Representations of Violence, Representations as Violence: When the News Reports on Homicides of Disabled People

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Abstract

Ableist necropolitics can be seen no more starkly than in news portrayals of the murders of disabled people by family or caregivers. When such murders are reported in the news, disabled people as full subjects fade away, portrayed as objects of care and suffering; their murders are routinely presented as an understandable if tragic response by 'overwhelmed' carers. This article examines Australian news reporting on four cases of family murder–suicide involving disabled victims to explore news framings *of* violence *as* violence. We situate these representations within a spectrum of connected and overlapping ableist violence and conceptualise the harms they can produce and sanction. We argue that news portrayals of homicides involving disabled victims not only are frequently ableist and legitimising but also constitute a form of ableist epistemic violence that scaffolds ontological, structural and direct violence against disabled people.

Keywords: Ableist violence; ableism; epistemic violence; murder of disabled people; news reporting of disability; media representation of disability.

Introduction

In 2004, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on the trial of Daniela Dawson, who pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of manslaughter for suffocating her son Jason. Jason was autistic. The article was titled 'When love is not enough'. It opened by describing Dawson as a good mother, chronicling her 'daily battles' raising Jason without adequate assistance and presenting the Crown's support of a diminished charge because the killing was 'an act of love'. It concluded by quoting Dawson's estranged husband:

> Any parent of an autistic child will tell you they believe they have served a sentence ... I can see no gain for the community, or any personal satisfaction, in seeing her sent to prison. (Sydney Morning Herald 2004)

Strikingly absent from the article was any human account of Jason—his personhood, experiences and rights, either across his 10-year life or in the moment he was suffocated. His life, like those of so many other disabled people, was characterised as a burden to others and likened to a prison sentence for his parents.

Such news reporting cannot be dismissed as a relic of outdated discourses of disability. Ableist discourses have proliferated—even intensified—in recent years (Briant, Watson and Philo 2013). Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the deep

roots of ableism: the 'masks' of purported progress lowered as non-disabled people experienced unexpected levels of corporeal vulnerability (Thorneycroft and Asquith 2022: 144). In this context, cultural licence has been granted to more explicitly cast the lives of disabled people[1] as disposable, legitimised as sites on which to absorb ableist anxieties and the fallout of the pandemic. Ableist discourses infuse the necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) that characterise news reporting on the deaths of people with disability, constructing some (non-disabled) deaths as tragic and illegitimate and other (disabled) deaths as natural, necessary and ungrievable (Thorneycroft and Asquith 2022). Such ableist politics can be seen no more starkly than in media representations of the murders of disabled people by their family or caregivers.

In this article, we present an analysis of Australian news reporting on four murder cases of disabled people by members of their families to explore how news framings represent violence against disabled people and how these representations might constitute epistemic violence—a form of violence that legitimises more overt structural and direct forms of harm. While we also seek to contribute to the relative sparsity of critical work examining how violence against disabled people features in the news, a key purpose of this paper is to situate these representations within a spectrum of connected and overlapping ableist violence and to conceptualise the harms they can produce and sanction.

Violence Against Disabled People: Representations and Realities

In news coverage of disabled people who are murdered by their families, disabled people as full subjects often fade away—they are presented as *objects* of care and suffering and defined by their relations to non-disabled persons (Loftis 2016; Perry 2017). Positioning disability primarily as '*as* suffering' (Waltz 2008) or a loss that has already occurred (McGuire 2010) legitimises framings of these murders as 'mercy killings' (Loftis 2016; Perry 2017; Seal 2018). Discourses of disability as burden—reducing the flourishing not just of the self but also of others—bolster narratives of the murders as understandable, if tragic, responses by 'overwhelmed' parents (Buiten and Coe 2022; Loftis 2016).

Portrayals of the murders of disabled people predominantly focus on the experiences, struggles and perspectives of non-disabled family and carers (Loftis 2016; Perry 2017). Consequently, there is a high level of perpetrator sympathising, and the killers' versions of such murders (e.g., as motivated by 'love') are typically taken uncritically as truths; further, broader social contexts for the murders are obscured in favour of tales of personal tragedy (Mathews 2018).

These representations have effects. Cultural representations of disability have historically served to legitimise institutionalised torture and inhumane 'treatment' (Waltz 2008). News reporting on the murders of disabled people can shape how carers who kill frame and rationalise their actions (Lucardie and Sobsey 2005a; Waltz 2008;). Once the murder has been committed, portrayals shape justice responses (Edwards 2014; Sullivan 2017) and reduce punishments 'because the victims are represented in ways that devalue them as human beings but make it easy to pity and sympathise with their carers' (Waltz 2008: 21). As Loftis (2016: 470) has explained, a 'fluid boundary' exists between cultural representations and reality.

Violence against disabled people is rife in Australia and across the globe. Disabled people are more likely to experience sexual and physical assault, financial abuse and intimate partner violence than non-disabled people (Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health 2021). Children with disabilities are more likely to be killed by their parents than those without (Coorg and Tournay 2013; Rupp 2018). Disabled people face not only these more visible and explosive forms of violence (Zizek 2008), but also numerous subtle intrusions located at the more 'mundane' end of a spectrum of harm. The systemic denial of bodily choice, for instance, can be considered a form of violence, which 'paves the way' for other more overt violence to occur (Hollomotz 2012: 58). People with disability additionally face forms of 'disability-specific lawful violence' such as forced sterilisation (Steele 2014). The structural and systemic violence of poverty, inadequate healthcare and neoliberal welfare cuts shape and intersect with overt, direct experiences of violence (Neille and Penn 2017).

We understand the homicides of disabled people by family and carers as intricately interconnected to these more subtle, systemic and permissible forms of harm. As Hollomotz (2012: 54) argued, 'violence should … not be understood as singular acts of physical or sexual assault. Those are merely more severe expressions of bigotry on a spectrum of routine intrusions'. Following Zizek, we also pay attention to 'the contours of the background which generates such outbursts' (2008: 8)—the ableism that underpins the array of violence disabled people experience and the often inadequate responses to this violence.

While some work has critiqued representations of the murders of disabled people by their carers, little research examines news media portrayals of these cases through a critical disability lens (Lucardie and Sobsey 2005a, 2005b; Perry 2017 is noteworthy exceptions). How the murder of disabled people is represented commonly emerges in studies as a subset of issues, in research on intimate partner homicides (Richards, Gillespie and Smith 2014), in broader work on ableism (Waltz 2008) or in the context of literary (Loftis 2016) and legal representations (Bottoms et al. 2011; Edwards 2014; Sullivan 2017). Little work explicitly examines media representations of violence against disabled people as a form of violence itself—in a way that can connect representations with the spectrums of violence experienced by disabled persons.

The Study

In this article, we analyse news media coverage of four familicide–suicides in which disabled people were victims. While relatively rare, familicide–suicides—the murder of a partner and child(ren) followed by suicide (Wilson, Daly and Daniele 1995)—are highly newsworthy events (Galvin, Quinn and Cleary 2021). Further, most recent familicide–suicides in Australia have included disabled victims, with disability featuring prominently in reporting (Buiten 2022). While disabled people experience a range of violences aside from homicides, many of these do not meet key news values—those elements of a story considered 'newsworthy'—and are therefore unlikely to be centred in reporting (Jewkes 2015). Further, harms inside segregated and secluded institutional settings, where many disabled people continue to reside (Ben-Moshe, Chapman and Carey 2014), often go unnoticed. Therefore, homicides outside institutional contexts represent one of the few forms of violence against disabled people reported upon in mainstream media, a tendency amplified in cases with multiple victims such as familicide. Thus, these cases mark sites of intense media and public engagement and reveal how news deploys discourses of disability to make sense of complex forms of violence often characterised as inexplicable (Galvin, Quinn and Cleary 2021).

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. We first outline our methodological approach. Then, we analyse four familicide–suicide cases, drawing on critical disability studies (Campbell 2009; Goodley 2014) to suggest that news reporting on homicides involving disabled victims is frequently ableist and legitimising. Next, we utilise conceptualisations of epistemic violence provided by Dotson (2011) and Spivak (2010) to suggest that news reporting on the murders of disabled people not only represents violence in a way that is problematic but also constitutes epistemic violence. That is, media representation *is* violent in its silencing of disabled knowledges about ableist violence. Because 'epistemic violence is always already entangled with other forms of violence, including direct and physical violence' (Brunner 2021: 201), we then consider the potential implications of ableist epistemic violence in scaffolding ontological, structural and direct violence against disabled people. Finally, we highlight the liberatory effects of centring disabled voices.

Methodology

The analysis centres on mainstream news coverage of familicide–suicide in which at least one victim was identified in the press as disabled. While non-traditional media plays an increasingly important role in mediating discourses of violence, mainstream news continues to enjoy broad public consumption, playing a significant role in setting the terms of debate and often influencing public perceptions and policy (Buiten 2022). Recognising that discourses of disability circulate in complex ways across and within various media platforms, we begin our analysis here, in the not-uncontested but influential Fourth Estate.

Strikingly, of the five familicide–suicide cases reported in Australian news between 2014 and 2021, four involved disabled victims. Data were drawn from national and state-based news sources across a range of reporting styles and political orientations. Terms such as 'murder-suicide', 'family murder' and 'family killing' were used to identify reported cases matching the study criteria. Once identified, data were collected from the *Australian and New Zealand Reference Centre* for print news and an open access online search, based on the name of the perpetrator in each case (Table 1). Duplicates were noted.

Table 1: Newspaper data summary

Publications	Cases				
	Hunt	**Milne**	**Manrique**	**Miles**	**Total** (excluding duplicates)
The Australian	5	1	7	10	23
The Canberra Times	5	0	7	5 + 1 duplicate	17
The Daily Telegraph (Sydney)	4	8	21	1 + 5 duplicates	34
Sydney Morning Herald	19	4	16 + 4 duplicates	9 + 8 duplicates	48
Northern Territory News	1	0	1	2	4
The Daily Mercury (Tasmania)	1	0	4 + 1 duplicate	9 + 2 duplicates	14
The Age (Melbourne)	10 + 12 duplicates	3 duplicates only	5 + 9 duplicates	16	34
The West Australian (Western Australia)	0	0	0	10	10
The Guardian	7	0	4	6	17
Crikey	0	0	1	2	3
News.com.au	4 + 1 duplicate	1 + 3 duplicates	13 + 3 duplicates	5	23
Total	70 **56**	20 **14**	100 **81**	91 **75**	281 **226**

The following cases were identified. In 2014, Geoffrey Hunt shot dead his wife Kim and children Fletcher (10), Mia (8) and Phoebe (6) before shooting himself. A major focus in the case was the perceived impact on Hunt of a traumatic brain injury Kim had sustained following a car accident in 2012.

In 2015, Darren Milne deliberately drove himself, his wife Susana Estevez Castillo (who was pregnant at the time) and sons Liam (11) and Benjamin (7) into a tree next to a strip of road in NSW. Only Benjamin survived. In notes found on his computer, Milne suggested he did not see a future for his family and his sons, who had Fragile X Syndrome.

In 2016, Fernando Manrique pumped poisonous gas into the Sydney home he shared with his wife Maria and children Elisa (11) and Martin (10), who were autistic, killing them all. The case was subject to a coronial inquest, which found that the children's disability was not a factor in Manrique's decision-making.

In 2018, Peter Miles shot dead his wife Cynda, adult daughter Katrina and Katrina's four children, Taye (13), Rylan (12), Arye (10) and Kadyn (8), before calling the police and taking his own life. The case was never subject to a coronial inquest, but media speculation circulated around a range of possible explanations, from mental illness to custody disputes, and reported that the children were autistic.

In line with broader patterns in familicide, all cases involved white, middle-class, heterosexual, nuclear families, one an immigrant family from Colombia residing in an urban area (the Lutz-Manriques) and the remaining cases rural and semirural.[2]

Representations *of* Violence: Crafting Violence Against Disabled People as Intelligible

News reporting on family violence is frequently criticised for representing perpetrator mental illness or personal stress as the cause of their actions (Buiten and Coe 2022). So, too, it was with reporting on the murders of disabled people. Once established, the existence of disability was frequently suggested—directly or indirectly—as the cause of perpetrators' assumed distress and the motive for their actions. This narrative was constructed in various ways: by essentialising disability as suffering, through superfluous references to disability that implicitly positioned it as omnirelevant, and by foregrounding perpetrator and carer experiences and perspectives.

Essentialising Disability as Suffering

At times, positioning the 'strain' of caring for disabled people as an intelligible cause of violence was patently speculative. This was particularly pronounced in more tabloid-style newspapers, where the disability-as-cause lens was deployed to sensationalise the cases, marking them as *apart* from the litany of gendered domestic homicide cases reported in the news. So it was in the Manrique case, where Elisa and Martin's autism was quickly assumed as the 'cause' and primarily framed through a pathology lens of disability as deficiency and pain (Goodley 2017). With little initially to go on to establish a motive for the killings, news outlets quickly crafted stories around the role the children's disability was presumed to have played. One headline asked, 'was it all too much for tragic parents?' (Brennan 2016). The article posited the following:

> Some believe the demands of raising two intellectually disabled children may have become too much for Ms Lutz—a dedicated volunteer and fundraiser—and her husband Fernando Manrique, whose children's severe autism meant they were unable to speak.

This framing was driven primarily by the tendency to rely on quotes from neighbours. For example, one 'described the victims as a lovely family but noted Ms Lutz had spoken of how they often struggled with their children's "severe" conditions' (Gusmaroli, Brennan and Paterson 2016):

> Maria used to tell me how hard it was on her and her husband having two kids who were deaf and dumb,' she said. 'She said it was a heavy thing on her heart and some days she found it impossible to cope. They were such a lovely, friendly couple.

Here, the distinction between those who used violence—assuming absolute control in the decision to extinguish life—and those who died by the violence of others is obscured; the 'family' is collectively positioned as 'tragic'. The (at this point two) suspected killers[3] are depicted in strikingly empathetic terms as victims themselves—victims of their children's 'severe conditions'. Pathologising terms such as 'deaf and dumb' (Shakespeare 2018) are uncritically included, depicting the Lutz children as largely silent, passive and incomplete subjects.

Assumptions that murder was caused by the 'burden' of caring for disabled children were later solidified by platforming statements provided by parents of autistic children and carer services. As one news piece suggested:

> The recent tragic events of a young family juggling the complex needs of their children with disability and other tragic carer stories puts a spotlight on the needs of those who devote every moment of their lives to caring, 24/7. Unrelieved caring can lead to strain symptoms such as exhaustion, guilt and anger. (Ballantine 2016)

The language used was predominantly essentialising, with caring for children with autism narrated through the motif of tragedy (Waltz 2008) and as traumatising to parents (Jones and Harwood 2009). Rather than asking whether or why neurodiversity may be experienced principally as suffering—what social, structural and cultural drivers may shape or mediate such experiences— readers are presented with a medicalised framing of 'unrelieved' caring for autistic children as inducing 'strain symptoms' sufficient to rationalise murder. Jones and Harwood (2009: 8) noted that, underscoring such essentialist discourses, 'autism is all too frequently represented as dangerous, tragic, debilitating and a heartbreaking, irresolvable "problem"'. This presumed irresolvability partly rationalises the leap from 'strain' to murder–suicide.

Such assumptions were peppered throughout reporting on the Manrique case. Despite multiple contextual factors remaining unknown and the well-established role of gender in domestic and family homicides looming large, the swiftness of the tendency to adopt this as a motive was deeply telling. Reporting on the coronial inquest findings in 2019, just over two years later, went some way to dislodge this assumption. The inquest found that Elisa and Martin's autism had no notable impact on their father's decision; rather, the coroner concluded that Manrique planned the familicide on hearing Maria intended to leave him (Truscott 2019). Eschewing the image of a suffering father, these findings were adopted in later reporting to reframe Manrique as a selfish, iniquitous murderer, revealing his 'second life' of sexual relationships outside the marriage.

However, most reporting in the days and weeks after the murders was inflected with the narrative of murder as an intelligible response to raising disabled children. Feminist scholars have often critiqued the portrayal of perpetrators of domestic and family homicide as sufferers of mental distress, which silences perpetrator agency and positions such violence as an individual anomaly (Buiten and Coe 2022). As this article shows, this individualising narrative is also rationalised through the trope of disability as it intersects with discourses of white, middle-class, heterosexual, nuclear families as immune to cultures of violence. In this way, ableist discourses scaffold the psychologising discourses used to report on men's violence against women and children.

Numerous articles were padded with detailed information on autism, implicitly representing the 'problem' as autism itself (e.g., Brennan 2016). Similarly, some reporting on the Milne familicide branched into extended discussion of carers' experiences (Iredale and Donald 2016). Regarding this case, the disability-as-cause narrative was less overtly speculative than it was in the Manrique case. There was evidence in notes left behind by Darren Milne that he saw no feasible future for his family in the face of his children's Fragile X. However, rather than questioning these ableist assumptions, the difficulties Milne described and his responses to them were naturalised as understandable.

Superfluous References

Sometimes, victims' disability was subtly construed as germane to their murders, with extraneous references to disability smattered throughout reporting. This was particularly the case for the Manrique and Miles familicides. One report on the Manrique familicide read: 'detectives believe gas deliberately filtered through the sprawling home in Sydney's north is the most likely cause of death. Both children had autism' (Whitbourn 2016). Another, reporting on the Miles familicide, stated that the bodies of 'Taye, Rylan, Ayre and Kayden Cockman, all of whom had autism, were found shot dead on a 30-acre property in Osmington on Friday' (Cormack and Whitbourn 2018). The terms 'autism' or 'autistic' appeared over one and a half times per news article covering the Manrique case, and in half of those covering the Miles case, demonstrating a preoccupation with autism despite no clear information as to its salience to perpetrators' motives.

Not only did this subtly infer a link, but autism was cast as all-defining (Jones and Harwood 2009). Children were primarily described through the prism of their disability, which was presented through a medical lens as an inherent 'condition' (Runswick-Cole, Curran and Liddiard 2018). In the Miles case, while the children's autism was not implicated directly in the murders, it was often raised superfluously, and readers were told little else about them. Other times, it was used to emphasise the humanity of their non-disabled mother rather than that of the children themselves, crafting gendered stories of 'ideal victims' (Christie 1986) in which disabled victims featured as symbols of the loss of their carers: '[Katrina Miles] was particularly admired by those who know how demanding it is to be the mother of kids with learning disabilities … [confronting] her challenges with good humour and a steely determination' (Barrass 2018). Disability was very present—whether as the directly inferred 'cause' of the murders or as a largely defining feature of disabled victims.

Privileging the Experiences of Non-Disabled Carers

The disability-as-cause narrative has been enabled by the platforming of perpetrators and non-disabled carers' perspectives. Some news reported at length on notes penned by Darren Milne and on the views of other parents of children with Fragile X. Reporting on killers' stated motives and potentially relevant contextual factors is arguably part of the journalistic mandate. However, the inclusion of such information can operate to frame the events from a killer's perspective (Mathews 2018). Editorial choices exist around which elements are included and emphasised, how they are presented, and how they are contextualised by other voices and expertise. Here, reporting implicitly rendered Darren Milne's stated motives understandable by privileging his voice.

One headline lead with a quote from Milne's notes: 'inside Milne family murder-suicide: "It is only going to get tougher as time goes on"' (Koubaridis 2016). The article emphasised the 'scathing comments' made by the case coroner who criticised Milne's 'total "disregard" for his two boys' lives, their human rights'. However, it also placed significant emphasis on Milne's 'despair', platforming at length ableist assertions that Liam and Ben's lives would not be 'worth' living and Milne's concerns that it would be 'too hard' to 'make it work' (Koubaridis 2016). In this way, it perpetuated the way disabled children are rarely imagined as having flourishing adulthoods, instead constituted as 'subject[s] with no future' (Fritsch 2016: 12). The article concluded with Milne's own words: 'he ended the note with: "Start cleaning stuff up"' (Koubaridis 2016). The ableist violence the murders represented was predominantly reified rather than interrogated by centralising Milne's motives at the expense of sources that could speak to the social contours of these motives.

A similar effect was rendered through the prolific inclusion of witnesses and coroner statements framing Kim Hunt's disability as the cause of Geoff Hunt's distress and violence. Geoff Hunt was represented as a caring man acting out of character, emphasising the negative impacts of Kim's car accident on his state of mind as a motive. While this was based on the coronial investigation, it was presented largely to the exclusion of the role of other factors implicated in family and mass violence. Quoting family submissions to the coronial inquest, readers heard, 'we could only imagine the depths of despair, pain and

isolation that Geoff must have felt. … We now live with the pain of regret that maybe we could have done more to help him' (Family of Geoff 2015). Reporting focused on failings of the 'mental health system' (Family of Geoff 2015), and a binary was often constructed around 'before' and 'after' Kim's acquired brain injury, which reinforced totalising cultural distinctions between non-disabled and disabled life (Botha and Harvey 2022). Almost entirely absent was the issue of violence against disabled people; the vulnerability of carers was emphasised rather than the vulnerability of disabled people to violence.

Some reporting drew on the cases to launch awareness-raising endeavours around disability. However, these were primarily aimed at the need for support for carers. While the coroners' comments 'slamming' Milne for his actions were reported, coverage of the case focused more on the difficulties faced by carers than the structural barriers around or experiences of disabled people themselves or patterns of violence against them. One piece by a parent with a former leadership role in the Fragile X association called for a 'thorough examination of the broader issues' raised by the case; in doing so, they emphasised 'the often exhausting daily demands of caring for loved ones with disability'. 'Darren was the intelligent loving father of two sons with a serious disability but he was unable to cope with the future', it concluded (Iredale and Donald 2016).

Reporting on the 'pointy end' of violence against disabled people can offer opportunities to engage the public on important issues around social supports. However, framing perpetrators' motives for violence in sympathetic terms and discussing social supports primarily as oriented around non-disabled carers produces two discursive effects (Bacchi 2009). First, the 'strains' raised are essentialised. Rather than placing ableist structures and cultures under interrogation as sites of strain shaping carers and disabled people's experiences (Cologon 2016), supports focused on 'respite' (Ballantine 2016) for carers reinforce medicalised discourses of disability (Goodley 2017). The very ableist cultural narratives that contribute to violence are reinforced. Second, in focusing almost exclusively on the experiences of perpetrators and needs of carers, news reporting obscures ableist violence itself. These become stories about 'tragic carers' (Ballantine 2016) rather than violence against disabled people. Readers are not encouraged to question the cultural scripts of disability-as-tragedy into which carers who kill can be enculturated (Cologon 2016).

It is not just that caring for disabled people was presumed or platformed as the cause of perpetrators' mental distress or motive for violence that concerns us. As shown, in some cases, the presumption that disability was imbricated in killers' motives was borne out. We do not deny the structural barriers and challenges disabled people face—nor those that may face carers. Disabling cultures and environments can be significant in family murder cases, which is reflected in the disproportionate numbers of disabled children killed by parents (Coorg and Tournay 2013). What we wish to problematise is the *way* these connections are forged—news portrayals largely essentialise family stresses; depoliticise and naturalise disability; obscure violence against disabled people; and erase them as full, knowing, human subjects by privileging the views and experiences of non-disabled carers. It is as much about what is excluded as included.

Representations *as* Violence: The (Re)Production of Connected Harms

> When people discuss violence, they often mean material violence. Cutting, hurting, harming … They often separate the discussion of such violence from the acts of violence described. (Ymous et al. 2020: 3)

While acknowledging the complexities around how such narratives are constructed—including their entanglement with the broader discourses and experiences of parents and carers—the outcome is to represent the murder of disabled people as an intelligible outcome of parents and carers' distress. In this section, we turn to the implications of these representations and argue that they are not only partial representations *of* violence but also *are in and of themselves* violent. That is, news narratives and those reporting techniques utilised suppress disabled voices and experiences, which constitutes epistemic violence.

Theorised by Spivak (2010), epistemic violence speaks to the silencing of marginalised groups and the damaging of 'a given group's ability to speak and be heard' (Dotson 2011: 236). While primarily used by Spivak to describe the suppression of colonised people's knowledges, the term also marks the silencing of (and refusal to hear) an intersecting range of populations (Lim-Bunnin 2020; MacDonald 2002). While 'certain bodies are listened to because their languages are considered understandable and reasonable', the annunciations of other bodies 'are exoticized, devaluated, ignored, or even eliminated altogether' (Brunner 2021: 200). Some subjects are dismissed as valid 'knowers' (Dotson 2011: 242), or their ways of communicating knowledge are made less culturally legible (Ymous et al. 2020).

Disabled people are rarely privileged as 'knowers' of their own lives, bodies and desires. As Ymous et al. (2020: 3) have highlighted, 'disability demarcates a type of knowing and lived experience that is systematically subverted'; disabled people are identified as 'not only incapable of testifying as to themselves, but as to anything'. This occurs in a range of contexts. Disabled people's knowledge of their health is often disregarded by medical professionals (Shakespeare 2018), their complaints about violence ignored (Wadiwel, Spivakovsky and Steele 2022), and their voices and choices over intimate personal decisions

such as sexuality and reproduction denied (Tilley et al. 2012). This silencing is compounded for First Nations disabled people, disabled people of colour, LGBTIQA+ disabled people and disabled children.

In the media analysed, disabled people were not perceived to be 'knowers' about the violence they experienced—disabled voices were rarely heard. Disabled activists, scholars, parents and children were typically not consulted to offer expertise, perspectives on or lived experiences of violence. Instead, neighbours attested to the struggles families faced (Gusmaroli, Brennan and Paterson 2016), coroners detailed the 'stress' (Family of Geoff 2015) to families caused by disability, euthanasia campaigners (Euthanasia Campaigner 2016) and parents of disabled children (Brown 2016) encouraged readers to 'walk' in parents' 'shoes', and relatives relied on medical discourses of disability to make sense of the crimes their family members had committed (Family of Geoff 2015).

These cohorts become primary definers: groups relied on in media to advance a 'primary interpretation' of an event (Hall et al. 1978: 58). Positioned as specialised, primary definers are commonly constructed as 'objective' and tend to reassert hegemonic knowledges (Hall et al. 1978: 58). Across the four cases analysed, these non-disabled groups provided the majority of the commentary, with their views predominantly taken unquestioningly as relaying valid knowledge of the experience of disability and nature of family violence involving disabled victims. By platforming permissive statements from such groups, largely to the exclusion of alternate understandings from disabled people and their allies, news reporting effectively framed these perspectives as reasonable and authoritative takes on the causes of violence.

By highlighting this, we do not suggest these cohorts are uniquely problematic or homogenous. Rather, a structural approach to epistemic violence (Brunner 2021) problematises the *ableist and disablist discourses* from which members of these groups often draw. While sometimes challenged, dominant neoliberal ableist knowledges of disability—as suffering, pathology, undesirable, dependent, devoid of a future—often remain the predominant narratives 'available' to parents, neighbours and coroners (Vaughan and Super 2019: 1118). Media have a responsibility to report ethically and in a non-discriminatory manner; without critical interrogation, platforming these narratives further normalises such perspectives on disability and disablist violence, renders some explanations of violence more intelligible than others, and limits possibilities to imagine disability otherwise.

The reliance on ableist knowledges to elucidate why violence against disabled people occurs, and to subtly condone it, reinforces that 'ways of naming and categorizing violence are part of ableist systems and ideologies that endanger disabled people in a myriad of ways' (Mueller, Forber-Pratt and Sriken 2019: 709). Epistemic violence is always enmeshed with other forms of harm, with silencing and erasure producing dehumanisation and objectification. Once a population is dehumanised, they become more vulnerable to other, more direct, violence. We now turn to consider some of these interconnections.

Entanglements of Epistemic and Other Violences

When covering familicides of disabled people, the epistemic violence of the media is intimately interconnected with three other forms of violence: ontological violence, structural violence and direct violence. Ontological violence is 'a violence against being or existence' (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2011: 607), whereby a marginalised group's ways of being or living in the world are invalidated. Consistently receiving messages surrounding the unworthiness of their modes of existence 'entices the dominated to contribute to their own domination by tacitly accepting … the limits assigned to them' (Bourdieu 1998: 12). Regarding disability, this acceptance is often referred to as internalised ableism: when 'the processes of ableism … induce an internalisation or self-loathing which devalues disablement' (Campbell 2009: 20). Deficit discourses and dehumanisation in media representations of disability contribute to this production of internalised ableism (Shakespeare 1994), which encourages perceptions of the self as a burden (Jones and Harwood 2009).

In the news analysed, the few pieces written by disabled activists and their allies foregrounded the ontological harms of such reporting. Disabled academic and activist Shakira Hussein (2016) wrote:

> When disabled children and adults alike are regarded as a soul-destroying burden to those who are supposed to love them the most, when killing them is regarded as a forgivable crime that is not to be judged by outsiders, it's apparent that large numbers of people believe that the world would be better off if we were dead. And from there, it's very easy to believe that we ourselves would be better off dead, too.

Entanglements of epistemic and ontological ableist violence have profound impacts. Internalised ableism can present as deep shame, self-imposed isolation, depression and anxiety (Jóhannsdóttir, Egilson and Haraldsdóttir 2022). Narratives of disability as 'worse than death' can also shape the experiences and perceptions of parents and carers (Cologon 2016), contributing to the materialisation of the very distress so naturalised in much news reporting and compounding disabled people's experiences of ableism within their families and relationships with carers.

Media representations of disability also have the capacity to inform structural violence (Briant, Watson and Philo 2013): harm that is 'built into the structure [of a society] and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances' (Galtung 1969: 171). Our study indicated that media reporting often foregrounded a lack of welfare services and support for disabled people and their families. However, calls for more support were often couched in medicalising narratives of disablement as burden and stress, potentially rendering certain types of support more favourable, such as medical 'treatment' and respite for parents. While the media could potentially play an important role in bringing attention to the structural injustices faced by disabled people, when they amplify neoliberal ableist narratives of individual carer suffering, supports that could equip disabled people to more fully participate in society (e.g., adequate housing and reasonable welfare payments) are invisibilised and rendered further out of reach (Briant, Watson and Philo 2013). In this way, epistemic violence can perpetuate or rationalise some forms of structural violence.

Finally, epistemic violence forms part of the backdrop for patterns of direct interpersonal violence (Galtung 1969) against disabled people. Marginalising disabled knowledges of ableist violence in a way that obscures it or legitimises narratives of the murder of disabled people as understandable (even 'loving') has the potential to encourage would-be perpetrators to enact violence (O'Hagan 2014; Waltz 2008). Perceiving a lack of censure in the media and more lenient treatment in the legal system (Sullivan 2017), those already inclined to view disability through a lens of suffering and failure may have these beliefs validated, which puts other disabled people at risk (Lucardie and Sobsey 2005b). The 1993 murder of Tracy Latimer, a young girl with cerebral palsy who was killed by her father via carbon monoxide poisoning, received highly sympathetic media coverage that emphasised her father's stress and her own suffering. Soon after the extensively covered homicide and trial, several other murders of children with disability in Canada resembled Tracy's in 'choice of victim, motivation, and act causing death' (Lucardie and Sobsey 2005b: 118). This is not to say that media reporting *causes* violence but to highlight that media representations amplify certain narratives that condone and minimise violence against disabled people, which inevitably has a range of lived effects (Bacchi 2009). As Loftis (2016: 470) highlighted, when 'narratives treat autistic people as objects to "cure or kill," it reinforces beliefs about the justifications for the filicide of autistic people'.

What Happens When Disabled Voices are Included?

A small cohort of articles critiqued and resisted the discourses elucidated above. Emerging mostly from opinion and commentary sections, they were often written by disabled people and those aligned with a disability justice perspective. We understand these contributions as cripistemologies, 'thinking from the critical, social, and personal position of disability' (Johnson and McRuer 2014: 134). The inclusion of these voices achieved three things: the purported motivations behind these familicides were critically interrogated, ableist media narratives were called out, and disabled ontologies were centred and celebrated.

Rather than raising disability as a rationale for murder, talkback pieces offered alternative readings: for example, that these were cases of control-driven domestic and family violence. In one piece, a friend of Maria Lutz highlighted that Maria, Elisa and Martin's deaths occurred soon after Maria stated her intention to end her marriage to Fernando Manrique: 'the final act of "I don't actually need you any more", for a man who was very much in control of his world, his life, his business, must have led to his losing control' (Benny-Morrison 2016). A similar comment underscored the proprietary motivations behind the Miles familicide: '[perpetrators] do not kill because their loved ones have disabilities or other difficulties. They kill because they … view their victims as goods and chattels, and therefore, it is their right to destroy them' (Moody 2018). Indeed, research suggests familicide and male-perpetrated filicide–suicide is frequently preceded by domestic abuse and separation and almost ubiquitously undergirded by proprietary attitudes to women, children and the family (Buiten 2022). Therefore, such reporting offered an important counter-narrative to destabilise and complicate explanations of disability-as-cause.

Disabled critiques also called out the ableism of media representations. Carly Findlay (2016) drew attention to the differential treatment of family murder–suicide perpetrators by the media and society more broadly: 'the level of sympathy towards parents who kill their disabled children is much different to the level of sympathy towards other parents who have killed non disabled children … when a parent allegedly murders their disabled child, the public (and judges, jurors) sympathises, empathises, even … This is ableism'. Findlay starkly reminded readers that these sympathetic responses would not make cultural sense if the victims did not have disability and highlighted the discriminatory underpinnings of such bifurcated reactions: 'it is as though a disabled life is worth less than a non-disabled one' (Findlay 2016).

Where the media dismissed or boxed in disabled subjectivities, the contributions by disabled people and their allies foregrounded the complex, creative and subversive potential of disabled ontologies. The most potent reminder of the value and richness of disabled ways of being came from Maria Lutz herself. When asked (prior to her death) how she 'coped' with two autistic children, Maria was reported in the news as saying: 'my children aren't dying, they are alive and well' (Benny-Morrison 2016). Maria rebutted the idea that disability is inherent suffering or a fate worse than death and highlighted the ways her children lived fulfilling and meaningful lives. Both Elisa and Martin were keen artists; while some articles foregrounded their artistic ability *despite* their disability, Moody (2016) framed their artistic prowess as *intrinsically linked* to their disability:

'both youngsters were talented artists who used paint, paper and brushes to show those around them how they viewed the world'. Here, diverse forms of communication are celebrated and perceived as rich ways of living in and interacting with society. Indeed, the NSW Deputy State Coroner highlighted that 'Maria and the children would, if left to live, have been more than happy on their own, indeed they would have prospered' (Truscott 2019).

Conclusion

> Disability is … a signifier: a term that calls out for signifieds or meanings to be attached. Too often the sign of 'disability–pathology' dominates our thoughts. (Goodley 2014: xi)

In much of the news media analysed, this prejudicial sign was reinforced, and marked violence perpetrated against disabled people as an intelligible outcome of caring for them, which framed disability itself as deficit, tragedy and incompletely human. What is evident in the contributions of disabled people and their allies is that a very different understanding of disability can be put forward, one that reinforces the signs of '"disability–celebration", "disability–subversion", "disability–politics", "disability–desire"' (Goodley 2014: xi). These voices are vital both for disabled people as consumers of news and frequent subjects of ontological, structural and direct harms, and for families, carers and wider society so often enculturated into deficit discourses and limiting conceptions of human value. As Waltz (2008: 21) has suggested, ableist knowledge hierarchies and practices 'pose a risk to all of us … entwined from their very beginning with an effort to define what it is to be normatively human, and act to constrain the boundaries of acceptable human variation'.

Greater inclusion of disabled knowledges and voices would go a long way in disrupting dominant narratives of disability that scaffold manifold violences, centring more liberatory disability perspectives and condemning ableist violence. Just as a number of academic disciplines are increasingly involving victim–survivors and disabled people in the co-production and analysis of research (Robinson et al. 2023), so we suggest that media must work with and amplify disabled voices.

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[1] We predominantly use the term 'disabled people' in recognition of disability as a sociopolitical category. However, 'people with disability' is also used as this is the preferred terminology of some Australian disabled people's organisations.

[2] For a closer analysis of how gender, class, rurality and (implicitly) race shapes reporting on these and other familicide cases, see Buiten (2022).

[3] Soon, it was established that Maria had no involvement in or knowledge of Manrique's plans to kill the family.

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