Tatum, Canetto and Slater were unable to say whether this concern became a reality.

In interviews with journalists in 2000, Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer found that many reporters were not aware that their reporting of suicides carried with it the potential for contagion “despite the long history of research on the topic” (1648). In their view, this pointed to the need to better inform journalists of the research. Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer say that for the guidelines to be effective, they have to be accepted by journalists and editors. This requires a “concerted effort to educate journalists about ways they can achieve their goals (writing compelling and newsworthy stories) while at the same time doing a responsible job of promoting public understanding and health” (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer 1645).

That point is also made by Pirkis et al. (“Media Guidelines”), who said that for the guidelines to be effective, they must be delivered into the hands of journalists and editors. But the authors said that typically, the dissemination is a less-than-ideal mass mail-out “with no targeted communication strategy” (“Media Guidelines” 85). As noted by Etzersdorfer and Sonneck, the effort to influence Austrian journalists in their reporting on subway suicides involved education of journalists who zealously defended their freedom and right to report on any issue (Etzersdorfer and Sonneck 71). “Our approach was to inform journalists and leave it up to them and their responsibility to make their own conclusions” (71). Etzersdorfer and Sonneck also found it necessary to “refresh” the education of journalists on the topic. As newsrooms turn over and new journalists are hired, the sensitivity to reporting on suicides can be lost and since it is often the junior reporters assigned to such stories,

they may be unaware of the contagion effects (72).

Yet ignorance is only one reason that some guidelines fail to be effective. Academic evaluations of the guidelines tend to discount another reality – that not all journalists accept there is a link between media coverage and suicides, and therefore ignore suggestions meant to shape their reporting on the topic. *Toronto Star* journalist Rosie Dimanno mocked the notion of contagion as “ridiculous” in a column written about a downtown Toronto apartment building that was the site of several apparent suicides. “Such speak-no-suicide conventions drive mental health issues and the despair that arises further into the closet,” she wrote (Dimanno). In provocative language, she wrote how efforts to deter suicidal individuals will only drive them to find other methods, saying, “All it takes is a chair and a length of rope, or a knife slicing lengthwise – never across – along the wrist or a stroll into the river with rocks in your pocket” (Dimanno). Not surprisingly, her column provoked a reaction from readers. Tim Wall, executive director of the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, accused Dimanno of deliberately seeking to shock. “There is no ‘speak-no-suicide’ convention driving mental health professionals and suicide prevention, in fact it’s just the opposite,” Wall wrote in a letter to the *Toronto Star* (Wall).

Picard is an advocate of sensitive reporting on mental health and suicide but says the evidence behind contagion concerns is “scientifically weak” (Picard, “Burying the”). Yet he says the science is “incontrovertible when it comes to showing that suicide is a symptom of severe, untreated mental illness. Let's stop pretending suicide is something mysterious and shameful” (Picard, “Burying the”). Writing in 2009, he said the guidelines produced by media, doctors' groups and mental-health

organizations, though well-intentioned, are “prudish and counterproductive.” “The seemingly compassionate rules are a convenient excuse for avoiding discussion of (and reporting on) an issue that makes us highly uncomfortable” (Picard, “Burying the”).

Journalists who are sceptical about the notion of contagion are thus resistant to any effort to shape their reporting on the topic, viewing such restrictions, though voluntary and well-intentioned, as an infringement on their professional responsibilities and even a threat to their editorial independence (Crane et al.; Bohanna and Wang; Tully and Elaska). Collings and Kemp interviewed Australian journalists and found most were sceptical of the imitative effects of suicide coverage and argued the real danger was restrictions that made the topic “unapproachable and unspeakable” (Collings and Kemp 246). But even with that scepticism, Collings and Kemp found journalists who conceded potential dangers. Without context and “careful framing,” stories on suicide “might resonate dangerously with vulnerable readers” (Collings and Kemp 245). Thus almost all journalists they interviewed for their research argued against including explicit details about the method of death (245).

Journalist Kathy English, who is the public editor at the *Toronto Star*, responsible for handling readers’ comments and concerns about the newspaper’s coverage, has heard journalists “sneer” at the notion of contagion. “I don’t think we’re qualified to say that’s not the case . . . It sometimes worries me that we’re too apt to just write it off and say ‘well, they just don’t understand journalists so we don’t need to listen to them’” (English, “personal interview”). English’s concern speaks to

the need not only for journalists to listen to the worries around contagion, but equally for those in the mental health field to present the concerns – and the solutions – in a fashion that accounts for journalistic work practices and integrity. Mental health professionals do not seem to fully appreciate how some guidelines run counter to the journalistic professional practices. The job of a journalist is to gather, verify and report facts (Kovach and Rosenstiel, “The elements”). It is ingrained in their work ethic to resist censorship and outside efforts to interfere with their reporting (Norris, Jempson and Bygrave).

So what might appear in the eyes of mental health professionals as an insignificant request to not report facts or to downplay details could in fact be asking journalists to not do their job. For example, a journalist would never simply report that there had been a fatal road accident, devoid of any details of what had actually happened. Rather, the journalist would talk to officials, witnesses, relatives and friends to paint a full picture of the tragedy, the weather and road conditions, the type of vehicles involved, the mechanics of how they collided and personal details of the victims. Kovach and Rosentiel call it the journalism of verification, seeking out facts and verifying facts: “The journalism of verification thus puts a high value on completeness: answering questions that the facts of an event may suggest and attempting to put those facts in complete context so that they can be understood as they happened” (“Blur” 37).

That is the same professional standard that journalists bring to reporting on suicides. Granted, journalists routinely screen their stories, occasionally omitting details out of consideration for taste, internal newsroom guidelines and legal

concerns. But such decisions are never taken lightly. Selena Ross, a reporter formerly with the Halifax *Chronicle Herald* notes, notes that details in stories are fundamental to good journalism: “It shocks me that people would automatically dismiss that. . . . It shows a lack of understanding of the very basics of journalism” (Ross, “personal interview”). Indeed, a reporter is trained to gather facts and put them all before a reader and to resist external influences or restrictions. “As reporters I feel you should be, aside from libel, . . . pretty much be free to report on the facts of things and just put them out there in the world and try to do it well,” Ross says (“personal interview”).

She said reporters are open to hearing the concerns about contagion. But often journalists are simply expected to accept the science around contagion research – and with it the guidelines to shape their writing – with little thought given to how such restrictions will impact their work. That is echoed by others who say ill-conceived guidelines are delivered in a way that erodes the goodwill of journalists (Lonsdale; English). For example, Tatum, Canetto and Slater concluded that journalistic failings are to blame for the fact that the guidelines were not being consistently followed. This can be the result of journalists not being aware of the guidelines. But it also suggests that elements of the guidelines are being ignored because they are at odds with journalistic practice. Such disputed elements include recommendations that discourage using photos of the deceased or interviews with loved ones to convey the sense of loss. Even the advice to omit the method of death puzzles journalists who see such basic facts as essential to their reporting. This illustrates a tension between guidelines, largely meant to downplay news of suicides, and the role of journalists to

tell a story and convey the news. For example, while the guidelines consistently stress that the exact method of suicide should not be included in a story, sometimes it is the unique method of a suicide that makes journalists decide a suicide is newsworthy. Blood, Pirkis and Holland cite the examples of a man who drove his car off a cliff, a woman strapped in a wheelchair found in a river or the case of two sisters who tied themselves together and jumped into a river, all taken from the pages of *The Daily Telegraph*, a newspaper in Sydney, Australia (67). The authors question what journalistic purpose is served by such “explicit” descriptions of the method of death and argue that a “complete” news story could have been told without such detail (67). But they neglect the fact that it was likely the unusual method of suicide that made these deaths a story in the first place.

More challenging for journalists is how to tell the story of a person who took their life but do it in a way that doesn’t glamourize the death or cause others to identify with the deceased, as cautioned against by several guidelines. As Steve Ladurantaye, former media reporter at the *Globe and Mail*, noted in a 2011 story: “Journalists are trained to tell a story through the most compelling means possible – finding human narratives to bring alive abstract themes such as mental health and poverty – and few storylines or questions are as compelling as what drives a young person to take his or her own life” (Ladurantaye). Even Blood, Pirkis and Holland were left to ask: “How should editors, journalists, medical and health professionals and the wider community, define ‘explicit’ in this context?” (66). Arriving at a common answer that can satisfy such a disparate group with perhaps competing interests remains the challenge in how the media handle such sensitive stories.

That's why ensuring the effectiveness of guidelines goes beyond simply how they are disseminated. It's how they are developed. As Norris, Jempson and Bygrave say, there is no shortage of advice for journalists writing on suicide – “the problem is that much of it comes from outside the media industry” (Norris, Jempson and Bygrave). The guidelines seek to influence a group that, by habit, does not seek outside advice on how to do its job: “(Journalists) tend to resent, ignore or overlook the injunctions or admonitions of others and rely entirely upon their instincts and a body of experience built up among their own colleagues” (Norris, Jempson and Bygrave). There's broad consensus (Bohanna and Wang; Crane et al.; World Health Organization, “A global” 35; Collings and Kemp) that guidelines developed in conjunction with reporters and editors are the ones that find greatest acceptance among journalists – and thus are most likely to succeed in influencing suicide coverage. “Media collaborations and participation in the development, dissemination and training of responsible reporting practices are also essential for successfully improving the reporting of suicide and reducing suicide imitation” (World Health Organization, “A global” 35).

As Lonsdale notes, that was the aim behind the development of the Canadian guidelines, *Mindset*. That effort seems to have paid off as the *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail* have publicly endorsed the guide. But ongoing ignorance, skepticism and distrust on the part of both journalists and mental health experts reveals a longstanding gulf between the two worlds that stands as a barrier to further improve reporting on mental health and suicides.

Chapter 3. Gore, news values and ethics.

3.1. Front-page gore -- an historical review of suicide coverage

In the early 20th century, suicides were front-page fare and readers were spared few details. Typical was the story that appeared on the front page of *The Toronto Daily Star* on 20 August 1909 under the headline, “A suicide in Jarvis Street.”

A suicide under peculiar circumstances took place some time during the night at a rooming-house at 52 Jarvis street, when Alfred E. Brown put the barrel of a bull-dog .38-calibre revolver in his mouth and pulled the trigger (The Toronto Daily Star, “A suicide”).

On 28 January 1914, another front-page story told the sad tale of a Toronto man’s attempts to murder his wife and take his own life. Accompanying the story was a picture of the husband and wife and their four children, along with a drawing by a *Star* artist of the couple’s bedroom. The story offered details of the violence and the suspected motive.

Despondent and in ill-health, out of work, and with little prospect of securing any, wearied of the struggle to make both ends meet to support his wife and four children, Robert McCutcheon, a Scotsman, 37 years of age, of 44 Laughton avenue, attempted to murder his wife by slashing her throat with a razor. He then cut his own throat in the bedroom of their home shortly after 7 o’clock this morning. (The Toronto Daily Star, “Out of work”)

Such suicide stories were a staple of the news coverage. “Determined Suicide of Candidate in E. Lambton” was a front-page story in the *Star* that detailed how a banking executive was found in the bank bathroom with “three bullet holes in his head and a revolver in his hand” (The Toronto Daily Star, “Determined suicide”). “Toronto Man Ends His Life Five Weeks After Wedding” told of a 25-year-old man who took his life in Cincinnati, his hands found clasped around a rubber pipe connected to a gas jet (The Toronto Daily Star, “Toronto man”).

Toronto's *Globe* newspaper gave similar profile to suicide attempts that happened around the city and further afield, offering details of the methods – from carbolic acid to an “ounce of laudanum” – and ample speculation around the motivation, from despondency to insanity, financial woes, religious mania, even rainy weather. “Suicide at Whitby Causes Sensation” was typical of the reports of suicides that appeared in the pages of the *Globe* during this era.

William Stone, the father of the young night telegraph operator, Wm. Stone, who was murdered at Whitby Junction station December 10 last, committed suicide last evening by throwing himself across the railway tracks in front of a westbound Grand Trunk freight train. His head was cut off, and his body cut in two. (*Globe*, “Suicide at”).

A 1918 story headlined “New Suicide Method” told how an Ontario man had leapt from an apple tree. “Securing a ladder, he carried it from the village across two fields, placed it against an orchard tree, mounted and jumped into space” (*Globe*, “New Suicide”).

By today's standards, the profile and details of these stories are jarring, even distasteful. But this is how suicides were covered in this period, not only in Toronto but elsewhere too. In the latter part of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century, stories on suicides that occurred locally and accounts of unusual suicides from other locales were the daily fodder of news. The stories spared few details of the deaths, offering graphic descriptions of how a bullet passed through a victim's head, a final leap in front of a train or how a razor blade cut a throat. In 1922, the *Washington Post* headlined a story, “Necklace of dynamite novel suicide method.” It detailed how Italians were “marveling” at the suicide of a man who had fashioned a necklace of dynamite sticks, which he touched off with a cigarette. The neighbours found his

headless body sitting in a chair and his head “had disappeared through a hole in the roof” (Washington Post, “Necklace”).

Today, health experts say that mental illness is present in more than three-quarters of those who take their life (Dalton et al. iv). Historical stories on suicide rarely presented such facts. When it was addressed, any reference to the mental state of the deceased was usually done in a pejorative fashion, portraying the act of suicide as evidence of a character flaw or weak moral fibre. A 1924 story in *The Washington Post* about the suicide of a local tailor expressed puzzlement at his death: “No one of the three principal causes of suicide – ill health, financial trouble, or domestic trouble – could be assigned” (The Washington Post, “Suicide of”).

On 24 June 1932, Britain’s *The Guardian* newspaper reported on the “dreadful suicide by a lady at Tottenham.” It described how a 45-year-old woman was discovered in a house “with her throat cut literally from ear to ear” (The Guardian, “Dreadful suicide”). On 12 November 1921, the newspaper reported on the death of a woman found with her head resting on a pillow in the gas stove and the gas turned on. The story quoted a note found a nearby table, “I cannot stand the pain any longer. Forgive me” (The Guardian, “Suicide by Gas Poisoning.”). Interestingly, eight years later, the same newspaper wrote how gas had “come into vogue” as a method of suicide, jumping from an average of 217 a year in the period 1911-1920 to 1,224 in 1928. The newspaper wrote that an inquiry into the deaths had made an appeal to the press that “undue newspaper publicity with regard to suicides to gas poisoning had tended to promote suicides.” The Council of the Institution of Gas Engineers’ council said the increase was the result of the publicity given to the “lethal

properties of the gas” (The Guardian, “Suicide by Gas.”). This episode reveals that even in this era of very graphic reporting, some voices in the community were concerned that the reporting was inspiring further suicides. Yet such concerns were largely dismissed, even mocked, by editors of the day who blamed “weak-willed human beings” for being vulnerable to what was branded “auto-suggestion” (New York Times, “Imitative Murders”). A 1911 *New York Times* editorial openly derided attempts by doctors to better understand the potential impact of newspaper coverage of suicides on subsequent deaths. It was the newspaper’s view that society, especially its “sane readers,” “should be informed of the violent ending of any of its members.”

The reading of the details of suicides suggests to normal minds their utter folly and cowardliness, not reasons for following their example. Those in whom it would lodge insane suggestions have already shown, by their behavior, that they need the watchful care of friends and physicians. (New York Times “Suicides”).

It was during this time – 1913-1914 – that the *New York Times* placed a record number of suicide stories on its front page, revealing how “even the most conscientious of news organizations may systematically, even intentionally distort the prevalence of a deviant behavior like suicide” (Wasserman, Stack and Reeves 66). The “hyper” coverage of suicides of this period happened in the absence of any increase in actual suicide rates or growing public concern about suicides. Instead, Wasserman, Stack and Reeves speculated that the *Times* may have been acting as a “moral entrepreneur” choosing to crusade on the issue of suicide: “On occasion, the press can act independently of social reality, creating or arousing public interest in social problems” (Wasserman, Stack and Reeves 76). Yet during this era, the *New York Times* made no apologies for its coverage, declaring in 1912 that there was “no

evidence” that people were driven to suicide by what they read in the newspapers (New York Times, “Suicide and Suggestion”). The attitude of the *New York Times* reflected thinking at the time that suicide was the result of the “weak-willed,” “diseased” minds, a criminal act that could be deterred by the bright light of publicity. The paper conceded that stories may provide ideas around the “means or method” but not the deed itself. Indeed, the newspaper boldly declared that the act of publicizing suicides would serve to shame the victims and thus deter further deaths.

And while the newspapers do not cause suicide by giving it publicity, the certainty that they will give it publicity undoubtedly prevents suicides in many, many instances. Suicide, like other crimes, is fostered by the hope and expectation of secrecy (New York Times, “Suicide and Suggestion”).

The sensationalist treatment given to suicides was not unique. In the latter part of the 19th century and early part of the 20th century, a fierce competition for readers gave rise to so-called yellow journalism when tawdry tales of sin, sex and violence were given prominence. It was a “shrieking, gaudy, sensational-loving, devil-may-care kind of journalism” that turned the dramas of everyday life into “cheap melodrama” to be sold by a “howling newsboy” on a street corner (Emery, Emery, Roberts 192). “The ‘yellow press’ was criticized for its obsession with crime, sex, catastrophes, questionable scientific discoveries, gossip and trial by newspaper rather than jury” (Keeler, Brown and Tarpley 49). Newspaper baron Joseph Pulitzer spoke to the tone of the time when he declared that “dramatic accounts” of murders, fires, corruption and other dramas all deserved prominent play in his papers (Pribanic-Smith 271). Said Pulitzer: “There is not a crime . . . there is not a vice which does not live in secrecy. Get these things out in the open, describe them, attack them, ridicule

them in the press, and sooner or later public opinion will sweep them away” (qtd. in Pribanic-Smith 271).

As Kesterton notes in his history of journalism in Canada, newspapers north of the border were not immune from sensational tendencies either. He writes that a “too frequent” failing during this period was the “practice of writing careless libel” by prejudging a court conviction with the overwrought descriptions of a crime and actions of the presumed guilty party (48).

However, in the early 1900s a move was underway to bring greater professionalism to the craft of journalism. Formal university education for journalists began appearing, the first at the University of Missouri in 1908 (Keeler, Brown and Tarpley 49). The style of newswriting changed as well with a new focus on facts, impartiality and ethical newsgathering. The American Society of Newspaper Editors crafted the “Canons of Journalism”⁶ in 1923 that set out defining principles for journalists that included sincerity, truthfulness and accuracy. It also called for fair play, impartiality and decency, noting that papers cannot claim a “high moral purpose” if they provide “incentives to base conduct, such as are to be found in details of crime and vice, publication of which is not demonstrably for the general good.” This code of conduct reflected a broader shift in thinking – that the media, because of its influential role, had a social responsibility to the society it served. This was driven home by the 1947 report of the Hutchins Commission in the United States. Commissioned by *Time* editor-in-chief Henry R. Luce, a panel of mostly academics issued a report titled *A Free and Responsible Press* that set out what they

⁶ Guidelines can be found at <http://ethics.iit.edu/ecodes/node/4457>

viewed as the five requirements for a free and responsible press. These included the need for truthful accounts with proper context, serving as public forums for comment and criticism, a focus on society's goals and values and better representation of cultural groups within society (Keeler, Brown and Tarpley 51). Such tenets spoke to the role of the media as a public service.

Again, that change was seen among Canadian newspapers as their content underwent a transformation to become less partisan and more inoffensive, all with an eye to serve the broadest readership possible. "The effect has been to make newspapers unprovocative, impartial, standardized and 'public service' in their approach" (Kesterton 82). Journalists wrote more objectively in the latter half of the century than they did in the early 1900s, "when treatment was often subjective and emotional" (Kesterton 128). Against this backdrop, suicide coverage in the *Toronto Star* and *Globe* became more restrained. By the middle of the century, the coverage overall had tempered, moving away from breathless, gory accounts of suicides to less detailed stories of where and when suicides had occurred.

These changes unfolded as society's perspective towards suicide was evolving as well. Once seen as a betrayal of church and state, public attitudes to suicide had eased. In the 17th century, suicide had been viewed as a terrible crime; such deaths were even dubbed self-murders. In England, for example, the reaction to suicide was "profoundly hostile" and punishment was "unprecedented and unparalleled in severity" (MacDonald and Murphy 77). The deceased were denied a Christian burial; instead their bodies were tossed in a pit and a wooden stake driven through the corpse. The families of those deemed to have died by suicide were left to suffer the

punishment for the perceived crime as they were stripped of their assets. “The suicide of an adult male could reduce his survivors to pauperism” (MacDonald and Murphy 15). Such condemnation was the product of religious, political and intellectual attitudes of the day (MacDonald and Murphy 16); sermons and religious literature ascribed suicide to the sin of despair, the “very antithesis of Christian hope” (MacDonald and Murphy 31). These attitudes relaxed into the 18th century. Harsh judicial and religious judgments were replaced by leniency and sympathy as classical philosophy and medical science influenced thinking on suicides. “Upper-class laymen came to regard suicide as a rational choice or a medical calamity” (MacDonald and Murphy 109). As well, by the mid-19th century, “much of the discussion of suicide in the United States had moved from the pulpit and the courtroom to medical journals” (Kushner 37). The transformation of suicide from a crime to a disease coincided with the rise of institutional psychiatry, as such deaths were less considered a crime against God or society. By the 20th century, two contradictory explanations emerged for suicide – social reformers blamed the pressures of modern, increasingly urbanized society while psychiatrists said it was the result of an individual disorder (Kushner 61).

These shifting attitudes were in large part facilitated by the daily and weekly newspapers and monthly periodicals of the day. Newspapers stories on suicides brought a secular and sympathetic perspective of such deaths to the population, which served to moderate the harsh attitudes (MacDonald and Murphy 301). “The papers persuaded the English that suicide was a frequent calamity that had social, economic, and psychological causes, rather than supernatural ones” (MacDonald and Murphy

302). Drawing from the posted mortality bills that listed weekly deaths, along with the details that emerged from coroner's inquiries, reporters brought a novelist's touch to their stories on suicide, infusing them with detail and drama to make the accounts "realistic and affecting" (MacDonald and Murphy 315). Such stories had the effect of humanizing an act that had been condemned by church and state. "It was difficult to condemn people who suffered misfortune that might befall anyone and felt the same extremes of love, and hate and despair that the reader did" (316). Still, stigma and misunderstanding lingered, fed by the prominent newspaper coverage in the late 19th century and early 20th century, which gave garish play to reports of suicide. As noted, the *New York Times* and other papers justified their coverage on the grounds that "suicide, like other crimes" was best deterred by the glare of publicity.

In Canada, attempting suicide did indeed remain a crime well into the 20th century. That changed in 1972 when Parliament amended the Criminal Code so that attempting suicide was no longer a criminal offence. Speaking to the change in Parliament on 1 May 1972, Liberal MP Gilles Marceau said the change should have been enacted "many years ago." "People committing such an offence are obviously sick in their minds, and putting them in jail will never offer a solution to their problems. I think anybody will agree on that."⁷ Speaking in the House of Commons on 27 April 1972, New Democrat MP John Gilbert reflected on a similar change to the law made by Great Britain almost a decade earlier. "Now we are taking the same

⁷ House of Commons Debates, 28th Parliament, 4th Session: Vol. 2
http://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC2804_02/850?r=0&s=1

human approach with regard to the problem of attempted suicide and we are placing it more in the field of a medical and social problem rather than a criminal one.”⁸

This legislative change represented a societal shift that had a further influence on how suicides were reported. No longer considered a criminal act but rather the result of a mental illness, it became inappropriate to report on the suicides of private people (Richardson). As a result, media reports of suicides “moved from widespread coverage to a focus on mainly bizarre and sensational deaths or the demise of prominent individuals” (Richardson):

It was the everyday, individual suicide deaths, often committed in private, that became taboo, and this type of coverage dwindled to nearly nil. This shift coincides with a greater acceptance by the medical profession and the general public of the link between suicide and mental illness. As suicide moved from crime to malady, it became inappropriate to report on the suicides of private people (Richardson).

English recalled her early days as a journalist at the Brantford *Expositor* in the late 1970s when editors made it clear the newspaper didn’t cover suicides. She found the same attitude at the *Toronto Sun* several years later when she asked why the newspaper didn’t write about the people who jump in front of the city’s subways. “I remember asking this question when I first came to Toronto . . . then being told ‘oh, we don’t write about jumpers’” (English, “personal interview”). English does not recall a reason being given for that editorial decision, saying, “My sense was that it was something that was just not done.”

⁸ House of Commons Debates, 28th Parliament, 4th Session : Vol. 2
http://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC2804_02/761?r=0&s=1

3.2. News values and ethics

To analyze why and when suicides make news, it is helpful to first answer a more basic question – what is news? What factors determine that an event around the corner or halfway around the world is “newsworthy” and merits coverage? In his 1913 book *Newspaper Writing and Editing*, Willard G. Bleyer defined news as, “anything timely that interests a number of readers, and the best news is that which has the greatest interest for the greatest number” (18). Harcup and O’Neill noted the seemingly murky process that determines what gets printed in the daily newspaper or makes the evening news: “Journalists speak of ‘the news’ as if events select themselves. Further, they speak as if which is the “most significant” news story, and which ‘news angles’ are most salient are divinely inspired” (261).

Yet, journalism is not divinely inspired. Instead, it is a process of selecting a story, reporting, writing and presentation, all of which requires countless judgment calls. The act of choosing what story to report, who to interview, the language used in the story and even where it gets placed in the paper or in the newscast line-up all serve to frame the issue for the reader or viewer (Nesbitt-Larking). Harcup and O’Neill quote Vasterman’s assessment of the news-making process: “News is not out there, journalists do not report news, they produce news. They construct it, they construct facts, they construct statements and they construct a context in which these facts make sense. They reconstruct ‘a’ reality” (265).

Just how journalists construct that reality is the product of their own professional training along with daily work in a newsroom where they are exposed to and participate in those countless choices that determine what makes the news. In

reality, the countless daily decisions that go into journalism are underpinned by what Harcup and O'Neill call "ground rules." "Such ground rules may not be written down or codified by news organisations, but they exist in daily practice and in knowledge gained on the job, albeit mediated by subjectivity on the part of individual journalists" (261). In a 1965 paper, Galtung and Ruge asked the question "how do 'events' become 'news'" (65) and set out their own criteria. These included threshold (the greater the impact, the greater chance it will be noticed); unambiguous (event can be clearly understood); meaningful (meshes with society's frame of reference); unexpected; and continuity (once in the spotlight, an event or issue will tend to stay there) (Galtung and Ruge 65). Galtung and Ruge also noted that events involving high-profile members of the community had a greater likelihood of news coverage. "The more the event concerns elite people, the more probable that it will become a news item." Readers and viewers will also feel a greater connection with news items they can relate to. "The more the event can be seen in personal terms, as due to the action of specific individuals, the more probable that it will become a news item" (Galtung and Ruge 68). Finally, there is a journalistic inclination towards bad news. "The more negative the event in its consequences, the more probable that it will become a news item" (68). This may appear to play into public perceptions that journalists are only on the hunt for bad news. But it also speaks to the nature of journalism. The status quo or the routine progression of a community and its residents are seen as normal and can "pass under-reported because it represents nothing new" (70). In contrast, Galtung and Ruge say that negative news more easily enters the news cycle because it generally happens suddenly, without warning and there is

usually clear agreement that it is news, unlike so-called positive news where not everyone will be in agreement that it is positive or newsworthy. “Negative news is more unexpected than positive news, both in the sense that the events referred to are more rare, and in the sense that they are less predictable” (Galtung and Ruge 70). That is echoed by Hall et al., who say things are newsworthy because they “represent the changefulness, the unpredictability and the conflictful nature of the world” (54).

In identifying the essential elements of journalism, Kovach and Rosentiel say a journalist’s first obligation is to the truth, providing people with “reliable, accurate facts put in a meaningful context.” “The ‘journalistic truth’ is a process that begins with the professional discipline of assembling and verifying facts. Journalists then try to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, subject to further investigation” (Kovach and Rosentiel, “The elements”). They also cite a discipline of verification to “get it right,” independence from those who are being written about and a goal to keep the news interesting and relevant. “Journalism is storytelling with a purpose. . . . Journalists must continually ask what information has the most value to citizens” (Kovach and Rosentiel, “The elements”).

Overlaying these decisions is another important consideration for journalists – the ethics of how they gather and present the news. Plaisance, Skewes and Hanitzsch says that journalists are constantly dealing with ethical issues as they move through the “continuous cascade of decisions that comprise the messy, complicated and often compromising production of news” (1). They say that ethical orientations are important for journalists because they “arguably govern work practices on a daily basis.” The journalists’ ethical choices are driven by individual characteristics along

with the influence of the news organization they work for and the broader society they work within (Plaisance, Skewes and Hanitzsch 3).

Elliott and Ozar note that consequences inevitably flow from the decisions that go into newsmaking: “Journalists make choices that cause emotional, physical, financial, or reputational harm; such harm is built into journalistic function” (10). They said that journalists have an obligation to avoid causing “unjustified harm” (18). This is an important consideration. They argue that because of the social role they fill, journalists have the power to “wreak considerable damage” (18). But they also say that under certain circumstances, it is ethically permitted to cause someone harm (20) but only after careful assessment whether the harm can be justified and whether there is an overall good served by publishing.

Ward relates these ethical considerations to editorial decisions to report on suicides, which he acknowledges can leave journalists open to criticism that they are exploiting a tragedy “to sell the news” (Ward). Yet he argues that suicides are often newsworthy and challenges journalists to “explore the economic and social factors that may help to induce suicidal behaviour” (Ward):

It is the responsibility of journalists to explore the reasons for these disturbing patterns in the fabric of society. Even when suicides are not part of a pattern, there are reasons for reporting them. Journalists should maintain a daily record of events so that uncomfortable topics are discussed publicly (Ward).

Ward says while the “pain of publicity is real,” telling the stories of tragedies is not, by itself, exploitation. Instead, Ward says it depends on how a journalist goes about his or her job of researching and telling the story. In cases of suicide, Ward says that journalists can show sensitivity to the topic if they follow some of the guidelines

that exist to help reporting on suicides (Ward). Says Ward, “Note that the principle behind such coverage is not ‘do no harm.’ The principle is ‘minimize harm’” (Ward).

3.3. The “newsworthiness” of suicide

As noted, “newsworthiness” is the criteria which defines what gets covered by journalists. By most journalistic standards, a life prematurely cut short is “newsworthy” with one significant exception – those who die by suicide. The stories of lives claimed in car crashes or other tragic accidents or die as the result of crime are routinely in the news pages. Yet, the stories of individual suicides are not reported with any regularity. (Pirkis et al., “The Newsworthiness”; Dalton et al.).

Undoubtedly, suicides are private, personal deaths where the grief of those left behind is often compounded by confusion and questions. But giving attention to such deaths is an opportunity to bring uncomfortable, difficult topics to the attention of the community, and with it greater profile to underlying issues such as mental health. But a combination of factors stands as roadblocks to these stories being told. These include the individual biases of journalists, formal newsroom edicts, bureaucratic inertia and the concerns around suicide contagion, which has had a chilling effect on suicide coverage.

The reluctance to report on suicides can start with journalists themselves, who sometimes believe such deaths are, by themselves, not newsworthy (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer 1649). This could stem from the fact that reporters are uneasy with the topic, viewing such deaths as private and that any coverage would be an intrusion into a personal time of grief (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer 1649).

“Journalists continually face conflicts between their desire to avoid voyeurism and

the public's 'need to know'" (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer 1949). Yet as previously noted, there are certain types of suicides that are routinely deemed newsworthy: those that occur in a public place; involve a public person, such as a celebrity or politician; and murder-suicides, which are typically covered as crime stories (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer 1649). Even here, the act of murder is seen as justification to allow a private space, like a home, to be treated as if it were the public sphere (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer 1653). Pirkis et al. ("The Newsworthiness") add a fourth category of suicide that often is often given coverage – those deaths that are seen as the result of incompetence on the part of authorities or organizations, such as lack of resources in the mental health sector or lack of supervision in jails (Pirkis et al., "The Newsworthiness" 280).

Despite their unease around such deaths, journalists' "feel obliged" to cover suicides that involve celebrities or those that happen in public places with witnesses (Jamieson et al. 1949). There is another factor at play that helps thrust these particular suicides into the public spotlight. Because of the nature of these deaths, they are more likely to be confirmed by authorities, unlike the vast majority of suicides which happen in private, to everyday people: "Reporters learn of an act of suicide when a public person commits the act or when the act itself takes place in a public place and as a result attracts police attention" (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer 1648). This is a significant factor. While suicide deaths are reported to coroners and such statistical data is available to journalists in official reports, learning about individual suicides when they happen is difficult. That's because without witnesses or official confirmation, journalists remain in the dark about the majority of suicides in a

community. In Ontario, for instance, the coroner has a mandate to investigate deaths that happen “suddenly and unexpectedly,”⁹ which includes almost all suicides. That investigation results in a report that details the circumstances of the death but in Ontario, such reports are shared only with immediate family members of the deceased and never made public because of the sensitivity of the personal information. That contrasts with the process in Quebec, where coroner reports are public documents. While the police will confirm deaths of a criminal nature, such as murder, and accidental deaths, such as car accidents or drowning, a suicide that has occurred in private will often remain just that – private, unless other circumstances compel authorities to provide confirmation. For example, Ottawa media outlets reported on 25 September 2014 that police were investigating the death of a man found in a third floor apartment in the city (Yogaretnam and Hurley; Schnurr). He was found “handcuffed to a heating vent, with his feet duct-taped together and a bag over his head” (Yogaretnam and Hurley). According to media reports that day, police had initially classed the death as suspicious. A day later though, the Ottawa Police Service issued a two-sentence news release advising that foul play was no longer suspected and “as such, the victim will not be identified” (Ottawa Police Service). No official explanation was offered for the death, whether it might have been the result of a suicide or natural causes, or why the police suddenly stopped talking about it. However the phrase “no foul play suspected” has become a euphemism for a death by suicide. In July 2014, the bodies of a man and his two sons were found in a burning car near Barrie, Ont. While it appeared to be a murder-suicide, the Ontario Provincial

⁹ Ontario Coroners Act. http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90c37_e.htm#BK19

Police refused to offer details about what may have happened, including a cause of death for the victims. “We’re satisfied that the person responsible for the other two deaths perished in the vehicle as well,” OPP Sgt. Peter Leon told the *Toronto Star* (Gerster). Yet other police forces said they would have no difficulty releasing the cause of death in such circumstances (Gerster). This inconsistent approach underscores one challenge facing journalists attempting to write more on suicides.

Reinforcing the reluctance to cover suicides are the newsroom policies of news organizations that provide advice to their journalists on ethical issues, such as their involvement in political activities, how to avoid conflicts of interest and guidance for handling sensitive stories, including suicides. It was not clear from the research for this thesis – through the interviews and literature review – whether the contagion concerns raised by mental health groups and their guidelines – had a direct bearing on how various newsroom policy guides were developed with respect to the issue of suicide coverage. But it is clear that newsroom policies reviewed for this research echoed the sentiments offered by mental health professionals by preaching a cautious approach to reporting on suicides, with a few even advising against any coverage at all unless compelling circumstances dictate otherwise. For example, the *Toronto Star*’s Newsroom Policy and Journalistic Standards Guide advises: “The Star generally does not report that a death was a suicide unless there is some overriding public interest in doing so. Suicide stories must be discussed with the managing editor (ME), or ME designate, before publication” (Toronto Star, “Newsroom Policy”). The *CBC/Radio-Canada*’s Journalistic Standards and Practices says, “We are sensitive in our handling of suicides, suicide attempts and desperate acts. In particular, we avoid

describing the act in detail or illustrating the method, and we consider the risk of glorifying this behaviour or of influencing vulnerable people” (CBC/Radio-Canada). *The Daily Press* in Newport, Virginia, advises its journalists: “We generally do not cover suicides unless the identity of the victim or the circumstances of the death thrust the event into public attention” (Norris, Jempson and Bygrave). *The Dallas Morning News* urges a similar approach: “Discuss with your editor whether we should report suicides, which we would do normally only if it involved a public figure or public suicide” (Norris, Jempson and Bygrave).

Deciding what is “news” is a subjective judgment that rests largely on the professional opinions of reporters and editors but is also influenced by the newsroom guidelines of the media outlet. But as will be discussed, such decisions are also shaped by the broader views of the community and the editorial attitudes behind such decisions do change over time to reflect values and concerns of the day.

3.4. Emerging from the shadows -- contemporary reporting of suicides

In 2013, Canadian media reported on the death by suicide of a Hamilton police officer who shot himself in a police station locker room; the deaths of an elderly couple, who jumped from the balcony of their Toronto apartment; and a spate of suicides by members of the Canadian Armed Forces, which put the spotlight on their military service abroad and the mental health services available to those in uniform. Journalists and editors (English; Lonsdale) and mental health professionals (Kutcher; Colman) say these types of stories underscore the media’s increasing willingness to write on suicides. Indeed, this coverage followed on the extensive profile that the media gave to the deaths of three former National Hockey League

players in 2011. In the span of just a few months, Rick Rypien and Wade Belak died of what were officially labeled “sudden deaths” and Derek Boogaard died of an accidental overdose. The deaths, which received widespread coverage, notably among sports columnists, stirred “debate over the role of fighting in hockey, the stress placed on enforcers and the possible impact of brain trauma on the men who absorb the sports’ biggest beatings” (Branch).

Steve Ladurantaye, then media reporter for the *Globe and Mail*, reflected on what he saw as a greater willingness by the media to write on suicides in a 2011 story titled, “How a journalistic taboo met its end.” He wrote that journalists were “taking their cue” from advocates seeking to bolster suicide awareness (Ladurantaye). He cited the decision in 2010 by the *Ottawa Citizen* to look at the sudden deaths of two teens in Perth, Ont. Journalists at the newspaper had spotted the obituaries for two teenagers from the same school who had died just days apart and decided to make inquiries. That assignment led to a powerful story by reporter Chris Cobb about the death of Jesse Graham, a friendly teen, loved by friends and family, who hanged himself in the basement of his home. This was the opening of Cobb’s story:

Everybody liked Jess Graham
Easy with a smile, he was a prankster, a joker and a music lover with a taste so eclectic it stretched from hip hop to the geezer bands in his dad’s record collection.
He made friends easily and was unwaveringly loyal to those close to him....
But behind the happy façade, he battled ferocious demons. He fought them alone – only he would have known for how long – until the early hours of Friday, June 18, when the demons won. (Cobb, “A young life”):

The story went against the recommendations of mental health groups on suicide reporting. For example, it was rich with details about Graham’s life, telling the story of his personality, his part-time job, his time at school, all provided by

friends and family. It was empathetic, giving readers a glimpse of the young man who ended his life tragically and the sorrow that the death left in its wake. It told readers exactly how he took his life. But Cobb also used the story to explain the common signs of depression and possible suicidal indicators. It pointed readers to agencies that offered help.

Cobb had approached both families about telling the story of their deceased sons. Only the Grahams agreed, with the hope that by speaking out, their story might help other families avoid a similar tragedy. Just days after Jesse's death, Cobb visited the parents to hear the story. "It would be the most difficult interview I have ever done. I can't imagine ever doing a more difficult one . . . They were very raw and I felt an enormous weight of responsibility," Cobb said ("personal interview"). The parents shared with Cobb their son's last text messages, photographs, even his suicide note, elements that all found their way into his story. At the time he wrote the story, Cobb said he was not aware of the mental health guidelines on suicide reporting. Yet Cobb says he was guided by his own principles and guidelines in writing the story. He echoes other journalists (Ward) when he speaks about the imperative to minimize harm when writing on sensitive topics, such as suicide.

For me, we all operate with a set of ethical guidelines. And one of those ethical guidelines is to minimize harm. You tell the story but it's this balance between truth-telling, if you will, and minimizing harm. You don't go out of your way to harm people unnecessarily. To me, if we operate by those guidelines I don't think we need any other guidelines (Cobb, "personal interview").

Cobb says the Graham story opened the door for the stories of suicides in the Ottawa area that were to follow, such as Daron Richardson (2010) and Jamie Hubley (2011) that further broke down a long-standing aversion to reporting on suicides.

These young people died by suicide and potential contributing factors to their deaths – such as cyberbullying and bullying in school – played out on social media and traditional media. Gerry Nott, editor-in-chief of the *Citizen* at the time, justified the coverage, saying that unless the deaths were written about, contributing factors would not be addressed by the mental health system or other agencies (Ladurantaye). “With such a significant number of deaths in terms of young people, if this were anything but suicide, we’d write about it incessantly,” Nott said (Ladurantaye). Cobb’s 2,800-word story on Graham is a good example of how compelling journalism can also serve a public service role by drawing readers into a tragic tale and then pointing them to community resources to avoid similar tragedies in the future. Cobb said the story sparked a reaction from grateful readers.

I got all kinds of emails from people across the country saying how much they appreciated the story, mostly from people whose children had committed suicide. One guy who wrote . . . said how he wished he had had the courage to do what this family did, speak about it (Cobb, “personal interview”).

As Samaritans notes, a “sensitive piece that explores the emotional devastation of a suicide on family and friends may prompt people with suicidal thoughts to reconsider or to seek help” (Samaritans, “Media Guidelines” 8). Such coverage can also help reduce the “taboo around talking about suicidal feelings as well as challenging stigma” (Samaritans, “Media Guidelines” 5).

In the fall of 2013, the Canadian Armed Forces was hit by a spate of suicides by soldiers. These deaths put a spotlight on operational stress injuries suffered by uniformed personnel during their service abroad, notably in Afghanistan, and they provoked questions about the level of mental health services provided by the military to its soldiers. The deaths attracted the attention of local and national media. A *CTV*

News report told of one soldier's "intentional final desperate act," describing how retired Cpl. Leona MacEachern drove her car into the path of an oncoming truck (CTV). Her husband Tom MacEachern later put out a statement acknowledging that her death was not a road accident but an act of suicide. The armed forces veteran had been suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and had been unable to get help, he said.

We would like to say that Leona had slipped through the cracks in the system but, in fact, there does not seem to be a system. . . . PTSD has reached epidemic proportions. In receiving condolences from her military family across the nation and in Afghanistan we have learned of many more members who have sought this solution and gone unreported or having been misclassified. (MacEachern)

The public spotlight on the military deaths wasn't widely applauded. In December, 2013, the Canadian Alliance for Mental Illness and Mental Health (CAMIMH) issued a statement urging caution about how suicides are discussed by society and the media:

CAMIMH reminds all Canadians that it is incumbent on all of us to be vigilant in how we approach and speak about suicide as more than half of the people with mental health problems unfortunately feel too ashamed to seek treatment. . . . CAMIMH also encourages the media, who play an important role in reporting the tragedy of suicides, to consider carefully how they report on suicides. The quality of reporting over the last two weeks has been inconsistent.

Gen. Tom Lawson, the chief of defence staff, said he feared the attention around military deaths had "brought a slight honour" to the act of suicide (Berthiaume). The military's surgeon-general, Brig.-Gen. Jean-Robert Bernier, speculated that media coverage of the military deaths might have caused suicide contagion (Brewster). But MacEachern's death and the other suicides put the state of mental health services for military personnel and veterans front and centre as the

federal government faced questions from opposition MPs about inadequate support systems.

During that same time, two other prominent suicides hit the news. In December, 2013, Staff Sgt. Ian Matthews of the Hamilton Police Service killed himself in the locker room at police headquarters. That same month, Christopher Peloso disappeared. He was the husband of George Smitherman, who was well-known as a former deputy premier of Ontario and a Toronto mayoralty candidate. Smitherman issued a statement via Twitter to reveal that Peloso had been found dead after a police search: “We will celebrate his life and we will find comfort somehow in knowing that he has found peace from the depression that has wreaked havoc on his mind” (Clarke). In his eulogy, Smitherman used the tragedy to urge an end to the stigma around mental health and encourage others to get help: “We will not be afraid, in Christopher’s name, to tell his story and to tell our story ... A man took his life because the pain in his brain was unrelenting” (Morrow).

National Post reporter Tom Blackwell noted how the deaths of both Peloso and Matthews became “very public matters,” a change from the days when suicide was not discussed (Blackwell):

But that restrained approach has slipped in recent years, with frequently unbridled coverage of suicidal behaviour linked to issues from Internet bullying to post-traumatic stress. Politicians, family members of victims and sometimes even police have also openly discussed cases that might have remained in the shadows before (Blackwell).

Blackwell was critical of the coverage of Matthews’ death, saying the media violated many of the guidelines by detailing the method of his death, offering glowing testimonials about the officer, publishing his picture and suggesting that the suicide

defied explanation (Blackwell). But this death, and other suicides by police officers, did spark extensive coverage by media outlets that examined the stresses endured by first responders and whether this made them more vulnerable to mental illnesses like depression. Newspapers such as the *Toronto Star* wrote editorials urging more attention be paid to the issue. The deaths of Matthews and Peloso had the effect of sparking a public conversation about mental health, including within the police service the officer had once served. “We are engaging in the dialogue of suicide,” Hamilton Police Chief Glenn De Caire said a month after Matthews’ death (Clairmont).

English, of the *Toronto Star*, said the reluctance to report on suicides is gradually falling away, being replaced with the view that in addition to the public and high-profile suicides that have historically warranted coverage, other suicides deserve profile too: “There is much to be communicated by reporting on the suicides of ordinary people who are struggling with mental health issues” (English, “personal interview”).

In February, 2013, the *Toronto Star* carried a powerful three-part series¹⁰ by writer Don Gillmor, who used the suicide of his brother to explore the tragedy of suicide in today’s society with a focus on why baby boomers in particular are taking their lives. It examined the motivations and mindsets of those died and those who had attempted suicide but survived. The stories, which won a National Newspaper Award in the long feature category, were an insightful and in-depth look at the research around suicide and an examination of those who attempt it. “Suicide has been with us

¹⁰ “Losing David” by Don Gillmor. *Toronto Star*.
http://www.thestar.com/news/swarm_features_blog/2014/05/losing_david.html

for millennia, the incomprehensible act that is both individual and social. . . . It remains mysterious and debilitating for those who surround every suicide and ask the question: What made him/her do it?" (Gillmor).

Yet so often that is a question families struggle with in private since the majority of suicides go unreported. Those deaths that do get reported by the media, like the cases cited above, tend to fit into the news criteria previously outlined – they either involve public figures, the method of death is unusual or like suicides among police officers and military personnel, they raise broader questions of institutional failings. Certainly, the profile given to the sudden deaths of N.H.L. players fit these criteria, even in the absence of official confirmation of a suicide. But many other suicides are not reported by the media at all – even when they arguably fit the news values criteria. For example, between 1998 and 2013, there were 221 suicides and 147 attempted suicides on the subway system in Toronto.¹¹ In 2009, each suicide produced, on average, a 75-minute delay in the subway service.¹² Suicides in the subway are a public death, usually with witnesses; they result in the shutdown of the subway, disrupting travel for thousands of commuters, many of whom may naturally turn to the media to learn the problem that snarled their commute. Subway suicides would fit the criteria as newsworthy and thus merit media coverage (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer; Etzersdorfer and Sonneck). Yet a search of the *Factiva* database shows that only four of the 368 suicides and attempts during this period were covered by the *Toronto Star*. Two of these were murder-suicides when parents

¹¹ 1998-2007 statistics from www.ttc.ca. 2008-2013 data from Freedom of Information request filed with Toronto Transit Commission by author.

¹² Report titled Subway Suicide Prevention prepared for the 17 February 2010 meeting of the Toronto Transit Commission.

holding young children jumped in front of a train. One of those stories explained that the *Star* “does not normally report suicides but is covering the incident because it was also a murder (Nuttall-Smith and Shephard).

Subway suicides were not ignored completely. During this time, there were stories in the newspaper about the suicide prevention efforts by the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) and the impact of suicides on subway drivers. In 2001, the *Star* reported how an all-news radio station broke a “long-held, unwritten agreement among media” when it told listeners that a suicide was the reason for a subway shutdown (Dunphy). The story quoted the radio station manager saying that commuters “have the right to know why they are going to be an hour late for their morning meetings” (Dunphy). But such stories were and remain the exception, as the *Star* explained in a 2009 story it did on the overall number of subway suicides: “The *Star* does not report that a death was suicide unless there is an overriding public interest in doing so, and unless the person involved is otherwise newsworthy” (Kennedy). The TTC, which operates the subways in Toronto, is sensitive to the concerns over copycat acts and cited that as the reason for denying the request of a local media outlet for data on suicides and attempts between 1998-2007. While the data was eventually released, the transit agency said it would maintain its policy of not publicizing suicides: “The TTC will continue its protocol of not communicating suicide incidents to the media when they occur” (Toronto Transit Commission).

The Toronto experience is not unique. News reports on suicide remain the exception rather than the rule. Pirkis et al. noted that of the 2,341 suicides that occurred in Australia between 1 March 2000 and 28 February 2001, just 19 or 1 per

cent, were reported in the media (“The Newsworthiness” 279): “It would appear that journalists, editors, and producers weigh up newsworthiness and/or public interest against other factors, and do elect to report on selected suicides. . . the fact that this number is small . . . suggests that such decisions are not made lightly” (Pirkis et al., “The Newsworthiness” 281).

The news values of media outlets are influenced by the values, tastes and interests of the communities they serve. That is apparent in how the coverage of suicides has evolved over the years, shifting as social attitudes towards suicide have evolved on the topic. But news organizations are not simply passive conduits. They can lead change and shape public opinion through their editorial decisions and the issues they decide to give profile to. Newspapers, for example, can use their news and editorial pages to advocate on community issues, providing a spotlight of attention that can lead to change. That is happening now to some extent on the issue of mental health where media outlets in Canada are doing more on the topic and thus encouraging discussions within the community.

Chapter 4. Case studies

4.1. Social media – pieces of a puzzle

A suicide is often a hidden death, receiving little attention in the mainstream media. As discussed, this is the result of societal and institutional biases that have discouraged such reporting. But it is also the result of practical barriers that keep information on suicide victims from journalists. In Toronto, for example, two-thirds of suicides happen in the individual's home (Dalton et al. 35). Without notification from authorities, journalists are in the dark about such deaths. But even if a reporter gets word of a suicide, he or she faces another barrier – the challenge of reaching out to family and friends to learn more about the deceased, their life and possible reasons behind the suicide. Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer found that reporters are more likely to cover a suicide if it can be developed into a “compelling narrative” (1653), which is true of many stories. Key to this narrative, they say, is “access to persons who can serve as sources of information about the victim, photographs of the victim or place of death, and salient trends or story lines that increase the relevance of the death to the news audience” (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer 1653). As the examples in this chapter will illustrate, social media can now provide all this. Facebook can offer details and photos of the deceased and provide a way for a journalist to connect with friends and family. Postings on blog sites, Twitter and Facebook can provide some insight into a person's state of mind and help a journalist craft the narrative. Journalists can even use social media to quote the deceased themselves using past on-line posts.

4.2. Jamie Hubley

On 16 October 2011, the *Ottawa Citizen* carried a brief, 132-word item on page B2 reporting that Jamie Hubley, the son of Ottawa city councillor Allan Hubley, had “died suddenly” (*Ottawa Citizen*). The following day, *Citizen* reporter Matthew Pearson went in for his regular Sunday shift and was given the task of finding out more about the teen’s death. He quickly found Hubley’s Facebook page and soon after, his account on Tumblr, a social media blogging site. It was from these pages that Pearson picked up clues about Hubley’s life; that he was gay and had been bullied. Hubley’s postings on Tumblr showed images of self-harm, men kissing, clothing and celebrities.

It was unlike anything I had ever seen. There were like images of self-harm – not of his own – mixed with images of him seeming very happy, images of men kissing, and sort of the language around all of those things. Very soon I realized, if not looked at with a gentle lens, this could be made out to be something that is just not (Pearson, “personal interview”).

The reporter stayed in touch with the assignment editor throughout the day and was aware of ongoing discussions among senior editors about the story. As Gerry Nott, the former editor of the *Citizen*, would later say, to not write about Hubley’s suicide would have been an abdication of the newspaper’s duty to the community: “We have a responsibility, if you believe in some of the great tenets of journalism, to question ‘why?’,” Nott said. (Pearson, “Jamie then and now”).

Pearson wrote a 1,200-word story that appeared on the front page of the *Citizen* on 17 October 2014. It began, “Jamie Hubley documented the final month of his life in heartbreaking and painful detail” (Pearson, “A teen’s”). As the opening sentence suggests, by drawing on social media, Pearson was able to paint a sad and

moving portrait of Hubley, his personality, his struggles and the despair that marked his final weeks. The story noted that Hubley had a personal YouTube channel, where he had posted videos of himself singing. It quoted from posts on Tumblr that gave insight into the teen's state of mind. "I hate being the only open gay guy in my school . . . it f---ing sucks. I really want to end it," Hubley wrote (Pearson, "A teen's"). Pearson sought to put some context around the conflicted postings on Tumblr, writing in the story, "There's a stark disconnect between the heaviness of the words and emotions expressed and the relative lightness of the pictures and what they suggest about a young man figuring out, accepting and perhaps celebrating his own sexuality" (Pearson, "A teen's"). The story quotes Hubley's final post: "Im tired of life really. Its so hard, Im sorry, I cant take it anymore" (Pearson, "A teen's"). Pearson also quoted from a Facebook memorial page and included comments from a Hubley friend he had interviewed after finding her via the social website. The story ended with a list of agencies and their contacts that can assist teens in distress.

Without social media, it is unlikely that Pearson could have pulled together such a compelling portrait of Hubley so quickly. Such an effort would have required finding and interviewing classmates, friends and teachers, a task made difficult by the fact it was Sunday and school was closed, coupled with the reluctance of some people to speak publicly during times of grief, a reluctance deepened by the sensitivity that can accompany a death by suicide. Of course, having access to social media does not excuse a journalist from pursuing information through other avenues and indeed, Pearson did that for this story with comments from a friend and a school trustee. Hubley's family declined to comment but did not object to the *Citizen's* decision to

write a story on the death. But the most compelling material in the story comes from Hubley himself via social media and it offers a first-person glimpse of a teen in distress, details that it is unlikely that friends, teachers, even family could or would have offered. Pearson says Hubley's voice is present throughout the story: "When do you hear from the victim that much, particularly when they are no longer?" (Pearson, "personal interview"). Deciding what to use from the social sites in such stories is not always easy. The challenge for a reporter is to present a fair and accurate portrait of the deceased and put into perspective the various elements of a life, especially troubling ones found on social media.

I think you have to be cautious and be very selective about what you're going to use and sort of always be asking those basic questions "why am I using this information? What does it add to the story? Is there another place I can get this information other than social media?" (Pearson, "personal interview").

Other media outlets also covered the suicide and like the *Citizen* story, they drew extensively on Hubley's social media postings. *Toronto Star* reporter Michael Woods wrote that Hubley's "frequently updated blog featured suicidal musings and photos depicting self-harm as he descended into a deeper depression" (Woods). Sarah Boesveld, of the *National Post*, went further than others in describing what could be found on Hubley's posts: "Jamie Hubley's goodbye letter appears on a blog that gave so many signs of what was to come: powerful images of other young people attempting suicide after being bullied, dark self-harm mantras and pictures of razor-sliced skin" (Boesveld).

Later that week, *Ottawa Citizen* columnist Kelly Egan reflected on how the coverage of Hubley's death stacked up against the mental health guidelines for reporting on suicides and concluded that the media had "violated most of them"

(Egan): “It may mean nothing – what would a shrink know about putting out a newspaper? – or it may be that in our rush to publish or broadcast, we overlook things, particularly the longer range impact; the so-called messaging.”

Egan singled out a column by *Toronto Star* writer Heather Mallick that had the headline, “Bullies broke him, this beautiful boy.” Mallick portrayed Hubley as waging a lone battle against schoolyard bullies. Egan complained that Mallick’s interpretation, done in what he called “overwrought language,” went far beyond the facts as she painted his death solely the result of bullying. Yet, Mallick does note that Hubley was battling depression: “Depression was Jamie's constant, the kind of depression that is implacable in the face of total family love, medical care, counselling and loyal friends” (Mallick). Still, it is another caution for journalists to be wary of citing easy hooks – a relationship breakdown, job loss or bullying – as the cause of a suicide while failing to acknowledge that the act is often the consequence of a complex combination of factors. As Egan noted and Hubley’s own father later confirmed, Hubley had a history of depression:

Surely that is the biggest elephant in the room? A lot of kids are bullied; a lot of kids are gay; a lot of kids are gay and bullied, yet do no harm to themselves. So there is more to it than one cause and one effect. This is the inherent problem with reporting complicated problems in newspaper stories. We only work with what we have (Egan).

Allan Hubley issued a lengthy statement four days after his son’s death. In the first paragraph, he says the cause of death was suicide. He confirmed media reports, including Pearson’s story that had appeared a day earlier, that his son had been bullied. He outlined how his son had been suffering from depression. Doctors and Jamie’s own friends had been working to help him cope with his mental illness and

struggles with his sexuality, his father said (Hubley). Hubley said he wanted to speak out about depression and bullying: “We hope from our tragedy others will become more active in stopping this cruelty towards children.”

Reflecting on the story three years later, Pearson said he remains satisfied that his reporting was fair and gave an accurate portrayal of Hubley, saying, “I think that I did him justice. I put into context who he was and what he was struggling with” (“personal interview”). At the time he wrote his story, Pearson was not aware of any mental health guidelines around suicide reporting. In the year following Hubley’s death, he obtained the guidelines issued by the Ottawa Suicide Prevention Coalition. Modeled on the guidelines issues by the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, they urge reporters to avoid:¹³

- Reporting about the method used
- Printing photos of the deceased
- Making generalizations or oversimplifying the complex causes of suicide (such as saying the victim was depressed, implying all depressed people are suicidal)
- Romanticizing the suicide (such as saying the victim wanted to be with his deceased girlfriend)
- Referring to suicide as “successful” or to a suicide attempt as a “failed attempt”

Reflecting on the guidelines and his own story, Pearson said that some recommendations are workable while others defy journalistic practice. For example, in his writings on Hubley’s death, Pearson never mentioned the cause of death. He did not see that as integral to his story and continues to believe that such detail does

¹³ <http://www.ottawasuicideprevention.com/media-guidelines1.html>

not need to be included in a story about a suicide. But he takes issue with the recommendation against using photos of the deceased, calling that a “non-starter.” This again underscores the gulf between some guidelines and the day-to-day reality of what reporters and editors view as critical to their storytelling. “I think some of it is a collision of our language and our job, which is to flatten things and make it readable and tell a story, and other people’s desires to protect people and protect families and those around victims” (Pearson, “personal interview”).

Pearson wrote a 3,843-word feature story to mark the one-year anniversary of Hubley’s death. It added personal details of the teen and reflections of his father, including the family’s rationale for publicly revealing that Jamie had taken his own life. Said father Allan Hubley: “If you don’t report it as a suicide, then nobody knows and then it’s going to happen to someone else and you’re going to feel guilty that you didn’t do something when you had an opportunity to act” (qtd. in Pearson, “Jamie then”). That feature included an extensive section devoted to warning signs to watch for and a list of agencies in the Ottawa area to aid youth and mental health crises.

4.3. Amanda Todd

In 2012, Amanda Todd took to YouTube with a dramatic and tragic video¹⁴ – her own suicide note. Standing in front of a camera, Todd did not speak but used messages written on flash cards, flipping through them to tell the tale of how she had been bullied, humiliated and assaulted. The video, titled, “My story: Struggling, bullying, suicide, self harm,” stretches for almost nine minutes. In it, she relates how she had been urged to expose her breasts during an online chat. A photo of that

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOHXGNx-E7E>

incident was later circulated at her school, setting off a pattern of torment and bullying that followed her even after she changed schools. “I can never get that photo back . . . it’s out there forever,” reads Todd’s cards. She said she was “very depressed” and detailed two previous suicide attempts – drinking bleach and an overdose. “I have nobody . . . I need someone,” reads one of her cards. Her final slide says, “My name is Amanda Todd.” In October, 2012, a month after she posted the video, the Grade 10 student took her life in her Port Coquitlam, B.C. home. News of the death was first revealed in a Facebook posting by members of her cheerleading squad: “Today we feel the loss of our former VAS family member Amanda ... I ask that we all watch her video and share her story so that her loss is not in vain. Allow this to be her legacy," the post said (Shaw, “Amanda Todd”).

Her suicide – and the long spell of bullying that preceded it – attracted widespread media attention. Her story made the front pages of newspapers, television newscasts and magazines, largely due to the compelling nature of the black-and-white video. As with Hubley, reporters drew on the contents of Todd’s social media message to help tell the story of her death. *Vancouver Sun* reporters Gillian Shaw and Lori Culbert wrote about Todd’s death in a story that appeared on the front page of the newspaper on 12 October 2012. In the story, the reporters described the video as “heart-breaking” and quoted from several of her flash cards, including, “Every day I think why am I still here?” (Shaw and Culbert). The reporters also quote from an accompanying message Todd posted with the video: “I’m not doing this (video) for attention. I’m doing this to be an inspiration and to show that I can be strong” (qtd. in Shaw and Culbert). They also noted that Christy Clark, the premier of British

Columbia, posted her own video on YouTube to send her condolences to the family and deliver the message that “bullying has to stop” (Shaw and Culbert). The story concluded with a note pointing readers to a web site and a hotline to assist people feeling suicidal.

Several days later, Shaw interviewed Carol Todd, Amanda’s mother, and wrote a story that provided more detail about Amanda’s experience and her rationale for producing the video. Said Carol Todd, “Amanda wanted to tell her story to help other kids. I want to tell my story to help parents, so they can be aware, so they can teach their kids what is right and wrong and how to be safe online” (Shaw, “Mom speaks”).

As discussed in the Hubley example, the causes of suicide are complex but Todd’s death quickly became a lightning rod for the issue of cyber-bullying and on-line abuse. Todd’s own video testimonial stirred community anger against her anonymous tormenters and became a powerful impetus to crack down on cyber-stalkers. That theme was almost entirely the focus of the media coverage of her death. The New York *Daily News* posted her video on its website, writing how Todd had been “bullied and tormented” and finally “couldn’t take it anymore” (Murray). The week after her death, *Maclean’s* magazine put a picture of Todd on its cover with the headline, “The Real World of Teenage Bullying.” Inside the edition, two stories examined the issue of cyber-bullying and Todd’s own experience, using photos of the B.C. teen and frame grabs from her video to illustrate the piece.

Her mother said she hoped her daughter’s final message would be widely shared. “I think the video should be shared and used as an anti-bullying tool. That is

what my daughter would have wanted,” Carol Todd said in a message on Twitter (Shaw and Culbert). Todd has become active in promoting mental health and her daughter’s video is posted on the website amandtoddlegacy.org.

Shaw returned to the story several months later, reflecting on how Todd’s story had attracted global attention and prompted anti-bullying campaigns. “‘Bullied to death’ was the headline that went around the world as social media spread Amanda’s story and mainstream media abandoned its customary practice of not reporting on suicides,” Shaw wrote in her 29 December 2012 story (“Amanda Todd”).

4.4. Rehtaeh Parsons

Selena Ross was working an evening shift as a reporter at the Halifax *Chronicle Herald* on 8 April 2013 when her editor asked her to take a look at a Facebook post by Halifax resident Leah Parsons. In the heart-breaking post, Parsons revealed the suicide of her daughter Rehtaeh¹⁵ and the tragic tale of events that led up to it. The mother wrote that the girl had gone to a home two years earlier where she had been assaulted by four boys. One of the boys took a picture of Parsons that was later distributed in the school, setting off a pattern of harassment and bullying that the mother said drove the girl to take her own life. In her reporting that night, Ross talked to the police, the school board and the mother. The next day, the *Chronicle Herald* published her story that opened:

¹⁵ As the victim of child pornography, Rehtaeh Parsons had been under a court-ordered publication ban. However, on 17 December 2014, the Director of Public Prosecutions in Nova Scotia announced that as long as her name was used in a “respectful way,” it would not prosecute any violations of the publication ban.

Rehtaeh Parsons had a goofy sense of humour and loved playing with her little sisters. She wore glasses, had long, dark hair and was a straight-A student whose favourite subject was science.

On Sunday night, the 17-year-old's family took her off life-support. Three days earlier, on Thursday night, she hanged herself in the bathroom (Ross, "Who failed").

Ross' story drew heavily on Leah Parsons' Facebook post as well as her interview with the mother, conveying the family's anger at the justice system for failing to hold the boys accountable for the alleged assault. Ross wrote how the mother wanted her daughter's suicide and the circumstances around it to be public (Ross, "Who failed"). Ross says that having the mother's social media post helped her craft the story ("personal interview"). With the Facebook post going "viral," the newspaper was under some pressure to get the story that night, and she wrote the story over several hours. Ross had heard of the mental health guidelines for suicide reporting and knew that the topic was "something to be careful about." But she says her editors vetted the story with the guidelines in mind. She says the story largely followed the guidelines – the story was on the front page but "below the fold," near the bottom to reduce its prominence and the word suicide was not used in the headline ("personal interview"). The story did mention that the girl had hanged herself in the bathroom, a detail contained in the mother's Facebook post, which the story linked to on-line. "I put a lot of thought into it and it was vetted," Ross said ("personal interview").

The national media covered the death too, with stories that also picked up on the frustration that Leah Parsons conveyed in her Facebook post. The *Toronto Star* story quoted the mother's post extensively: "Rehtaeh is gone today because of the four boys that thought that raping a 15-year-old girl was OK and to distribute a photo

to ruin her spirit and reputation would be fun,” the story said (Slaughter). “The justice system failed her. Those are the people that took the life of my beautiful girl.” The *Globe and Mail* cited Rehtaeh Parsons’ own Facebook page, noting how her self-portraits were accompanied by “grim captions about death and dulling her pain with drugs.” The story quoted one of the girl’s posts: “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends” (Ha and Taber).

Days after the death, Dr. Stan Kutcher, a professor in the department of psychiatry at Dalhousie University and staff psychiatrist and Sun Life Financial Chair in adolescent mental health at the IWK Health Centre, used an opinion piece published in the *Chronicle Herald* to express concerns about some of the media coverage about Parsons’ death though he did not specify which stories or what media outlets concerned him. Citing research that some media coverage can increase the chance of copycat suicides in young people, he said that reporting of youth suicide is a “shared community responsibility” (Kutcher, “Do no harm”):

Years of scientific research has identified that some types of media reporting can increase the possibility of ‘copy-cat’ or ‘contagion’ suicide in young people. This is, regrettably, the kind of reporting we saw following the tragic death of Ms. Parsons. This is both unfortunate and, from the perspective of our collective responsibility for enhancing positive outcomes for our youth, regrettable (Kutcher, “Do no harm”).

Kutcher went on to ask the media to review the guidelines for suicide reporting, adding, “It would be very helpful to know that the media are part of the solution to the challenge of suicide prevention in our young people (“Do no harm”).

The story of the Parsons’ assault and subsequent bullying and death would play out in media across Canada for months to come. The publicity sparked multiple reviews by community agencies that had been involved in her case. The police re-

opened their investigation into the 2011 events and months after her death charged two males with child pornography offences. Coupled with Todd's death six months earlier, there was extensive public discussion and political pressure to address cyberbullying, which was seen – rightly or wrongly – as the cause of both suicides. There was lengthy discussion on the extent of the problem, potential solutions and how to protect children in the Internet age. It was an issue that attracted the attention of political leaders. Prime Minister Stephen Harper met with parents of children who had suffered cyberbullying, including Carol Todd and the parents of Rehtaeh Parsons in May 2013. Harper lent a sympathetic ear to their concerns and reassured them that a review of federal legislation was underway to identify potential gaps (Lambert). The Nova Scotia government announced additional funding for a sexual assault centre that had seen a surge in demand for counselling services following the publicity around the girl's death. Glen Canning, the father of Rehtaeh Parsons, appeared before a parliamentary committee to testify in support of federal legislation to give police more powers to combat on-line crime, including a provision to make it illegal to distribute an intimate photo without the consent of the subject.

Ross heard concerns that reporting on Parsons' suicide had contributed to an increase in other self-harm cases among young women in Nova Scotia. The experience left her concerned about the possible contagion of media reporting of suicides ("personal interview"). But she is also convinced that more reporting of suicides would be beneficial. Ross notes the increased numbers of people who, moved by the story of Parsons' alleged assault, came forward to sexual assault centres to seek assistance with their own experiences. As noted, that in turn prompted

additional government funding to improve such services. That is just one example of the kind of benefit that came from the attention around the teen's death, says Ross. "Even if there was a very small group of people who were really at risk at that moment, who were put in danger with suicide attempt, there could have been a much, much bigger group that it helped with the exact same thing" (Ross "personal interview").

Ross came away from the experience less impressed with the medical community's understanding or appreciation of the role of the media, made evident she says by the concerns voiced about the reporting around Parsons' death.

I write all of my stories thinking about what the average person needs to believe that the thing happened, to understand that it happened, to picture it, to just comprehend it . . . that's not a process I expect a doctor to understand. We don't understand each other's jobs that well (Ross, "personal interview").

Ross and fellow *Chronicle Herald* reporter Frances Willick were honoured with a top prize by the Canadian Association of Journalists for their coverage of Parsons' suicide and the subsequent fallout. *Vancouver Sun* reporters Gillian Shaw, Lori Culbert and Dean Broughton were nominated for a National Newspaper Award for their reporting on Todd's suicide. Together, the writing around both suicides was recognized as among the best journalism done in Canada during that period.

Had these two deaths happened a decade earlier, it's not certain the local communities would have learned about the suicides of Todd and Parsons, beyond their circle of family and friends. Nor is it likely the deaths would have touched off the national firestorm of publicity and resulting calls for action to address the factors seen by some as contributing to the suicides. What made the difference was publicity. The publicity in these two cases was enabled by the parents and encouraged via social

media. They saw the publicity as a means to address what they saw as the institutional failings that contributed to the deaths of their children.

4.6. Despair revealed -- the ethics of using social media for suicide coverage

For a journalist seeking to write about a suicide, social media can represent a rich trove of information. From Facebook, a journalist can access photos along with contacts for friends and family. From Facebook and Twitter, a reporter can read the last postings of the deceased, perhaps one meant to serve as a suicide note. It means a journalist can craft a powerful narrative of a person's life, even document the anguish of the final days. But just because all this information is available to journalists, does it mean they should use it? Picard, of the *Globe and Mail*, says the "ubiquity" of social media poses ethical challenges for journalists writing on suicides: "How much information is enough or too much" (Picard, "Williams gives"). Indeed, the challenge for both journalists and mental health experts is that the information available on social media can be precisely the information that mental health experts caution against publicizing, such as suicide notes and photos of the deceased.

But the information found on social media can also help the media paint a fuller portrait of a deceased, thus guarding against glamorization. Social media postings can convey the sense of sorrow and loss felt by family and friends that is also important to highlight in stories on suicide (Hatcher). Hatcher said the messages left on social media by a distressed person can sometimes be the early warning signs of mental health woes. If quoted by the media after a suicide, they could serve as a warning for others. "I think it's an opportunity to say these are the signs of something

who may well be asking for help, who may be depressed and these are the things to be aware of” (Hatcher).

Kutcher argues that just because the information is available, it doesn’t give a journalist licence to use it. This is where application of professional standards and judgments come into play (“personal interview”): “Whatever profession we’re in, whether it’s journalism or education or medicine or whatever, we try within the dictates of our professional responsibilities try to ensure that what we do will in the long run create less harm.”

Picard writes that we live in a “post privacy world” where details previously kept under wraps now spill out in cyberspace (“Williams gives”). But he urges journalists not to “linger” on the details of suicides but rather use them as a springboard to a broader discussion about the causes of suicide and the improvements needed for treatment (“Williams gives”).

The issue of tapping social media to assist with reporting on suicides raises broader questions of journalistic practice in this new information era. To what extent, if any, does using information from social media sites infringe on personal privacy. What are the ethics of a journalist taking information on social media and reposting it for viewing on the website of a news outlet when it was meant only for friends and family? (Whitehouse 311). This is especially relevant after a death when social media sites can offer a “wealth” of first-person information: “Journalists can turn to public Facebook pages to find out the deceased’s life goals, dating preferences, and a host of other details” (Whitehouse 322). Whitehouse argues that family members should have some control over “how private facts about their loved one, however publicly

posted, are shared” and that journalism ethics codes must detail the need to protect “not only private people but ignorant private people” (322). Whitehouse concludes that privacy “should not be invaded simple because the tools are easily available (324).

There’s no doubt that the Internet age is redefining the boundaries of privacy. But surely it must depend on how public the information was in the first place. In an era when people post updates on their relationship status, pictures of their children, and details of their date nights on a social media site and make it all publicly accessible, it would seem unreasonable to declare that this information so easily viewed by others on the Internet should be considered off limits to a journalist. In his sensitive handling of the on-line postings of Jamie HUBLEY, the *Ottawa Citizen*’s Matthew Pearson provided an example of how such material can be responsibly interpreted and framed for a reader. That is not to say this will always be the case. But when it comes to complex, emotional stories that require sensitivity, having an institutional track record of sound and ethical editorial decision-making, informed by guidelines and newsroom policies, makes it easier to make judgment calls in the fast-moving environment that social media so often dictates today, says David Walmsley, editor-in-chief of the *Globe and Mail* (Walmsley). “That’s where the editors have to come in and the stewardship. . . . It’s just having the balance and ensuring you are not going too far too fast.”

The social media gives us the access. Again I would say that with that greater access, the level of second layer thought is even more important and that stewardship of where you stand has to be more transparent. In a complex and fast-moving world, the more you’ve written down and the more good practice that you’ve been able to announce, the less likely you are to mess things up. (Walmsley).

That is echoed by Pearson who says that reporters should be asking their editors for guidance on how to handle sensitive material found on social media sites: “What do you want me to do with that? What do you actually want to put in the paper regarding that?” (Pearson, “personal interview”).

The information on social media is not the whole story of a suicide. But it is part of the story and a critical part because it can originate from the deceased themselves. It can offer some insight into their state of mind, the activities in their life and thus enable the reporter to pull together a more complete profile. Deaths that previously may have been written as “unexplained” and a “mystery,” may now be partially explained. This is an area where journalists have not done well in the past. Researchers have found that much reporting on suicide is simplistic, even wrong, and merely serves to reinforce myths. For example, suicide stories appear around end-of-year holidays, implying that “holiday blues” are a trigger for suicides, even though most suicides in the United States happen in the spring and fall (Jamieson, Jamieson and Romer 1657).

Fishman and Weimann reviewed the reports of suicides in two leading Israeli newspapers and compared the details contained in news accounts against official suicide records and statistics compiled by Israel’s Ministry of Health that included personal details such as gender, age, marital status and the motives for the suicide (201). Their research detailed large discrepancies between media portrayals of the victims of suicide and their motives as compared to the reality. For example, they found that young age groups were overrepresented in media reports compared to

actual suicides and older people were unrepresented.¹⁶ “The press consistently misrepresented the real frequency of the very young and the very old” (Fishman and Weimann 203). But the biggest discrepancy occurred in the motives that journalists assigned to suicides compared to the reasons cited in official reports. The media rarely got it right. Journalists routinely cited economic hardship and romantic upset as the reason for a suicide while underplaying the reason most often found by officials – mental illness.¹⁷ Finally, the media skew the public’s understanding of suicide by selectively reporting only some of the deaths. The researchers concluded that reporters choose to focus on certain types of suicides for “legitimate journalistic considerations” but caution that the portrayal of suicide by the media – trends, magnitude, demographics – creates an image of reality “far removed from what the official data suggest” (209).

This can all be the result of preconceived notions and biases and editorial judgments that deem the suicide of a teenager more newsworthy than the death of a senior citizen. But it can also be the result of journalists working with incomplete information, certainly when it comes to wrongly ascribing motives. Here, social media can help fill in some of that picture. But it also marks a challenge for a reporter

¹⁶ Stories on suicides among those aged 15 to 21 comprised 18.3 per cent of the coverage in the newspapers, yet just 9.1 per cent of all suicides (Fishman and Weimann 202). Likewise, those 65 and older got fewer mentions in the media – just 8 per cent of the coverage – even though this demographic made up 22.4 per cent of all suicides.

¹⁷ Economic hardship was cited as a motive by the press in 9.5 per cent of all motives reported, yet just 1.6 per cent in official statistics (Fishman and Weimann 204). Romantic upset was named by the media 16.1 per cent of the time yet just 1.2 per cent by officials. Mental illness was understated in media reports, mentioned in 27.6 per cent of news stories while officially identified as a factor 58.9 per cent of the time (204).

seeking to understand whether the persona found on social media reflects the person they are seeking to write about. Ross says that social media – by channelling the voices of family, friends, even the victim – can help humanize the story of a suicide. Still, she also cautions against relying on social media alone to write about a suicide, saying it may not give a full portrait of the deceased. “I wouldn’t want to . . . report from their social media without knowing the bigger story from their family because you have no idea of what the real arc of their life was” (Ross, “personal interview”). That caution is echoed by Lonsdale who says reporters should be mindful that the social media postings of the deceased may shed some light on their personal situation but not likely the complete story: “What someone puts on their Facebook page is useful but it may not be anything like the full story because the person may or may not have insight into their situation. That said, you can’t ignore it” (Lonsdale, “personal interview”). Pearson says a reporter should seek out people who knew the deceased to verify whether information found on social media is true. “You could say things like, “I noticed this on their Facebook page. How much of a role did that play in their life? . . . Is this an accurate depiction of what she was like and what her life was like?”” (Pearson, “personal interviews”).

It is also wise to remember that using social media demands the same journalistic rigour that is applied to other sources. Pearson encountered this during his reporting on Hubley’s death. Reaching out to friends of Hubley he found on Facebook, he was later left unsettled when he learned that one friend he had quoted may not have been as close to Hubley as he first thought. He came away from the experience with an even greater conviction to ensure that people he interviews are

indeed who they claim to be. “Prove to me that you are who you say you are. That for me was a huge red flag, who you talk to on Facebook and who you believe on Facebook” (Pearson, “personal interview”). This speaks to the role of journalist and the imperative to verify the information, not simply pass it along. Kovach and Rosentiel say that good journalism requires engaged, active reporters who remain ever skeptical of the information. They call it the “way of skeptical knowing” (Kovach and Rosentiel, “Blur” 30). *Reuters*, a global news service, acknowledges that social media can be a useful source of information sometimes available nowhere else. But it makes clear to its reporters that information found on the Internet must be held to the same journalistic standards. “Internet reporting is nothing more than applying the principles of sound journalism to the sometimes unusual situations thrown up in the virtual world. The same standards of sourcing, identification and verification apply” (Reuters). In particular, *Reuters’ Handbook of Journalism* advises its reporters to use caution when using information found on social media because verification can often be a “major issue” either because of sloppiness on the part of the person posting the information or deceit (Reuters). *Reuters* reporters are told to treat Twitter as a tip service and are encouraged to find the information through more traditional, “solid” sources (Reuters).

4.7. Analysis

The victims of traffic accidents are often profiled in news stories, thus informing a community’s residents of the tragedy that has unfolded in their midst. When underlying factors such as drinking and driving or speeding are identified as possible factors, police and politicians are pressed to respond to mitigate the risks

with an eye to avoiding future deaths. Yet those who die by suicide, for the most part, remain in the shadows with little known about their lives or the circumstances around their deaths. But the case studies illustrate how social media is now pulling back the curtain on some of these deaths. It is early yet to make conclusions about how this may ultimately affect the overall reporting of suicides. But we can conclude from the evidence and experiences so far that social media is already changing how journalists find out about suicides and then go about reporting such deaths. In cases like the death of Rehtaeh Parsons, it was a Facebook posting that first alerted media to the suicide and provided journalists with a storyline of her troubles that was subsequently conveyed in news stories about the death. The coverage of the suicide of Jamie Hubley is instructive because it reveals how social media became an invaluable tool for reporters in the days after his death as they were able to weave a narrative of his life and torment from his own postings on social media.

As noted in the introduction, the suicide of Robin Williams and the resulting coverage underscored how postings by mainstream media on social media in the wake of a suicide can run counter to good taste, editorial policy and the guidelines on how these deaths should be reported. Television stations carried the police news conference live and media outlets tweeted extensively on the police announcement, publicizing information on the suicide that they normally would not carry, such as the very detailed explanation of how Williams had taken his life, which sparked immediate concerns from viewers and readers. The tweet from Cori Ferguson was typical of the anger: “@CityNews Not really sure it's helpful to provide a 'how to' on hanging yourself in a door frame, regardless of whether police did” (Ferguson). This

drives home the imperative of having firm editorial oversight in such instances to ensure that newsroom principles and guidelines are maintained in the face of a fast-moving story with competitive pressures.

The online news stories posted in the hours following the news conference by Lt. Keith Boyd, of the Marin County Sheriff's Office, offered varying levels of detail on the method of Williams' death. The *Toronto Star* website carried a story by *The Associated Press* that said Williams had died "after hanging himself with a belt" and that he also had superficial cuts on his wrist (The Associated Press). The *CTV News* website carried the same wire story but omitted the fact he had been found with cuts to his wrist. The websites of the *Toronto Sun* and *The Globe and Mail* each posted a *Reuters* story that provided more detail about the death. The story told how Williams was "suspended from a belt wedged between door and a door frame in a seated position just off the ground" (Saphir). It quoted Boyd's description of the exact position of the body and that rigor mortis had set in by the time the body was found. A story posted on the *CBC News* website stated only that Williams had hanged himself and made no mention of the belt or how it had been wedged in the doorframe (CBC). The story noted the wounds to his wrist but did not mention the pocketknife.

In an online column, Sylvia Stead, the public editor at the *Globe and Mail*, said that the Marin County Sheriff's office had provided "excessive details" about the suicide and noted how it had been streamed live. She said that the *Globe* had shown "restraint" by stating only in its articles that Williams had died by asphyxia. "Even though it was public information, that did not mean that the *Globe* should have followed in lockstep with those details" (Stead). However, she said that Williams'

death had provided an opportunity for a broader discussion about suicide and depression.

Another important point was revealed in the research for the case studies. Even in the absence of mental health guidelines and formal newsroom policies, it was evident that reporters, by their education and newsroom ethos, are already guided by a set of ethical standards. Few reporters would treat a story on suicide lightly. All journalists interviewed who had reported on a suicide showed a deep sensitivity to the topic, the deceased and the loved ones left behind. Their reporting clearly made an emotional impact that has remained with them years later. Cobb said he felt the “weight of responsibility” in being taken into the confidence by the Graham family to tell the story of their son’s life and death: “The responsibility of exposing very injured people to the public. And I knew that that it was my responsibility to do that in an ethical, gentle way” (Cobb, “personal interview”). Nor are journalists immune from the emotion of such stories. Returning to Ottawa after the interview, Cobb got a few kilometres down the highway when he was suddenly overcome by emotion. “I had to pull over. I collapsed on the steering wheel just sobbing. It was awful. Never happened to me before or since. It just came out of the blue” (“personal interview”). Pearson had a similar reaction after writing about Hubley’s suicide. In the days after the story, he was irritable and unable to sleep. He wrote a first person column telling of his own experiences as a teenager growing up in a small Ontario town and related it to Hubley’s time in school. In that story, he reflected on the challenge of covering Hubley’s death. “It was one of the most difficult assignments I’ve ever had and I remain troubled by it days later,” Pearson wrote (Pearson, “Adults must”).

Cobb offers this advice to reporters faced with a similar assignment: “Listen. Be sensitive. When you write something like this you have the power to heal or the power to hurt, hurt people more. Choose your words carefully.”

Chapter 5. Mental health and newsroom attitudes.

5.1. Mental health, stigma and change

As noted earlier, societal attitudes towards suicide have been marked by harsh condemnation, intolerance and moral judgment. In many ways, those perceptions mirror society's evolving attitudes toward what so often underlies suicide – mental illness – and it, too, has also suffered from ignorance and isolation. Though attitudes are changing, thanks to public awareness campaigns, mental illness continues to exist under a cloud of stigma. Decades ago, it was seen as a character flaw, a weakness of the spirit – an attitude reflected in the news coverage of the day. Those suffering from mental illness were cared for by families or housed in lunatic asylums and were considered as “incurable, non-functioning members of society” (Kirby et al.). Such attitudes persisted after 1945 as those with mental health disorders were placed in psychiatric institutions – sometimes against their will – and the emphasis was on “custody rather than therapy” (Kirby et al.). But medical understanding and treatment of mental disorders became more sophisticated and successful and with these advances came the greater awareness that mental illnesses were the result of a physical condition rather than a weakness of character. This spurred efforts to educate the public about mental health and illness and ensure mental health and wellness is put on the same footing as other health conditions. In 2006, a Senate of Canada committee issued a landmark report on the state of mental health care in Canada. Among its many recommendations, it urged that public attitudes had to change. It found that those suffering from mental illness continued to suffer from stigma and discrimination that affected their quality of life in areas such as housing, employment

and medical treatment (Kirby et al.): “Only by changing our perception, removing the social stigma and understanding more about mental illness can we as a society begin to improve the treatment and care provided to the people who suffer from a mental disorder.

The Senate report led to the creation of the Mental Health Commission of Canada in 2007 with a mandate to provide a national focus to improve the mental health system and change “attitudes and behaviours” of Canadians on the issue.¹⁸ In 2012, the commission released what it said was Canada’s first strategy to improve mental health of Canadians. The extensive report¹⁹ made 100 recommendations in areas such as promotion and prevention, access to services, recovery and reaching out to specific groups, such as First Nations, Inuit and Métis. “Our history in Canada with regards to mental health and providing support for those who experience mental illness is not a good one. We have marginalized and stigmatized those who have these experiences, and have neglected their voices,” said Shana Calixte, a member of a commission advisory committee who spoke at the launch of the strategy.

News media are also now reflecting the growing – and changing – public conversation with a new focus on writing about mental health (Walmsley; English, “We need”). “I think the silence was false, it was wrong because it wasn’t reflecting reality, which is that it’s an enormous issue. I think everyone knows someone who is

¹⁸ Mental Health Commission of Canada website
<http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/who-we-are>

¹⁹ The strategy can be found at
<http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/initiatives-and-projects/mental-health-strategy-canada>

suffering mentally. It's part of society. So the idea we can't talk about it is a madness to me," Walmsley said (Walmsley).

Mental health professionals like Colman, Hatcher and Kutcher all speak of the need to improve what they call mental health literacy among the public to break down continuing misunderstandings and ignorance. But Kutcher is nervous about the growing profile given to suicides in the media and the community through well-meaning efforts to raise awareness on the issue. He said that not enough is known about the possible contagion impact such increased profile may play on other suicidal behaviour: "I think people have had a very difficult time finding the balance here and I think that much of it is due to a huge deficit in mental health literacy. I am still constantly gobsmacked at how people don't understand what mental health is" ("personal interview").

That is one of the goals of *Mindset*. In its introduction, the authors say their aim is to show that journalists unintentionally contribute to stigma, highlight what they can do about it and offer encouragement to write about mental health: "It's also about alerting ourselves to stories we may be missing – stories that probe issues, successes and shortcomings in Canada's fractured and sometimes fractious mental health system" (*Mindset* 9). Lonsdale echoes the sentiments of others in expressing the goal of changing the language around mental illness and ensuring it is given the same profile as other illnesses.

Surely society needs to look at what on earth we are doing, why we are not treating people with mental illness the way that we treat people with cancer. There's a huge disparity here. Partly it's a matter of stigma, partly people don't come forward but partly the resources aren't there if they do. That's a big factor in many suicides. Not talking about it is not going to get that fixed. Some of that attention is happening already (Lonsdale, "personal interview").

5.2. Newsroom attitudes and suicide

Writing in the *Mindset* guide on mental health reporting, Picard, of the *Globe and Mail*, calls for much more vigorous coverage of suicides, saying journalists should cover these deaths the same way they cover murders, “seeking to find the answers about the causes, while mourning the dead, flaws and all” (Mindset 4). There have been additional calls for a new perspective on how media approach suicide. In a 7 December 2012 editorial, the *Globe and Mail* said that the media silence around suicide and mental illness “has been part of the problem. It has made it harder for individuals and families to seek help” (“Teen suicide”).

The debate has extended into newsrooms where there’s a growing sense that journalists have not done a good job of covering mental health or brought enough attention to the issue of suicides. The public editors of the two biggest English-language newspapers in Canada – the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* – both support more proactive coverage of suicides and mental health. Stead, of the *Globe and Mail*, says coverage of suicide should be treated as a public health issue: “depression and mental illness are often silent diseases that for years no one has ever discussed” (Stead). English, at the *Star*, says that “for too long suicide has been the shameful cause of death that dare not be mentioned by the media . . . if journalism’s first obligation is to the truth, why has the truth that some desperate people take their own lives been largely off-limits to journalists” (English, “We need”).

English describes herself as an old-style journalist who began her news career when writing about suicide was discouraged. Yet she says that perspective – and the attitudes of many Canadian journalists on the topic – was challenged by an evocative

feature penned by journalist Liam Casey. Writing in the *Ryerson Review of Journalism* in 2011, Casey related his own experience with suicidal thoughts and concluded that newsroom thinking that discourages coverage of suicides is dangerously outdated since it ignores a serious public health threat to the community.

Suicide avoidance is a throwback to journalism's dark days, a time when editors and news producers could choose to ignore unpleasant matters. But the industry can no longer justify failing to cover a tragedy that will affect so many people in one way or another, at some time in their lives. (Casey).

In his piece, he takes aim at the "hypocritical" coverage of suicides by media, deciding that suicides are off-limits – except when they're not. The result is haphazard coverage of high-profile suicides or those that journalists find intriguing, often at the expense of painting a true picture of the problem.

The mainstream media are hypocritical, breaking their suicide silence if it involves a public figure, a murder-suicide or some other hook. A spate of gay teenagers killing themselves captured the media's attention in the fall of 2010. The coverage made it seem like a new problem, but it isn't. It just hadn't been reported. Men aged 35 to 54 are the most likely suicides in Canada, but it's rare to read an article about a middle-aged man who shot his brains out, or a feature on a schizophrenic who hanged himself (Casey).

Casey also wrote that the psychiatric community needed to be pressed on the "validity" of their contagion concerns and lamented that journalists have been influenced by the research around contagion without doing enough to challenge the conclusions that media coverage and subsequent suicides are linked: "Few journalists have pushed the psychiatric community on the validity of the contagion effect. It's like a relic bomb from the Second World War that no one wants to examine, even though it's likely a dud. Stay away. Do not touch. Avoid" (Casey).

In 2012, *Calgary Herald* writer Dave Budge questioned why the suicide of a 12-year-old boy in his Calgary home did not make the news.

If Noah had been hit by a car and killed last Thursday, it would be news. If he'd fallen from a balcony, or slipped into the river, or been murdered, you would have heard about it. Only deaths from disease fly under the radar like suicide does. The terrible irony is that this may be the issue that the public needs to hear about and think about most (Budge).

In newsrooms across Calgary, Budge said many journalists argued against reporting on the boy's death, a decision he said was motivated by the media's long-standing reluctance to report on suicides and the personal views of reporters themselves: "News coverage often tends to seek blame, not simply report the facts, and most news people don't want to add to any family's suffering. Journalists don't like to cover events like this. Nobody with feelings would" (Budge).

Al Tompkins, senior faculty for broadcasting and online at the Poynter Institute, suggests that concerns over contagion have put a chill on reporting on suicides by media. "By avoiding the story in an effort to minimize potential harm to the victims' families or concern that news coverage might prompt others to take their lives, journalists avoid an important issue that viewers need to understand" (Norris, Jempson and Bygrave).

Crane et al. note the dilemma at the heart of the discussion: "how to produce challenging, provocative, and informative media output for the majority who are not at risk, but at the same time protect the interests of the minority who are at risk" (Crane et al. 42).

Yet there is progress being made in how journalists tackle the topics of both mental health and suicide. Picard cited the coverage of the Williams suicide as evidence of how media coverage of suicides and mental illness had progressed in the 20 years since the 1994 suicide of grunge rocker Kurt Cobain. In Cobain's case, the

media highlighted his drug use but said little about his severe depression or addictions (Picard, “Williams gives”). Contrast that with the news coverage given to Williams, where his depression and use of alcohol and drugs was openly discussed. The emphasis, Picard wrote, was on how mental illness can affect anyone, regardless of wealth or status (“Williams gives”). The vast majority of those who take their lives suffer from an untreated or undertreated mental illness (Picard, “Williams gives”; Kutcher; Dalton et al.). Yet Picard says that society – and in most cases, the media – are still grappling with the fact that mental illness is a public health priority, much like cancer or heart disease (Picard, “Williams gives”). Williams’ death spurred broad coverage examining mental health and illness and helped put a spotlight on a demographic – middle-aged men – that is particularly vulnerable to suicide (Picard, “Williams gives”): “The breadth and sophistication of the media coverage is heartwarming. You can virtually feel the knowledge of depression growing, and stigma surrounding mental illness evaporating, that may well be Mr. Williams’ most lasting legacy.”

Those pushing for more publicity and discussion also include family members of those who have died by suicide. They are going public – sometimes via social media – with the news of losing a loved one. In 2010, Ottawa teenager Daron Richardson took her life. Her death attracted considerable publicity because her father, Luke Richardson, was an assistant coach with the Ottawa Senators hockey team. A memorial service for the 14-year-old girl attracted 5,600 people to an Ottawa hockey rink, prompting the *Globe and Mail* to editorialize that it was a “rare public” tribute for someone who had died by suicide: “Suicide, particularly the suicide of the

young is no longer the taboo it has been” (Globe and Mail 2010). That article struck a chord with Richardson’s mother, Stephanie, who later recounted how the couple came face-to-face with the stigmas around suicide after the death: “The assumption was that because Daron died of suicide due to mental illness, we should feel her life is in some way diminished, unworthy of a memorial” (Payne).

There have also been voices in the mental health field urging greater focus on suicides. The Canadian Association of Suicide Prevention (CASP) says suicide is one of the country’s most serious health issues (CASP 8) yet doesn’t get the same attention as other serious illnesses. That is largely blamed on the fact that until recently suicide has involved “secrecy, stigma and taboo” (CASP 8). “Through our silence, and fueled by our fears and ignorance, much suffering has resulted. We are not confronting the silence and we must continue to do,” the association said in a 2009 blueprint for a national suicide prevention strategy (CASP 8). The strategy outlines recommendations to improve awareness and understanding of suicide, including a call to increase the media’s knowledge of the topic (CASP 11).

There may be another factor at play in how news organizations treat suicides – a generational change within newsrooms. The newsrooms of decades ago and the editors and journalists who worked in them were not inclined to write on suicides. Indeed, Gerry Nott, former editor of the *Ottawa Citizen*, says one barrier to more reporting of suicides is a generation of older editors who see such deaths as private: “It’s older journalists who categorically say we don’t do suicides,” Nott said (Casey). It’s fair to assume that as society at large better understands mental health and illness such evolving attitudes will be reflected in the newsrooms, particularly as staffing

turns over. Yet Pearson, of the *Citizen*, downplayed the theory when asked, saying that news values, the previously discussed criteria that go into deciding what makes news, rather than demographics, are the factor in deciding whether to cover a suicide (Pearson, “personal interview”). Ross, too, doubts that a generational change is changing newsroom attitudes to suicide coverage. Instead she says the greatest factor in discouraging suicide reporting has been concerns of contagion.

I think actually the reticence about suicide reporting, at least in my newsroom, is much more imposed from the outside and kind of people making us scared about what could go wrong if we do it rather than anyone on the inside thinking that it’s a taboo topic that is not worthy of public attention (Ross, “personal interview”).

With societal attitudes changing and a willingness to talk more about suicide, there comes a note of caution that such conversations, especially around suicide, must be done carefully. For example, Kutcher says the media are writing more about suicides but adds, “are they writing more responsibly? That remains to be seen” (“personal interview”). He said mental health is the “new cancer,” suddenly in vogue and “now all of a sudden people are talking about suicide . . . It’s like the dam broke, which is also not good” (Kutcher, “personal interview”):

There’s a big difference between let’s talk and let’s talk smart. Because you’re talking doesn’t mean you’re doing the right thing. You can talk about things in a way that is going to be really helpful and you can talk about things in a way that are going to be harmful (Kutcher, “personal interview”).

5.3. The “Papageno” effect

The “Werther” effect has been used to describe the contagion effect of the publicity around a suicide. Conversely, the “Papageno” effect describes when media attention can help prevent suicides. It takes its name from a character in Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* who overcomes suicidal ideations because of the support of

three friends (Niederkrötenhaler). While mental health professionals express caution about the risks of publicity around suicides, the Papageno effect suggests there can be a benefit in writing about suicides. That is the opportunity to bring publicity to the issue for the wider community and policy makers (Hollings 146). “The current restrictions effectively eliminate the opportunity for restrained responsible reporting that may promote discussion of the systemic causes of suicide” (Hollings 147). Other public safety issues, such as road accidents, child abuse and infectious diseases, attract media attention, leading to a public awareness that can drive an agenda for change (Hollings 149). This speaks to the power of the media to put issues on the public agenda.

For example, the deaths of Daron Richardson and Jamie Hubley sparked public discussions about crucial matters surrounding suicide. Richardson’s parents spoke about the tragedy and the community launched “Do It for Daron,” a campaign to boost awareness around youth mental health. Along with Hubley’s death, this resulted in sustained news coverage on the topics of suicide, bullying and mental health. The stories in particular addressed issues facing teens and young adults, a group that can be especially susceptible to contagion (Swanson and Colman). In the weeks after both suicides, there was a dramatic increase in the number of young people, aged 12 to 18, who went to the emergency department at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario in Ottawa seeking assistance for mental health issues (Leon et al.). There was a 119 per cent increase in the number of visits in November, 2010, the month that Richardson took her life, over the same month the previous year. There was a 59 per cent increase in visits by young people in October, 2011, the

month that Hubley died (Leon et al.). Yet the researchers found no significant differences in symptoms acuity, suicidal status or hospitalization rates of those who presented in the two weeks prior to the suicides compared to those who presented after. In other words, there was no difference in the severity of the patient's intent to take their life. The authors concluded that the publicity around the suicides had a beneficial impact.

These results might suggest that the extensive media attention surrounding Daron and Jamie's suicides sensitized the community to (mental health) issues – possibly through parental identification of youth at risk – and increased help-seeking behaviours for all youths and their families, enabling more youths to receive needed services (Leon et al.).

Writing about their research, Stephanie Leon and Dr. Mario Cappelli said that media attention can play a positive role by boosting mental health awareness. In the case of Richardson and Hubley, they said the media coverage had been “careful, thoughtful” and included community resources where teens could seek help (Leon and Cappelli). The authors concluded that, “Media reporting of suicide does not necessarily have negative consequences – it all depends on the quality of the coverage” (Leon and Capelli). The authors did highlight the mental health guidelines and noted that the “right” kind of media coverage is needed to create beneficial effects. Colman also says that talking about suicide is important but only in a way that does more good than harm: “Shutting down the reporting of suicides in large measure shuts down public discussion of the issue, thus eliminating any chance the media can play a positive role to help erode the stigmas that exist around mental health and suicide” (Colman, “personal interview”).

This is reinforced by other work that suggest the benefits occur when journalists adhere to the guidelines and the stories include a preventive theme, by pointing readers and viewers to community resources. Such stories include those with a focus on individuals who had suicidal thoughts but didn't act on them and instead adopted successful coping mechanisms.

The impact of suicide reporting may not be restricted to harmful effects; rather, coverage of positive coping in adverse circumstances, as covered in media items about suicidal ideation, may have protective effects (Niederkröth et al.).

That was the kind of story penned by *Toronto Star* reporter Leslie Scrivener in 2011 when she profiled three young people who had contemplated and even attempted suicide but had been able to put those experiences behind them. The story takes the reader through the despair and helplessness felt by each of them and how they have since been able to cope. Scrivener's story is both compelling and instructive, offering a raw glimpse of the kind of depression that can overwhelm a person to the point where living becomes difficult. The story quotes one of them, a university student, who makes the point that feelings of anger, despair and loneliness are temporary and do pass (Scrivener). As the story notes, "their lives aren't perfect; they still have problems, but they gained perspective and learned how to cope" (Scrivener). If stories on suicide can spur contagion, then perhaps stories like these can spur a different kind of contagion, people who can draw inspiration and life lessons from the stories of others.

Chapter 6. Reporting on suicides in a digital age.

6.1. Symbiosis – social media and mainstream media

Social media has transformed how mainstream media journalists do their job, providing a vast new array of sources of information, new venues to post stories and an ever-present urgency to write stories and publish them on-line ahead of the competition. In recent years, journalists have come to rely on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter as vital tools to alert them to stories and assist them in research.²⁰ The popularity of social media has exploded in recent years. By late 2014, Twitter had 284 million active monthly users sending 500 million tweets a day.²¹ Facebook, launched in 2004, now has 1.35 billion users who are active on a monthly basis.²²

The era of “social journalism” has meant that citizens, once consumers of news, are now sources of news with “journalists using posts, statuses, and comments on social media as a means of information gathering” (Rottwilm 16). In a November, 2014 speech, Emily Bell, director at the TOW Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia Journalism School, reflected on how digital media was redefining how news was consumed. “News companies make it hard to publish; social media platforms make it easy to publish. Consequently nearly everything these days is published or shared at some point on a social media platform,” Bell said in remarks to

²⁰ In a 2014 survey of 1,080 U.S. journalists, 40 per cent said that social media was very important to their work with more than one-third spending up to an hour each day on social networking sites. The journalists said they used social media to check for breaking news (78.5 per cent), identify story ideas (59.8 per cent) and search out additional information (56.2 per cent).

²¹ Statistics on Twitter taken from <https://about.twitter.com/company>

²² Statistics on Facebook taken from <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>

the Reuters Institute in Oxford (Bell). Indeed, the ever-increasing amount of information on social media is redefining traditional news values and influencing how journalists “display, present and follow-up their stories (Rottwilm 16). Walmsley, of the *Globe and Mail*, calls social media a “tip service” that can serve to alert journalists to potential stories that are unfolding while remaining cautious about the sourcing:

You can look at it and go, “okay, that’s happening.” You also have to look at it and go “is that really happening.” More than one organization has got bitten by taking a tweet as news and it’s not necessarily. It’s a delivery mechanism, social media. The principles of journalism have to be the same. You’ve got the sourcing on it, you know exactly who is behind the tweet, then you trust it. . . . You want to get it right and you want to be able to say why you’re doing it because there’s a lot of social media that’s just pure tittle tattle (Walmsley, “personal interview”).

Walmsley notes the fast-moving world of social media can pose risks for mainstream media journalists. An issue which generates a lot of traffic on social media – all unfolding at a fast pace – can give the appearance of “news” and thus unduly influence the editorial decisions of mainstream journalists, perhaps not always for the soundest reasons. “The definition of reporting on something changes . . . they get caught up, almost feel the pressure of social media’s traffic and then decide therefore it’s a story,” Walmsley says.

The time pressures are relentless. In the world of traditional media, the deadline for the next print edition, radio broadcast and television newscast are fixed and known so a journalist could have 30 minutes to write a story or three hours. In the world of digital journalism, stories can be posted on-line immediately so the deadline is usually ASAP – as soon as possible. “In a world of instant connectivity journalists are always ‘on deadline’ and acutely aware of their competition both from other news

providers and the myriad of other content available online (Rottwilm 16). The immediacy of social media can be seen on any issue daily as news breaks on Twitter, followed soon after by a flood of reaction and commentary on the new development.

The death of Robin Williams underscored a new reality, driving home how editorial standards, newsroom policies and the guidelines on suicide reporting can be swept aside in the face of the time and competitive pressures brought on by social media. Says Colman:

I think because of the social media, everything that is happening there, that puts pressure on the mainstream media to push things out faster and possibly include details or write in a certain way that they might not have done because they're competing with non-traditional media (Colman, "personal interview").

English says that social media continues to transform how mainstream media do their work: "Digital media, particularly the social media aspect, has changed everything about what we do and caused a rethink of everything we do in our policies and practices" (English, "personal interview").

6.2. Suicide on social media – not the whole story

The publicity around recent suicides has focussed on the tragic deaths of teenagers and Canadians would be forgiven if they thought this group was most at risk. It is not. In fact it was the death of Robin Williams that turned a spotlight on the group most at risk of suicide – middle-aged men. Canadian men are three times more likely to take their lives than women (CASP 33) and numbers from Statistics Canada show that men, aged 50-54, are at greater risk of committing suicide. Aboriginal youth, another at-risk group, have also not merited the same kind of spotlight. According to the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, the suicide rate for First Nations people in 2000 was twice the rate of the general population; in Inuit

regions, the rate was 10 times the general population (CASP 18). It raises the question why journalists give greater attention to certain segments of the population and not others. Newsroom judgments are at play here as journalists and their editors decide that some suicide deaths are more newsworthy. Issues such as cyberbullying or military service have been portrayed as factors in suicides profiled by the media. This suggests that journalists latch on to an external factor as justification for their reporting and thus the suicides that lack a clear news “hook” go unreported.

Another factor to remember is that because of the demographics of those who use social media, the older population may be underrepresented in coverage of suicides. That’s because Twitter users, for example, are mostly a younger demographic; one study suggests that 73 per cent are between 15 and 25 and just 6 per cent are 46 and older.²³ Since Twitter doesn’t require users to disclose their age these results are not definitive. Still it is a caution for journalists that social media may only tell part of the story.

6.3. In a social media era, do guidelines still matter?

Many of the guidelines around suicide reporting pre-date the explosion of social media sites and few have been updated to reflect the new connected-reality that exists for not only journalists, but society at large. Before the Internet, keeping details such as the method of a suicide out of the media ensured that the public at large would effectively be kept in the dark. Today, details not available in a television or newspaper report can sometimes be found elsewhere on the web with just a few keystrokes.

²³ Statistics taken from <http://www.beevolve.com/twitter-statistics/#a2>

That reality now begs the question, if the information is already available online, then why have the guidelines at all? In a 2012 editorial, the *Globe and Mail* raised that very issue, asking how the media could ignore Amanda Todd's death after it had received such broad exposure on the Internet.

It would be futile for the mainstream media to tiptoe around Amanda's suicide when young people are informed by social media. Twenty million people watched the video made by Amanda in which she discussed her pain at being bullied over the Internet. Her face and heartbreak are known everywhere (*Globe and Mail*, "Teen suicide").

Picard calls the guidelines meant to shape reporting on suicide "outdated and anachronistic in the Facebook age" (Picard, "Burying the"). In a 2009 story, he cited the case of a University of Ottawa student who jumped to his death from a school residence building. Picard noted that while some media outlets, including the school newspaper *The Fulcrum*, tiptoed around the death and didn't call it a suicide, news spread quickly across campus via email, Blackberry messages and later Facebook postings ("Burying the"). "Let's face it, with technological advances and shifting mores, privacy is not what is used to be. Neither is suicide" (Picard, "Burying the").

It should also not be assumed that keeping suicide details out of the mainstream media will help shelter adolescents, believed to be an at-risk group, from contagion, from the news of such deaths. In the social media age, traumatic life events like a suicide rarely remain secret in a school or a circle of friends. "When these things happen the kids know what's going on. It's not as though they are secret," Cobb says (Cobb, "personal interview").

Kutcher and Colman make the case that journalists should be held to a higher professional standard than social media, steered by codes of conduct and guidelines and daily oversight by editors.

There's a difference between social media and mainstream media. Social media can be any idiot with two thumbs and a Blackberry . . . The thing that differentiates professional journalists from some hack with a cell phone is hopefully a lot of training, a lot of thought and a lot of skill (Kutcher, "personal interview").

On that thought, there is common ground between journalists and mental health experts. Newspapers, television and radio stations became the authoritative, trusted source of news in their communities because of their commitment to standards and track records as trustworthy sources of news. That reporting and delivery of news has long been underpinned by professionalism and an institutional history. As a result, news outlets are still typically held to a higher standard by the communities they serve and subject to greater scrutiny and verification. English and Walmsley echo the sentiments of many journalists when they argue that the free availability of information on the Internet cannot become justification for mainstream media to abandon journalistic principles and standards.

I don't think we throw up our hands and say we shouldn't have any guidelines when we still aim to be a trusted, credible, source of information, an organization with some integrity. We're not the mob and arguably social media is the mob (English, "personal interview").

That trust in mainstream media continues even as the explosion of social media is changing how people consume their news. A survey of 1,492 Americans in early 2014 for the U.S.-based Media Insight Project found that 40 per cent of Americans said they had learned of news in the last week over social media, using

sites such as Twitter or Facebook.²⁴ The use of social media for news is more prevalent among those under age 30 (70 per cent) but also remains high for groups up to ages 60 and older, where just 1 in 5 say they obtained their news via social media. “Social media, in other words, has become a significant part of the news consumption habits for many Americans across generations,” the survey concluded. Yet that same survey revealed that Americans place more trust in the news from a news outlet (43 per cent trust it mostly or completely) compared to what they see on social media (only 15 per cent said they had high level of trust). The survey also found that people turned to newspapers, both in print and online, more than any other source, especially for news about their local community.

This research and studies like it underscore the point that while social media is proving a popular way of alerting people to news, news organizations are still viewed as authoritative sources of the news. For that reason, there is good justification in the minds of some to maintain guidelines for mainstream media. In its review of restrictions around reporting on suicides, the Law Commission of New Zealand found that reports of suicide in the mainstream media are likely to be viewed as more authoritative by young people than what they see on social media (Law Commission 16). In a 2011 study, Dunlop, More and Romer looked at how young people learned about suicides and concluded that traditional media remain a respected source of news even for this demographic. The researchers interviewed 719 people aged 14 to 24; respondents reported knowledge of persons they knew who had taken their life or

²⁴ Research based on survey of 1,492 Americans in January and February, 2014. Results can be found at <http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/personal-news-cycle/>

attempted suicide as well as personal experiences of hopelessness and suicidal ideation. The most frequently cited sources of suicide stories were print versions of newspapers (64 per cent), followed by friends or family (55 per cent) and Internet news sites (44 per cent) (Dunlop, More and Romer 1076). Other Internet platforms also provided exposure to suicide stories, including social networking sites (25 per cent) and discussion forums (Dunlop, More and Romer 1078). The results showed that traditional news sources remained a dominant source of news at the time of the study.

More recently, the study of suicide clusters by Gould et al. prompted their conclusion that guidelines for mainstream media remain relevant (Gould et al. 41): “Even since the advent of the Internet, therefore, newspapers remain the predominant source of suicide reporting to which adolescents and young adults are exposed, and consequently research-informed guidelines for print media reporting remain important.”

All this points to the conclusion that guidelines remain valid and relevant in the social media age. That is certainly the view of journalists like English, Lonsdale, Walmsley and others, who say there is a place for guidelines on suicide reporting in news organizations. But they also make clear that such guidelines must be developed in a way that accounts for journalistic practices and respects the integrity of reporters. Journalists like Cobb, of the *Ottawa Citizen*, also stress that the mainstream media have an important role to frame the information that spills out on social media. Professional journalists can put events in perspective, point readers to community help and “correct the misinformation which social media inevitably perpetuates”

(Cobb, “personal interview”). Journalist Liam Casey noted that while social media is changing the conversation on suicide, there remains a role for traditional media: “Suicide forces its way into the public realm through new media. Good reporting would give it the context that a Facebook tribute page or a memorial website cannot” (Casey).

6.4. Guidelines for a digital age

Very few of the guidelines written to assist journalists in reporting on suicides offer advice related to the digital age. While many recommendations can apply to stories that appear across a range of media platforms, only a few organizations have gone that extra step with advice specifically tailored for the social media era. One of them is Samaritans. In its media guidelines for reporting on suicide, the organization offers specific suggestions for digital media. For example, it confirmed the caution voiced by Pearson with its recommendation that journalists apply extra vigilance when using online sources. It also notes that circumstances around a death can be easily misreported (Samaritans, “Media Guidelines” 12). “The instantaneous and ‘viral’ circulation of information online makes it all the more important to double check the reliability of trustworthiness of online sources of information” (Samaritans, “Media Guidelines” 12). It suggests reporters use caution when using content from chat rooms and be careful about referencing web sites that memorialize the deceased to avoid glamorizing the death. It suggests care be taken when using photos or videos from social media sites to illustrate a story (Samaritans, “Media Guidelines” 12). Another set of guidelines, jointly produced by a number of organizations, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Association of

Suicidology, also has advice for online media, bloggers and what it calls citizen journalists.²⁵ Like the advice to mainstream media, it says a message of hope and links to treatment services can help reduce contagion (CDC). It says that message boards should be monitored for inappropriate comments or statements that might signal distress. It notes that the potential for a large web audience makes it especially important to monitor online content: “The potential for online reports, photos/videos and stories to go viral make it vital that online coverage of suicide follow site or industry safety recommendations” (CDC).

Yet despite this stated necessity for journalists to get on-line suicide reporting right, there is a dearth of guidance on how to report on suicides through digital media, a shortcoming that mental health organizations would be wise to tackle given the growing importance, reach and influence of this medium.

6.5. Shrinking newsrooms and a sensitive topic

Digital media is changing not only the work practices of journalists but is dramatically undermining the business model that has long sustained traditional media outlets. Advertisers are looking to other venues to spend their dollars, resulting in steep revenue losses for media organizations. This has meant budget cuts and downsizing, resulting in the layoffs of editors and reporters. In 2013, there were 36,700 journalists working at 1,400 U.S. newspapers, down from 55,000 at 1,472 newspapers in 1997, according to the American Society of Newspaper Editors.²⁶ Media outlets in Canada have also seen their workforces shrink. The cuts come at a

²⁵ <http://reportingonsuicide.org/Recommendations2012.pdf>

²⁶ Statistics taken from the annual newsroom census by the American Society of Newspaper Editors. <http://asne.org/content.asp?pl=121&sl=15&contentid=387>

time when news organizations are providing more content across multiple platforms – legacy product, website and social media – with fewer staff and less editorial oversight. Such dramatic changes are causing concerns about what they mean for the workload and skills of journalists and the content they produce, even their capacity to “mentally and physically survive in a more pressured environment” (Rottwilm 16):

There are concerns that greater time pressures and reduced editorial resources have led to ‘deskilling’ in other areas of more traditional journalistic expertise and professional practice in terms of background research, fact checking and reporting based on multiple independent sources (Rottwilm 16).

Those concerns play out in all aspects of a newsroom’s operations. But they can be especially felt in the handling of sensitive stories and the level of editorial oversight required to ensure they meet editorial and legal standards. Both English and Walmsley stress the importance of the oversight of senior editors on stories such as these, a fresh set of eyes that can evaluate copy for taste and adherence to newsroom guidelines. In the case of the *Chronicle Herald*, that editorial oversight ensured that suicide reporting guidelines were considered as they vetted Ross’ story on Parsons’ death. Cobb and Pearson praise the editorial oversight and guidance provided by *Citizen* editors during their writings on suicide. But feeling a responsibility to provide their own due diligence, both reporters say they took extra care in vetting aspects of their respective story’s production, such as editing and the writing of headlines and cutlines, duties normally left to an editor. As Pearson notes, stories on suicide require “nuance and care” and he worries that the changing media landscape – fewer staff and more deadline pressures – could undermine the care that is needed (“personal interview”):

In a competitive landscape where we've lost tonnes of staff, editors, copy editors, colleagues, that's one fear I have is that we aren't going to be sensitive because you're rushing to get it in the paper or on-line and you're not taking the step back to say 'why don't we all just meet at the big table and talk about this' (Pearson, "personal interview").

The changing landscape has had another side effect. With fewer ads, newspapers have gotten smaller, meaning stories – at least for print – have to be shorter. Cobb's story on Jesse Graham was 2,800 words, a luxury of space that provided for rich, nuanced reporting. But at that length such stories are the exception rather than the rule. That leaves reporters struggling to tell the story of a suicide in 500 to 700 words – about the length of a typical newspaper story, for both print edition and online. That is not a lot of space if a journalist is to avoid the simplistic type of reporting that mental health experts complain too often happens. Pearson's first story on Hubley's death was 1,245 words.

Finally, shrinking newsrooms means that media outlets are losing the luxury of so-called beat reporters, those journalists who are dedicated to an issue or topic and can hone an expertise in that field. For example, Picard is widely respected for his coverage of health issues for the *Globe and Mail*. But as newsrooms downsize, beat reporters are lost, replaced by general assignment reporters who tackle the stories of the day, moving from one topic to another as the news dictates. That was partly the driving force behind the *Mindset* guidelines. The advice was written not for the specialist reporter who already knows the topic. Rather it was written to assist the general assignment reporter who is suddenly thrust into covering a story with a mental health angle and who might not have the luxury of time to fully research the issues around the story.

6.6. Finding a balance – should media do more reporting of suicides?

Media coverage of suicides in recent years has brought attention and change in areas such as teenage bullying, concussion injuries in the National Hockey League and mental health services for military personnel. Research into suicide contagion suggests that such news coverage carries the risk of prompting further suicides. But as noted there is potential benefit, as well, that comes with stories on suicide and mental health, raising community awareness about the issues. In writing stories on suicide, Cobb says the media have to balance the “potential good against the potential bad.” He says the stories about the deaths of Jesse Graham, Daron Richardson and Jamie Hubley have “done far more good than they have bad. They’ve done an enormous amount to remove the stigma around suicide, which is still a huge problem” (Cobb, “personal interview”). He said stories on suicides and others that he has done on post-traumatic stress disorder suffered by soldiers “tells people that they’re not alone and that they have options and they have support” (Cobb, “personal interview”). As noted, Cobb’s story on Graham resonated with readers, prompting emails from across the country. While mental health professionals worry about those who are vulnerable to copycat suicides, Cobb wonders how many might have been saved over the years had more been written on suicides. Such publicity can alert people to the warning signs of mental distress and point them to community resources that can help. “If they caught one, two or three before they got to this stage, then boy, that’s very much worthwhile. It has also raised awareness. I don’t think it’s up for discussion. This is the way to do it,” Cobb says (“personal interview”).

Mental health professionals (Hatcher; Colman) see some benefits in bringing greater profile to suicides. But they remain distrustful of the ability of journalists to write about the topic in a way that doesn't spur contagion. The caution is underpinned by several concerns: a greater public willingness to discuss suicide coupled with journalists who either through ignorance or professional considerations are not moved by the concerns around contagion and are not willing to follow guidelines, plus the added challenges of working in an environment where time pressures can undermine guidelines. Says Colman:

I'm worried that the appetite for following the guidelines is wavering in the interest of pressure to publish stories that people are going to read. I think for example the Robin Williams is a good example of really respectable media organizations flagrantly breaking the rules (Colman, "personal interview").

While some reporters debate the merits of the research around contagion and the strength of links between a story on suicide and further deaths, others are unaware about the concerns around the issue, one which psychiatrists say carries a real human toll (Kutcher; Hatcher). Journalists and editors can make their own decisions on the issue but they should at least be informed decisions and thus journalists should be familiar with the concerns and research on the topic. Even those who dispute the notion of suicide contagion can find useful guidance in the pages of *Mindset*, whose recommendations do not infringe on editorial integrity or ask journalists to compromise their story telling.

While mental health professionals criticize journalists for their lack of knowledge about the guidelines and the research around contagion, they are not so quick to acknowledge their own lack of understanding of the principles and practices that underpin the media's work or how journalists see their role in society. That

ignorance is betrayed by comments that journalists only cover suicides to sell newspapers or purposely sensationalize such deaths. That gulf, noted by Ross, became apparent to Lonsdale during discussions for the preparation of the *Mindset* guide. “There is a lack of understanding about journalists and what they do,” Lonsdale said (“personal interview”). Lonsdale says that writing about suicide speaks to the role of the media to highlight issues of public concern in a community. “We draw issues to people’s attention that need to be looked at. Suicide surely is one of them. It is a major killer and we treat it as though it’s just ‘that thing’ out there instead of looking at what the causes are, the real causes,” he said.

Suicide stories are difficult to report. They are emotionally taxing for journalists, who must immerse themselves in the grief of families and friends during their interviews. Journalists feel the responsibility of producing a story that is a fair and accurate portrait of the deceased. The dimension of contagion and the implied threat that so-called risky reporting could lead to further deaths imposes a further stress on reporters. Notes Ross, “It’s a big burden we don’t face in other kinds of reporting” (“personal interview”). The unique risks of writing on suicide were highlighted by Hatcher as well, who noted, “I think that reporting on suicide is reasonably unique in that you do need to report things without killing the reader” (Hatcher). But Lonsdale says that journalists cannot be paralyzed or “cowed” into not writing on suicides because of the potential risks: “I think we have to be responsible and ethical but we’ve got to know . . . we can’t control all of the consequences and that on balance good journalism that looks at issues will do more good than harm” (“personal interview”).

Unlike medical professionals who work under the ethos “do no harm,” such a goal is likely impossible for journalists. For example, under a “do no harm,” mandate, it is unlikely that journalists could have reported on former Toronto Mayor Rob Ford’s use of crack cocaine since such stories would have certainly “harmed” Ford’s reputation. Instead, as Ward notes, journalists should aspire to “minimize harm” with the goal that any negative consequences of a story will be outweighed by the publicity brought to the issue by media attention. In Lonsdale’s view, the argument speaks to the role of journalism: “It’s not journalism’s job to solve the problems of the world, it’s to bring them up to the surface for discussion (“personal interview”).

If the conclusion is the media should be writing more on suicide, what is the right number of suicides to cover? All of them? Kutcher doesn’t buy into the argument that more coverage will lead to fewer suicides.

I’ve heard people argue that the media should report every suicide because this is going to decrease the stigma. That’s just an idiocy argument. The media doesn’t report every murder or every domestic abuse. You just don’t do that. Why? Because it’s not news is the answer (Kutcher, “personal interview”).

Like murders and domestic assaults and indeed other events in a community, news values and judgments ultimately dictate what gets covered, although stories on suicide remain a challenge simply because journalists remain in the dark about many of the deaths. As result, the suicides that are profiled in the news pages can result in a skewed picture of the reality of suicides, as Fishman and Weimann highlighted in their research.

Walmsley says the media’s position on suicide reporting has been at times “inconsistent, paradoxical” by not covering some deaths but publicizing others:

What are the parameters? Have you got principles in place that explain transparently why it is you're covering the suicide as opposed to not covering the suicide? There usually, I think, has to be a public interest, which is fertile ground, public interest is in the eye of the beholder so very often (Walmsley, "personal interview").

As previously noted, the *Mindset* guidelines pose this question to journalists:

"Do consider whether this particular death is newsworthy." The sentiment behind the question is an important one – should this suicide be in the media spotlight? There will rarely be a "right" answer. The same suicide may prompt one response from journalists, another from mental health professionals, perhaps another from family and friends of the deceased. Yet, the move to give greater profile to suicides is not a call to return to the days of sensationalist reporting, with gore-filled stories of suicide splashed across the front page. Nor does it mean a swing to the other extreme with no stories written on such deaths. Instead, it suggests finding an informed middle ground, where suicide is treated as a serious health concern that takes a tragic toll on individuals and society but where there is also a recognition that the stories on suicides may themselves have consequences. Indeed, the viewpoints of journalists and mental health experts are not mutually exclusive. Instead they point the way to writing more about suicides, but carefully since the "consequences are so much more severe" (Colman).

The guidelines around the reporting of suicide have often been taken as deterrence to not report on suicides at all. That is not the case. All urge caution and provide recommendations – some more workable than others – to journalists on how to report on deaths to minimize the potential for contagion. But they are not meant as a call for silence. Indeed, the guidelines produced by the Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention in conjunction with others recognize that publicity can be helpful (CDC): “Covering suicide carefully, even briefly, can change public misperceptions and correct myths, which can encourage those who are vulnerable or at risk to seek help.”

Hatcher says there is “compelling” evidence that the words and pictures around suicide reporting do contribute to a contagion effect but says that reporting suicides in a “slightly different way” can bring attention to the issue without potentially deadly side effects: “I think suicides are a tragedy but they are also, if they are reported, an opportunity for education, an opportunity to improve mental health literacy and to give people information about where to go to get help” (Hatcher).

Journalists (English, Stead, Cobb) and mental health professionals (Colman, Kutcher) say that news organizations are reporting more on suicide than has been the case in the past decades. Unlike the gory coverage of suicides in the early part of the 20th century, Walmsley said that reporting on suicide today is more likely to be accompanied by follow-on stories trying to more closely examine the root causes of the tragedy. “You might really get that root cause if you can explore it properly and understanding the cause and effect and the mechanics that are attached to it all” (Walmsley). Yet the research for this thesis suggests that the suicides that are covered are still those involving a celebrity or extenuating circumstances, such as military service. It appears that the media continue to need a “news hook” to cover a suicide; that the act of suicide by itself is not seen as newsworthy. There is an opportunity for journalists to break this model of suicide coverage and decide that more of the “everyday” suicides are worthy of coverage, even absent other obvious factors.

Writes English: “Most any time someone takes their own life, it seems to be there’s a case to be made for ‘overriding public interest’ in seeking to understand why”
(English, “We need”).

Chapter 7. Conclusion

This thesis sought to explore how social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have influenced coverage by traditional media outlets in Canada of some suicides. Specifically, I sought to examine several questions: are social media sites changing the way suicides are covered and if so, how? With the onset of the Internet and social networking sites, do the guidelines offered by mental health organizations to influence how suicides are reported remain relevant or valid? Finally, what ethical concerns confront journalists in this new era, such as incorporating suicide notes found on the Internet into their stories?

The analysis examining the media coverage around the deaths of Rehtaeh Parsons, Amanda Todd and Jamie Hubley highlighted how journalists were able to draw on social media sites for their coverage. In each case, reporters were able to use Facebook, Tumblr and YouTube to uncover personal information about the deceased, even possible motivations for the suicides. The death of Robin Williams illustrated how authorities will speak publicly about the suicide of a prominent person.

Before the advent of social media, journalists usually had difficulty getting such information because of the reluctance of a grief-stricken family to speak about a death and the refusal of authorities to provide information about a suicide. That remains a significant hurdle for journalists seeking to report on the suicide of an individual not considered to be a celebrity. Though the interaction between social media and traditional media is in its early stages, I conclude that social media is already changing how journalists report on suicides.

Given that influence, it is fair to ask whether the guidelines proposed by mental health groups to influence the reporting on suicides remain relevant. From the research, I conclude that there is value in having guidelines that both respect journalistic integrity while seeking to address concerns around contagion. I see a continuing role for guidelines because traditional media remain influential voices in their communities.

Finally, what are the ethical considerations around drawing on social media to report on suicides? First, journalists must answer the concern that applies to all information found on social media. They must assure themselves of its source and verify its truthfulness. But there is also the question about information specific to suicides and whether journalists should publish details found in a suicide note or a blog that provide hints about motivation for the death or the mental distress leading up to it. There can be no blanket rule. Like all ethical decisions faced by journalists and editors in handling sensitive material, they must be taken on a case-by-case basis, weighing the circumstances of each story. But following on the advice from Pearson, Lonsdale and Ross, it is critical that journalists not view such information in isolation or form conclusions about person's life based only on what they view solely on social media. Such information must be put into context, with the help of family and friends, and carefully framed in a story. Journalists and editors should give thought to this new reality and have a discussion about the ethical questions that such scenarios pose.

Changing societal attitudes around mental health, a growing willingness to more openly discuss suicides and the increasing profile of social media are combining to bring suicides into the public spotlight – and into the news. Reporting on suicide

speaks to a news organization's obligation to the community it serves – to report on events and trends that deserve attention but do so in a way that is responsible. The challenge for journalists is how to bring greater profile to mental health issues, including suicides, in a way that respects their professional duties as journalists but also considers the potential effect of such coverage on vulnerable members of the media audiences.

At the heart of this lies the concern voiced by mental health professionals around contagion – that the publicity around one suicide – notably the method of death and details about the personality of the deceased – can act as a trigger and prompt other vulnerable individuals to attempt to take their own life. There is scepticism among the ranks of journalists about the potential side effects of suicide coverage. Indeed, not every media report on suicide will spur further suicides. But mental health experts insist the effect is real. Everyone should be able to agree that stories about suicide require “nuance and care,” as *Ottawa Citizen* reporter Matthew Pearson notes. But the concern around contagion should not scare off reporters from tackling the topic. Picard and Lonsdale encourage journalists to write about suicide with the same vigour and attention they give to other illnesses and diseases that are affecting Canadians. Pearson, Cobb and Scrivener are all examples of journalists who have shown that writing on suicide can be done sensitively and effectively.

The media's treatment of suicide has swung from enthusiastic gore-filled coverage splashed across the front pages a century ago to a reluctance to cover suicides, except in cases of a prominent death. This hesitancy to routinely report on suicides is captured by the newsroom practices of the *CBC*, *Globe and Mail* and

Toronto Star, which are representative of the journalistic norms on the topic. Such attitudes represent a blend of influences: the societal view that suicide is private and individual along with the view of the mental health profession that writing on suicides can be dangerous. Such attitudes took root so long ago that journalists interviewed for this thesis were unable to explain how they became part of the accepted newsroom culture or internal policies. And while the formal link cannot be traced, journalists such as Lonsdale and Tompkins say the mental health concerns, for example, have caused a chill in suicide reporting. So if, in fact, newsrooms have arrived at this approach to reporting on suicides through a blend of sometimes indiscernible influences and haphazard standards, it would seem appropriate then for editors to stop and actively question whether such approaches are still appropriate. It can be argued that it is time for editors to assess their news coverage of suicides as social attitudes themselves are evolving.

Social media can help break down some of the barriers that stand in the way of such coverage. Yet social media, in its worst forms, represents the kind of 19th-century/early 20th century, devil-may-care attitude of the kind that saw gore-filled suicide stories splashed across the front pages. It operates largely without guidelines or an ethos of service to the community. For the most part, journalism itself has moved away from its sensationalist days, becoming more professional and in many cases motivated by a sense of responsibility to the community. It is these attitudes that journalists must bring to their evolving approach to suicide. Journalists must resist the news circus atmosphere that social media amplifies, by its volume of information and speed.

Kovach and Rosentiel speak of a journalist's obligation to bring "meaningful context" to information. That obligation is arguably even more important and more useful in the social media era. As Walmsley notes, today's journalists writing on suicide are more likely to seek out the "why" of a suicide, attempting to put such a death in a broader context. Ward says that journalists have an obligation to write on suicides as part of their responsibility to cover a community. "Journalists should maintain a daily record of events so that uncomfortable topics are discussed publicly" (Ward).

As noted, Canada lacks a national set of guidelines to shape reporting of suicides. That means Canada has also lacked the concerted education campaign that has accompanied such guidelines in places like Australia to raise awareness among journalists about the potential risks of such reporting. Of course, the creation of national guidelines would raise important questions. Who would write them? Would they have to be followed? Would they infringe on press freedoms? Certainly, Canada does not want to go the route of New Zealand, which enacted legislation backed by the threat of monetary penalties to influence how suicides are reported in that country. Nevertheless, there is a need in Canada for national guidelines that are accepted by Canadian journalists. *Mindset* goes a long way to filling that gap. It is an excellent primer for journalists on how to report sensitively and responsibly on issues of mental health and suicide. But such guidelines need to be effectively disseminated to journalists if they are to have any use.

Several recommendations have emerged from the thesis research to assist journalists covering the topic and mental health professionals who want to see mental health in the spotlight but in way that minimizes concerns around contagion.

7.1 Recommendations

1. The first challenge is the gulf that divides journalists and mental health professionals. Some journalists view the concerns around contagion with scepticism. Already wary of any outside influences on their stories, they will dismiss guidelines meant to influence their reporting on the topic unless the recommendations are credible and account for journalistic practices. For their part, mental health professionals can be too quick to label suicide coverage as sensationalist, to denounce such stories as a bid to sell newspapers or attract viewers without understanding what largely drives such coverage in the first place – the professional responsibility that most journalists feel when covering their communities. An effort by journalists and mental health experts to better understand each other’s professional obligations, practices and concerns would help both sides find common ground as we seek to find ways to write responsibly on sensitive issues such as suicide.

2. Education of journalists. The reluctance of some journalists to acknowledge suicide contagion is not entirely borne out of mere scepticism. In some cases, it is the result of ignorance. Kutcher bemoans the lack the of “mental health literacy” amongst the Canadian population and newsrooms are not immune to that ignorance. Journalism schools should be teaching students about the concerns – and scepticism – around media-induced contagion. Even if not all journalists embrace the theory, they should at least be made aware of the debate and be sensitized to the issues and familiar with

the various guidelines that exist. They should know that reporting the method of death is considered by mental health professionals to be especially problematic as is romanticizing the deceased and glorifying the act of suicide. But they should also know that writing about suicide has the potential to bring attention to the problem, break down stigmas and point readers or viewers to community resources to get help.

3. Rethinking newsroom attitudes to the coverage of mental health and suicides. As noted, there is a confluence of factors that should prompt media outlets to rethink the newsroom attitudes and the editorial policies that have discouraged the reporting of suicides in the past decades, either individual deaths or the topic at large. There is greater willingness in society to discuss mental health issues with the goal of knocking down stigmas and encouraging people to get help. This attitude extends as well to suicide. Families of those who have died by suicide are speaking out in a bid to help others avoid a similar tragedy. Finally, in some cases, social media sites are providing a window into some of those deaths. As noted, the *Toronto Star's* newsroom policy guide says that the newspaper should only report a suicide when there is an "overriding public interest." But as English asks, is there not an overriding public interest in every suicide, to examine the circumstances that led to the death with the goal of preventing further deaths? This is not a call to cover every suicide, just as media outlets don't cover every murder or fatal car accident in great detail. But the practice of covering only those suicides that happen in public or involve public figures falls short of properly telling the story of a societal problem that claims close to 4,000 Canadians a year. Media outlets should have an ambition to better tell the story of suicide and the impact of mental illness. This will require the assistance of

authorities, such as police forces, to be more open with information about suicides. This is not to argue that the police should publicize every suicide by issuing a news releases, as is the case for murders and serious traffic accidents. But when asked whether a suicide has occurred, hiding behind the phrase “no foul play suspected” should no longer be an acceptable response.

Newsroom policy guides should be rewritten to encourage this coverage and provide journalists with clear guidelines that outline what precautions are helpful in such stories. News organizations should assess the various guidelines offered by mental health groups and decide if there is one set of recommendations that best aligns with their own editorial policy. Those recommendations should be outlined in editorial policy to ensure journalists are aware of them.

The newsroom policy manuals should also acknowledge the new reality of social media and provide guidance to journalists on how to handle sensitive information about a deceased, such as a suicide note, found on sites like Twitter and Facebook. As well, Robin Williams’ death revealed that in this era of social media, coverage of a suicide can now unfold with unprecedented speed, undermining editorial oversight and guidelines. Live televised news conferences mean that details of a suicide, such as the method of death, can be broadcast with no editorial filter. In the case of Williams’ death, details were broadcast and subsequently posted on news websites that perhaps might not have been aired or published had editors had the benefit of time and reflection. Therefore, knowing the potential for trouble with such news events, editors need to consider what precautions they can put in place to ensure potentially disturbing details are vetted before being posted on-line or broadcast.

The death of Robin Williams also provided insight into the potential good that can come from coverage of such deaths. It put suicide in the spotlight, at least for a time. That in turn sparked social media discussion about the imperative to reach out to those who may need help. News stories examined the factors behind suicides, the causes of depression and its treatments and highlighted the kinds of community resources available. As noted by Stead, of the *Globe and Mail*, Williams' death became a "wide opportunity for the media to talk about this public health issue" (Stead).

Finally, it's helpful to recall the advice offered from the *Mindset* guidelines: "Don't shy away from writing about suicide" (Mindset 30). Indeed, the guide makes the case that sensitive reporting of suicides is even more important in the era of social media, "when false information and rumour may be rampant" (Mindset 30). The message from mental health professionals, for all their cautions, strikes a similar note: "We want to talk about this but we want to talk about this in a very particular way so that we're doing more good than harm" (Colman).

Appendix A

A.1. Interviews.

Cobb, Chris. Reporter, *Ottawa Citizen*. 10 November 2014

Colman, Ian. Canada Research Chair in Mental Health Epidemiology, associate professor, School of Epidemiology, Public Health and Preventive Medicine University of Ottawa. 27 October 2014.

English, Kathy. Public Editor. *Toronto Star*. 26 November 2014.

Hatcher, Dr. Simon. Psychiatrist at The Royal, professor and vice-chair of research, department of psychiatry, faculty of medicine, University of Ottawa. 20 November 2014.

Kutcher, Dr. Stan. Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Dalhousie University and staff psychiatrist and Sun Life Financial Chair in adolescent mental health at the IWK Health Centre. 29 October 2014.

Lonsdale, Cliff. President, Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma. 19 November 2014

Pearson, Matthew. Reporter, *Ottawa Citizen*. 14 November 2014; follow-up 17 February 2015.

Ross, Selena. Reporter. *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*. 28 November 2014.

Walmsley, David. Editor-in-chief, *Globe and Mail*. 31 October 2014.

A.2. Questions for mental health professionals.

These are the questions that formed the basis of the interviews with mental health professionals for this thesis though spin-off questions often arose during the discussions.

1. Is suicide contagion a concern for you? If so, why?
2. If suicide contagion is a concern, are there specific aspects of news coverage that are especially worrisome? Or is it all coverage in general?
3. Is reporting the method of suicide a concern? If so, why?
4. Many media outlets do not report suicides unless there is a compelling public reason, largely out of a concern for suicide contagion. Do you agree with this approach?
5. Do you think there should be more reporting of suicides? Less? None at all?
6. Has the lack of coverage around suicides contributed to any stigma that surrounds mental illness?
7. Mental health associations have presented guideline to assist journalists in their reporting on suicides. Have you had a chance to see these guidelines and if so, what do you think of them?
8. Do you find that reporting on suicides, when it does occur, adheres to the guidelines?
9. If not, does the reporting tend to violate the guidelines in a way that fits any pattern? For example, are there common mistakes made by journalists?
10. Are there any changes you would make to the guidelines?
11. Or if there are problems with coverage of suicides, do journalists need to be better informed that such guidelines exist and the concerns about the potential for copycat suicides?
12. Some voices have urged change. David Goldbloom, chair of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, says the guidelines “reflect late-20th century thinking. They need to be seriously reconsidered.” In an editorial, the Globe and Mail said the silence around suicide has made it harder for individuals to seek help. Do you agree?
13. Do you see any benefit to increased attention on suicides?
14. Do you have concerns about the impact of social media on suicide contagion. If so, what are those concerns?
15. Should the guidelines offered by mental health associations to assist media with writing on suicides now be extended to anyone who writes on suicides in a public forum, such as social media sites such as Facebook.
16. Is social media changing the way that suicides are being reported by the media?

A.3. Questions for journalists and editors.

These are the questions that formed the basis of the interviews with journalists and editors for this thesis though spin-off questions often arose during the discussions.

1. Does your media outlet have a formal policy regarding how suicides should be reported?
2. Have you ever reported on a suicide?
3. If so, why? Were there secondary circumstances that influenced the decision to report?
4. Are you aware of the concept of suicide contagion?
5. Are you aware of guidelines published by the mental health community to assist journalists in reporting suicides?
6. Did the guidelines assist / influence your reporting?
7. Did you find the guidelines relevant / valid?
8. Do you think the guidelines should be changed? If so, how?
9. Does the media in Canada do enough reporting on suicides and the associated issues of mental health?
10. Some voices have urged change. David Goldbloom, chair of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, says the guidelines “reflect late-20th century thinking. They need to be seriously reconsidered.” In an editorial, the Globe and Mail said the silence around suicide has made it harder for individuals to seek help. Do you agree?
11. Many media outlets do not report suicides unless there is a compelling public reason, largely out of a concern for suicide contagion. Do you agree with this approach?
12. Do you see media attitudes towards coverage of suicides changing? If so, how?
13. Is it your impression more stories are being written about suicides? If so, why is this the case?
14. Is social media changing the way that suicides are being reported by the media?

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