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(Un)Covering Suicide: The Changing Ethical Norms in Canadian Journalism

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Graduate Program in Media Studies
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy
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(UN)COVERING SUICIDE: THE CHANGING ETHICAL NORMS IN CANADIAN
JOURNALISM

(Thesis format: Integrated Article)

by

Gemma Richardson

Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

In this integrated article dissertation, I examine media coverage of suicide in two Canadian newspapers. I seek to answer two research questions: how has media coverage of suicide changed in Canadian newspapers between the mid-19th century and 2013, and what were the standard policies and procedures in newsrooms regarding coverage of suicide during this time? Through a qualitative analysis of historical coverage and a quantitative analysis of contemporary coverage, I show how media coverage of suicide has changed. My historical analysis incorporates extensive primary research from the archives of the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*, and ultimately shows that suicide was not always taboo in the mainstream press. In fact, the tip-toeing around reporting on suicide only began in the mid-20th century. I argue that as public perceptions of suicide, and the laws surrounding it, gradually shifted from considering the act a crime to conceiving of it as an aspect of a psychiatric malady, reporting on suicide changed. Once suicide became an untouchable subject in newsrooms the stigma became entrenched, making it a challenging subject matter to address in any meaningful way for decades; however, in recent years the taboo around suicide has begun to break down and once again there is an evolution in how it is covered in Canadian print media.

In addition to a historical and contemporary analysis of media coverage, I provide a review of existing newsroom practices and policies on covering suicide. My review of these routines and rules shows that the approach to suicide differs from newsroom to newsroom and there is not standard agreement on how it should be dealt with in most cases. In this review, I discuss the development of media guidelines for reporting on

suicide and the contagion literature that spurred many of these protocols. This work is complemented by insights from some of the leading experts on ethics in Canadian media whom I interviewed for this research. I conclude by outlining the implications of my research and I argue that an ethics of care framework offers a promising alternative to prescriptive and simplistic media guidelines.

Keywords: Journalism, Suicide, Media Ethics, Canadian Newspapers, Media History

I write of melancholy by being busy to avoid melancholy.

- Robert Burton (1621/2004).

Journalism matters. Journalists sketch in the contours of our moral landscape. They contribute to the business of telling us who we are, interpreting the world for us, making it intelligible.

- Karen Sanders (2003, p. 9).

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my partner, Lee. Thank you for supporting me throughout this process and in everything I do.

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I would like to thank my wonderful supervisors, Dr. Carole Farber and Dr. Romaine Smith Fullerton. Their support and encouragement throughout this process has been invaluable. I greatly appreciated having supervisors who were not just knowledgeable scholars who guided me through this work, but also caring and supportive individuals. I would also like to thank Dr. Jacquelyn Burkell for her support, particularly her guidance on the quantitative aspects of this research. I feel very lucky to have these three incredible women on my committee. I am also honoured to have Dr. Susan Knabe, Dr. Candace Gibson and Dr. Mary Lynn Young (University of British Columbia) serve on my examining committee.

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Preface

Last year, in April 2013, I completed the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) workshop. This intensive two-day workshop, developed by LivingWorks, has been taken by over a million people worldwide since it was first offered in 1983 (LivingWorks, 2014a). I was immediately struck by one of the core beliefs underlining ASIST, and all the training offered by LivingWorks—suicide must be talked about in an open, direct and honest manner. The premise is that a decision to live is far more likely when a person at risk can make it in the company of someone who is comfortable talking about suicide (LivingWorks, 2014b). This was a pivotal moment for me because it affirmed much of what I was trying to articulate in my research about the importance of *how* suicide is discussed. I wanted to determine in my research, looking at both historical and contemporary coverage, how particular newspapers talk about suicide? Do these newspapers approach the topic in an open, direct and honest manner?

When I analyzed media guidelines for reporting on suicide, I found two immediate contradictions. First, the guidelines contended that suicide was a complex phenomenon that required contextual coverage; yet most of these same guidelines offered simplistic, formulaic criteria for suicide coverage—directives such as, always avoid mention of suicide in the headline or keep suicide stories off the front page. A complex phenomenon like suicide deserves nuanced approaches to add to contextual understandings, but this is precluded through the guidelines. Second, choosing to follow the suggestions to always keep suicide stories off A1 and never mentioning the topic in headlines would contribute to stigmatizing suicide by hiding it away. This approach

generalizes front page coverage and headline writing to suggest they would always be sensational and does not necessarily allow for reporters to address the topic in an open, direct and honest manner. Coming to this realization helped me shape some of the chapters in this dissertation¹ and fueled my belief that this research was an important contribution to both media and community discussion on this issue.

Finally, in the spirit of open, direct and honest talk about suicide, I want to acknowledge here my own struggle and personal experiences with the suicide. While I did not believe it was appropriate or necessary to discuss these experiences in the course of my research, I do think in terms of personal disclosure I should mention here that I first came to consider and write about media coverage of suicide over a decade ago while an undergraduate in journalism school, during an incredibly difficult and painful time in my life. I have publicly spoken about my struggles elsewhere (see Richardson, 2011), not because I am proud, but because I am no longer ashamed. This is why I also wanted to briefly address my own situation here: informed by both personal experiences and my research, I believe the mainstream news media have an important role to play in allowing individuals to speak out, to diminish the shame and stigma, and to show the human face of what are otherwise just unknown or incomprehensible suicide statistics.

¹ This is an integrated article dissertation so there may be some redundancy across the chapters but I have tried to avoid this as much as possible.

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1. Situating Suicide in Western Societies: An Overview

Defining Suicide

There are as many potential definitions of suicide as there are opinions on the ethics of the act. It is a term that is frequently used, yet what exactly it constitutes is highly debatable and certainly not unanimously agreed on by scholars, doctors, journalists, or even coroners. John Maxwell Atkinson grappled with the vague legal definitions and lack of a coherent process among coroners in ruling a death a suicide in his 1978 work *Discovering Suicide*: "[t]he idea that there are or may be many different definitions and different types of definitions of suicide leads immediately to a bewilderingly complex situation from the point of view of doing empirical research into the subject" (Atkinson, 1978, p. 87). The many different definitions of suicide not only impact empirical work, but also theoretical work. Regardless of whether the work is theoretical or empirical, it is imperative to provide a clear definition of what the term suicide involves and encompasses so that the reader is clear on exactly what behaviours and scenarios constitute the use of the term. That being said, I have come to realize that defining suicide is not necessarily as simple as stating something along the lines of "any behaviour that a person undertakes in order to end his or her own life." For one, the issue of intent is debatable and often ambiguous. As American sociologist Jack Douglas (1967) pointed out, while there is some general agreement that the intention to die must be in some way inferable in order to categorize a death as suicide, there is a great deal of disagreement between national and local laws on how suicide and intention should be defined, and what constitutes adequate grounds for inferring intention. Ethicist Gavin Fairbairn (1995)

argued that it is often not possible to say with any certainty whether someone who dies as the result of self-inflicted harm intended to die.

Some suicides will mistakenly be labelled as death by misadventure or accident, while some actions that end in death but were not aimed at achieving it, may be viewed as suicide. One reason that mistakes occur in deciding on the nature of the suicidal acts that people perform is that most often it is difficult to decide what the intention of a person was in acting. (Fairbairn, 1995, p. 11)

Yet despite this inherent difficulty in determining the intent of an individual who is no longer alive, Fairbairn went on to say that "[t]he question of whether an act was a suicide depends upon the intention of the individual who is an agent in enacting it" (1995, p. 56). Circular debates like this one on intention demonstrate why suicide is such a difficult term to define and categorize with total certainty. Intent is clearly an important aspect of defining suicide, but I would note that social definitions of "intention to die" or "desire to die" are ambiguous categorizations (Douglas, 1967) inherent in all classifications of suicide.

There are numerous definitions used in the vast literature on suicide.² American philosophers Tom Beauchamp and James Childress (1983) defined suicide based on the intention to achieve death: "suicide occurs if and only if one intentionally terminates one's own life—no matter what the conditions or precise nature of the causal route to death" (p. 95). It is important to determine whether the conditions that led to the self-

² See the table in Maris, Berman and Silverman (2000, p. 30) for various definitions of suicide.

inflicted death matter when one defines suicide; as Fairbairn (1995) pointed out, people can die by suicide not only by taking *action* (e.g. jumping from a high place or ingesting poison), but also through *omission* (e.g. refusing to eat or drink, or refusing to inject required insulin). Philosopher Raymond Frey (1980) defined suicide as a death that occurs intentionally as a result of a person knowingly and willingly putting themselves in perilous circumstances. This would include heroic and altruistic acts, such as standing in front of a train as part of a political protest, or wandering into a blizzard to save a missing person. This definition would also encompass deaths stemming from a fatal mix of erotic pursuit, potential suicidal intent and accident—those involved in sadomasochism, bondage and ultimately auto-erotic asphyxiation.³ I would point out that from this perspective Jehovah's Witnesses who refuse required blood transfusions due to their religious beliefs would also be encompassed in Frey's definition of suicide; the same could be said for cancer patients who refuse to undergo treatment even if it is was likely to prolong their life for a considerable time and with good quality. Including these deaths would be controversial and problematic because it is hard to envision these types of situations as always being cases of clear-cut suicide.

Fairbairn (1995) argued that those who act to bring about their own deaths simply because it is required by social convention should not be considered suicides, which would exclude those who die by seppuku (a Japanese practice, commonly known as hari-kari, in which a person facing defeat or dishonour disembowels themselves), or the death of Socrates (who drank the hemlock as ordered by judicial decree). This also raises the

³ Litman and Swearingen explore suicide in the context of fetishistic masturbation in their article "Bondage and Suicide" (1996).

issue of those who utilize suicide for political or ideological reasons, which Fairbairn (1995) argued are different from other suicide deaths because the individuals intended to die, but only because only through death could they achieve their ultimate objective—death in and of itself was not what they wanted. For instance, he referenced the kamikaze pilots⁴ in World War II:

Though some of the kamikaze pilots may have wished for death, it is arguable that perhaps many of them undertook the task of flying their planes loaded of explosives at enemy targets simply with the honourable aim of serving their country, willing to sacrifice their lives, but not aiming to be dead. (Fairbairn, 1995, p. 132)

Nevertheless, there have been some recent studies that challenge the notion that "suicide-bombers" are only driven by political or religious loyalties, suggesting that some are actually suicidal in the commonly-used, Western-sense of the term (Kix, 2010; Lankford, 2013). These claims are refuted by scholars such as Mia Bloom (2005), who argued that the motives of suicide-bombers, particularly those in the Middle East, should not be equated with Western notions of suicide. I agree with Fairbairn's arguments on the different intentions provoking some forms of suicide and thus have excluded acts of politically-motivated suicide (when an individual takes his or her own life in a public

⁴ Interestingly Szasz (1999) points out that kamikaze means "Divine Wind", nothing along the lines of "suicide-bombers" which is what these pilots were called in the West.

fashion as a clear political message aimed at drawing attention to a particular issue)⁵ and acts of suicide terrorism (when an individual uses their own suicide as an opportunity to kill and injure others in an act of terrorism)⁶ from my analysis of media coverage of suicide. That being said, acts of murder-suicide, wherein an individual kills others and then him or herself immediately afterwards, were included in my analysis. I made this distinction because both the act of murder and the act of suicide in suicide terrorism are simultaneous—one cannot occur without the other; however, with murder-suicide the two acts are separate, and there are many individuals who commit murder without also taking their own lives afterwards—whereas with suicide terrorism the murder and suicide are co-dependent.

When defining suicide, the issue of assisted suicide must also be considered. Fairbairn argued that in both suicide and assisted suicide cases, "a person wishes and intends to be dead and takes steps to arrange that death is achieved" (1995, p. 121). Why is a different term for deaths considered voluntary euthanasia needed at all then, instead of just using the term suicide? According to controversial psychiatrist Thomas Szasz (1999), "[t]he difference between a physically ill person discontinuing dialysis and a physically healthy person discontinuing eating is not that one is not suicide and the other is, but that we approve of the former and disapprove of the latter" (p. 124). I have included assisted suicide in my analysis of media coverage of suicide because these

⁵ The suicide of Buddhist monk Thich Quand Duc in Saigon made internationally famous by the Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of his self-immolation taken by Malcolm Browne is a classic example of a politically-motivated suicide.

⁶ The September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre buildings and the Pentagon building in the United States are the most well-known and clear examples of suicide terrorism.

individuals have a clear intention to end their own life but are often are no longer physically able to do so themselves, thus requiring the assistance of another person.⁷ Cases of euthanasia, where people cannot consent but have their lives ended out of concern for their quality of life by family or medical professionals, were not included in my analysis.⁸ While these definitional debates are not central to my dissertation research⁹, they must at least be mentioned to acknowledge the incredible spectrum of actions and decisions that can result in death that could potentially be considered suicide, depending on how the term is defined.¹⁰

For the purposes of my research, I found the definition from Edwin Shneidman (1985), one of the founders of the field of suicidology, to be one of the most useful: "Currently in the Western world, suicide is a conscious act of self-induced annihilation, best understood as a multidimensional malaise in a needful individual who defines an issue for which suicide is perceived as the best solution" (p. 203). I prefer this definition because it clearly states that this view on suicide is within the Western context, making it clear that it does not take into consideration the different ways that other cultures and regions may view suicide. I found another constructive definition from Ronald Maris, Alan Berman and Morton Silverman (2000) in their *Comprehensive Textbook of*

⁷ Examples of assisted suicide would be the individuals who sought out and died with the assistance of infamous US suicide doctor Jack Kevorkian prior to his conviction and imprisonment in 1999.

⁸ Perhaps one of the most famous Canadian cases surrounding the debate around euthanasia, or "mercy killing" is that of Robert Latimer who was convicted of second degree murder for killing his severely disabled daughter, which he said was done out of a desire to end her suffering and pain.

⁹ While the issues of euthanasia and assisted suicide are not addressed in any detail in this dissertation, there is a large volume of work that can be consulted on this matter, including the edited collections of Horan and Mall (1980), and Downing and Smoker (1986), among many others.

¹⁰ See Fairbairn (1995) for more in-depth analysis of the ethical and definitional controversies surrounding the term "suicide".

Suicidology. They defined "suicides" as "individuals who have actually died by their own hand" (p. 15). This differs from the proposed definition of someone like Fairbairn (1995), who suggested that the term be used for both fatal and non-fatal actions where there is intent to die. Maris, Berman and Silverman outlined four key elements in defining suicide: 1) a suicide is a death; 2) suicide is intended; 3) suicide is done by oneself and to oneself; 4) suicide can be indirect or passive. This last element includes not taking life-preserving medicine or intentionally not moving from the path of an oncoming train, for example. As with most definitions of suicide, this requires retrospectively focusing attention on evidence about the state of the individual (Fairbairn, 1995). These two definitions inform my research, but as I mentioned above, I made the decision to include murder-suicide and assisted-suicide in my analysis, while excluding politically-motivated suicide and suicide terrorism. I provide greater detail on the exclusions I made while analyzing contemporary coverage of suicide in Chapter Five.

Ethical Debate

Suicide has a timeless place as an item of ethical debate. For the sake of simplification, I envision a spectrum of positions ranging from liberal to conservative. A liberal position involves viewing suicide as the autonomous action of an individual and that any attempt at prevention is an affront to individual liberty and autonomy. The notion that we own ourselves and hence have a right to end our lives was first articulated by David Hume (1777/2011) in his posthumously published essay "On Suicide" (Szasz, 2011). It was also the position taken by French writer Jean Améry, who regarded suicide as a political act,

"a protest whereby the victim ceases at last to be a victim by taking control of his [sic] own fate" (as cited in Lieberman, 2003, p. 5). This liberal position was strongly articulated over the past few decades in the work of Szasz, who vehemently argued against the medicalization of suicide (see the section below on medicalization for a detailed discussion of this issue), because for him suicide is always an act of freedom and the right of each individual regardless of circumstance (Marsh, 2010). Szasz clarified his position in *Fatal Freedom* (1999), stating that he was "neither praising and recommending nor condemning and discouraging suicide" (1999, p. 131). While fully supportive of individuals who for any reason wish to end their lives, Szasz did not condone public displays of suicidal behaviour:

To be sure, suicidal activity, like any intimate bodily activity, ought to be permissible only in private. Public suicidal activity, exemplified by a person's threatening to jump from a high building, interferes with the everyday activities of others, constitutes public nuisance, and ought to be prohibited and punished by the criminal law. (1999, p. 130)

In contrast to the liberal position articulated by Szasz, a conservative position entails a belief either that suicide is always wrong, or a belief that it is not the choice a rational person would make, therefore warranting intervention. The latter is the position that is taken by the medical establishment and police. One of the founders of American psychiatry, Benjamin Rush, argued that humans do not have absolute power over their own lives when it comes to wanting to dispose of them, equating suicide with madness (Szasz, 2011). A conservative position is one that argues *against* suicide, with the ethical arguments against suicide motivated either by a consequentialist philosophy—evaluating

the moral status of suicide according to its effects, including effects on others, or by a deontological philosophy—asserting that suicide is simply wrong as a matter of principle or moral law (Battin, 1995). Fairbairn concluded that "the more contact a person has had or may have with suicide and self-harm, the less likely it is that she will tend toward a liberal position" (p. 160). As my research into both historical and contemporary media coverage will show, in Canadian society there is generally a conservative attitude towards suicide.

Theoretical Frames for Analyzing Language

Finally, in defining and debating suicide, I want to make mention of the language used to speak of this phenomenon.¹¹ The discourse used to talk about self-inflicted death is neither neutral nor without connotations. As Stuart Hall explained, discourse "governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others" (Hall, 1997, p. 44). Similarly, Michel Foucault (1970/1994) argued that things mean something and are true only within a specific historical context, or episteme. An episteme is the conditions of possibility of knowledge in any given time period. In *The Order of Things* (1970/1994), Foucault argued that each episteme has its own discursive formations whereby things appear as a meaningful construct, but through history new epistemes can arise and replace existing modes of thinking and knowing. It is not really possible to

¹¹ See Fairbairn (1995) for a detailed review of the language of suicide and for his ideas on how the term should be used, which would constitute redefining the term "suicide" as it is commonly used today.

know and see the confines of an episteme while it exists, and Foucault used German philosopher Hegel's concept of Minerva's Owl to describe this limit in comprehending an episteme. In the preface to his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel stated: "the owl of Minerva, takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering" (1820/1896). This means that one can only understand a historical condition as it passes away and this can be illustrated with the concept of suicide: what seems to be an absolute truth about the conditions and knowledge of this phenomenon have changed over time and it is difficult to see the ways the current episteme shapes this society's understanding of suicide until the episteme breaks down. Foucault explained that discourse is the actualization of episteme; it sets the limits of what we can know and understand. Hall (1997) echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that meaning is constructed and produced, and does not inhere *in* things. Meaning is the result of a signifying practice, a practice that produces meaning and makes things mean (Hall, 1997). This is very much the case with suicide because the meanings of this act and the terminology used to describe it—as I will discuss in the next section—have changed over time. I work from Hall's approach to representation, meaning that suicide does not have a stable, true meaning, but instead a meaning produced by humans in a culture. By examining the representations of suicide in media coverage, insights can be gleaned on how suicide is perceived in Canadian society and how these perceptions have changed over time.

In terms of etymology, the word suicide was derived from the Latin *sui* (of oneself) and *cide* or *cidium* (a killing). Yet, as I outlined above, what constitutes self-killing can be a rather narrow and precise definition, or a large, encompassing term that can include risk-taking behaviours. Fairbairn (1995) argued that the English language is

extremely impoverished to describe and talk about suicide and self-harm. This is much in line with Foucault's point that humans are confined by the grammatical arrangements of language; people "believe that their speech is their servant and do not realize that they are submitting themselves to its demands. The grammatical arrangements of a language are the a priori of what can be expressed in it" (Foucault, 1970/1994, p. 297). For example, when suicide is talked or written about, it is often as an act "committed", which Karen Lebacqz and H. Tristram Engelhardt (1980) pointed out portrays suicide as a crime to be "committed", as is murder. Fairbairn (1995) favoured the use of the verb "to suicide", though he admitted that "to commit" suicide is deeply embedded in the English language by years of use of the expression. This may suggest that in common parlance people do not discuss suicide much because otherwise it might have different terminology. I think the most important issue at stake when considering language surrounding suicide was pointed out by Fairbairn, who was concerned that impoverished language options have a significant impact on how society acts towards those who have attempted or completed suicide. David Mayo (1992) argued that while most suicides are tragedies, this must not eclipse thoughtful debate on whether intentionally ending one's life can ever be rational or praiseworthy.

If this debate is to proceed in a clearheaded way, it is important to be clear on what is meant by "suicide," and to define the term in a way that is neutral on the normative issue, so that this issue can be debated independently. (Mayo, 1992, p. 91)

Szasz (1999) was similarly concerned about the far from neutral connotations the term carries, arguing that suicide was synonymous with moral failure or mental illness. I will now consider how Western society came to hold these views.

Historical Overview¹²

A Valid Choice

Western cultural meanings and attitudes towards suicide are not fixed and stable, but have changed over time.¹³ Ukrainian psychoanalyst Gregory Zilboorg (1938/1996b) argued that the first suicides were often in the form of human sacrifices or voluntary reunions with the dead. Stories and descriptions of human sacrifice are characterized, Zilboorg contended, by the fact that those who were sacrificed were *volunteers*. In Greek mythology the gods of sleep and death—Hypnos and Thanos—were brothers, showing the close relation between the two states of sleep and death.¹⁴ Yet British writer Al Alvarez reminded us that "[e]ven in the civilized Athens of Plato, the suicide was buried outside the city and away from other graves; his [sic] self-murdering hand was cut off and buried apart" (1971, p. 64-65). Later on the ancient Scythians regarded it as a great honour to take their own lives when they became too old for their nomadic way of life,

¹² The brief history of these cultural meanings presented here does not touch on the very different conceptions of suicide in Eastern cultures, for example Japan.

¹³ There have been several histories of suicide published that offer a far more comprehensive look at historical suicide than what is presented here. See Anderson, 1987; MacDonald & Murphy, 1990; Murray 1998, 2000; Minois, 1995/1999; and Marsh, 2010.

¹⁴ The connection between suicide and the wish to sleep is taken up by Friedlander (1996).

thus saving younger members the trouble and guilt of having to kill them (Alvarez, 1971). The Romans looked on suicide with neither fear nor revulsion, but instead as a carefully considered and chosen validation of the way they had lived (Alvarez, 1971). In fact one could go before the Senate and ask approval to end one's own life. Émile Durkheim (1897/1966) pointed out that if one stated the reasons that life was intolerable and had the request granted by the Senate, suicide was considered a legitimate act. Alvarez (1971) reminded us that while suicide was neither an offense to morality nor religion at this time, it was against the capital investments of slave-owners or the treasury of the State. Despite the later condemnation of suicide by Christian authorities, the beginnings of Christian teachings were actually a powerful incitement to suicide, with the glory and emphasis on martyrdom. The Bible contained no law forbidding suicide (Durkheim, 1897/1966; Alvarez 1971), and a number of suicides were referred to in the Bible with no hint of condemnation (Mayo, 1992). That said, a population that will gladly end their own lives for a chance at the glorious afterlife proved to be problematic for the authorities of the time. It was at the 452 Council of Arles when St. Augustine declared suicide a crime. This was followed eventually by civil legislation following the lead of canon law, which added material penalties to the religious penalties (Durkheim, 1897/1966).

Christian Condemnation

The Christian prohibition and condemnation of suicide had a deep and long-lasting impact. In Europe during the Middle Ages, it was common to punish severely those who took their own lives. Historical accounts showed that a death was investigated by coroner and jury and a judgment would then be made on whether the deceased person was *felo de*

se (which literally means felon of themselves) and therefore guilty of self-murder, or *non compos mentis* (not of sound mind), rendering them innocent of a crime (Marsh, 2010).

As for the penalties for those deemed *felo de se*:

... their moveable goods, including tools, household items, money, debts owed to them, and even leases on the land that they had worked were forfeited to the crown... The suicide of an adult male could reduce his survivors to pauperism. Self-murderers were denied Christian burials; their bodies were interred profanely, with a macabre ceremony prescribed by popular custom. The night following an inquest, officials of the parish, the churchwardens and their helpers, carried the corpse to a crossroads and threw it naked into a pit. A wooden stake was hammered through the body, pinioning it in the grave, and the hole was filled in. No prayers for the dead were repeated; the minister did not attend. (MacDonald & Murphy, 1990, p. 15)

As suicide researcher Ian Marsh (2010) pointed out, these punishments were a stark and visible reminder that self-killing was considered a form of transgression, a challenge to the authority of God and sovereign. Foucault (1978/1990) explained that for a long time one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death. Suicide was a crime "since it was a way to usurp the power of death which the sovereign alone, whether the one here below or the Lord above, had the right to exercise" (Foucault, 1978/1990). Both symbolic exclusion and material consequences were a form of redress for this transgression (Marsh, 2010). Alvarez indicated that this was common throughout Europe during the Middle Ages:

In France, varying with local ground rules, the corpse was hanged by the feet, dragged through the street on a hurdle, burned, thrown on the public garbage heap. At Metz, each suicide was put in a barrel and floated down the Moselle away from the places he [sic] might wish to haunt. In Danzig, the corpse was not allowed to leave by the door; instead it was lowered by pulleys from the window; the window-frame was subsequently burnt. (Alvarez, 1971, p. 64-65)

During this time, suicide was represented as a threat, not only to individuals but also to the population at large; it was discussed in terms of contagion and fear of epidemics (Marsh, 2010). Georges Minois demonstrated in his work *History of Suicide* (1995/1999) that suicide was also a class phenomenon in the period between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Elite suicides were rather restricted, and when they did occur elites did so for "noble" reasons—honour, debts, love—leading authorities to largely tolerate these deaths because they did not challenge social order.

Throughout this time, however, the term suicide was not used to describe these deaths. The word was not coined until the middle of the 17th century and not part of popular discourse until the 18th; prior to this, one was either a criminal and a sinner, or mad (Marsh, 2010). The term "suicide" was first used in Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* published in 1694 (Marsh, 2010). Eventually it became widely used, replacing phrases such as "self-slaying", "self-killing", and "self-murder", which Marsh (2010) argued was a reflection of the changing conceptions of the individual subject. Shneidman (1985) suggested this difference in terms was subtle but significant—now one could "commit suicide", dispensing of the notion of the immortal soul, indicating a shift in the relationship between human beings and their God. Valentin Voloshinov and Mikhail

Bakhtin¹⁵ pointed out the term's significance by arguing that its use is the most sensitive index of social change:

The word is the medium in which occur the slow quantitative accretions of those changes which have not yet achieved the status of a new ideological quality, not yet produced a new and fully-fledged ideological form. The word has the capacity to register all the transitory, delicate, momentary phases of social change. (Voloshinov & Bakhtin, 1929/1994, p. 54)

In recent years there have been calls for news media to avoid using the term "commit" when discussing suicide, an idea which I explore in greater detail in Chapter Four.

The Revolution abruptly put an end to the laws against suicide in France in 1789. It took almost another century in England until the provision that suicide was a felony (leading to the confiscation of all property by the Crown) was officially abolished. Yet Durkheim (1897/1966) noted that the excessive nature of this law had made it inapplicable for quite some time before it was officially abolished. By the latter decades of the 19th century, suicide was "regarded with sympathy rather than with abhorrence. It is spoken of as a 'misfortune' rather than a crime" (Henson, 1897, as cited in Gates, 1988, p. 166). In her book *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (1987), Olive Anderson noted that for Edwardians, "their approach to suicidal action was more brooding and long drawn out, and less casual and impulsive, than that of their mid-

¹⁵ There is controversy over whether this particular text was in fact written by Voloshinov (whose name originally appeared on the text) or whether Bakhtin was the actual author. Therefore, I have chosen to cite both men as the authors here. See the Introduction to the *The Bakhtin Reader* (1994) for more detail on this controversy.

Victorian predecessors" (p. 420). She concluded that in the Edwardian period, suicide was characterized as "essentially an introspective agony over private fears and feelings" (1987, p. 420). Along the same line, Alvarez (1971) concluded that what had once been a mortal sin became a private vice, something shameful to be avoided and tidied away:

[Suicide became accepted] as a common fact of society—not as a noble Roman alternative, nor as the moral sin it had been the Middle Ages, nor as a special cause to be pleaded or warned against—but simply as something people did, often and without much hesitation, like committing adultery. (Alvarez, 1971, p. 235)

Since the Suicide Act of 1961, it has not been a criminal offense to commit, or attempt to commit, suicide in the UK; however, the Act does outline jail time for those who assist in any way in the suicide of another person, as is the norm in many countries. Attempting suicide was not removed from the Criminal Code of Canada until 1972. Under section 241 of the Canadian Criminal Code, counselling a person to end his or her own life, as well as aiding and abetting suicide remain a crime, punishable by up to 14 years imprisonment.

The academic study of suicide has 18th century roots but it has only been in the last 50 years that it has grown robustly (Maltzberger & Goldblatt, 1996). The term "suicidology"—meaning the study of suicide and related phenomena—was coined by Shneidman. One of the most well-known studies on suicide is Durkheim's (1897/1966) *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. I will now review the findings and significance of this study because its precedence requires that all comprehensive works on suicide reference it.

Durkheim's Study of Suicide

Émile Durkheim's book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897/1966) is one of the most well-known studies on suicide, yet despite how well-known this work is, the impact it had on the attitudes and beliefs about suicide in Western society is now quite limited, as I will explore in the next section about the acceptance of the medicalization of suicide.

Durkheim defined suicide as a term that could be "applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself [sic], which he knows will produce this result" (1897/1966, p. 44). The purpose of his study was to show how regularities in the suicide rates of nations and cultures across time would best be explained by *social* rather than individual (psychological) factors (Marsh, 2010).

Central Conclusions

Durkheim began by rejecting biological, cosmic and medical factors in suicide. Using the statistics available to him at the time, he concluded that suicide was not a distinct form of insanity, nor was insanity always connected with suicide. In fact, he found that the countries with the fewest number of insane (as deemed by the State), had the *most* suicides. This finding, however, did little to stop the psychiatric co-option of suicide, as discussed in the next section. Durkheim also found that to every female there were on average four male suicides, a statistic that remains relatively accurate in the present (see Navaneelan, 2012). It is this statistic that Durkheim used to rule out notions of people being predestined for suicide due to hereditary origin, as the number of suicides between males and females would be far more equal if heredity had much influence. Durkheim argued that a sociologist must be careful in searching for the influence of "races" on any

social phenomenon, as the word "race" no longer corresponded to anything definite (1897/1966, p. 85). This is an important observation, which complicates any research questions regarding suicide rates based on ethnicity. In light of this, Durkheim made generalized statements about people based on their geographic location when he referred to ethnicity. For example, he argued that if the people of Northern Europe committed suicide more than those in southern regions, it was not because they were predisposed to it by their ethnic temperament, but because the social causes of suicide were more specifically located in the north. Durkheim found that contrary to popular belief, more suicides occurred during the six warmest months (March to August), not the six coldest. Not one country was an exception. This is another finding that is still relevant and accurate over 100 years later (see Sample, 2005). Also contrary to popular belief, Durkheim found that the majority of suicides occurred during the daytime, not in the lonely hours after dark. After refuting these commonly held beliefs about cosmic, biological and medical/psychological causes of suicide, he moved on to reject the fears of the imitative influence of suicide, which is addressed in detail in the Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Ultimately, Durkheim concluded that there were three classifications for suicide, although often an individual suicide may have mixed characteristics of these three types: egoistic, altruistic and anomic (see Table 1.1). Egoistic suicides are generally the melancholy and introspective deaths of people who are detached from society. Durkheim found that when society was strongly integrated, it held individuals under its control, acting as a preventive force towards suicide:

The type of suicide actually the most widespread and which contributes the most to raise the annual total of voluntary deaths is egoistic suicide. It is characterized by a state of depression and apathy produced by exaggerated individuation. The individual no longer cares to live because he [sic] no longer cares enough for the only medium which attaches him [sic] to reality, that is to say, for society.

(Durkheim, 1897/1966, p. 356)

Table 1.1: Aetiological and Morphological Classification of the Social Types of Suicide - Individual Forms Assumed (Durkheim, 1897/1966, p. 293)

	Fundamental Character		Secondary Varieties
Basic Types	Egoistic suicide	Apathy	Indolent melancholy with self-complacence. The sceptic's [sic] disillusioned sangfroid.
	Altruistic suicide	Energy of passion or will	With calm feeling of duty. With mystic enthusiasm. With peaceful courage.
	Anomic suicide	Irritation, disgust	Violent recriminations against life in general. Violent recriminations against one particular person (homicide-suicide).
Mixed Types	Ego-anomic suicide		Mixture of agitation and apathy, of action and revelry
	Anomic-altruistic suicide		Exasperated effervescence.
	Ego-altruistic suicide		Melancholy tempered with moral fortitude.

Egoistic suicide stems from excessive individualism; for example, Durkheim argued that the proclivity of Protestants for suicide must be related to the spirit of free inquiry that animated the religion. Durkheim argued that the reason for the higher rates of suicide was because the Protestant Church was less integrated than the Catholic Church. Being a minority religious population seemed to indicate lower suicide rates due to the tight-knit

nature such groups were forced to take as a minority population—even the Protestant tendency towards suicide decreased where it was a minority religion. He argued: "The more numerous and strong these collective states of mind are, the stronger the integration of the religious community, and also the greater its preservation value" (1897/1966, p. 170). Durkheim found that in all the countries of the world, women committed suicide much less than men. Amusingly a product of his time, he suggested the lower education levels for women were to blame, as well as the "traditionalist nature" of women that led them to have "no great intellectual needs" (1897/1966, p. 166).¹⁶

The second classification—altruistic suicides—are often the emotionless acts of those who believe taking their lives is a duty to a collective order or higher power.¹⁷ While the third classification—anomic suicides—are generally the passionate acts of those who lack societal or emotional regulation and who feel personally wronged by an individual or society. Those who commit murder-suicides would be classified as anomic. Anomy can be caused by progressive changes, such as an improvement in one's financial or social situation, or regressive changes, such as a sudden lowering of one's standard of living. Durkheim argued that "[a]nomy, whether progressive or regressive, by allowing requirements to exceed appropriate limits, throws open the door to disillusionment and consequently to disappointment" (Durkheim, 1897/1966, p. 285). Anomic suicide results from a person's activity lacking regulation and their consequent sufferings, but both

¹⁶ Durkheim argued that educated circles of people tended to have a higher tendency towards suicide because of the weakening of traditional beliefs and the state of moral individualism that resulted from higher education.

¹⁷ For example, early 20th century anthropologists documented forms of altruistic suicide by elderly members of some Inuit communities when they were no longer able to keep up with the hunting and movement of their family group (see Kirmayer, Fletcher & Boothroyd, 1998).

egoistic and anomic suicide stem from society's insufficient presence in individuals. Durkheim's ultimate conclusion was that suicide varied with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual formed a part. He used statistics to show that suicide was not correlated with biological or cosmic phenomena, but with social phenomena, such as family, politics, economic society, and religious groups.

Critiques of Durkheim

While Durkheim was hailed for bringing the sociological aspects of suicide to light, "explicating it in terms of society's tendency to integrate its members (or not), and to regulate the way they think, feel and act" (Maltzberger & Goldblatt, 1996, p. 2), there were serious critiques of his work. One of the most common was in regards to Durkheim's reliance on official statistics (see Douglas, 1967; Halbwachs, 1930/1971; Aktinson 1968, 1978). Douglas (1967) and others argued that official statistics are biased due to the systematic differences in moral judgments of suicide. Maris, Berman and Silverman (2000), contended that there was a general consensus that vital statistics undercount suicides, from 10% anywhere to as much as 50%, and these errors of omissions were greatest in the upper socioeconomic status group, because they were more powerful and effective in avoiding the potential stigma of a suicide classification (or losing insurance money). Zilboorg (1936; 1937/1996a) also argued that statistical data on suicide deserved little credence, as too many suicides were not reported as such.

Those who kill themselves through automobile accidents [or other seeming accidents, such as falling from a balcony or window] are almost never recorded as suicides; those who sustain serious injuries during an attempt to commit suicide

and die weeks or months later of these injuries or of intercurrent infections are never registered as suicides; a great many genuine suicides are concealed by families; and suicidal attempts, no matter how serious, never find their way into the tables of vital statistics. (Zilboorg, 1936, p. 1350)

These critiques throw into question some of Durkheim's findings because he relied heavily on official statistics and his work showed little attention to the problematic nature of numerical representations.

There are additional concerns with Durkheim in terms of his conclusions. Jack Gibbs and Walter Martin (1964) contended that he did not operationally define "social integration", making his hypothesis not testable. They proposed a solution to this with their own concept of "status integration". Another critique came from historian Lisa Lieberman (2003), who contended that sociological explanations that emphasize social causes over personal intentions render people who die of suicide as passive victims of forces beyond their control. I see this as an accurate portrayal of Durkheim's approach because he emphasized throughout *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* that little impact could be made on the national suicide rates over time other than significant changes in the respective social structures of each society. Additionally, Andrew Henry and James Short (1954) argued that Durkheim neglected social-psychological factors in relation to suicide. The importance of sociological perspectives versus psychiatric perspectives on suicide became an issue of debate especially within French sociology (see Giddens, 1965). This critique has been long lasting and is now generally accepted as a truth. As Marsh (2010) pointed out, "[s]ociological approaches to the study of suicide represent something of a challenge from 'outside', but have for the most part lacked sufficient discursive currency

to unsettle the accepted truths of the causes of suicide formulated in terms of individual pathology" (p. 186). I will now discuss these accepted truths about the psychiatric nature of suicide.

Medicalization

While many factors came together to lead towards the medicalization of suicide, the work of some of the founding psychiatrists ought to be cited as important milestones. Harvard psychiatrists John Maltzberger and Mark Goldblatt (1996) argued that it was Jean Esquirol (1772-1840) who led the way in medicalizing insanity, and in the process, suicide. Esquirol's 1821 text argued that suicide was madness and madness was medical; therefore, suicide was medical (Hacking, 1990). As Marsh pointed out, "[t]he postulation of an essential core self, alienated from itself but aware of its actions, directly challenged traditional moral beliefs about the degree of agency and responsibility individuals possessed" (2010, p. 106). In the process of medicalizing suicide, individuals who wished to die became patients, "victims of disease, and are thus taken to have a diminished responsibility for their actions. In relation to the suicidal patient, the responsible and accountable (and possibly culpable) clinician is formed" (Marsh, 2010, p. 144). Sigmund Freud was another key figure who equated suicide with depression, an individual psychological issue beyond the realms of the social determinants that Durkheim concluded were the causes of suicide. In Freud's (1917) well-known "Mourning and Melancholia", he addressed suicide and argued it was caused by depression. He theorized that one became melancholic through the loss of a love object and this loss then became introjected. The aggression directed towards the lost object became directed against the self, and then the super-ego's destructive impulses forced the individual to destroy him or

herself. Psychiatrist Karl Menninger (1938) referred to suicide as murder in the 180th degree. Menninger, and to a lesser extent, Freud, saw all suicides as having three fundamental dimensions: hate, depression and guilt (Maris, Berman & Silverman, 2000). According to Anderson (1987), with the medicalization of suicide far less concern was afforded to one's social standing (for instance, the shame that may have accompanied the revelation of debt or sexual impropriety) or financial security (such as the loss of work and the threat of destitution). Suicide became essentially an escape from depression (Anderson, 1987). The linking of depression and suicide resulted in a long lasting medical truth that carries major clout in our current North American understandings of suicide.

One of the first empirical studies to indicate that a vast majority of people who took their own lives were in fact clinically ill was conducted by Eli Robins *et al.* (1959/1996). They investigated all the suicides that took place in St. Louis over the course of a year and determined that 98% of the people who died by suicide were clinically ill, of which 94% had a major psychiatric illness. This was a major milestone in the psychiatrization of suicide. Such studies have since multiplied.

Study after study in Europe, the United States, Australia and Asia has shown the unequivocal presence of severe psychopathology in those who die by their own hand; indeed, in all of the major investigations to date, 90 to 95% of people who committed suicide had a diagnosable psychiatric illness. (Jamison, 1999, p. 100).

In a study cited by Maris (1992), the authors stated:

Almost all individuals who commit suicide have a diagnosable mental disorder, usually one of the affective disorders, although suicide risk is also high among individuals with schizophrenia and some personality disorders. It has been estimated that about 15 per cent of depressives eventually commit suicide and that about two-thirds of suicides have a primary depressive illness. (Black & Winokur, 1986, as cited in Maris, 1992, p.10)

The link between suicide and mental illness, particularly depression, is not limited to studies of Western populations. Australian suicide prevention expert Robert Goldney wrote that "[p]sychological autopsy studies have consistently demonstrated, across countries with different cultures, that 80% to 90% of suicides had mental disorders, particularly depression and substance abuse" (2005, pp. 129-130). According to Marsh (2010), even in Japan, with its history of hara-kiri (suicide to admit failure or to atone for a mistake), giesi-shi (sacrificial suicide), jyoshi shinju (love-pact suicide) and oyako shinju (parent-child suicide), suicide is now read as essentially pathological and an individual phenomenon. There is also widespread acceptance of not just the psychiatric links to suicide, but also neurological. J. John Mann and Shitij Kapur (1991) argued suicide was likely a result of a dysfunction of the serotonergic system (especially low 5-HIAA levels, postsynaptic receptors, and related biological markers). Those who point out that suicide rates in the population at large have not declined since the introduction of antidepressant drugs (see Maltzberger, 1992), which are believed to target the serotonergic system, seem to go unheard in the scramble to pinpoint the potential neurological factors leading to suicidal activity. Brain scans and clinical drug trials are

commonly studied in relation to suicide now, instead of social factors, such as those Durkheim argued were the root causes of suicide.

[S]uicide has come to be seen by the public and particularly by health professionals as primarily a matter of mental illness, perhaps compounded by biochemical factors and social stressors, the sad result of depression or other often treatable diseases—a tragedy to be prevented. With the exception of debate over suicide in terminal illness, the only substantive discussions about suicide in current Western culture have concerned whether access to psychotherapy, or improved suicide-prevention programs, or more effective antidepressant medications should form the principle line of defense. (Battin, 2005, p. 164).

Marsh (2010) raised the same concerns as Margaret Pabst Battin above, stating that the linkage of mental illness and suicide is, on the whole, accepted uncritically within medicine and psychiatry, government and media . He argued that within this dominant discourse, mental health patients are positioned as passive victims of illness processes that may push them into self-destructive behaviours. He also argued that the "compulsory ontology of pathology" leads to subjugated knowledge, in that "suicide being understood almost solely in relation to notions of illness, diagnosis, treatment, prevention, etc.—has disqualified other ways of approaching the subject" (2010, p. 72). In other words, a way of discussing suicide outside the terms offered by psychiatry and medicine is absent, or at least in short supply (Marsh, 2010). Echoing these concerns, Zilboorg (1937/1996a) stated that our society has been led by silent consent to the assumption that suicide is the act of an abnormal individual who must be a psychopathic person. These critiques of the medicalization of mental health and suicide in particular continue to mount. Lieberman

argued that "[t]herapeutic strategies that treat suicide as an illness, medicating the depression while ignoring the underlying motivations that drive people to end their lives, effectively diminish individual responsibility for the decision to die" (2003, p.7). In response to those who link suicide with depression in the vast majority of cases, Shneidman (1993/1996) contended that depression was not the same as suicide—one just needed to look at the fatality rates to see the enormous difference. He pointed out that it was quite possible for a person to live a long, albeit unhappy, life with depression, yet this was not true of anyone in an acutely suicidal state. Similarly Maltzberger and Goldblatt noted in their introduction to Robins *et al.*'s article:

[s]uicidal phenomena are too complex, too rich in meaning, too elusive, to be caged in a psychiatric or neurobiological box. They will not be reduced. That suicide is not merely an epiphenomenon of depression is demonstrated by at least two inescapable facts: the majority of depressed patients are not suicidal, and suicide occurs in a substantial number of persons after depression has lifted.

(1996, p. 144)

Szasz argued passionately against the medicalization of mental health issues (he referred to mental illness as a myth) over the past few decades, particularly in relation to suicide. Szasz (1999) contended that human behaviours, whether personal, sexual or social, were not medical matters. This applied to suicide: "[k]illing oneself or others is a behaviour: It is a matter of ethics and politics. Attributing suicide to mental illness is merely the latest attempt to control and condemn voluntary death by medicalizing it" (Szasz, 1999, p. 8). He urged the de-medicalization of suicide and for its acceptance as a behaviour that has always been and always will be a part of the human condition. Another critic of the

medicalization of suicide is Améry, who took a Foucauldian approach in his critique, stating that "today it is sociology, psychiatry, and psychology that are the appointed bearers of public order, that deal with voluntary death as one deals with a sickness" (1976/1999, p.97). This is reminiscent of Foucault's statement that there can be "no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (1977/1995, p. 27). The medicalization of suicide certainly adds a new dynamic in the power relations at play in suicide.¹⁸ The critiques of the medicalization of suicide bring to light the importance of a comprehensive and complex approach not just to studying suicide, but also of media reporting on the issue.

One of the founders of suicidology, Shneidman, suggested an approach that did not favour medical or social determinants, but instead looked at suicide as a complex phenomenon. It was near the end of his long career and pioneering work on suicidology that Shneidman (1993/1996) reached this conclusion, suggesting that suicide occurs when the "psychache" (his term for psychological pain) is deemed by that person to be unbearable. This means that suicide involves different individual thresholds for enduring psychological pain, but does not rule out that social factors (or any other factors for that matter) might be causing this pain exclusively in favour of individual mental illness. Most importantly, Shneidman took a balanced approach:

[t]he most evident fact about suicidology and suicidal events is that they are multidimensional, multifaceted, and multidisciplinary, containing, as they do,

¹⁸ See Marsh (2010) for a full Foucauldian analysis of suicide.

concomitant biological, sociological, psychological (interpersonal and intrapsychic), epidemiological, and philosophical elements. (Shneidman, 1993/1996, p. 637)

While this seems like an obvious statement, it bears repeating in light of the emphasis currently placed exclusively on mental illness in causing suicide. As Shneidman aptly pointed out, "we cannot hope to find a single cause for human phenomena as complex as self-destruction" (1985, p. 225).

I will just briefly acknowledge here that suicide is by no means exclusively a Western phenomenon; there are variations in how it is viewed and practiced throughout the world. Durkheim (1897/1966) noted that in India in 1821, there were 2,366 recorded suicides of widows following their husbands' deaths (a practice known as suttee or sati, in which a widow must burn herself to death on the funeral pyre of her husband), and in Gaul when a prince or chief died, his followers were forced not to survive him. He also noted in Polynesia, a slight offense often resulted in a man killing himself, while conjugal quarrels or jealous impulses often sufficed in North American aboriginal populations to cause suicides.¹⁹ While public opinion did not require suicide in these situations, Durkheim suggested that it certainly was favourable to them—the person who renounced life on the least of provocations was apparently praiseworthy in these societies. Similarly, Alvarez (1971) commented that in some "warrior societies", suicide was looked on as a

¹⁹ The casual use of the terms "slight offense" and "often" here perhaps indicate not only Durkheim's own dismissive attitude towards other cultural norms outside of his own, but also the problematic nature of anthropological study at the time. The problem of Western anthropologists judging rather than understanding and viewing other cultures as inferior and "savage" is taken up in detail by George Stocking in his groundbreaking 1968 work *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*.

great good. He went on to mention a common custom in some African tribes whereby warriors and slaves put themselves to death when their king died in order to live with him in paradise. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1971) referred to the Kuma of New Guinea where suicide attempts, always by drowning, formed a method of protest by newly married women who were unhappy with the match that had been made for them. While this dissertation focuses mainly on suicides in the North American context, I will make reference to a few international suicides that made headlines in Canada from time to time. As I detailed above in the section on defining suicide, this dissertation does not touch on the different cultural associations and meanings of suicide, because this is a complex topic that requires separate, comprehensive studies.²⁰

Contemporary Suicide in Canada

The World Health Organization (WHO) has focused international attention on the issue of suicide, noting that in the last 45 years, rates have increased by 60% worldwide. Every year, more than 800,000 people die by suicide, which works out to roughly one death every 40 seconds (WHO, 2014). As to why this increase has occurred, those who take a sociological approach to suicide, like Durkheim, would point to changing social factors and increasing economic pressures. Meanwhile, those who take a psychiatric approach to suicide would point to the increase in mental illness, particularly depression, worldwide.

²⁰ For further detail on suicide in non-Western societies, see Part III (pp. 155-239) of Giddens's (1971) *book The Sociology of Suicide*, Farberow's (1975) edited collection, *Suicide in Different Cultures*, or any of the numerous country-specific studies on suicide.

It has been argued that "deinstitutionalization, the use of newer drug treatments and shorter stays in hospital all potentially lead to higher numbers of patient suicides" (Healy *et al.*, 2006, as cited in Marsh, 2010, p. 166). According to Battin (1995), the following data are now fairly well established in Western cultures: male suicide rates are usually four times higher than female rates; suicide rates increase with age and are highest among men over 75 (although this is not accurate in the Canadian context, as explained below); suicide attempt rates are three times higher for females than for males; and seasonal upswings occur in the late spring months.

A Statistics Canada report on suicide confirmed many of these trends (see Navaneelan, 2012). In 2009, there were 3,890 suicides in Canada, at a rate of 11.5 per 100,000 people. The suicide rate for males was three times higher than for females. Although suicide deaths affected almost all age groups, those aged 40 to 59 had the highest rates. This is contrary to the trend in many countries for the suicide rate to increase with age. In Canada, the suicide rate is highest among the middle-aged, followed by those under 35. Of all the suicides in 2009, 45% of these were in the 40 to 59 age group, followed by 35% in the 15 to 34 age group, and then 19% for those 60 and over. Statistics Canada stated that suicide is the ninth leading cause of death in Canada, but amongst those aged 15 to 34, suicide is the second leading cause of death, preceded only by accidents (Navaneelan, 2012). While there has been a global increase in suicide, in Canada the increase mainly occurred in the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s (Centre for Suicide Prevention, 1998). According to the Centre for Suicide Prevention (1998), the population of Canada more than doubled from 1950 to 1995, yet the number of suicide deaths increased threefold—from 1,067 in 1950 to 3,970 in 1995. When discussing

suicide in the Canadian context, it must be acknowledged that Aboriginal communities suffer from a disproportionately high rate of suicide compared to the rest of the population. Suicide is the leading cause of death for First Nations youth and adults up to age 44 (Health Canada, 2013). It was found that between 2004 and 2008, Inuit children and teenagers had a suicide rate 30 times that of youth in the rest of Canada (Branswell, 2012). In light of the discussion above about the complexities of determining whether a death is a suicide, I would like to point out that these statistics only account for those deaths that were officially ruled as suicides by a coroner. Determining whether a death is a suicide is not a consistent practice across time or location, and statistics on the situation in contemporary Canada are no less flawed.

Research Problem

Ultimately, the following chapters seek to answer two overarching research questions: how has coverage of suicide changed in the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star* between the mid-19th century and 2013, and what were the standard policies and procedures in newsrooms regarding coverage of suicide during this time?

While I provide justifications for my selection of these two particular newspapers in the chapters on historical coverage (Chapter Two) and contemporary coverage (Chapter Five), I will also briefly address here why I chose to focus on these two publications. The purpose of my research was to get a sense of "everyday" reporting on suicide in Canada, which required searching through a large volume of coverage in digital archives. Only the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star* have complete and accessible

digital archives dating back to their founding, making these two newspapers the obvious choice of focus for my research. These two newspapers are also the two highest circulating daily newspapers in Canada (Newspapers Canada, 2014). While I acknowledge the limitations of focusing on just two daily newspapers, I believe that there are still many transferrable traits in this coverage. As I will point out, many of the reports on suicide were taken from smaller regional papers prior to wire services being available, and with the growing reliance in the 20th and 21st centuries of all newspapers on wire services, it is fair to assume that there is similarity between the coverage of suicide in these two large Toronto-based daily newspapers as there is in smaller local dailies and weeklies. I also believe an argument can be made that these two newspapers have become the "standard-bearers" for newspapers in Canada. The *Globe and Mail* is the oldest and most respected national newspaper in Canada, while the *Toronto Star* continues to be the highest circulating newspaper in the entire country—with a total weekly digital and print circulation of over 2.5 million (Newspapers Canada, 2014).

Organization

To answer these research questions, I divided my study into six chapters. I move from a historical analysis of how suicide was once covered in Canadian newspapers, to an overview of the ethical issues at stake and the various policies and procedures in Canadian newsrooms, to an analysis of recent coverage; this is followed by my conclusions and the implications of my research for journalists, suicidologists and concerned citizens.

Here in Chapter One I have interrogated the various definitions of suicide and set the boundaries for the forms of suicide included in my analysis of media coverage. I discussed the ethical debates surrounding suicide, and provided a historical overview of the changing conceptions of this phenomenon over the course of Western history. This overview also detailed Durkheim's study and the medicalization of suicide, which is of key importance to understanding how media currently represent and discuss suicide. I provided information about suicide in contemporary Canadian society, and then presented my overarching research questions and an outline of the dissertation as a whole.

Chapter Two explores early Canadian newspaper reporting on suicide and the common aspects of the coverage analyzed over the course of 150 years. The archival research on the reporting practices of two long-standing newspapers I present shows that suicide was certainly not taboo in the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*. In fact, the tip-toeing around reporting on suicide only began in the mid-20th century. Early newspaper accounts frequently reported on suicides, both local and far removed, including details on the exact manner of death. As public perceptions of suicide, and the laws surrounding it, gradually shifted from considering the act a crime to an aspect of psychiatric malady, reporting changed. Once suicide became somewhat of an untouchable subject in newsrooms the stigma became entrenched, making it hard for journalists and editors to address in any meaningful way for decades.

In Chapter Three I detail the long history of claims that media coverage leads to increased rates of suicide immediately following coverage; however, I show in my review of the empirical studies that this is a highly debatable assertion that few journalists

and editors are now willing to accept. The guidelines issued by mental health professionals over the past two decades are then reviewed, along with the critiques of these guidelines. This work is complemented by insights from some of the leading experts on ethics in Canadian media whom I interviewed for this research.

Chapter Four examines the ethical issues surrounding media coverage of suicide and includes a review of the literature in journalism studies on the matter. In this chapter I detail some of the existing newsroom practices and policies on covering suicide. My review of these routines and rules shows that the approach to suicide differs from newsroom to newsroom and there is not standard agreement on how it should be dealt with in most cases.

After reviewing the policies and practices in Canadian newsrooms, I move on in Chapter Five to a detailed content analysis of contemporary media coverage in the same two leading daily newspapers as I analyzed for the historical coverage in Chapter Two. Through a quantitative content analysis of a random stratified sample of coverage from every year from 2000 to 2013 in both the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*, I found several noteworthy trends. First, the coverage in these two newspapers is generally reflective of actual suicide demographics. Second, mention of mental illness in suicide reports is a growing trend. Third, several of the aspects warned against in reporting guidelines regularly appear in suicide reports in these papers, including mention of the method and headlines about suicide. The two newspapers did have some interesting differences on their approach to these aspects though, and neither emerged as being significantly more compliant with reporting guidelines than the other.

In Chapter Six, I summarize the news coverage analyzed in this research, the implications of this research, and provide some examples of reporting excellence on suicide. I then review the literature on the ethics of care and propose that this theory provide a guiding framework for moving forward and addressing concerns over coverage of suicide. I argue that reporting on suicide guided by an ethics of care may prove more effective than prescriptive guidelines stating what journalists can and cannot report. An ethics of care in suicide reporting emphasizes compassion, requiring sensitivity on the part of journalists for story sources and subjects. This approach may offer a way to open up the dialogue on suicide in an empathetic and respectful manner. I conclude by discussing future directions for research on this topic.

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2. A History of Suicide Reporting in Canadian Newspapers: 1844 - 1999²¹

In recent years there has been increasing discussion about coverage of suicide in mainstream news media as issues of mental health move from the private to the public sphere. Media ethicist Nick Russell asserted that there was a newsroom rule of "No suicides. Except" (2006, p. 155), meaning that it was general practice not to report a suicide, unless it involved a high-profile person. However, my research shows that this so-called tradition of "No suicides. Except" is not nearly as longstanding as some might believe. In fact, suicide was regularly discussed, and in quite shocking detail, in the Canadian press of the 19th and early 20th century. It was not until the mid-20th century that reporting on the suicides of everyday people (in contrast to high-profile individuals) dwindled and eventually became somewhat taboo. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the findings of my archival research on media coverage of suicide over the past 150 years in two Canadian newspapers with historic roots and well-established reputations: the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*. The scope of this research was to conduct the first scholarly exploration of Canadian suicide reporting from the mid-19th century through to the end of the 20th century. This historical research is important to consider because journalism scholars cannot make claims about traditions or how suicide reporting may be changing without an understanding of how the topic was historically covered in the press. A historical exploration of Canadian coverage of suicide has not been done before; this research aims to fill that gap by illustrating how suicide reporting has changed over time.

²¹ A version of this chapter has been submitted for publication: Richardson, G. (under review). "A history of suicide reporting in Canadian newspapers: 1844-1990." *Canadian Journal of Communication*.

Sources

To conduct this archival research, I required access to digital archives of Canadian newspapers. Digital archives allowed for searches of vast quantities of coverage on suicide across a large span of time. The purpose of this research was to get a sense of what "everyday" reporting on suicide looked like. This ruled out searching through microfiche for coverage of particular famous suicides on exact dates; however, using digital archives for general searches of suicide-related terminology across a large span of dates greatly limited the newspapers I was able to search, as only the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* have complete digital archives dating back to their founding. In addition to having complete digital archives, these two newspapers are the two highest circulating daily newspapers in Canada (Newspapers Canada, 2014). Therefore, this historical research is centered on the coverage contained in the *Globe and Mail* since it began in 1844 and the *Toronto Star* since it began in 1894. While I acknowledge the limitations of focusing on just two daily newspapers, both located in Toronto, I believe that there are still many transferrable traits in this coverage. As I will point out, many of the reports on suicide were taken from smaller regional papers prior to wire services being available, and with the growing reliance in the 20th century of all newspapers on wire services, it is fair to assume that there is a great deal of similarity between the coverage of suicide in these two large Toronto-based daily newspapers as there is in smaller local dailies and weeklies. It is my hope that a greater number of Canadian newspapers will digitally archive their back issues and make these archives accessible, which would allow me to conduct future research of a comparative nature between smaller regional newspapers and large dailies.

Method

Although this research was not undertaken with the goal of performing a quantitative content analysis, the sampling technique was informed by the studies and recommendations of media content analysis scholar Daniel Riffe (and colleagues). Riffe, along with Stephen Lacy, Staci Stoddard, Hugh Martin and Chang Kuang-Ko (Lacy *et al.*, 2001) argued that simple random sampling in media content analysis studies was inefficient compared to other types of sampling due to the cyclic nature of media content (such as the rather scant news in Saturday editions compared to larger Wednesday editions, and the impact of advertising cycles on news content). Lacy *et al.* suggested that a better sampling technique that takes into account these fluctuations in daily news coverage was stratified sampling that yielded constructed weeks. This involves identifying all Mondays, and randomly selecting one Monday, then identifying all Tuesdays, and randomly selecting one Tuesday, and so on, to construct a sample week that ensures each day of the week is equally represented. Riffe, Charles Aust and Lacy (1993) found that a minimum of two constructed weeks were required to reliably represent an entire year's content. Building on this premise, Lacy *et al.* (2001) suggested three approaches for long-term studies of newspaper content—one of which is to select two constructed weeks from each year; however, to avoid sampling from each and every year over such a large span of time, a constant interval, such as every two or five years, should be selected. Unfortunately, there is no published evidence about what type of interval would work best. Based on these suggestions, my archival research is based on a random stratified sample comprising a constructed two-week sample of individual articles that explicitly mention terminology related to suicide from each of the *Globe and*

Mail and the *Toronto Star* for every 10 year interval since 1900.²² The coverage prior to 1900 was thoroughly examined but in a less systematic way, as *The Globe* began in 1844 but did not move to daily publishing until 1853, while *The Star* began regular daily publishing in 1894. A supplementary search was also conducted for all articles on potential suicide deaths that never explicitly mentioned suicide through the search term "no foul play is suspected", as will be explained below.

Early Canadian News Coverage of Suicide

The first printing press in Canada was brought into Halifax in 1751, leading to the first issue of the *Halifax Gazette* being published on March 23, 1752. This was Canada's first newspaper, followed by the *Quebec Gazette*, *La Gazette du commerce et littéraire* (predecessor to the *Montreal Gazette*, making it Canada's oldest existing newspaper) and then several others on the east coast. The first newspapers appeared and disappeared quickly. According to Peter Desbarats (1996), by 1800, almost half a century after the appearance of the *Halifax Gazette*, there were only nine printing establishments in British North America.

The first newspapers in Canada looked quite different than the newspapers of today. They were just a few pages in length and incredibly dense, with few illustrations and drawings to break up the grey monotony of the small print. As Wilfred Kesterton explained, prior to the 20th century, news stories were not designed for the selective

²² Random stratified sampling of constructed weeks is also discussed in Chapter Five.

reading of busy readers. Instead, "[n]ews accounts were written in chronological order and in a discursive, literary style (Kesterton, 1984, p. 7). According to Stephen Ward (2004), the first popular paper in Canada was George Brown's successful and influential *Globe* (predecessor to the *Globe and Mail*), which was founded in 1844 by political reformers and Free Kirk Presbyterians. Figure 2.1 shows the dense front page of *The Globe* in 1844, typical of newspapers at the time. Minko Sotiron (1997) pointed out that for most of the 19th century the layout and content of Canadian newspapers resembled that of the four-page Toronto *Globe* in 1844:

Page one usually offered lengthy non-political articles lifted from the British and American press and, when the British and Canadian parliaments were in session, almost verbatim reports of the debates. Page two, the most important page, contained the editorials. Page three presented "commercial intelligence", snippets from the foreign press. The advertisements were found on page four. By 1865 not much had changed, except that there were more advertisements and they were found on more pages. (p. 4-5)

Not only did early Canadian newspapers resemble each other in form and content, as outlined by Sotiron, but they also frequently borrowed news reports from each other. In this archival research, I found that in the 19th century *The Globe* often reprinted articles directly from smaller regional Canadian newspapers, as well as from the British and American press. The Canadian newspapers *The Globe* borrowed from included the *Hamilton Journal and Express*, the *Hastings Chronicle* (Belleville), the *Guelph Advertiser*, the *Quebec Chronicle*, and the *Kingston News*, while American newspapers included the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, the *Buffalo Advertiser*, and the *Boston Post*.

Based on Sotiron's assertion about the content of Canadian newspapers resembling that of *The Globe* for much of the 19th century, and the fact that many of the reports were often taken directly from other newspapers, I contend that the suicide coverage examined here is likely representative of what was contained in other early Canadian newspapers.

The news coverage of suicide during the 19th century was vastly different from what we have become accustomed to today. The *Globe and Mail* reported on individual suicides since it first began (as *The Globe*) in 1844. The first suicide story in *The Globe* appeared on October 22, 1844 on the fourth page. The article is illegible in many places, as the paper was not well preserved, but it is an excerpt copied from a British newspaper about two gamekeepers who killed themselves a day apart, apparently due to the anxiety and dread of an impending visit from an important person (perhaps the owner of the wildlife preserve). Suicide deaths were treated as everyday occurrences and received small mentions along with other local, national and international information. When the *Toronto Star* began publishing in 1894 (as the *Evening Star*, and later as the *Toronto Daily Star*), it also reported on individual suicides with full names and information about the method.

Gory and Graphic Details

Explicit details were often provided in the reports of suicides, such as the type and sometimes even exact amount of a poison taken, or details on how people cut their own throats or the passage of bullets through bodies in self-inflicted gunshot wounds. On September 4, 1847 *The Globe* ran a small blurb in a list of notices on the second page that stated: "A carpenter, named Nimbs, committed suicide in Niagara, on the 28th ultimo, by

swallowing 55 grains of opium." It was followed immediately by a brief about the monthly meeting of the Toronto Building Society the following Monday. These were just matter-of-fact pieces of information being passed along to the readers, and it did not matter whether the individual was high-profile for his or her suicide to be reported. Other poisons that were explicitly mentioned in articles on suicides throughout this time included chloroform, strychnine, ammonia, carbolic acid, formaline, laudanum, and Paris Green (a brand of rat poison). In a piece on December 9, 1848, *The Globe* detailed how Sergeant James Wilson in New Brunswick killed himself while under the influence of liquor by "means of a pistol and powder only—the contents entering one of his cheeks and out of one eye" (p. 3). The article went on to detail how the man "lingered about 36 hours afterwards, when death terminated his sufferings." Perhaps one of the most detailed and gruesome accounts can be found in *The Globe* on July 26, 1853, which was taken from the American press and given the headline "Horrible Case of Suicide" (p. 2). The report detailed how a wealthy American man had jumped in front of a train in New York, "the whole train passing over him literally smashing him to pieces." The incredibly graphic detail of the state of the body can be found in the excerpt of the article contained in Figure 2.2 below. A classic example of the detail given to the method of suicide even in short reports on local deaths can be found in Figure 2.3, while another example of the rather gruesome and highly unnecessary detail given to the exact cause of death can be found on February 16, 1848 in *The Globe*:

An emigrant made a most determined attempt to commit suicide at Lloydtown a few days ago, by cutting his throat with a razor. He severed the windpipe nearly across. Dr. Ball was promptly in attendance, but owing to the extent of the injuries

inflicted, but faint hopes are entertained of his recovery. He had lost his wife and children in the summer, by the emigrant fever, and has been in a desponding state ever since; and to this his neighbours attribute the rash act. (p. 2)

Figure 2.2: Excerpt from July 26, 1853, page 2 of *The Globe*

broken and had it all taken away. We have said that the body was "literally smashed to pieces". If this statement be literally understood, it will convey some idea of the appearance which the body presents. Never has it been our lot to behold such a spectacle. The head neck and shoulders are completely ground off. Not a piece of the skull can be found larger than a penny. Both arms, and the right leg and foot have shared a similar fate. The vertebrae is broken in several places, and the left foot smashed to pieces. The brains, and mangled flesh and intestines lay scattered in all directions. Here was a broken leg, while there lay a part of a hand or some other portion of that human frame in which life and spirit beamed a minute ago. The hand that writes this description of a horrible death, gathered up the scattered brains and mangled limbs, placed them on a plank, and assisted to carry them to New Rochelle depot. The suicide occurred about three hundred yards north east of the depot.

Figure 2.3: Excerpt from January 1, 1848, page 3 of *The Globe*

SUICIDE.—A girl named Jackson, who resided about a mile from town, committed suicide this afternoon by cutting her throat with a razor, from ear to ear. No cause assigned for the rash act.

As seen in this example, and in Figure 2.3, suicide was often referred to as a "rash act" in early newspaper accounts, especially when explaining the circumstances surrounding the

death. For example, on July 15, 1848 *The Globe* ran a small piece from the *Boston Post* on Edward Phillips, a young man in Vermont who shot himself after coming into considerable wealth. The second last sentence of the small piece on his death stated: "An affair of the heart is said to be the cause of the rash act" (p. 1). Many of the reports on suicides attempted to identify a single cause, a rationale, for the death. When a simplified reason could not be attributed for the death, reporters would state that the cause was not yet determined, as if there would at some point always be a singular reason found in every single case. The rationales ranged from a person not being of sound mind, to trouble in love, to a personal or economic disgrace of some manner. The headline on a suicide story in the *Evening Star* on April 30, 1894 was: "Builder fails in business and shoots himself" (p. 1). An article taken from the *Hamilton Journal and Express* by *The Globe* on August 12, 1852 stated:

The deceased was about forty-six years of age, and held a situation on the line of railway near London for some time, from which, it is thought, he was dismissed; and that the dismissal so preyed upon his mind, that he determined to destroy his life. (p. 3)

A December 2, 1854 article in *The Globe* reported on a ship captain who shot and killed himself, explaining: "the deceased had been in a very despondent mood for the last few days, on account of a great loss he occasioned the owners of the vessel by paying too high a price for its freight home" (p. 1). Other stories included statements such as "It is thought that [he] is insane" (*Evening Star*, March 21, 1894, p. 1), "committed suicide by hanging herself, whilst in a state of mental derangement" (*The Globe*, November 9, 1850, p. 3), "He was in a melancholy state for some time past, and it is thought that he

committed the rash act while labouring under insanity" (*The Globe*, November 21, 1850, p. 2), "Embarrassed circumstances are stated to have been the cause of his self destruction" (*The Globe*, July 28, 1871, p. 1), and "Old age made him despondent" (*Evening Star*, July 10, 1894, p. 4).

Suicide Notes

Some of the articles mentioned suicide notes and a few even included reprints of these letters. *The Globe* reprinted in full a letter by Thomas Steele, the Irish politician involved with the Catholic Emancipation movement, written to his friend immediately prior to his suicide attempt (from which Steele died several days later) in spring 1848. The letter was several paragraphs long, the last three of which can be viewed in Figure 2.4.

Figure 2.4: Excerpt from May 27, 1848, page 1 of *The Globe*

" Before you receive this to-morrow. I will have ceased to live, I am quite weary of existence, although, of course, as a matter of manly firmness, in private society, I deport myself as if I were without a care.

" I shall manage the matter in a way that there shall be no cause for the ceremony of a coroner's inquest and *post mortem* examination. When a thing of this kind *must be done*, the more quietly and less theatrically it is done the better.

" I am, with most grateful feelings for all your kindness to me for so many years, as a private and public journalist,

My dear, —————

Affectionately yours—Farewell for ever !

THOMAS STEELE."

On December 4, 1849 *The Globe* printed in full one of the notes left by a woman who apparently jumped to her death in Niagara Falls, stating: "The following is a copy of the

letter addressed by Mrs. Miller to Mr. White, of the Eagle Hotel" (see Figure 2.5 below). The *Evening Star* published a small item in the middle of the fourth page on August 17, 1894 with the headline: "His Dog, Not his Wife" with the subhead "Woman driven to suicide through abuse." The article included a reprint of a short note she left for her husband before killing herself: "I have been your dog and not your wife; now it will end. It seems hard to part from my children; treat them different from what you did me." The article went on to state: "When arrested [the husband] expressed no surprise that his wife had killed herself. He admits the cruelty and says she cried once before to die." These deaths would not even be reported on now, let alone with such detail.

Figure 2.5: Excerpt from December 4, 1849, page 1 of *The Globe*

[The following is a copy of the letter addressed by Mrs. Miller to Mr. White, of the Eagle Hotel :]

To the Proprietor of the Eagle Hotel.

My mind is made up. I have no wish to live any longer. I shall go where my body will never be recovered. No one shall gaze on my mangled remains. Please take care of my two little boys till they can be sent to Detroit where their grandparents reside: They are the sons of Major Miller of the army, now in Florida, and grandsons of Hon. John Norvell, Detroit, Michigan. Please forward my letters and protect my children till some of their relatives can come for them.

MRS. J. G. MILLER.

Attempted Suicide

Both newspapers reported not just suicide deaths, but also about people who attempted suicide, especially those who faced charges for their attempt. The front page of the

November 5 *Evening Star* in 1894 included a small article of a man appearing before police court on a charge of attempting to commit suicide (see Figure 2.6). There were numerous other examples of attempted suicides that were reported in detail, often with full names and methods mentioned. *The Globe* carried a report from Britain on September 26, 1850 that named a man who had "attempted to commit suicide in his cell by butting his head against the wall with all his force, breaking the scalp from the forehead to the crown" (p. 2). On page 1 of the March 21, 1894 *Evening Star*, an article entitled "HE WANTS TO SUICIDE" detailed how an elderly man had tried to kill himself by taking poison; however, when the doctors managed to revive him, he said he would do it again as soon as he got the chance so he was arrested. *The Globe* carried a report from the *Milwaukee Sentinel* on April 29, 1852 about a woman who had tried to drown herself in a lake "in consequence of some hard words from her worser [sic] half" (p. 3). These types of revelations were quite common and not considered exclusively private matters of no public interest, as they are now.

Figure 2.6: Excerpt from November 5, 1894, page 1 of the *Evening Star*

LAYCOCK AT LIBERTY.

The Would-Be Suicide Placed in His Father's Care.

Albert Laycock was neatly dressed when he stood in the dock at Police Court to-day and pleaded not guilty to a charge of attempting to commit suicide.

His father was present and promised to take charge of him. He was liberated on bail, and the case was enlarged for a week.

Coroner's Inquests

Coroner's inquests were reported in detail, including possible motives for suicide and the findings of the inquest judges. The front page of the *Evening Star* on January 23, 1894 featured a lengthy column on an inquest into the body of a man found in the Humber River that took up almost the entire first column, of the eight on the front page. It featured numerous headlines and sub-heads, the third being "Very Much Like Suicide." The article gave the names of the inquest jurors and detailed all the evidence before them about the discovery of the man's body. While at the time of the report it was not known if the man had been murdered, drowned accidentally, or purposefully ended his life in the river, the article included an entire section speculating about the potential reason that would have led the man to choose suicide. The article stated: "If Bacon committed suicide there is only one explanation of the case, and it was for disappointment in love." Apparently the man went missing shortly after he found out that a young woman he loved had married another man. The verdicts of the coroner's inquiries often assigned a singular cause to the suicide, such as despondency from being out of work, or temporary insanity, indicating that it was not just reporters who sought a singular cause in each death, but also the medical professionals of the time; examples of coroner's verdicts included:

"The Coroner's Jury returned a verdict of *Felo de se*" (*The Globe*, March 11, 1845, p. 3).

"The verdict of the Coroner's Jury was 'temporary insanity'" (*The Globe*, July 5, 1848, p. 2).

"a verdict returned to the effect that 'the deceased in a fit of temporary insanity, caused by intemperance, threw himself into the river, and was drowned'" (*The Globe*, June 20, 1850, p. 3).

"The Jury returned an unanimous verdict of 'Wilful Suicide'" (*The Globe*, November 21, 1850, p. 3).

"... the Coroner's Jury were of the opinion that his death was caused by voluntarily taking Strychnine under the influence of temporary mental derangement" (*The Globe*, November 4, 1851, p. 3).

"An Inquest was held, and the jury found that the deceased was not insane, but that she had been impelled to the dreadful act by despair in consequence of being abandoned by her seducer, William Sandford Dewel" (*The Globe*, March 9, 1852, p. 1).

"... the Coroner is of the opinion that the deed was committed while in a fit of temporary insanity" (*The Globe*, March 13, 1894, p. 1).

"Verdict of 'suicide, while despondent and out of work'" (*The Globe*, April 28, 1894, p. 2).

Simply ruling the deaths as self-inflicted was not enough; a cause—a rationale—for such behaviour was often stated in the coroner's verdicts for suicide deaths. While suicide remained a crime, many people were deemed to be suffering from a fit of despondency or temporary insanity, excusing them from being fully responsible for such an act. The emphasis on the mental state of individuals who killed themselves continued to grow in

the 20th century, foreshadowing the current highly medicalized conception of suicide that is now widely accepted.

Early 20th Century Coverage of Suicide in Canada

The newspaper industry in Canada expanded rapidly in the late 19th century. According to Ward (2004), in 1873 there were 47 dailies in Canada, including eight in Montreal and four in each of the cities of Halifax, Saint John, Quebec and Toronto. By 1892, the number of dailies had doubled to 94, including seven in Toronto alone, a city of 182,000 residents (Ward, 2004). This major growth can be attributed to the increasing literacy rate, which was at 85% by 1891 (Sotiron, 1997), and an increasingly urbanized population. Along with the growth in the number of dailies, the actual newspapers themselves physically underwent expansion during this time, growing fivefold in size between 1891 to 1905 (Sotiron, 1997). The *Toronto Star* began publishing (then called the *Evening Star*) during this time of expansion, entering the Toronto market as the seventh daily newspaper in 1892. Sotiron (1997) argued that ownership of the Canadian daily press became highly concentrated in the period from 1890 to 1920 because there was a transition from the politically-oriented newspapers of the 19th century to the corporate entities of the 20th. During this period there was "a rapidly expanding urban population, increased literacy, the economic boom of the Laurier era, and a growing national market for consumer foods" (Sotiron, 1997, p. 4), all which contributed to the profitability of new newspaper ventures. The pressures of competition and influence of American newspapers likely contributed to a trend towards yellow journalism as the 19th

century came to an end, however Ward (2004) contended that Canadian newspapers were never as yellow as William Randolph Hearst's or Joseph Pulitzer's in their prime. John Cameron, editor of the *Toronto Globe* from 1882 to 1890 did speak of yellow journalism in Canada though, mentioning out-of-proportion headlines, and the "tearing open of private wounds of families for sensational ends" (as cited in Sotiron, 1997, p. 19); however, Canadian society was generally conservative and despite the rapid expansion of the daily newspaper industry, it was still a less-heated newspaper market than that of the US. This resulted in popular papers in Canada adopting the sensationalist techniques of their American counterparts in varying degrees (Ward, 2004). According to Sotiron (1997), quality newspapers such as the *Montreal Gazette* and the *Toronto Globe* were able to remain aloof from sensationalism because they had a secure financial status; however, newspapers in more desperate circumstances, including "the *Montreal Herald* in the mid-1890s and the *Toronto Star* at the end of the century—when the new owners fought for survival in a crowded and extremely competitive market—had little choice but to sensationalize the news" (Sotiron, 1997, p. 19). In the early 1900's, the *Toronto Daily Star* began employing some of the methods of the popular American newspapers that earned the *Star* the title "the last home of razzle-dazzle journalism" (Kesterton, 1984). The newspaper spent lavish amounts of money to hire lots of reporters to cover big stories and even hired trains and airplanes for news-staff use. Figure 2.7 shows a fairly typical front page of the *Toronto Daily Star* in the first half of the 20th century. During the Victorian era, journalism moved from partisan to a more objective, modern style. According to Ward (2004), the failure of partisan papers such as the *Toronto Empire* and Montreal's *La Minerve* were proof that strident partisanship did not pay.

Kesterton added that the influence and reliance on advertising led newspapers to become "unprovocative, impartial, standardized and 'public service' in their approach" (1984, p. 83). Another factor contributing to this transition from partisan to objective reporting was the growing reliance on wire services for news reports. When the Canadian Press (CP) was founded in 1917—through an annual government subsidy that lasted until 1923—it made traditional objectivity its defining principle. Ward (2004) explained that CP was impartial for the same reason that the Associated Press (AP) was—reports had to be free of political bias if the agency was to satisfy over 100 newspapers. CP showed how to employ an objective reporting method and disseminated the rules of objectivity in its well-used stylebooks (Ward, 2004); these are still mainstays in the Canadian journalism industry today.²³

At the turn of the 20th century, individual suicides of both high profile and everyday citizens continued as regular items reported in the pages of Canadian newspapers. The graphically intrusive nature of the coverage also continued, in the same vein as it did in the 19th century. Numerous examples can be found of gruesome accounts in early 20th century coverage, such as the article in *The Globe* on June 30, 1910 of a man who laid down across some railway tracks in Owen Sound. The report detailed: "His head was severed completely from the body, and the lower part of his face was too mutilated for recognition" (p. 7). Attempted suicides were also still reported and treated as matter-of-fact news pieces. The *Toronto Daily Star* reported on March 2, 1900: "Mrs. Samuel Oliver, of St. Thomas, tried to cut her throat with a butcher knife, on Friday, but the

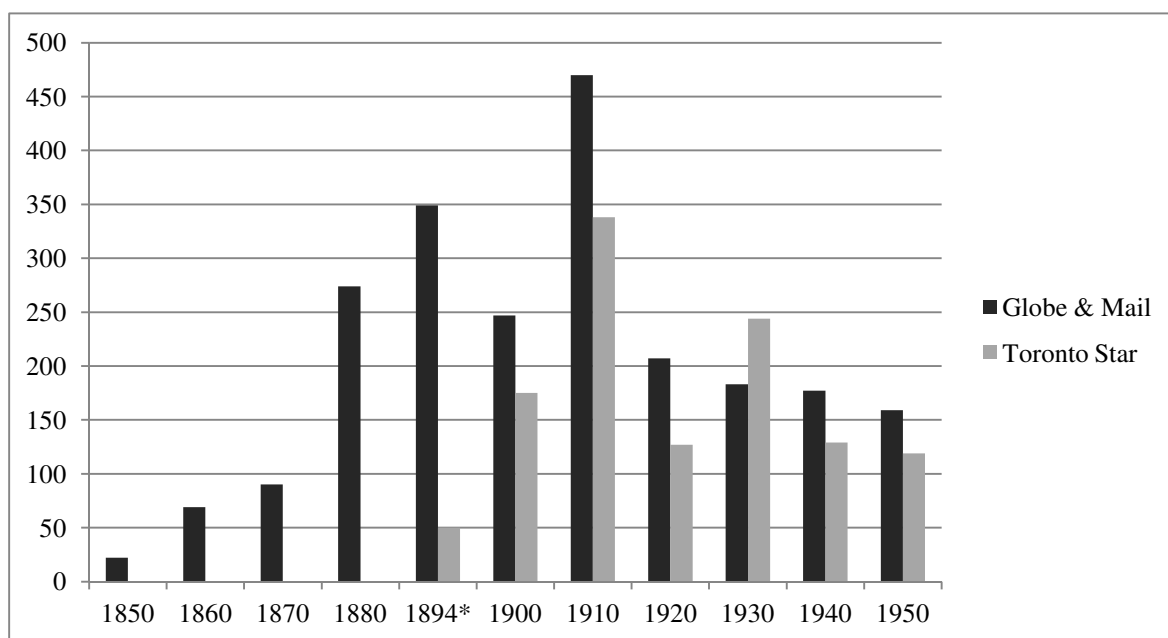
²³ A more detailed discussion of objectivity (based on the arguments made by Kovach and Rosenstiel) is included below in the section on mid-to-late 20th century coverage.

injury is not serious" (p. 6). This small notice was one of several items included under the heading Provincial News Notes, along with short one or two sentence blurbs about a fire, a woman being sent to jail for a month for shoplifting, an upcoming shareholders meeting, and several local deaths. Suicide letters were still referred to and, like 19th century coverage, occasionally suicide notes were reprinted in full, such as the one the *Toronto Daily Star* reprinted in the article titled "Aged suicide left pathetic letter" (May 19, 1910, p. 3). Suicides both local and international were reported, such as the small item in the *Toronto Daily Star* on January 12, 1900 of two US army men who killed themselves in Manila (p. 8). It seemed no suicide death was beyond reporting, whether a young woman in a London, Ontario hospital (*The Globe*, August 15, 1900, p. 7), a Woodstock farmer who hanged himself in his barn while his family celebrated Christmas in the house (*Toronto Daily Star*, December 27, 1910, p. 3), a wealthy Italian baron who jumped from a window in his palace after finding out he could not wed his mother's housekeeper because she was in fact an illegitimate daughter of his own father (*Toronto Daily Star*, October 29, 1910, p. 20), or a man from a prominent New York family who shot himself in the bathroom of his aunt's home (*Toronto Daily Star*, June 19, 1920, p. 28). The term suicide was often used in the headline or first sentences—the cause of death was clear and not obscured or merely alluded to in any way; however, I found the beginnings of an interesting shift in a small article from *The Globe* on September 4, 1930 with the headline "Irish artist dies" (p. 3). This piece did not mention the fact that his death was suicide until the final sentence. While this appears to be out of the ordinary at the time since most articles were forthright about whether suicide was a factor, it marks the beginning of this move to a peculiar format for suicide coverage. In this style, the

death and details about the person are mentioned without any indication of suicide being the cause until the final sentence and even that sentence sometimes does not refer to suicide, but instead that "no foul play is suspected." The use of this phrase will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

My search results show that while the overall number of articles mentioning suicide did not greatly increase (see Figure 2.8 below), but I found that the number of articles that referenced suicide in relation to war and politics increased, along with articles referencing abstract and distant examples.

Figure 2.8: Total Number Of Articles Returned in Archival Database Search of Suicide-Related Terminology for Every 10 Year Interval, 1850-1950



* 1894 included instead of 1890, as this is when the *Evening Star* began publishing.

During World War II, vague mentions were made about German suicides as well as the suicides of "hundreds of Jews" (*Globe and Mail*²⁴, June 28, 1940, p. 6). Terms like "suicide squad", "suicide attack" and "suicide bomber" begin to appear in relation to WWII coverage, especially to describe Japanese Kamikaze pilots. Other than this war terminology, however, coverage of suicide in the early 20th century was quite similar to the coverage of the 19th century. It was not until the mid-to-late 20th century that more noticeable shifts can be gleaned from the coverage.

Mid-to-Late 20th Century Coverage of Suicide

Media scholars Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone (2001) explained that modernism became the established vocabulary for newspaper authority during the mid-20th century. This style involved a streamlined front page with a hierarchical story placement that informed the readers what mattered most (see Figure 2.9 for a fairly typical front page of the *Globe and Mail* from the 1960s). Barnhurst and Nerone found that while Victorian newspapers seemed crowded and busy, modern newspapers appeared more purposeful and organized. As newspapers grew longer, the paper was divided internally into sections that further compartmentalized and labelled the news (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001). Another marked difference in newspapers during this time was the elevation of objectivity as the most important feature of the journalism craft.

²⁴ *The Globe* was merged with the *Mail and Empire* in 1936, becoming the *Globe and Mail*.

Figure 2.9: Front page of the Globe and Mail from January 4, 1960

Where to Find It

Amusement	22 23
British Deaths	28
Comics	13 to 21, 22, 23
Contract Bridge	14
Crossword Puzzle	14
Editorial Page	6, 7
TV Guide	24 to 25
World News	24 to 25
Women	13 to 15

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WATCH THE CANADA LIFE BEACON
Snow, Colder,
High Here 25
FOR WEATHER CHANGES



Russia Ready For A Pact: Khrushchev

London, Jan. 3 (Reuters)—Premier Khrushchev repeated today that Russia will not resume nuclear weapons testing if the West does not and said he is ready to sign an agreement banning tests for all time.

The Soviet leader said his country believes all necessary conditions now exist for an agreement by the world powers on the banning of nuclear weapons and immediate cessation of tests of all kinds of nuclear weapons.

"Now it is up to our Western partners," Mr. Khrushchev said in an interview released by the official Soviet news agency, Tass.

If Russian proposals for complete disarmament were accepted, a referendum of all nations would be supported by the overwhelming majority of the world population, the Russian Premier said.

The 10-nation disarmament committee, scheduled to meet in Geneva Jan. 12 will begin its work in a few days, he said. He said the committee is preparing for a serious improvement of the international situation, he declared.

The statements were made in reply to a questionnaire submitted by Robert McNamara, director of the Bureau of Arms Control, Washington.

Mr. McNamara said the questionnaire was sent to the State Department, that the President never answers questions from individual newspapers.

No further reference was made to Mr. Khrushchev's statement following the day that the Premier was considering cutting down his conventional armaments and reducing his nuclear armaments to a level of 500 warheads.



From the Hamilton Bureau of The Globe and Mail, Burlington, Jan. 3.—Five boys playing in a deserted shed on the Appleby Lane were badly burned Saturday afternoon in a gas explosion as it was being moved into a small house.

The fire was reported to be in critical condition in the early hours of the morning, Hamilton, tonight. They were George T. and Paul Moore, 12, both of Appleby Lane.

In the same hospital in Burlington are Paul's brother, David, 7, Ian McKinley, 6, of Appleby Lane and his brother, Michael, 11.

All five injured boys have burns on the face, chest and abdomen. David Moore also has an injury to his right eye.

A nursing matron, Robert Matlin, 18, of Cleveland Dr. at the boys' home, across a non-covered field to the shed, the most severely injured, said the boys were playing in the shed until about 10 p.m. when they were told to stop. They were told to stop because the shed was being moved.

41 Cents Over 30 Months

Quebec, Jan. 3.—The cost of living in Quebec has risen 41 cents over a 30-month period, according to a report released today by the provincial government.

The report, which covers the period from January 1957 to January 1960, shows that the average family of four has paid 41 cents more for the same basket of goods and services.

The most significant increases were in food, which rose 15 cents, and housing, which rose 10 cents. Other categories such as clothing, recreation, and transportation also saw increases.

The report also noted that the cost of living in Quebec is higher than in any other province in Canada, with the exception of Ontario.



From the Hamilton Bureau of The Globe and Mail, Burlington, Jan. 3.—Five boys playing in a deserted shed on the Appleby Lane were badly burned Saturday afternoon in a gas explosion as it was being moved into a small house.

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Blast Burns 5 Children in Old Shed

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Swastikas Painted On N.Y. Synagogues

New York Times Service, New York, Jan. 3.—A second Jewish temple within 24 hours was discovered painted with swastikas, a symbol of hate, in the Bronx, police said today.

The swastikas were found on the walls of the temple, which is located in the Bronx. The temple is one of several synagogues in the area that have been targeted by hate groups.

Police said that the swastikas were painted in black paint. The temple is located in the Bronx, and the swastikas were found on the walls of the temple.

The temple is one of several synagogues in the area that have been targeted by hate groups. The swastikas were found on the walls of the temple, which is located in the Bronx.

Death of Quebec's Premier Saue Creates Problem of Succession

By LANGVINE COLE, Ottawa, Jan. 3.—The death of Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis today created a succession problem for the province's Conservative government.

The Premier died of a heart attack in his home in Quebec City. His death has left a power vacuum in the province, as there is no clear successor.

The Conservative Party in Quebec is divided over the issue of succession. Some members favor a return to a coalition government, while others favor a different approach.

The Premier's death has also raised questions about the future of the province's Conservative government. The party is currently in a minority in the provincial assembly.

Man Kills Self With Police In Same Room

Upset by a police investigation, an East York man rammed a kitchen pocket knife into his heart while police stood by unaware of the bizarre suicide.

The man, identified as Leslie Cyril Unsworth, 38, of Glenora Ave., died in Toronto's East General Hospital less than half an hour later. An autopsy will be performed today.

Constables Gordon Forsyth and Robert Duggan, of the 10th squad, went to Unsworth's home when he called the police. The man was found in his room, and a kitchen pocket knife was found in his chest.

The police started to search the room and Unsworth fell to the floor. They lifted him up and he fell again. It was then that Constable Duggan noticed blood on the front of the man's shirt.

Doctors at the hospital said the knife had penetrated his heart. Unsworth has no known relatives in Canada.

Bonn Calls Slogans Bid to Blacken Name

Bonn, Jan. 3 (Reuters)—The West German Government declared Saturday that the latest series of anti-Semitic outcries was part of a concerted plan to blacken West Germany's name.

The government said that the outcries were part of a concerted plan to blacken West Germany's name. The government said that the outcries were part of a concerted plan to blacken West Germany's name.

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37 Saved as Ship Breaks Up in Raging Sea

Ship's agents said they believe the vessel would account for the remaining seven, who abandoned ship and put out in lifeboats Friday. A search plane was launched by the Canadian coast guard and is expected to find the missing seven by Saturday.

The ship's agents said tonight that all 37 men aboard, including Canadian, were believed safe after three days of rescue operations in the heavy water-swept sea.

The sea drama began Thursday when the 7,200-ton freighter, on route from Portland, Ore., to Halifax, with a full load of wheat, ran aground on Barataria Bay Rock in stormy seas.

SOS messages took up the line as the ship's crew and passengers were rescued. The ship's agents said they believe the vessel would account for the remaining seven, who abandoned ship and put out in lifeboats Friday.

New Talks Convened By Mitchell

Washington, Jan. 3 (AP)—An agreement was reported in the steel labor industry today by Secretary of Labor Mitchell.

The agreement was reached after a series of talks between the industry and the United Steelworkers of America. The agreement covers wages and working conditions for the next year.

Secretary Mitchell said that the agreement was a significant step towards resolving the industry's labor problems. He said that the agreement was reached after a series of talks between the industry and the United Steelworkers of America.

Death of Quebec's Premier Saue Creates Problem of Succession

By LANGVINE COLE, Ottawa, Jan. 3.—The death of Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis today created a succession problem for the province's Conservative government.

The Premier died of a heart attack in his home in Quebec City. His death has left a power vacuum in the province, as there is no clear successor.

The Conservative Party in Quebec is divided over the issue of succession. Some members favor a return to a coalition government, while others favor a different approach.

Man Kills Self With Police In Same Room

Upset by a police investigation, an East York man rammed a kitchen pocket knife into his heart while police stood by unaware of the bizarre suicide.

The man, identified as Leslie Cyril Unsworth, 38, of Glenora Ave., died in Toronto's East General Hospital less than half an hour later. An autopsy will be performed today.

Constables Gordon Forsyth and Robert Duggan, of the 10th squad, went to Unsworth's home when he called the police. The man was found in his room, and a kitchen pocket knife was found in his chest.

Bonn Calls Slogans Bid to Blacken Name

Bonn, Jan. 3 (Reuters)—The West German Government declared Saturday that the latest series of anti-Semitic outcries was part of a concerted plan to blacken West Germany's name.

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37 Saved as Ship Breaks Up in Raging Sea

Ship's agents said they believe the vessel would account for the remaining seven, who abandoned ship and put out in lifeboats Friday. A search plane was launched by the Canadian coast guard and is expected to find the missing seven by Saturday.

The ship's agents said tonight that all 37 men aboard, including Canadian, were believed safe after three days of rescue operations in the heavy water-swept sea.

The sea drama began Thursday when the 7,200-ton freighter, on route from Portland, Ore., to Halifax, with a full load of wheat, ran aground on Barataria Bay Rock in stormy seas.

Wet Wheat Bursts Open Seams

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According to Kesterton (1984), objectivity rose to prominence because modern dailies aimed to please as many and offend as few as possible. The rise of objectivity also had an impact on the layout, with modern newspapers keeping fact and opinion apart by isolating news and editorials from each other. When mentioning objectivity, it is important to be clear here on exactly what is meant. As journalism scholars Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel pointed out, the contemporary understanding of objectivity has been confused as a stance taken up by journalists themselves when in fact it is the *method* of the journalist. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) explained that when the concept of objectivity first migrated to journalism, it was not meant to imply that journalists were free of bias; rather it was an appeal for them to adopt a consistent method of testing information so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work. The confusion is that most people now think of objectivity in journalism as an aim, not as a method; however, the key to objectivity in journalism is the discipline of the craft, not the aim (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). Under Kovach and Rosenstiel's clarification of objectivity in journalism, neutrality is not a fundamental principle of journalism; the impartial voice is a device to persuade the audience of the journalist's accuracy and fairness.

Sensational or Crime-Related Suicides Predominate

Over the years, the reporting on more sensational deaths took over from the more mundane and everyday-type suicides, which can perhaps be attributed to the increasing size of the population (and increasing number of suicides) or the lasting effects of sensational-type reporting, the "yellow journalism" mentioned earlier that was popularized by Hurst and Pulitzer. The bizarre and sensational stories of suicides from all

over the world were printed in small blurbs, like the piece that the *Toronto Daily Star* ran on January 16, 1940 entitled "Bald at 29 too much, dead" (p. 5). The story was of a man in Los Angeles who died of suicide by asphyxiation because losing his hair bothered him greatly. On February 20, 1950, the *Toronto Daily Star* included a small item from Reuters about a 15-year-old boy in Italy who had thrown himself under a train rather than face his father with a bad report card from school. The report was titled, "Report bad, boy, 15 dives under train" (p. 19). On May 17, 1950, the *Globe and Mail* ran a small piece about a house painter in France entitled, "Swallows shirt in Third Attempt at Suicide, Dies" (p. 3). It explained how a man tore up his shirt and swallowed it while being treated in the hospital for the injuries from his first two attempts.

Attempted suicides were still reported in the mid-20th century and those involved could still be charged with criminal acts, until attempting suicide was finally removed from the Criminal Code of Canada in 1972. Yet by the 1960s, many of the articles mentioning suicide were related to criminal cases, such as numerous murder-suicides or people charged with crimes who attempted suicide while in custody or out on bail. The *Toronto Daily Star* ran a CP article about a 17-year-old who shot himself in the chest on a golf course after firing a shot at a police officer and narrowly missing (January 6, 1950, p. 17). The *Globe and Mail* ran a small item on October 6, 1960 about a Windsor man who was in custody on vagrancy charges and hanged himself by his coat in his cell (p. 5). In another example, on December 21, 1970, both the *Toronto Star* (p. 23) and *Globe and Mail* (p. 5) included articles based on a CP account naming a 17-year-old boy who hanged himself by his pajamas in his cell in a Guelph juvenile detention centre. Jailhouse suicide was given quite a lot of coverage in comparison to other suicides, as numerous

inquests were held and suggestions made on improving the surveillance and response mechanisms in Canadian prisons.²⁵ These types of stories, along with numerous murder-suicides and the occasional highly sensationalized suicide story, were predominant, while the everyday stories of local suicides, once common in the 19th and early 20th century press, tapered out and disappeared for the most part. This leads me to speculate on whether this is an indication of the growing privacy accorded to most individuals, but denied to those associated with crimes. It also suggests to me a growing focus on the suicides of those in official institutions, while the far more numerous occurrences of suicide outside these institutions appear to be considered private in nature.

Photographs Accompanying Articles on Suicide

While photos rarely accompanied articles on individual suicides, on June 16, 1950, the *Toronto Daily Star* included an American AP wire photo of a man hanging off a bridge by his fingertips. The man was talked down by police who urged him to "think of his poor mother" (p. 27). A large photo of inquest jurors touring the Toronto police station where a man in custody hanged himself was featured on the front page of the Metro section of the *Toronto Star* in early 1970 (January 22, p. 65). In May of 1980, the *Toronto Star* ran a small photo at the bottom of page A16 of convicted Montreal financier Michele Sindona on a stretcher being rushed to hospital after slashing his wrists in a US prison cell. In March 1990, the *Toronto Star* carried an AP photo of relatives grieving over the open coffin of a high-ranking Romanian military officer who had died by suicide

²⁵ See, for example, "8 suicides at Montreal prison shock probers" (1970, May 30) and O'Donnell (1980, April 16) for articles on numerous suicides taking place in Canadian prisons and juvenile detention halls.

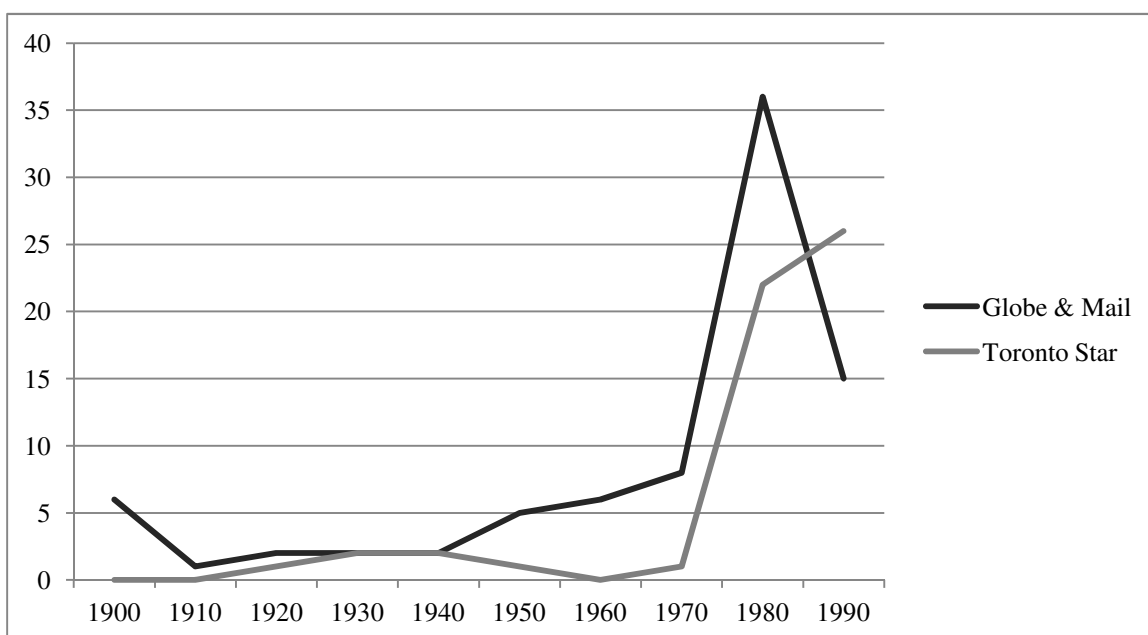
(March 4, p. A4), and just a few months later the *Globe and Mail* carried a Reuters photo of a funeral procession marching behind the closed coffin of a Lithuanian man who died of self-immolation while staging a political protest in Moscow (May 1, p. A9). Articles on murder-suicide were more likely to carry photos of the deceased or even police at the crime scene than articles that detailed an individual suicide. I would suggest this is likely because murder-suicide is newsworthy first and foremost for the crime of the murder, followed by the deaths of multiple people. The suicide was secondary in these cases and it appears concerns around decency and privacy were often treated differently for photographs of murder-suicides than individual suicides. The different nature of reporting on murder-suicide is an issue that I also address in the analysis of contemporary coverage in Chapter Five.

"No Foul Play is Suspected"

From the mid-to-late 20th century, the appearance of articles that reported on deaths but made no mention of suicide even if it was the case became more common. Obviously these articles were not included in the digital archival search results for articles explicitly mentioning suicide, but instead I found them through searching for the now commonly used phrase at the end of stories about mysterious deaths: "No foul play is suspected" (along with minor variations on this phrase). The use of this statement, usually in lieu of any mention of suicide, increased throughout the 1970s and 1980s and continues today. The term "no foul play is suspected" first appeared in *The Globe* in January 5, 1903 in an article about an elderly man found dead in his apartment (p. 12). The cause of death could have been natural, accidental or suicide, but it was left ambiguous in the article, other than to say "no foul play is suspected." The number of articles using this term became

more and more common over the 20th century, with a large spike in the use of this statement particularly in the 1980s (see Figure 2.10). Many of these deaths may have indeed been accidental or natural, not just suicide—all that is clearly known is that homicide is not suspected.

Figure 2.10: Total Number Of Articles Returned In Archival Database Search For "Foul Play Is Not Suspected" (and similar terminology) For Every 10 Year Interval, 1900-1990



The term is also used not just when a body is discovered, but also in some missing persons cases or even fires to assure the public that no one suspects any malicious intent; however, in some cases it is quite likely that the deaths being discussed in these articles were suicides based on the information provided in the articles. Still, no such statement is made other than the death not being a result of foul play; for example, a CP article in the *Globe and Mail* in 1991 about an inmate found hanging in his cell leaves little possibility other than suicide (January 3, 1991, p. A7). This is also the case in a *Globe and Mail* article that ran on August 12, 1977 on the death of the son of former Ontario premier

John Robarts. His son was found dead of a gunshot wound to the head, his body discovered in an isolated area with a firearm nearby, with a police inspector quoted as saying "foul play is not suspected" (p. 2).²⁶ There were several articles that used this term while also stating that the death was likely the result of suicide, which I found an interesting redundancy for journalistic writing because a death being suicide automatically means there is no foul play in question. In a CP article in the *Globe and Mail* in early 1989, the headline was "Charged in son's death, father, 42, hangs himself" (January 4, 1989, p. A3); yet, at the end of the second paragraph was the statement "Foul play is not suspected." In a 1987 *Toronto Star* article about a woman found dead behind the wheel of her car in the garage with the ignition on, the coroner stated that her death appeared to be suicide. This was immediately followed by a quote from local police, who said "no foul play is suspected" (April 14, 1987, p. A7). Other than these cases where suicide is directly mentioned, the rise in the use of this term can perhaps be partly attributed to the growing concern in the 1970s and 1980s around the potential copy-cat effect of reporting on suicide²⁷—using this term provided a mechanism for reporters to allude to suicide without actually saying it.

Shift in Perceptions on Suicide: From Criminal to Exclusively Medical

While early news coverage on suicide often referred to the mental state of individuals, in recent decades the equation of suicide to mental illness, in particular depression, has become standard. From 1960 to 1990 this transition from likely link with mental illness

²⁶ Robarts himself would make headlines just a few years later when he also died by suicide, a fact that could not be avoided by journalists who wrote about the shocking death of the former premier.

²⁷ This is taken up in detail in Chapter Three.

to known "truth" can be seen in the coverage. A science column in the *Toronto Daily Star* in 1960 reported on the promising results of a drug trial for suicidal alcoholics (March 3, p. 18).²⁸ Even in a religious column that told the story of the power of prayer in saving one woman from suicide, the columnist relied on the authority of psychiatrists who asserted that suicidal people "have a great need to feel more important and needed" (*Toronto Daily Star*, April 6, 1960, p. 28). The tone is not one of condemnation in this article extolling the virtues of prayer, but one of compassion. The *Globe and Mail* carried an AP report about the American Medical Association's 1970 convention, which included a session on suicide where a psychiatrist urged doctors not to ignore suicidal talk from patients (June 26, 1970, p. 11), and a few months later the *Globe and Mail* reported the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was calling for the removal of offenses such as drug addiction and attempted suicide from the category of crimes, and to instead have these matters referred to health authorities (December 8, 1970, p. 11). An article in the *Toronto Star* in 1980 reported that a national brain tissue bank was to be set up at a psychiatric institute in the city. Among the conditions to be studied was suicide, "which some scientists say may result from an organic illness" (October 30, p. B15). The discussion of suicide solely in terms of it being a psychiatric issue has continued and has become even more prevalent since the 1990s; the increased medicalization of suicide was detailed in Chapter One and I revisit this issue in the contemporary content analysis in Chapter Five.

²⁸ The drug mentioned in this article was actually the first antidepressant in the monoamine-oxidase inhibitor series that was discontinued in most of the world a short time later because it was found to cause severe liver damage.

Conclusions

This archival research brings new information to journalism and media studies by showing how reporting on suicide has changed over the course of some 150 years. It is clear from my work that suicide was once regularly reported on in the Canadian daily press of the 19th and early 20th century, and not kept hidden from the public as one might expect in the Victorian era. Details on suicide deaths and attempts were regular features of the daily newspapers, and not just in regards to prominent and powerful people. The suicides of farmers, local trades people, teenagers, foreigners, military personnel, professionals, politicians, and of those in distant and remote places around the world were all reported. This began to change around the mid-20th century, as suicide reports shifted focus to sensational deaths or the demise of highly prominent individuals. There was also a growing focus on suicide deaths and attempts made by those who were incarcerated for various crimes. Murder-suicide was always reported and continued to be the one form of suicide that was consistently chronicled across the entire 150 year span I analyzed. It was individual suicide deaths, often committed in private, that became of a more taboo nature and this coverage dwindled until it was unlikely that the report would be carried in these newspapers. This 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 more taboo to report on the suicides of private people. This is an aspect that is touched on again in the other chapters.

The changing perceptions of suicide from a criminal to a predominantly medical, in particular psychiatric, phenomenon was a long and gradual one, detailed in Chapter One. As I already mentioned, Shneidman aptly pointed out, "we cannot hope to find a

single cause for human phenomena as complex as self-destruction" (1985, p. 225). This is advice reporters and editors must keep in mind as public perceptions on suicide change in light of its medicalization and there is a growing appetite for open and in-depth reporting on this topic. Before moving into an analysis of contemporary media coverage of suicide, I will first discuss the policies and procedures in Canadian newsrooms in the late 20th and early 21st century.

Archival References

All archival newspaper articles referred to in this chapter were obtained through the following two databases:

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Toronto Star Archives (1894-2010). Accessed via:
<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/thestar/search.html>

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3. Suicide, the Media, and Contagion

Debating the Contagion Factor

There has been a longstanding debate over the degree, if any, to which media can impact individuals' behaviour. While some early media researchers argued that the media had significant influence on audiences (also known as the "bullet theory"), others argued that receptivity to media influence varied in each individual.²⁹ In their book about crime and human nature, James Wilson and Richard Herrnstein wrote:

If so many commercial and political interests invest so much money in media advertising, it would seem absurd to believe that the media have no effect on our behaviour, including, perhaps, our criminal behaviour. Otherwise, billions of dollars are being wasted by advertisers. And if the media changed only the noncriminal aspects of our behaviour, that would only be slightly less remarkable. (1985, p. 337)

Throughout this chapter, and the next, quotes and insights are interwoven into the literature review from the interviews I conducted with Canadian editors, ombudspersons and journalism instructors. These interviews were conducted in the spring and fall of 2014. All interviews took place in-person in either Toronto or London, Ontario. The ethics approval for these nine semi-structured interviews is contained in Appendix I. All interviewees signed a consent form prior to the interviews. The topics of discussion in

²⁹ See, among many others, "Effects of Mass Communication" in Severin & Tankard (2001) and "A Brief History of Media Effects Research" in Sparks (2013) for an overview of the various effects theories in media studies.

each interview revolved around their professional opinions on media coverage of suicide, such as how it may have changed over time and any particular cases that stand out as being prominent and precedent-setting in terms of coverage of the issue. I also asked all interviewees what they felt were the most influential factors on newsrooms when covering suicide, what their thoughts were on the copy-cat effect and media guidelines on reporting suicide.

Prior to the 20th century, the media's influence on behaviour was taken more as a fact than as a debatable topic for research, especially when it came to suicide; for example, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1774 publication *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774/2002) was blamed for causing copycat suicides and even banned in some European cities. In the book, the main character, Werther, was a man of high intelligence and passion who becomes obsessed with a married woman, and out of extreme despair, eventually shot himself and died. The book was very popular in Europe, but shortly after its publication it was blamed for a series of suicides of young men employing the same tactics as the book's main character.³⁰ Al Alvarez (1971) said Goethe's *Werther* made suicide attractive for Romantics all across Europe, just as Thomas Chatterton, perhaps one of the most famous literary suicides, made the act desirable for British poets. Chatterton's death was revisited in de Vigny's *Chatterton* (1835/1908); after publication, the text was credited with doubling the annual suicide rate in France between 1830 and 1840 (Alvarez, 1971).

³⁰ The controversy over Goethe's book led Phillips (1974) to coin the term the "Werther effect", which is used to describe imitative suicidal behaviour.

The authority of the imitation effect argument continued into the 19th and 20th centuries. An article in 1893 entitled "The Psychology of Crime" argued that regular reading of unwholesome material, especially by impressionable young people, could lead to murders, suicides, sexual immoralities, thefts and numerous other problematic behaviours (as cited in Ferré, 2009, p. 18). John Ferré (2009) pointed out that claims such as these seemed to be confirmed by the suicides that followed the publication of "Is Suicide a Sin?" by Robert Ingersoll in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. In the article, Ingersoll attacked laws that punished would-be suicides, asking "When life is of no value to him, when he can be of no real assistance to others, why should a man continue?" (as cited in Ferré, 2009, p. 18). Ferré recounted how some readers apparently took Ingersoll at his word, including a couple who ended their three-month extramarital affair in Central Park with a double suicide. Ingersoll's column on suicide was found by police in the man's pocket, leading to a public outcry, including a condemnation from the New York Minister's Association:

Detailed accounts of suicides are not only obnoxious to all but the morbid, but are among the potent causes of the alarming increase of self-murder, especially when communications extenuating and even advocating it are sought and exploited as a means of increasing circulation. (as cited in Ferré, 2009, p. 18)

The *New York Times* jumped on the condemnation bandwagon, charging that the *New York World* had precipitated an unprecedented number of suicides by publishing the article (Motto, 1967/1971). While this accusation was shown to have no statistical validity, the *Times* maintained that many future suicides would be due to the *World's* dissemination of this article. After a rash of suicides in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1910, the

American Academy of Medicine devoted a section of its annual meeting the next year to this matter, resulting in a unanimous characterization from the medical, legal and religious opinions expressed that the public press was "incendiary literature", "vile and pernicious" and "an accomplice in crimes against the person" (as cited in Motto, 1967/1971, p. 307). Motto wrote that in the same year, newspaper accounts giving names and dosages of poisons used in suicide attempts were protested by the National Association of Retail Druggists, and two years later a wave of suicides from ingestion of bichloride of mercury were noted to subside after newspaper accounts deleted mention of the drug. As late as 1948, the British Medical Association moved to prohibit reports of inquests into suicides, in the belief that publicity might lead to imitative suicides (Motto, 1967/1971). The imitative effect seemed to be widely accepted, that is until Durkheim rejected it as a large-scale phenomenon with the ability to increase societal suicide rates.

Durkheim (1897/1966)³¹ agreed that suicide can be contagious within localized areas and conceded that different suicides almost always resemble one another to an astonishing degree; he relayed the story of "fifteen patients who hung themselves in swift succession in 1772 from the same hook in a dark passage of the hospital. Once the hook was removed there was an end to the epidemic" (1897/1966, p. 97). Nevertheless, he concluded that contagion of suicide is from individual to individual, and never goes as far as affecting the overall societal suicide-rate. Therefore, he challenged the notion that suicide contagion has social effects, contending: "Within a narrow circle it may well occasion the repetition of a single thought or action, but never are its repercussions

³¹ See Chapter One for an overview of Durkheim's work on suicide

sufficiently deep or extensive to reach and modify the heart of society" (1897/1966, p. 142). Durkheim also concluded that imitation is not an original factor in suicide because predisposition must be very strong to translate into action. He addressed those who called for the prohibition of printing suicides and crimes in newspapers in order to curb their imitative power, arguing that such a prohibition might succeed in slightly reducing the annual total but could hardly modify their social rate. He went on to state:

Actually, what may contribute to the growth of suicide or murder is not talking of it but how it is talked of. Where such acts are loathed, the feelings they arouse penetrate the recital of them and thus offset rather than encourage individual inclinations. But inversely, when society is morally decadent, its state of uncertainty inspires in it an indulgence for immoral acts frankly expressed whenever they are discussed, and which obscures their immorality. Then example becomes truly dangerous not as example but because the revulsion it should inspire is reduced by social tolerance or indifference. (Durkheim, 1897/1966, p. 141)

This passage is particularly apt for a central aspect of this dissertation: informing studies of *how* suicide is talked about in the media. Following Durkheim's dismissal of imitative effects, it was nearly 60 years before the relationship between suicide and imitation was thoroughly revisited in research (Maris, Berman, & Silverman, 2000).

Sociologist David Phillips was one of the first to challenge Durkheim's assertion that imitative factors had little impact on suicide rates. He published multiple studies indicating patterns of increased suicide rates following publicity suicide deaths received

in the media, confirming the "Werther Effect" (c.f. Phillips 1974, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1982). Another term used to explain how certain reports in the media can trigger additional suicides is something Phillips, Katherine Lesyna, and Daniel Paight described as a "natural advertisement" for the idea of suicide (1992, p. 499). Elmar Etzersdorfer and Gernot Sonneck (1998) explained the general assumption about suicide contagion through media coverage:

A person in a suicidal crisis is ambivalent and therefore possibly prone to suggestion in both directions. A media report which allows one to identify with the person described and its [sic] suicide and to experience it as support for the (already existing and possibly urging) idea of killing oneself, may work as the last trigger for the decision to commit suicide. Another aspect was that a person who is constricted in a severe crisis and cannot think of a way out could find the solution for his [sic] unbearable situation formulated in the media report. (p. 69)

Since Phillips' suicide contagion studies, there have been many additional studies on the effects of traditional mass media (i.e. newspapers and television) that have tried to answer the question: Can the media cause suicide contagion?³² A 1987 *Newsweek* article stated: "There is no question that news of a youthful suicide often triggers others, and it may be dangerous to even discuss the problem" ("The Copycat Suicides", p. 28). I think it is important to acknowledge that much of the existing research on the topic of media coverage of suicide focuses on media in Western Europe (c.f. Barraclough, Shepherd, &

³² For example, see Fekete & Schmidtke, 1995; Stack, 1996, 2002, 2005; Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998; Pirkis & Blood, 2001; Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003; Au, Yip, Chan, & Law, 2004; Romer, Jamieson, & Jamieson, 2006; among many others.

Jennings, 1977; Gunnell, 1994; Hawton & Williams, 2002), the United States (c.f. Bollen & Phillips, 1982; Kessler & Stipp, 1984; Berman, 1988), Australia (c.f. Hassan, 1995; Pirkis *et al.*, 2002), Japan (Stack, 1996) and Hong Kong (Au, Yip, Chan, & Law, 2004; Fu & Yip, 2008), while research within the Canadian context remains limited.

Peter Marzuk *et al.* (1994) presented one of the most dramatic illustrations of the imitative effect in their study on suicides following the publication of the book *Final Exit* (written by Derek Humphry). The book serves as a how-to-manual for those who are terminally ill and wish to end their lives. Published in 1991, *Final Exit* recommended two methods in particular, detailing how to die by poisoning from certain prescription medications and suffocation from a plastic bag. Marzuk *et al.* found that suicide by asphyxiation increased 313% in New York City, and in 27.3% of cases, a copy of the book was found at the scene. In their national study, Marzuk, Tardiff and Leon (1994) found that suicidal asphyxiations involving a plastic bag increased 30.8% and poisonings increased 5.4% the year the book was published, yet there was no change in the number of suicides involving other methods or in the total number of suicides between 1990 and 1991. The study's authors also asserted that most individuals who had apparently consulted the book before taking their own lives did *not* have a terminal illness. The authors conceded that it would be an ecological fallacy to exclusively attribute the increased deaths by these particular means to the book, but argued that the significant rise the year the book was published was not likely to be coincidental.

Studies such as Phillips' and Marzuk's seemed to give empirical weight to the argument that media models of suicides can lead to a copycat effect. On the other hand, Motto studied suicide rates during newspaper strikes in several US cities where there was

a complete blackout of print news in particular cities, and concluded that "[t]he contention that unrestricted newspaper reporting of suicidal behaviour precipitates such behaviour on the part of susceptible readers is not supported by the data presented here" (1967/1971, p. 310). Motto (1970) then revisited his earlier study after a lengthy newspaper blackout in Detroit and found that when combined age and sex specific groups were compared, the newspaper blackout was accompanied by a significant reduction in the suicide rate of the female population, especially under age 35. This is indicative of the conflicting nature of the research that has been done on suicide contagion over the past several decades. In another example, the death of Marilyn Monroe in August of 1962 and the media coverage surrounding her suicide also produced conflicting research studies. Her death was blamed as a trigger of suicides in at least half a dozen cities (Appignanesi, 2007). Phillips (1974) asserted that Monroe's death led not only to a national increase in suicide rates (an increase of 12% in the month after her death), but also an international increase (by 10% in England and Wales). Motto (1967/1971) reported that although there was a 40% increase in suicides in Los Angeles during the month of Monroe's suicide, this did not lead to a significant change in the annual rate. So I would argue that Motto's (1967/1971) finding seemingly affirms Durkheim's arguments about imitative suicide not having an impact the overall societal rate of suicide, despite the possibility of localized and short-term imitative effects, especially in regards to chosen methods.

While many of the research studies suggested there may be some correlation between media portrayal of suicide and rates immediately following the coverage, these correlations fluctuate across variables such as age and gender. To provide an explanation for these variations in findings, Steven Stack (2005) applied logistic regression

techniques to 55 prior studies on imitative effects of media coverage of suicide. He found that studies measuring the effects of media coverage of a celebrity suicide were 5.27 times more likely to find a copycat effect and studies focusing on female suicide were 4.89 times more likely to report a copycat effect than other studies. Stack's study indicated that there are numerous variables that must be accounted for in conducting this type of research, including the amount of coverage, the presence of "negative" definitions of suicide (versus romanticised or glorified definitions), the type of media being examined, the time period, and the victim's gender and age group. He ultimately concluded that while narrative research reviews of existing studies have found a strong association between media coverage of suicide and ensuing suicidal behaviour in society, his own quantified statistical review of the previous studies actually determined the weight of the evidence to be *against* an imitative effect. In fact, 64.2% of the findings he analyzed reported the absence of an imitative effect. Interestingly, Stack's (2005) findings have not quelled the authority of the imitative effect of media coverage of suicide argument. It is the previous, conflicting and often times inconclusive, studies that are referred to in media guidelines issued by mental health organizations and suicide prevention groups as evidence of the potential of the imitative effect. This was a surprising finding as I reviewed the literature. Contagion is made out to be a clear-cut issue in media guidelines, yet there are many complicating factors that are not acknowledged. As I will detail in the next section, I am not alone in my concerns about the contagion literature that spurred many of the reporting guidelines.

Media Guidelines on Suicide Coverage

The debatable correlation between media coverage and suicide imitation resulted in calls for awareness of the impacts and ways in which journalists report on suicide (c.f. WHO, 2000, 2008; Nepon *et al.*, 2009).³³ In 2000, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a set of guidelines for journalists entitled *Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals*, which was then expanded and reissued in 2008. Several countries have also issued similar guidelines specifically for their national media, including Australia (Australian Press Council, 2011), New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Health, 2011), the United States (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2012), Canada (Canadian Association for the Prevention of Suicide, n.d.), Hong Kong (University of Hong Kong, n.d.), Ireland (Irish Association for Suicidology & Samaritans, n.d.), Austria (International Association for Suicide Prevention, 2005), and the United Kingdom (Samaritans, 2008), among others.

In 2009, the Canadian Psychiatric Association (CPA) published a policy paper entitled *Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide* (Nepon *et al.*, 2009). In this paper, the CPA cited several studies as evidence demonstrating the "significant" link between media reporting of suicides and copycat suicides among youth and young adults under 24 years

³³ Media portrayal of suicide is not the only type of coverage to provoke study and ultimately guidelines for journalists. There are international media guidelines for reporting on people with disabilities (International Labour Organization, 2010), at-risk children (UNICEF, 2010), people living with HIV/AIDS (Foreman, 2000), and violence against women (International Federation of Journalists, 2009), among others.

of age.³⁴ They cited the review of existing studies conducted by Jane Pirkis *et al.* (2002)—which is one of the reviews that Stack (2005) criticized for being of a narrative nature and not producing quantifiable data through a systematic analysis. The CPA policy paper simplified the existing research on suicide contagion to argue that there is a clear correlation, without any acknowledgement of the conflicting and contradictory findings contained within many of the studies on this phenomenon. The paper stated that while guidelines exist for media on careful reporting of suicide, most journalists are still unaware of the impact of reporting on suicide and are often not acquainted with the guidelines. The CPA endorsed the guidelines published by the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, as well as the Centre for Disease Control in the United States, and highlighted the key items from these guidelines in the policy paper, which are very similar to the WHO guidelines mentioned above, as well as most other national guidelines. In fact, Pirkis, R. Warwick Blood, Annette Beautrais, Philip Burgess and Jaelea Skehan (2006) analyzed nine sets of national media guidelines on reporting on suicide and found that they all had very similar content, but differed in the ways in which they were developed and disseminated. I have reproduced and included here the table that summarizes the guidelines from the CPA policy paper (see Table 3.1).

³⁴ Only one of the 10 studies they cited was included in the logistic regression study of Stack (2005), detailed above, so the authors of the policy paper were mainly working from different evidence than that refuted by Stack.

Table 3.1: Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention and Centre for Disease Control, Guidelines for Media Reporting Suicide (Nepon *et al.*, 2009, p. 3)

AVOID	CONVEY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Details of the method • The word “suicide” in the headline • Photo(s) of the deceased • Admiration of the deceased • The idea that suicide is unexplainable • Repetitive or excessive coverage • Front page coverage • Exciting reporting • Romanticized reasons for the suicide • Simplistic reasons for the suicide • Approval of the suicide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternatives to suicide (e.g. treatment) • Community resource information for those with suicidal ideation • Examples of positive outcomes to a suicidal crisis (e.g. calling a suicide hotline) • Warning signs of suicidal behaviour • How to approach a suicidal person

While some of these criteria are concrete, some are subjective; it is a lot harder to measure whether an article contains "approval of the suicide" than whether the word "suicide" is in a headline. The Samaritans offered a bit more elaboration in their media guidelines on the notion of romanticizing or glorifying suicide, stating that "[r]eporting which highlights community expressions of grief may suggest that the local community is honouring the suicidal behaviour of the deceased person, rather than mourning their death" (as cited in Marsh, 2010, p. 46). In terms of not overemphasizing the "positive" results of a person's suicide, the Samaritans' most recent guidelines specify:

A dangerous message from the media is that suicide achieves results; it makes people sorry or it makes people eulogize you. For instance, a soap opera storyline or newspaper coverage where a child's suicide or suicide attempt seems to result in separated parents reconciling or school bullies being publicly shamed may offer an appealing option to a despairing child in similar circumstances. (2008, p. 9)

In light of the development of media guidelines, some researchers on media effects of suicide have examined if and how media guidelines may indeed reduce the number of suicide deaths (Etzersdorfer, & Sonneck, 1998; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007), while others have tried to determine whether media guidelines have at least changed the way in which news is reported without comparing this change in media coverage to actual suicide rates in their respective regions of study (Michel, Wyss, Frey, & Valach, 2000; Jamieson, Hall, & Romer, 2003; Fu & Yip, 2008). In their often cited article “Preventing Suicide by Influencing Mass Media Reporting: The Viennese Experience 1980-1996,” Etzersdorfer and Sonneck (1998) documented how, after the first subway system was implemented in Vienna in 1978, jumping in front of oncoming subway trains became an increasingly utilized method of suicide. The Austrian media often sensationally reported on these suicides, prompting the formation of a study-group that developed media guidelines and launched a media campaign in 1987. Etzersdorfer and Sonneck found that media reporting changed drastically following the campaign and subway suicides and attempts dropped an astounding 80% within six months. They concluded that “it is possible to prevent imitative suicides by influencing the reports” (1998, p. 72). This is by far the most commonly cited study giving credibility to the argument that reporting that adheres to the recommended guidelines can in fact reduce suicides. In another study, K. Fu and Paul Yip (2008) conducted a content analysis of print media in Hong Kong to study the suicide reporting styles of five major newspapers. According to the authors, Hong Kong has an exceptionally high proportion of suicides reported in the media, reports that are often accompanied with photographs. In November 2004, the Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention in Hong Kong issued a manual

entitled *Recommendations on Suicide Reporting for Media Professionals* and held a public event on the issue. The guidelines included suggestions to avoid publishing photographs, suicide notes, specific details of the method used, simplistic reasons for suicide, religious or cultural stereotypes, or messages that could glorify or sensationalize suicide or blame someone. Fu and Yip examined whether there was a change in reporting style by newspapers in Hong Kong by comparing coverage of suicides before and after the launch of the media recommendations and awareness program. They noted a decrease in articles with photographs and avoidance of the circumstances of the suicide in the headline; however, they did not find any change in story placement from the front page or the adoption of appropriate messages to discourage suicide. The results of their study indicated that media guidelines and awareness campaigns can change certain reporting styles on suicide.

I conducted my own analysis regarding the elements warned against in guidelines and whether or not these elements were included in the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star's* coverage. I found these newspapers differed in approach to suicide articles. The *Globe and Mail* had a significant proportion of articles on suicide featuring a headline that mentioned suicide. This is a clear deviation from the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention's recommended reporting guidelines that specify headlines explicitly mentioning suicide should be avoided in order to decrease the imitative effect. That being said, the *Globe and Mail's* suicide coverage showed a decrease in mention of the method, which is in-line with reporting guidelines that recommend these details be avoided. Both newspapers had very few front page articles on suicide, but even still the *Globe* only had

half the number of front page stories as the *Toronto Star*. These findings and several others are part of the quantitative content analysis detailed in Chapter Five.

There are those who are critical of guidelines from mental health organizations on reporting suicide. Suicide researcher Ian Marsh (2010) argued that guidelines place limits on the portrayal and interpretation of suicide: "We are asked to look away, and if we do think about the subject, to do so in one way only (as an act arising from individual pathology)" (p. 212). *The Globe and Mail* health columnist André Picard said the guidelines were well-intentioned, but end up perpetuating the stigma surrounding suicide the guidelines aimed to address, ultimately making them self-defeating (Tremonti, 2012). Picard was also critical of the premise of the copycat effect underlining all guidelines on reporting suicide. He said there is no good evidence on the contagion effect so he does not accept that premise. In particular, he questioned the CPA policy paper's focus on people under the age of 24 and the copycat effect on them, as it seems very few young people are thorough and regular consumers of news media (Tremonti, 2012). Cliff Lonsdale, former CBC editor and producer, echoed this concern, arguing that if media contagion is an issue, how does one explain teenage suicide when so few 15-year-olds are reading newspapers (C. Lonsdale, personal communication, September 27, 2013)? Journalist Liam Casey pointed out that the CPA guidelines do not govern the Internet, where most young people can access detailed information on individual suicides (Casey, 2011). Former editor of the *London Free Press* and coordinator of the print and broadcast journalism programs at Conestoga College Larry Cornies concluded that the imitative effect is not something about which journalists are overly concerned:

I don't think journalists have ever bought into [the copycat effect]. Although I wouldn't be surprised if there is some evidence that it is true. But generally, if we got gun-shy about reporting certain things because other people might do it, then you also might not want to report that someone planted a bomb at the Boston Marathon, other people could do it at other marathons. It is a very slippery slope you don't want to go down. (L. Cornies, personal communication, May 14, 2013)

Another major critique journalists and editors have with guidelines, such as the ones endorsed by the CPA, is that they are written far too prescriptively and often by third parties who solicited little to no input from journalists when developing the guidelines. Lonsdale said journalists take issue with the fact most guidelines are not written by people who appreciate news judgment, often resulting in the "baby getting thrown out with the bath water", as good points in the guidelines are dismissed along with the rest. This is why the organization he heads, the Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma, partnered with the *CBC* and the Canadian Mental Health Commission to develop media guidelines on reporting on mental health issues. Suicide is addressed in their recently released guidelines (which includes a small book and comprehensive web site)³⁵. Guidelines such as the ones developed by Lonsdale and his colleagues likely have a much greater appeal to journalists and editors because they were written by journalists for journalists, with a strong appreciation for what actually goes on in newsrooms across the country.

³⁵ The Mindset/En-Tête guide and web site was launched in late April 2014: <https://sites.google.com/a/journalismforum.ca/mindset-mediaguide-ca/home>

Sylvia Stead, Public Editor at the *Globe and Mail*, favours the suicide reporting guidelines that were developed by several American mental health agencies in collaboration with schools of journalism, media organizations and selected journalists (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2012).³⁶ Stead said she finds these guidelines "less hard and fast" and not as prescriptive as some of the other guidelines (S. Stead, personal communication, September 25, 2013). She sends these guidelines to *Globe* staff when reporters are covering a suicide (see the reproduction of the table from these guidelines in Table 3.2). The guidelines from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, produced in collaboration with several media sources, provide a more nuanced and balanced approach than the recommendations in the CPA policy paper and many other suicide reporting guidelines. These guidelines provide concrete examples of how journalists can frame their reports, and language, to provide a more balanced and considerate approach on reporting suicide.

³⁶ The full list of media collaborators for these guidelines are: Associated Press Managing Editors, National Press Photographers Association, Poynter Institute, The Ad Council, Irene Saunders Goldstein (freelance editor and writer), Jackie Crosby and Kate Parry (reporters with the *Minnesota Star Tribune*), and Melissa Allen (reporter with the *Seattle Times*).

Table 3.2: Recommendations for Reporting Suicide (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2012, p. 1)

Instead of This ✘	Do This ✔
Big or sensationalistic headlines, or prominent placement (e.g., “Kurt Cobain Used Shotgun to Commit Suicide”).	Inform the audience without sensationalizing the suicide and minimize prominence (e.g., “Kurt Cobain Dead at 27”).
Including photos/videos of the location or method of death, grieving family, friends, memorials or funerals.	Use school/work or family photo; include hotline logo or local crisis phone numbers.
Describing recent suicides as an “epidemic,” “skyrocketing,” or other strong terms.	Carefully investigate the most recent CDC data and use non-sensational words like “rise” or “higher.”
Describing a suicide as inexplicable or “without warning.”	Most, but not all, people who die by suicide exhibit warning signs. Include the “Warning Signs” and “What to Do” sidebar (from p. 2) in your article if possible.
“John Doe left a suicide note saying...”	“A note from the deceased was found and is being reviewed by the medical examiner.”
Investigating and reporting on suicide similar to reporting on crimes.	Report on suicide as a public health issue.
Quoting/interviewing police or first responders about the causes of suicide.	Seek advice from suicide prevention experts.
Referring to suicide as “successful,” “unsuccessful” or a “failed attempt.”	Describe as “died by suicide” or “completed” or “killed him/herself.”

The Public Editor of the *Toronto Star*, Kathy English, said journalists must use their own judgments after weighing all the evidence, and guidelines are just one part of that weighing process (K. English, personal communication, September 30, 2013). Ryerson journalism instructor Janice Neil made a similar argument, saying that while journalists have an instinct to be naturally suspicious of outside groups issuing guidelines, they still look at guidelines to consider the arguments. The Chair of Ryerson's School of Journalism, Ivor Shapiro, said journalists do seek out guidelines whenever they encounter

a sensitive issue, such as suicide. When guidelines make sense to journalists, they are invested with a sense of authority, he argued; however, this is ultimately detrimental, as it releases journalists from the obligation of critical thinking (I. Shapiro, personal communication, September 25, 2013). Media guidelines from external sources are usually far more explicit and detailed than any internal newsroom guidelines on covering suicides. Guidelines created by external bodies for media personnel may seem restrictive, but they do not call for the outright silencing of discussion on suicide in the media. As media ethicist Louis Day stated: "[a]s unfortunate as [copycat] incidents may be, however, no reasonable person would suggest that the media should retreat entirely from such coverage as a remedy for society's ills" (1991, p. 205). Yet in many ways that is exactly what many believe newsrooms across North America did when it came to coverage of suicide. In the next chapter, I will explore the ethical aspects related to suicide coverage in Canadian journalism and the common practices when it comes to reporting on a suicide.

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4. Addressing Suicide in the Newsroom: Existing Policies and Practices

Overview of Journalism Ethics

Before discussing particular policies and practices, it is important to articulate the broader theoretical frameworks encompassing journalism ethics, and to delineate the traditions from which I am basing my research. According to media ethicists Clifford Christians, John Ferré and Mark Fackler (1993), in order to conclude whether some behaviour is right, we must examine three broad types of thinking: the ethics of consequence (which looks at goals, such as utilitarian thinking), the ethics of virtue (looking at the motivations of individual choices), and the ethics of duty (which looks at types of behaviour that promote human community). The authors of *The Canadian Reporter*, Catherine McKercher and Carman Cumming (1998), posited that there is a general consensus within Canadian journalism that public life ought to be shaped on the greatest good for the greatest number and that the consequences of an action are important in deciding if an action is ethical, both utilitarian ideas. McKercher and Cumming contended that Western conceptions of ethical conduct in journalism draw mainly from liberal philosophers, such as John Milton and John Stewart Mill. According to Nick Russell (2006), author of Canada's first text on media ethics, there are a multitude of values at work in the Canadian mosaic, but the Judeo-Christian ethos is the dominant factor.

Ferré (2009) explained that in the North American context, media conduct has been a concern ever since colonial times, but it was not until the 1890s that people began to think about what they were doing in terms of ethics. Journalism ethics, a type of applied ethics (Ward, 2010), began in this sense then in the progressive era, which spans

from 1890 to 1920. Ferré outlined the three periods of ferment that followed the sustained ethical evaluation of the progressive era: "demonstrations of professionalism in the 1920s; the forceful definition of the long-used, but ambiguous concept of social responsibility after 1947; and growing interest in normative theory and ethical universals since the 1970s" (2009, p. 16). Former dean of the University of Western Ontario's school of journalism, Peter Desbarats (1996), pointed out that journalism ethics have come a long way—many newspapers in the early 20th century were outrageously unethical by today's standards because partisan political journalism was considered the norm and crimes were reported in lurid detail in the sensational dailies. The yellow press of the late 19th century and early 20th century evolved and partisan reporting and outright sensationalism were traded in for neutrality and objectivity³⁷ in reporting. Media ethicist Stephen Ward (2004) said this newfound responsibility in the press was not just a business strategy to sell more newspapers or to carve out a respectable social status for journalists; it was also a rhetorical response to the public criticism of the yellow popular press. Editors attempted to assure readers of the credibility of their reporters in order to keep readers loyal (Ward, 2004). As Christians, Ferré and Fackler wrote:

By the 1930s, news conventions had rejected political partisanship and bias of all forms because they restricted readership and audience. To report as much uncensored information about as many events as quickly as possible, from a nonpartisan, "facts-only" point of view, became the supreme goal. (1993, p. 36)

³⁷ When using the term objectivity, I am working from the definition provided by Kovach and Rosenstiel (elaborated on in Chapter 2), whereby objectivity refers to the method of the journalist, not the aim.

With this new importance on press freedom and neutrality, however, Christians, Ferré and Fackler (1993) also pointed out that this meant autonomy from *all* constraints, with professionalism implying loyalty to the idea of objectivity rather than service to the local community.³⁸ Ward (2004) contended that journalism ethics changes when existing norms interact with new social trends and public expectations of their news media. In Canada, Desbarats (1996) said this led to serious discussions among journalists about professional conduct from the 1960s onward. One of the key factors in determining the ethical responsibilities of the media is based on how one conceives of the role of the media, which has changed over time and is subject to new social trends mentioned above by Ward.

Media ethicist Louis Hodges (1986) explained that one must have an idea of what can and should be the role of the media in our society in order to ethically evaluate the media. It is this understanding of the responsibilities of the media that guides journalists and editors in their daily decisions (Hodges, 1986). One of the most well-known theories on media systems is the *Four Theories of the Press* by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm (1956). The authors argued that in general media operate under the systems of authoritarianism, libertarianism, communism and social responsibility. This is clearly an outdated view of media systems, receiving numerous critiques about the imprecise nature of these categories and that they are not really theories of the press *per se*, more systems of political organization at large (Black & Roberts, 2011). Of the four models, libertarianism and social responsibility are the most applicable to the North

³⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of the concept of objectivity in journalism, see Ward (2004) *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*.

American context and I would argue they can roughly be translated into what many would now call the market model versus the public interest model. The concept of public interest is important to the Western ethical consensus on journalistic principles (McKercher & Cumming, 1998), as invoked in a statement by the Canadian Newspaper Association: "The newspaper has responsibilities to its readers, its shareholders, its employees and its advertisers. However, the operation of a newspaper is a public trust and its overriding responsibility is to the society it serves" (1995). This is a statement that could be replicated in the United States or almost any other Western nation; but, this is not to say that journalistic values are identical in all these countries (McKercher & Cumming, 1998). In fact, Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2012) argued in *Comparing Media Systems* that they:

wanted to avoid the kind of universalizing approach to comparative analysis in media studies—symbolized by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's *Four Theories of the Press* (1956)—that ... had held back the field for many decades, producing superficial analyses not based in detailed research on particular media systems and often riddled with ethnocentric assumptions. (p. 1)

Hallin and Mancini demystified the notion of a single "Western media model" through their work, detailing how media systems in the Western world have actually developed according to several distinct patterns under particular historical conditions.

For the purposes of my research the notion of public interest, as expressed above by the Canadian Newspaper Association, and the general principles of journalism within a liberal democratic society will serve as the theoretical framework for how I approach

the role of media in Canadian society. The code of the Society of Professional Journalists (1996) summarized this framework by placing specific standards and norms under four principles: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable. Echoing this sentiment, Ward argued that the ethical basis of journalism is service to the public or the public good: "Journalism's best practices, its norms, and its ideals are ultimately justified by appeal to the creation, maintenance, and promotion of a democratic public sphere" (2010, p. 204).

The media are not solely gatekeepers, deciding what information the public should know or not, especially since this aspect of journalism has changed dramatically with the rise of Internet communication. Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel explained, "[i]f the *New York Times* decides not to publish something, at least one of countless other web sites, talk radio hosts, and partisans will" (2001, p. 23). Therefore, Kovach and Rosenstiel contended that the modern journalist helps audiences to make order out of information. This is not just about adding interpretation or analysis to news reporting, but about verifying what information is reliable and then ordering it so people can grasp it efficiently (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Ethicist Deni Elliott (1997) added to this, arguing that journalists must go beyond simply telling stories about individuals in isolation because telling the policy story is the moral responsibility of the journalist. In specific regards to covering suicide, the importance of the policy story for which Elliott (1997) advocated would mean not just covering individual suicides, but also addressing the wider social implications of suicide on families, communities, and related health policy decisions. The responsibilities of journalists to act in the public interest, to produce interesting and insightful reporting on issues that matter in our society, requires ethical

decisions to be made on a daily basis by journalists and their editors on *what* is covered or not, and *how* these topics and events are covered.

Stephen Klaidman and Tom Beauchamp (1987) pointed out that prior to publishing or broadcasting, journalists must determine whether the public would benefit more from having the information released or withheld. Philosopher Dale Jacquette expanded upon this point in his work, explaining:

Not all facts are worth reporting, and professional journalists must pick and choose what to report and what to ignore based on professional standards and their own commonsense judgment and experience. Reporters are supposed to identify only information that is pertinent to a news event, which they then convey to their readers or audience in a way that helps make sense of what has occurred. (2007, p. 30)

It is not as simple as publishing any information for which a market exists. Journalists must decide what is relevant to the public interest and justify their decisions as contributing to the public good (Jacquette, 2007). This leads journalists to question: "what kinds of information do members of society need in order to conduct their business as self-governing citizens of a free society?" (Jacquette, 2007, p. 189). Media critics argue that journalists and editors often fail in this regard. Christians, Ferré and Fackler (1993) also added that there is a lack of critical reflection about the collective culture and institutional structure within journalism, which tends to reinforce the status quo in society. In light of these charges, several media ethicists have proposed journalists take on a new theoretical framework when approaching ethical choices in journalism, guided

by the principles of an ethics of care. I discuss the ethics of care in detail in Chapter Six, so it is to the industry pressures within journalism that often have an impact on ethical decision making that I now turn.

Impact of Political Economy Factors on Journalistic Ethics

The news media do not just provide a means to find out information; they also shape how events are presented and how they become relevant to the public (Blidook, 2009).

Therefore, I believe it is important to analyze (or at least consider) the political economy factors, often behind the scenes, that have an impact on media and determine how these factors may change the behaviour of journalists and editors. The political economy of media is a critical element in determining who and what receives coverage. The vast majority of media outlets today are commercially owned, mainly by massive media conglomerates. David Demers (1999) noted corporate newspapers are usually owned by shareholders, which means those newspapers must be “constantly oriented to the bottom line to keep stockholders happy and investment flowing in” (p. 379). W. Lance Bennett (2007) expressed the same ideas on corporate ownership of mainstream news organizations, pointing out that there is a tendency to seek the most convenient and attention-grabbing stories because of the profit pressures from mega-corporate owners. With increased concentration in ownership comes less diversity of voices. Desbarats (1996) explained that while it may seem that it was solely increased discussion and education about ethics that rid mainstream journalism of many of the outrageous ethical abuses that were once common, it was also due to the lessening of newspaper

competition that these changes occurred. Charlotte Ryan (1991) argued that “mainstream media pander to news fads—each wants to cover what the other is covering. Mainstream media are fickle; hot issues rapidly become passé” (p. 32). There is a tendency towards pack journalism, in which the major media outlets cover the same topics, ensuring that no one is upstaged. Russell (2006) explained that pack reporting occurs for mutual protection: each journalist is assured that his or her news judgment is right and will not be contradicted by others. Pack journalism has an impact on suicide coverage. When one media outlet covers a suicide story, the rest seem to follow. This means that some media outlets are compelled to offer coverage on a suicide even if they were reluctant at first. When media outlets were questioned over the heavy coverage of the suicide of Amanda Todd, the British Columbian teen who took her own life after struggling with cyber-bullying in 2012, the response was “well everyone else is doing it” (Tremonti, 2012). This is just one example where pack journalism has clearly had an impact on which stories are covered and how they are covered.

Determining *why* particular events receive news coverage, including suicides, is a complex matter with political economy factors often motivating what is covered. As Howard Sudak and Donna Sudak pointed out in their review of studies concerning media effects on suicide, “[h]eadline writers are charged with the task of attracting the reader’s attention so that overdramatization becomes a virtue” (2005, p. 497). This could be one of the reasons that some suicide stories receive prominence despite the taboos around covering these deaths—in order to attract reader attention to more sensationalistic stories. Sudak and Sudak provided several shocking examples of poor reporting on suicide in the US, including “lurid reports of suicides at New York University and at Massachusetts

Institute of Technology—some replete with pictures of students in mid-air following jumping from a rooftop” (2005, p. 498). University of Western Ontario journalism instructor Paul Benedetti said that sensational reporting often follows celebrity suicides, whereby all the rules go out the window (P. Benedetti, personal communication, September 24, 2013). While the profit motives of sensationalism can be a factor, I would also suggest that often journalists are simply not aware of the impacts of their reporting, with no commercial motivation underlying their actions. This is why further awareness and research is crucial.

David Skinner, James Compton and Mike Gasher (2005) pointed out that the current standards journalists are supposed to abide by are restrictive. They argued that patterns of omission in the news are not simply the product of concentration of ownership or interference by the owners—they can also be traced to “the ways in which both news values and journalistic practices tend to foreclose on the range of perspectives included in the news” (2005, p. 298). A large part of this is the notion of objectivity. While a century ago, “newspapers were typically tied to a political party, making no pretense of fairness or objectivity” (Russell, 2006, p. 8), this drastically changed in the early 20th century. One of the problems with the pursuit of objectivity in news reporting is that arms-length objectivity presumably means journalists must not be moved by compassion for the people caught up in the news or by concern for the results of a story (Russell, 2006); however, this conception of objectivity seems to fall into the confused ideal that Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) pointed out and upon which I elaborated in Chapter Two. Journalists and editors can hide behind this faulty notion of objectivity when charges of insensitivity are levelled at them. Steiner and Okrusch (2006) argued that it is not just

objectivity, but also the conventional criteria of newsworthiness (timeliness, proximity, prominence, impact, human interest, etc.) that are ethically empty because these criteria "offer no help to journalists who might want to pursue justice and in the meantime, must make judgments about topics, sources, length, graphics, and so forth" (p. 103). How journalists and editors define news and what is worthy of publication or broadcast will have an impact on when and how suicide stories are covered. According to Russell (2006), a variety of factors influence newsroom decisions, including technical requirements (e.g. physical space in newspapers), economic considerations (e.g. commercial media must be profitable), and visual and consumer concerns (e.g. balancing advertising and layout). Editor-in-Chief of the *London Free Press*, Joe Ruscitti, also pointed out to me that in today's Internet-driven newsroom, speed is a large factor determining how stories are covered. He explained that the Internet has changed the way things are done in journalism because it is now about who is fastest—who gets the story up first (J. Ruscitti, personal communication, October 1, 2013). He said to stay alive in today's news industry a media outlet has to get the story up first, which can present problems with suicide cases. Often times a story about a body being found, for example, will go up on a news web site, but once the death is ruled a suicide, the news organization has backed itself into a corner. The news organization must then try to find a way to avoid covering the individual suicide story after already drawing attention to it, resulting in the usual line at the end of the story "no foul play is suspected".³⁹ As Russell summarizes, "[t]he realities of deadline journalism often weigh on journalistic ethics"

³⁹ The use of the term "foul play is not suspected" was explored in the historical research conducted in Chapter Two, and is also addressed in the contemporary analysis in Chapter Five.

(2006, p. 4). Esther Enkin, Ombudsperson at the CBC, said it is getting harder and harder in an all-news environment to put in those extra few lines that might make a difference in suicide stories; this speaks to the difficulty of including more context or the resources for vulnerable people that are encouraged by many suicide reporting guidelines. Context is often sacrificed for speed and simplicity, meaning that a complex topic like suicide "doesn't lend itself well to daily news" (E. Enkin, personal communication, September 30, 2013).

While I view these newsroom impacts as mainly negative, political economy factors may play a *positive* role in the establishment of codes of ethics, press councils and reader representative positions at large media outlets because the quest to ensure journalists remain credible, and their products continue to be consumed, can make these proclamations of ethical standards attractive to publishers and owners. I will now briefly review some of these developments and the potential role they can play in reporting on suicide.

Institutionalized Ethical Measures

Interest in media ethics is a relatively recent phenomenon. According to John Hulteng (1985), in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there became a growing awareness that much of the public was distrustful and resentful of the news media, with public disaffection growing widespread and more pronounced. Due to this criticism, several new initiatives were introduced, and many of these practices have now become standard and institutionalized. This section will provide background information on written codes of

ethics, press councils and media ombudspersons, and how these initiatives can potentially impact media coverage of suicide.

Ethics Codes

A 1974 survey by the Associated Press Managing Editors Association found that written ethics codes had been adopted by only 9% of American newspapers (Prichard & Morgan, 1989). By contrast, nine years later in the post-Watergate period, three out of four news organizations replying to a questionnaire by Ohio University journalism professor Ralph Izard said they had written policies governing newsroom standards and practices (Schneider & Gunther, 1985). By the mid-1980s, surveys showed that about 60% of newspaper journalists at all levels—publishers, editors, and staff members—favoured written codes of ethics (Prichard & Morgan, 1989). The Society of Professional Journalists' code is one of the oldest national codes, and has been influential in the writing of other codes around the world (Ward, 2010). While most major newspapers now have some sort of written code of ethics⁴⁰ and are members of associations with their own codes by which all members are supposed to abide, there was considerable debate in the early 1980s on whether "rules" were necessary. Former American Society of News Editors president Eugene Patterson (in Quinn & Patterson, 1984) argued ethical dilemmas constantly change and evolve, making codes irrelevant. This is in line with what many feminist ethicists argued because most "reject claims that ethical codes can be deduced from a set of timeless, logical, hierarchically-arranged rights; they resist

⁴⁰ Although, it must be noted here that in his 2006 publication, Russell said that few Canadian newspapers had codes so this indicates much of the literature on ethical codes is based on American news outlets. After all, it was not until April 2002 that the Canadian Association of Journalists, with over 1,500 members, approved its first statement of principles at an annual meeting in Ottawa (Ward, 2004).

universalizing, abstract, and disembodied conceptions" (Steiner, 2009, p. 366).

Christians, Ferré and Fackler argued for explicit codes, which would surely offend Patterson who did not see the point in codifying standards that would become irrelevant as ethics evolve and change:

Hortatory codes insisting that journalists tell the truth, promote justice, act honourably, and keep faith with their readers are vacuous rhetoric. Only explicit, practical, itemized, and carefully nuanced codes establish a company mystique while decreasing quandaries and resisting flagrant misjudgements. (Christians, Ferré and Fackler, 1993, p. 138)

Philip Meyer, professor emeritus and former Knight Chair of Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, pointed out that while the idea of codifying ethical principles is popular, it is most accepted by publishers, "who are least likely to get their hands dirty with real-life application of those codes" (1983, p. 48). Echoing this sentiment, journalist and academic Ian Richards pointed out that the real power in the corporate world to withstand pressures to behave unethically lies with senior management, not individual practitioners; yet journalism ethic codes seldom, if ever, apply to those in such positions (Richards, 2010). Christians, Ferré and Fackler (1993) argued that too often codes exist at media outlets due to the misguided idea that they enhance press credibility. Russell (2006) in contrast suggested that codes of ethics *do* contribute to accountability, as they are a tool much like press councils and ombudspersons whereby the relationship between journalists, their audience and their peers can be measured. Russell is highly supportive of codes, pointing out that they provide recognition that ethics are worth discussing and are important, and that the

actions of each individual in the newsroom affects the credibility of all. Former editor of USA Today John Quinn (in Quinn & Patterson, 1984) argued that journalists should have clear ethics guidelines to consult to help them deal with questions of conduct; yet Russell cautioned that these codes "must never be regarded as final and all-inclusive, because experiences, technologies, and situations all change and blend" (2006, p. 234). He called for wise and thoughtful debate and interpretation according to the situation to accompany codes of ethics. I agree with Russell's sentiments that ethics codes demonstrate recognition that ethics are important, but these documents must adapt and evolve instead of remaining static and out-dated. One other critique of media codes of ethics is that often these documents are confined to the institution and employees themselves. The problem, as Louis Day (1991) explained, is that the public ought to be informed of the existence of standards of behaviour expected of media professionals. He suggested that newspapers could periodically publish the codes for their readers as an acknowledgement of public accountability. This problem is largely solved now through the web sites of most media outlets; the *Globe and Mail*, *CBC* and the *Toronto Star*, for example, have their codes of ethics available online. I take up several of these codes of ethics and review them in relation to coverage of suicide in the section below entitled Written Editorial Policies.

Press Councils

Press councils have been far less popular than codes of ethics in the United States, but have enjoyed relative success in Canada and parts of Europe. The idea originated in Sweden, which has a press council empowered to require the publication of apologies, corrections and replies, and even to impose fines. In the US, a national press council was founded in 1974 but collapsed by 1984 when funding from private foundations was

exhausted and member media organizations would not support it. Only a few local press councils remain in the US Press councils in Canada are voluntary and supported by news media members. The first Canadian press council came into being in Windsor, Ontario in 1971, followed by the Ontario Press Council and Alberta Press Council in 1972. Quebec's press council started the following year and now every province except Saskatchewan has had a press council (Miller, 1998), although Manitoba's press council folded in 2011 and the Maritimes has a single council, not one for each province. Canadian press critic and former Ryerson journalism professor John Miller is highly critical of press councils in Canada. He contended that complaints are usually heard in private and many members do not even tell their audience that they belong to a press council. According to Miller (1998), 75% of complaints to the Ontario council are abandoned every year, in large part because people get tired of waiting for justice. He also took issue with the lack of enforcement capabilities of press councils in Canada:

Even if there was a comprehensive code of conduct for the press in this country, and a courageous body to enforce it, it would be effective only if sanctions were attached to it. No journalist or newspaper in Canada today can be fined, disciplined, suspended or forced to redress a wrong, even if a press council finds that he or she or it acted irresponsibly. (Miller, 1998, pp. 46-47)

The Ontario Press Council does not have a formal code of practice for media publishing. Instead of choosing to follow the lead of the U.K. Press Complaints Commission and some other European councils, the Ontario Press Council relies on previous decisions as the precedents by which it judges current issues (Ontario Press Council, 2012a). While this could be viewed as a weakness on the part of the Ontario Press Council, few in

Britain would argue that their Press Complaints Commission has been successful in curbing ethical violations, especially in the wake of the *News of the World* scandal and subsequent Leveson inquiry.⁴¹ The ideals behind press councils are legitimate and important, but I would argue that these far-removed bodies offer little practical remedy for ethical controversies in newsrooms. They can only act reactively to ethical decisions, whereas internal codes of ethics and especially ombudspersons—topics I will discuss in the next section—are more suited to offer practical guidance to journalists in-the-moment.

In 2003, the Ontario Press Council waded into the issue of suicide coverage when it issued a press release to respond to a recommendation made by an inquest jury that media refrain as much as possible from mentioning the method or location of a suicide. The jury was examining the case of a student who jumped from the Bloor Street viaduct in late 1997, several years prior to the suicide barrier being erected.⁴² In the press release addressing the inquest jury's recommendations on reporting on suicide, the Ontario Press Council stated: "Deciding whether to publish information about a suicide should be left to newspapers, which have generally shown they are responsible and sensitive in dealing with this subject" (Ontario Press Council, 2012b). The jury argued that reporting on

⁴¹ Several journalists and editors at Britain's *News of the World* newspaper were implicated in a phone hacking scandal that first came to light in 2006. The scandal led to numerous resignations, the arrest of several key figures and the closure of the *News of the World* in 2011. Several months after the newspaper's closure, the British government launched the Leveson inquiry into media ethics and journalism standards.

⁴² The Bloor Viaduct was a known suicide magnet prior to a suicide barrier being erected in 2003. It is believed some 500 people jumped to their deaths there since it was built in 1919, making it the second largest suicide magnet in the world, after the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. After years of lobbying efforts, Toronto City Council finally agreed to build a suicide barrier, known as the "Luminous Veil". It cost \$5.6 million to build and was completed in March 2003. As construction crews were erecting the barrier, several people jumped to their deaths, averaging one every 22 days (Wilkes, 2003, January 21).

suicides, in particular naming locations of suicides, acts as a magnet to perpetuate the act. While acknowledging the importance of the issues raised by the jury, the Press Council stated that "the press does not report suicides unless they are clearly newsworthy" (Ontario Press Council, 2012b). This is the only instance I discovered where the Ontario Press Council addressed media coverage of suicide at all.

I was not able to find any mention of suicide on the web sites of the other press councils in Canada. In contrast, press councils around the world, such as those in Australia, Ireland and Hong Kong, have taken active roles in addressing issues surrounding media coverage of suicide, including issuing formal guides, as discussed in the previous chapter, and offering dedicated sections on their web sites to address these concerns. I do not think the Canadian press councils need to wade into the business of issuing yet another series of reporting guidelines on suicide, but addressing the issues at stake on their web sites and being an active part of public discussion on the topic seems well within their mandates. Instead of acting as distanced judges and juries on matters of media ethics, press councils in Canada would do more to foster their own sense of public legitimacy if they were to engage in discussion of ethical issues in general, not just in the wake of complaints.

Ombudspersons

In addition to codes of ethics and membership in press councils, some major Canadian media outlets have embraced the concept of an ombudsperson, or public editor. The International Organization of News Ombudsmen was formed in 1980. Jay Black and Chris Roberts, authors of *Doing Ethics in Media* (2011), found that fewer than 40 major

news organizations in the US had ombudspersons. Ones that did included *The New York Times*, *ESPN*, and *The Washington Post*.⁴³ In the UK, *The Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Independent on Sunday*, and the *Mirror* have appointed ombudspersons. It was the *Toronto Star* that established Canada's first reader's representative position, now called the public editor position. The *Globe and Mail* and *CBC* also have public editor or ombudsperson positions. I interviewed the ombudspersons at all three of these major Canadian news outlets for this research and their comments are dispersed throughout this chapter and the previous chapter. While suicide coverage is just one of a myriad of concerns they deal with on a regular basis, all had experienced situations where they pondered how their reporters approached covering a suicide, whether in terms of the language used, type of story frame, and/or inclusion of help line information, as suggested by some media guidelines. For readers, victims' families, and for mental health professionals, I would argue that establishing dialogue with a public editor offers the most accessible and effective means to address suicide coverage. Not only do public editors consider reader and source feedback, and at times offer thoughtful columns addressing the issues that have recently come across their desks, in some media outlets, the ombudsperson is also responsible for facilitating internal ethics workshops and committees. Christians, Ferré and Fackler (1993) found that media outlets that struggle through ongoing ethics committees with regards to coverage of suicide or rape victims, for example, guarantee higher-level responses to crises than when individual practitioners "shoot from the hip". Codes of ethics avoid any detailed discussion of the issues

⁴³ For a full account of the history of news ombudspersons, see Nemeth (2003) *News Ombudsmen in North America*.

surrounding suicide, and at times avoid suicide all together, and press councils are critiqued for the incredibly bureaucratic pace at which they handle complaints; therefore, I believe public editors offer a far more practical and effective means to raise issues of concern (or praise journalistic excellence in reporting suicide) and to have open and frank discussions about this topic.

When it comes down to what has the most effects on ethical decision-making in the newsroom, several studies, in addition to the anecdotal evidence I gathered during my interviews with industry experts, indicated that informal professional norms usually have the most impact. Prichard and Morgan (1989) found that unwritten professional norms were often the best predictors of ethical decision-making behaviour. Similarly, David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit (1986) found that newsroom learning, or so-called parables of the newsroom, were the most important influence in shaping ideas about journalism ethics. Ruscitti of the *London Free Press* said that his editorial staff always looks to past practice in the newsroom instead of having written policies. They consider each story on a case-by-case basis and make judgments based on precedent (J. Ruscitti, personal communication, October 1, 2013). Cornies echoed this, stating that coverage of matters such as suicide is decided on a case-by-case basis, and most newsrooms look to best practices, not policies (L. Cornies, personal communication, May 14, 2013). In a similar vein, Prichard and Morgan (1989) concluded that rather than being direct, the influence of formal norms, such as statutes, contracts and ethics codes, tend to be indirect, subtle and ambiguous. In fact, despite the similarity among many codes of ethics, a survey of journalists in 21 countries found little consensus about ethical norms, professional roles and journalistic values (Weaver, 1998). Therefore, it is important to

analyze what has been written and said about actual existing practices in newsrooms, especially within the Canadian context; I will discuss this next.

Written Editorial Policies

Russell (2006) explained that the media have a simple rule: "No suicides. Except" (p.155). It is the exceptions that are difficult to define. Here I will review the approaches to dealing with suicide coverage that are suggested by journalism textbooks, stylebooks, and Canadian journalism codes, then outline how some individual newsrooms approach the issue.

In the Canadian Press *Stylebook*, widely used as the basic standard for journalistic writing and practice, for many decades there was no directive on how or when suicide should be reported. The only mention of suicide first appeared in the 7th edition in the "Obituaries" section: "When suicide is suspected but not officially confirmed, it may be possible to report that a note or a gun or an empty barbiturate bottle was found near the body" (Canadian Press, 1984, p. 174; Taylor, 1989, p. 192; Buckley, 1992, p. 69; Tasko, 1999, p. 69; Tasko, 2004, p. 74). This statement remained in the CP Stylebook until it was removed completely from the 14th edition (Tasko, 2006) onward. The only other mention of suicide was in a statement that appeared starting in the 12th edition (Tasko, 2002) that was revised to include suicide (this statement had only mentioned AIDS in previous editions):

When the cause [of death] is suspected to be suicide or a disease like AIDS, which carries certain connotations, respecting the wishes of the family can normally be justified. However, in the case of someone clearly in public life, the right to privacy in such matters can be outweighed by the public's right to know. If in doubt, consult Head Office. (Tasko, 2002, p. 73; Tasko, 2004, p.73; Tasko, 2006, p. 69; Tasko, 2008, p. 87)

The guide did not elaborate on what connotations exactly suicide carried with it, but clearly these were negative or scandalous connotations being suggested to warrant this stigmatizing statement. This statement was removed as of the 16th edition and instead in the cause of death section the following sentence was added: "When the cause of death of a publicly known figure is known to be suicide but the family has asked that it not be reported, their preference is usually outweighed by the public's right to know" (Tasko, 2010, p. 92, McCarten, 2013, p. 92). Also now appearing in the 17th edition, the most recent version of the *Stylebook*, is a small dedicated piece on suicide in the "Sensitive Subjects" chapter. In this section the debate around suicide contagion is mentioned, and the importance of responsible coverage. It concludes: "Put simply: suicide cannot be ignored. Thoughtful judgment is called for in deciding when and how to pursue a story" (McCarten, 2013, p. 26). This is a significant change, as prior to the 17th edition, there really was no acknowledgement of the difficulties posed by suicide stories for many journalists and editors.

As with most ethical guidelines for journalists, those of the Canadian Association of Journalists' (2011) only offer general principles and there is nothing that can be really applied to stories involving suicide. Similarly, American journalists seem to have little

guidance from the national journalism organizations and bodies. The only vaguely relevant aspect of the 1973 code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists stated: "The media should not pander to morbid curiosity about details of vice or crime." The current version of the code of ethics states more simply: "Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity" (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996). The American Society of Newspaper Editors offers no guidance either: "According to John R. Finnegan, chairman of the ethics committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, there are no industry standards or ethical guidelines for newspapers to follow when covering suicides" (Jaben & Hill, 1986, p. 10). With the lack of a clear directive on how and when to report on suicide in the Canadian Press *Stylebook* or the ethics codes of the major national journalism organizations, it is clear that individual Canadian media organizations either have their own internal policies, or suicide stories are decided on a case-by-case basis. According to McKercher and Cumming (1998), traditionally Canadian newspapers did not report "a death was a suicide unless the subject was unusually prominent or the circumstances were extraordinary—as when a former premier shot himself in his shower, or when a woman leaped from the Peace Tower" (p. 188). I must point out here though that in Chapter Two, I illustrated that this is clearly not the case in early Canadian news coverage—suicide reporting was common, detailed and not just reserved for those of public status. This is exactly the type of assertion commonly made in journalism texts that my historical research has shown is not nearly as long standing a tradition as currently thought. McKercher and Cumming contended that in recent years, there appears to be a greater tendency to state the fact of suicide if it is so labelled by the police.

Regardless, they recommended any reporter check his or her newspaper's policy before going ahead with a suicide story.

According to Russell (2006), many newsrooms have a standing rule against covering suicides, in part because of the evidence of imitative suicides resulting from coverage. For example, he cited the policy manual of the *Windsor Star*, which specified all stories mentioning suicide be cleared by a senior editor, and stated that most suicides should not be reported, unless they are very public or the title of the person is significant. Russell also cited the former CFPL-TV news department policy (operating in London, Ontario from 1953 until 1998 when it was bought and rebranded), which stated the channel did not cover suicides except in circumstances such as murder-suicide, public suicide, or when the person involved was of high public profile. The 1985 manual of the *Toronto Star* said the following under the news and editorial section:

Our policy on suicides is not to indicate that a death was a suicide unless there is some over-riding public interest in doing so. All stories mentioning suicides must be cleared by the city editor and the senior editor on the news desk before they are published. (Toronto Star, 1985, p. 9)

The *Toronto Star*'s most recently updated policy manual has much the same wording:

"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, or ME designate, before publication" (Toronto Star, 2011). *CBC* Ombudsperson Esther Enkin said many journalists believed they were not allowed to report on suicide, even if there was no such explicit rule. *CBC*'s internal guidelines

(which are more extensive than the ones available to the public on the web site) reference the guidelines on reporting on suicide by the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (E. Enkin, personal communication, September 30, 2013). On the "Journalistic Standards and Practices" page on the *CBC* web site, the entry on suicide, listed under the Crime and Police Reporting section, said: "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, 2013). While the above examples involve newsrooms that have written policies, these internal policies are not firm and exceptions are made. Most newsrooms that do have policies on suicide state that it is not general practice to report on suicide, with the key exceptions being when a public person takes his or her own life, or when a suicide is done in a highly public manner. Many newsrooms have no written policy on suicide, including the *Globe and Mail* (see *Globe and Mail*, 2013) and stories are decided on a case-by-case basis, usually by precedent.

Editorial Practices

According to Russell (2006), some newsrooms believe the solution "is to not mention how the person died in news stories or obituaries—in effect laundering the news and protecting the community from reality" (p. 117). The (former) managing editor of *The Des Moines Register* told Jaben and Hill (1986) that his newspaper did the opposite to this, and printed suicide as the cause of death in its obituaries: "The purpose of the

obituary is to inform the readers, not necessarily to make the families happy" (p. 10).

This is the sentiment expressed by Hulteng (1981) who argued that readers have a strong interest in knowing the cause of death because they want to be aware of the ailments that are striking down their fellow citizens; however, Jacquette (2007) argued this is just morbid curiosity when it is not obvious why it should make any difference to the public how someone died. This opens up discussion around the concept of the "public's need to know", a phrase often thrown around but rarely defined. Philosopher Sissela Bok (1982) pointed out that in the US, the Supreme Court has not recognized the right to know as a constitutional right; for example, she said no one could sue the *New York Times* for *not* publishing the Pentagon Papers. Bok explained that the difference in levels of need, in terms of the "public's need to know", is what "engenders a difference in the degree to which reporters should respect requests for anonymity and privacy" (Bok, 1982, p. 253). The Canadian Association of Journalists' ethics guidelines touched on this very matter, but provided no definition or guiding framework of what would constitute this public interest in knowing other than to say that conflicts between the right to privacy and the rights of all citizens to be informed about matters of public interest be judged by "common sense, humanity and relevance" (Canadian Association of Journalists, 2011). Russell (2006) pointed out that the privacy aspect in determining whether to cover suicides is limited, as a dead person has no privacy to protect. It is a matter of concern to their relatives and it is usually the cause of suicide that leads to debates over privacy, rather than the death itself (Russell, 2006). One example of this occurred in the UK when the Sheffield University student newspaper published a story about a student who had hanged himself. The coroner left the cause of death as an open verdict because it was

unclear whether the student died as the result of suicide or auto-erotic asphyxiation; however, the research of a reporter with the student newspaper supported the latter explanation and the story was published with this information. Sanders (2003) said the story provoked student outrage and a coroner's complaint. The student newspaper argued that detailing the dangers of auto-erotic asphyxiation outweighed the intrusive nature of the report (Sanders, 2003). Russell (2006) provided another example where a newspaper was criticized for violating the privacy of a suicide victim while the editor defended the decision to print the information:

... a seasoned editor at a small BC daily was faced with a bizarre incident involving a local suicide. He reported the death because the day before the same man apparently had been attacked on the street, suffering three stab wounds, causing a wave of concern that a maniac was loose in downtown Cranbrook. The man's family and friends were irate, knowing the paper's policy was normally not to cover suicides. (Russell, 2006, p. 147)

The editor defended his decision, arguing it was the right thing to do to let citizens know that there was no maniac running around town trying to kill passersby at random. He said it was an issue of the peace of mind of the many versus the privacy of the few (Russell, 2006). In a shocking example of poor taste in violating the privacy of a suicide victim and that of his family, Hulteng (1985) recounted how the newspaper of one California town published a report that a migrant worker with a wife and four children had killed himself by cutting his wrists and hanging them over the edge of a bathtub so the blood drained into the tub. A copy editor apparently put the following headline on the story: "At least he was neat about it" (as cited in Hulteng, 1985, p. 51). As Hulteng (1985)

explained, the details of this story would have been offensive in any setting, even in a distant community, but the fact this was the man's hometown paper where his widow and four children continued to live made it even more distasteful.

The key exception to the general practice of not reporting suicide (a practice on which most journalists now agree) appears to be when a public person takes his or her own life or when a suicide is done in a public manner. Day (1991) however cautioned that even in these circumstances, journalists should approach such stories with a sense of compassion for the family and friends of the victim. Most journalism texts offer a checklist of criteria for what constitutes news—proximity, immediacy, deviance from the norm, impact, prominence, conflict, etc. A suicide can potentially fall into one or several of these categories, or none at all. Another important factor to consider is the sheer number of suicides that take place each year in this country. As Russell (2006) noted, some "news" is omitted for good reason—many stories are simply too mundane to tell. Death is not news *per se* (Russell, 2006); it depends on the person or circumstances. While most homicides in Canada are reported on, suicide cannot be approached in the same manner. First of all, there are far more suicides than homicides—in 2009, there were 3,890 suicides in Canada (Navaneelan, 2012), compared to 610 homicides (Beattie & Cotter, 2010). While the volume of suicides alone makes it difficult to report on every case, most local media will report on motor vehicle fatalities that occur within the area they serve even though this number is much higher than the annual homicide rate. In 2009, there were 2,209 fatalities from traffic collisions in Canada (Transport Canada, 2011). Clearly there is much more at stake than just the large number of suicides to consider when it comes to media coverage. As discussed in Chapter One of this

dissertation, suicide has carried a great deal of stigma for centuries. It was in large part this stigma, along with the fear of a potential copycat effect (as discussed in the previous chapter), that led most newsrooms to take up the practice of "no suicides. Except." Alluding to this stigma, Jacquette said reporting on suicide "is a problem at most of respecting the privacy of the survivors of the deceased, who by hypothesis will suffer pain, discomfort, and distress at the public dissemination of the fact that the person has committed suicide" (2007, p. 201). Cornies however touched on what may actually be a more relevant factor in today's newsrooms:

Suicide used to be a spooky thing. There was a stigma around it. You just didn't want to touch it. Nowadays, there is still some of that but news managers more widely understand that suicide is often motivated by a mental illness; therefore, it is no more or less worthy of coverage than the effects of other illnesses. (L. Cornies, personal communication, May 14, 2013)

As newsrooms, and society at large, move away from thinking of suicide purely in a religious or criminally-stigmatizing manner, the medicalized conception of suicide seems to have taken over as the primary motivator for newsroom decisions. Enkin points out there used to be stigma around cancer; the word simply was not uttered and the disease certainly not reported on (E. Enkin, personal communication, September 30, 2013). This has clearly changed dramatically in the past few decades, making it almost hard to imagine such a prevalent and highly-discussed disease being once taboo to mention. Suicide is undergoing much of the same transformation. Stigma is being stripped away and in its place is a medicalized understanding of the phenomenon, whereby it is assumed

to be mainly a mental health issue and in many ways no different from death by cancer or a heart attack.

Along with this change in attitude, the language surrounding this act is also evolving. While assisted suicide continues to be fought out in the court system and aiding and abetting a suicide remains a crime in Canada, the act of an individual ending his or her own life themselves is no longer in itself a crime, nor has it been for many decades now. As mentioned in Chapter One, attempting suicide was removed from the Criminal Code of Canada in 1972. Yet suicide is still referred to as something people "commit". The only other acts that are still referred to as being "committed" are crimes or scandalous acts, such as adultery, and even then it is seldom that "committed" is used when talking about murder, robbery or adultery. Suicide seems to be one of the last acts that is spoken of in this manner on a regular basis. Some media organizations (and mental health organizations) are now pushing to remove "committed" from any discussion of suicide.⁴⁴ Stead sent a memo to *Globe* staff in December 2012 urging them to stop using the phrase "committed suicide" and instead to say "died by suicide" (Stead, 2012, December 10). Enkin recalled receiving some complaints over the use of the term by the *CBC*, but said there is a bit of pushback from journalists over omitting "committed" because clarity of language is important (E. Enkin, personal communication, September 30, 2013). Neil explained that journalists do not want to sterilize language just because an activist tells them they should; journalists pride themselves on writing accurately and

⁴⁴ While any direct quotes that are included in this dissertation that use the phrase "committ(ed) suicide" are kept in their original form, I have refrained from using this phrase myself at all and instead use phrases such as "died by suicide", "killed him/her/them self" or "took his/her/their own life".

concisely so while "committed suicide" is still commonly used in everyday discourse, it is hard to urge journalists to stop using the term (J. Neil, personal communication, September 25, 2013). Enkin offered a more subtle variation and explained that if changing the terminology does not compromise clarity and meaning, then what suicide experts and families who are victims of suicide want should matter to journalists. Shapiro said journalists follow changes in language rather than lead them, with clarity being the first goal (I. Shapiro, personal communication, September 25, 2013). I myself would argue that perhaps journalists ought to take a lead on some of these matters—unless personally touched by suicide, many people only know what they have seen and heard through various forms of media. As I outline in Chapter Six, I believe an ethics of care approach can offer a guiding framework for journalists and editors to approach the topic of suicide in an empathetic manner, which would include careful consideration of the language used in news stories.

Practices Surrounding Threats of Suicide

There are several cases mentioned in journalism ethics books where journalists have faced situations in which a person has threatened suicide if journalists move forward with publishing particular personal information.⁴⁵ Addressing such incidents, Day argued:

As tragic as these events are, reporters and editors cannot be held hostage to every threat that accompanies the release of a controversial story. Nevertheless, a

⁴⁵ For case studies of such incidents, see Moscovitz (1984), Sims (1984), and Day (1991).

minimum standard of decency would suggest that when such threats are made, some family member or outside authority should be notified. (Day, 1991, p. 207)

Perhaps one of the most well-known cases is that of a leader of an anti-Semitic group in the US, Daniel Burros, whom reporters found out was born of Jewish parents and had been raised according to that faith. Burros had changed beliefs over the years and concealed his background from other members of the group. Reporters notified him that they had discovered his origins and planned on publishing the information. Burros pleaded that the story not be used because it would destroy the career he had built for himself; he threatened suicide if they went ahead with publishing the story. Hulteng recounted:

The reporters consulted with their editors and it was decided that the story should run. When it did appear, [Burros] killed himself. In the aftermath, the writers and editors involved stood by the decision to publish, pointing out that the story was newsworthy and that it had to be published in the public interest. Other editors around the country generally supported the decision, although some said that they might have felt an obligation to warn [Burros'] doctor before going ahead with the story. (1981, p. 56)

While this neo-Nazi individual wanted to keep the information about his Jewish background secret, Bok (1982) argued that since he had taken such a strong public stance of anti-Semitism, he could hardly hold that the information about his Jewish parents was irrelevant to the public's evaluation of his views. She also argued that his suicide the day after the story appeared did not render the publication any more invasive.

There have also been cases where the threat of suicide prevented publication of stories. Hulteng (1981) recalled two instances at another newspaper where suicide threats were reported to the doctors of the persons who were to figure in the news stories and in both cases the editors decided not to run the stories in question because the doctors indicated that suicide was a distinct possibility. While these are ethical dilemmas in and of themselves, this dissertation focuses on the coverage of suicides, not coverage prompting threats of suicide. Threats of suicide were not included in the historical or contemporary analysis conducted for this research. Another ethical issue surrounding suicide is raised when an individual tries to take or does take his or her own life in front of journalists for the publicity. I take up such a case below involving a then-public figure, Budd Dwyer.

Suicides in Full-View of Journalists

To illustrate just how divisive an issue suicide coverage can be, Russell pointed to Budd Dwyer, the Pennsylvania state treasurer convicted of taking bribes in the 1980s and facing up to 55 years in jail. In January 1987, Dwyer called a press conference and after reading a statement, took out a gun and killed himself in front of the rolling news cameras.⁴⁶ Dwyer was a public official and his suicide was public; yet, in Canada *Global News* did not even report the incident, while *CTV* and *CBC* mentioned it without showing the video (Russell, 2006). *CTFO* in Toronto ran the first few seconds of the video until

⁴⁶ For a fuller account of the Budd Dwyer incident, see "News photo of public suicide placed many editors in a quandary" (1987), and Parsons and Smith (1988).

Dwyer put the gun in his mouth and then went to a black screen with the sound still running. One Pennsylvania station ran the event live. Apparently many Canadian dailies ran the gun-in-the-mouth still-shot picture, including some that chose to run it on the front page, such as the *Hamilton Spectator* (Russell, 2006). The *Vancouver Sun* ran a brief story but included no pictures. In examining the *Globe and Mail's* coverage, I noticed that they ran a story several pages in (on A5) that included a photo of Dwyer with the gun in his hand, but not the photo of him with the gun in his mouth. I found that the *Toronto Star* also ran a brief mention of the suicide, but included a photo of Dwyer with the revolver in his mouth. Interestingly, I also found a column by the *Star's* ombudsperson at the time, Rod Goodman, published two days after they ran the Dwyer suicide photo. He said he received calls from angry readers questioning the decision of the *Star* to run the photo, including one who said: "I didn't expect that kind of sensationalism in a classy paper like *The Star*. Using that picture came across as a lousy attempt to sell a few papers" (Goodman, 1987, January 24). Goodman explained that senior editor Michael Pieri had to make an almost instantaneous judgment call because the photo arrived just in time for the final edition. Pieri told Goodman:

There was no time for deliberation between editors. If we had an hour or two to debate it, the picture might have been on page one or inside. But it was a very dramatic news photo and a social commentary of the United States, where such a thing is done in public. Even today a man shot himself in a crowded Louisiana courtroom. We held to a *Star* policy of not exploiting violence or suicide. The photo was taken before Dwyer killed himself; we would never have used the photos of the aftermath. It was certainly no more horrific or startling than the

picture we published recently of 60 dead Iranian children. However, I must confess that if more time for reflection had been available, I'm confident I wouldn't have played the picture on page one, or so prominently. (as quoted in Goodman, 1987, January 24).

Pieri's comments confirm what I discussed above on the political economy and industry pressures that have an impact on decisions of ethical matters. The public outrage over coverage of Dwyer's death indicates many readers do not find graphic coverage of suicide tasteful or ethical, regardless of the profile of the person, or any potential newsworthiness of such a public act. According to Day (1991), at one American news station, some advertisers even withdrew their support in protest of the Dwyer coverage. Val Limburg (1994) argued that Dwyer's suicide did not have the news value of a national (or international) story in itself, but the fact that it was witnessed by TV cameras was in fact the newsworthy aspect of the story. This case further illustrates that there is no consensus on how to treat suicide, even when dealing with public suicides and public officials. Suicides or suicide attempts that are caught on videotape, an increasingly common occurrence with the proliferation of personal recording devices such as cell phones, must be treated with extreme caution:

Competitive pressures and the excitement of such dramatic footage can lead to a moral lapse on the part of some producers and news directors. Not only is the respect for persons an important value in the ethical decision-making process under such circumstances, matters of taste, especially where the suicide is graphic or gruesome, require that the moral agent be sensitive to the viewing audience as well. (Day, 1991, p. 144)

There have also been cases where individuals have summoned the press to view their suicides with full disclosure that a suicide would in fact take place (unlike Dwyer's) or other instances where journalists were caught off-guard, such as the jumpers of 9/11 (discussed below). Canadian Erwin Krickhahn, who was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease, wanted assisted suicide to be legalized. In 1993, he invited several media outlets to watch him take his own life at home, but after newsrooms across the country grappled with the ethical, and potentially legal, dilemmas this posed, only the *Toronto Sun* assigned a reporter to be in Krickhahn's apartment for the suicide.⁴⁷ The other reporters would only wait in the apartment lobby. According to Russell (2006), the media confusion and reluctance to view his death left Krickhahn unhappy and he ended up postponing the suicide event.

Suicide in front of journalists as a form of political statement is nothing new. Hulteng (1985) recounted how on June 11, 1963, the Associated Press (AP) sent from Saigon a photo of a 73-year-old monk who had set himself on fire in protest against the regime then in power in South Vietnam. There were various reactions from editors to the photo, from total rejection to only including mention in words of the incident with no photo, to fully publishing the photo for all to see. Many editors said they did not use the photo of the suicide as a matter of taste—it would offend too many of their readers. The *New York Times* and several other newspapers said they always question "how would it look over the breakfast table" as their rule in determining whether to publish

⁴⁷ See Fine & Mitchell (1993, November 4) for a fuller account of the Krickhahn story.

controversial photos (Hulteng, 1985).⁴⁸ Yet, the editor of the *Honolulu Star* said: "We have a policy against using grisly pictures and showing tragic personal moments, particularly of local persons. But we had no hesitation about using this picture" (as cited in Hulteng, 1985, p. 55). One of the AP reporters who was there at the scene of the self-immolation later admitted that he perhaps could have "prevented the immolation by rushing at the monk and kicking the gasoline away if I'd had my wits about me. As a human being I wanted to; as a reporter I couldn't" (Arnett, 1994, p. 119). Day (1991) wrote that few would doubt reporters and photographers should intervene to prevent a distraught individual from killing him or herself (although there have been cases where journalists have refused to do so), but if the individual is staging a suicide as a form of political protest, this throws into question the journalists' obligation to intervene.⁴⁹

I would also question in these circumstances whether the discussion and images of suicides of those considered foreign and "other" are somehow more palatable to news editors and the public. Would all of the newspapers that ran the photo of the monk on fire have done the same thing if the picture was of an American on American soil? In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag (2003) asserted that photographs of suffering and pain of "others", as in non-Americans in distant locations, are far more acceptable than showing Americans in the same situations. Even Americans who are "othered" as distant and different seem to be afforded less privacy in death, such as the

⁴⁸ See Hulteng (1985, pp. 52-55) for a fuller account of the responses from editors in regards to this famous photo of the monk in flames.

⁴⁹ As mentioned in Chapter One, I consciously chose not to include overt forms of political suicide in my analysis of historical or contemporary coverage, so this example is only used here because it is one of the few discussed in journalism texts, offering a strong illustration of the problematic nature public suicides pose for journalists.

cult followers involved in the Jonestown mass suicide in 1978. Pictures of their dead, bloated bodies were published in the American press, although they were clothed and face down (Hulteng, 1985). Details and images captured from scenes like this should cause pause and reflection about if and why these images and details are appropriate for publication. Susan Moeller (1999) argued that watching and reading about suffering has become a form of entertainment, and certainly suicide coverage could be caught up in this fascination with the morbid. In a scenario where a large crowd has gathered downtown to watch a person threatening to jump off a high-rise building, Russell (2006) argued that media should resist the temptation to use pictures of the person threatening to jump and of police taking him or her down. Instead a newspaper in this situation should just run a couple of inches of copy explaining the traffic jam. He explained that if no charges are laid, a suicide attempt is not only a victimless crime, it is a crimeless crime. While there may be public curiosity and interest in the details and images, Russell said journalists must ask who gains and who loses from such coverage? The would-be suicide gets the attention that perhaps he or she craves, and potentially others could "decide to do the same, causing grief in their families and untold costs to the community (perhaps traffic tie-ups, emergency response teams, hospitalization)" (Russell, 2006, p. 117). He said it is not a matter of *if* journalists leave information out of a story, just a question of which and why.

The Falling Man of 9/11

The images of people jumping from the World Trade Center before the twin buildings collapsed on September 11, 2001 were some of the most shocking to emerge from the most photographed disaster in history. These images are in fact so powerful and conjure

such strong emotions that they have been virtually stricken from the historical record. The most famous photo of a jumper is known as The Falling Man of 9/11 (see Figure 4.1), which has been the focus of several articles and even a television documentary.

Figure 4.1: The Falling Man of 9/11, photograph by Richard Drew (AP)



The image of The Falling Man of 9/11 was taken by Associated Press photographer Richard Drew. Drew took multiple shots of people jumping from the towers before they collapsed, but this particular photo immediately stood out to him for its symmetry. Tom Junod, a writer for *Esquire* magazine, has written one of the most in-depth pieces on the image. As Junod (2003) explained, The Falling Man of 9/11 stands out from other photos of those who fell or decided to jump that day, as the man in the photograph appears to fall somewhat comfortably. The photo is incredibly symmetrical. Strangely, the man is

directly in the middle of the North Tower (to the left of him) and the South Tower (to the right of him). The man's trajectory is directly in-line with the vertical lines of the buildings, as he plummets head first. The colours in the photograph are simple and muted—the colours of steel, glass and concrete. The smoke coming from the South Tower makes the sun appear as a soft, hazy brightness reflecting off the South Tower, in contrast with the darker and sharper image of the foregrounded North Tower. Linda Kauffman aptly described how the photo “juxtaposes the World Trade Center's vertical massiveness with the puniness of the figure plunging to his death” (2009, p. 652). According to Andrea Fitzpatrick, who has written one of the very few academic pieces on images of falling and September 11, “the falling people embodied the unfolding of the events themselves, actualizing the disaster with a precise individuation of human loss and giving flesh and form to the falling movements by which the architecture was also destroyed” (2007, p. 88).

The Falling Man was not alone that day. Estimates range from a (highly conservative) minimum of 50 people to up to the more likely estimate that at least 200 people jumped or fell from the World Trade Center buildings on September 11 (Flynn & Dwyer, 2004, September 10). People fell (and jumped) from all sides of the buildings, one after another, continually streaming down until the towers collapsed. One person even landed on a firefighter, killing him (Cauchon & Moore, 2002, September 3). Many of those who fell or jumped came from the North Tower's 101st to 105th floors, where Cantor Fitzgerald had offices, and the 106th and 107th floors, where a conference was underway at the Windows on the World restaurant (Cauchon & Moore, 2002, September 3). David Simpson noted that in the aftermath of September 11, the tiniest fragments of

human bodies were painstakingly excavated from the rubble, carefully documented and tested for DNA. Anything that could be identified was sent to the families of the dead for conventional burial; however, “little remained so that bodies and body parts became absolutely precious and were accorded unprecedented levels of respect and attention” (Simpson, 2006, p. 28). This obsession with the details presents a unique contrast—while the New York medical examiner’s office refused to consider if any of the victims that day jumped or fell from the towers,⁵⁰ the human remains at the site were sorted through with a fine-tooth comb to determine by DNA testing if even small fragments of bodies could be sent to particular families for burial. Simpson made the important point that,

the near-total physical destruction that deprives us of bodies to bury is perhaps the material analogue of an enforced denial of materiality itself, since so many of the bodies that have survived—those who jumped or fell from the towers... have been quietly removed from public sight and thus from a reckoning with the dimensions of time and space involved in their endings. (2006, p. 53)

According to Junod (2003), the photo of The Falling Man appeared the next day on page 7 of the *New York Times* and in hundreds of other newspapers, including the *Globe and Mail*. After running the photo once, most newspapers never ran it again and many had to defend their decision to print it in the first place. Newspapers that ran the photo were accused of stripping the man of his dignity, exploiting his death and invading his privacy. As Junod pointed out in his article, those who jumped from the towers were,

⁵⁰ According to the medical examiner’s office, no one jumped—they were blown out or fell (Junod, 2003). The medical examiner ruled the cause of death for all the victims of 9/11 to be homicide and did not determine whether any particular person may have jumped.

by terrible necessity, a prolonged act of mass suicide. I argue that our cultural assumptions and beliefs surrounding suicide inform much of the reaction to this photo and others of those who jumped from the Twin Towers that day. These images provoke complex thoughts and feelings that have resulted in these photos now being kept from public view. Although no one dares to say so, it seems as if the underlying belief about the jumpers is that somehow they were less patriotic, less heroic than the others who died in the terrorist attack. When the *Globe and Mail's* Peter Cheney was assigned to figure out who exactly The Falling Man of 9/11 was, he approached the family Norberto Hernandez who was working at the Windows on the World restaurant that day. While Hernandez's brother and sister agreed with Cheney that the image of The Falling Man was indeed their brother, Hernandez's wife and three daughters were outraged at the suggestion. In fact, his eldest daughter said to Cheney: "That piece of shit is not my father" (as quoted in Junod, 2003). Another of his daughters told Junod that after Cheney's piece ran identifying Hernandez as The Falling Man, people told her that her father was going to hell because he jumped. While it turns out that Cheney was wrong and the Falling Man was most likely not Hernandez, the family's initial reaction was in line with what remained an unspoken sentiment: the jumpers were somehow cowardly, less heroic, and had chosen suicide. Junod eloquently detailed the resistance to images of jumpers such as The Falling Man, so I quote him here at length:

The resistance to the image—to the images—started early, started immediately, started on the ground. A mother whispering to her distraught child a consoling lie: "Maybe they're just birds, honey." Bill Feehan, second in command at the fire department, chasing a bystander who was panning the jumpers with his video

camera, demanding that he turn it off, bellowing, "Don't you have any human decency?" before dying himself when the building came down. In the most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world, the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo—the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes. All over the world, people saw the human stream debouch from the top of the North Tower, but here in the United States, we saw these images only until the networks decided not to allow such a harrowing view, out of respect for the families of those so publicly dying. At CNN, the footage was shown live, before people working in the newsroom knew what was happening; then, after what Walter Isaacson, who was then chairman of the network's news bureau, calls "agonized discussions" with the "standards guy," it was shown only if people in it were blurred and unidentifiable; then it was not shown at all. (Junod, 2003)

Even in the documentary on September 11 made from footage shot by two French filmmakers, the only acknowledgement of the jumpers was the audio recording briefly played of the noise jumpers made on impact, but even this recording was edited to remove one of the most disturbing aspects: the frequency with which the sounds occurred (Junod, 2003). The images of jumpers are now quite hard to find unless one is willing to search through Internet sites that feature shock photos and videos of graphic deaths. What is it about *The Falling Man* of 9/11, and other photos of jumpers that day, that provokes such debate and emotional reaction? A range of emotions are potentially stirred up in different viewers of the photograph. While some might see a stoicism or willpower, others might see resignation and terror (Junod, 2003). Junod noted how the Hernandezes

"looked at the decision to jump as a betrayal of love—as something Norberto was being accused of," while another woman who was approached to determine if The Falling Man might be her husband looked "at the decision to jump as a loss of hope—as an absence that we, the living, now have to live with" (Junod, 2003). Perhaps The Falling Man represents not just our societal taboos surrounding individual suicide, but he also stands in for a type of national suicide. Jacques Derrida suggested that the suicide hijackings of September 11 incorporated two suicides in one: their own, but also the suicide of those who welcomed, armed and trained them, since America in effect trained and subsidized the forces that turned against it (as quoted in Simpson, 2006). Jean Baudrillard also offered a unique take on the collapse of the twin towers, saying that when they collapsed, "one had the impression that they were responding to the suicide of the suicide-jets with their own suicide" (Baudrillard, 2002, p. 404). It became apparent on September 12 when the photo of the Falling Man ran in several major newspapers that much of the American public was outraged and incensed that this photo was published. How much of that had to do just with privacy in death, the horror the image conjured, or the fact this individual had jumped (and therefore enacted a type of forced suicide) remains a matter of debate.

While this chapter has focused mainly on the problematic aspects surrounding media coverage of suicide, I detail some of the pieces on suicide that are highly regarded for their skill at navigating such a sensitive subject in Chapter Six, along with how an ethics of care approach can offer a way forward as an ethical framework for journalists. Before moving into a discussion of the ethics of care though, I will now discuss my research findings of the content analysis I conducted of contemporary suicide coverage.

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5. An Analysis of Contemporary Canadian Newspaper Coverage of Suicide: 2000-2013

Gemma Richardson and Jessica Thom⁵¹

With several high profile teen suicides related to bullying, and well-known Canadians such as Luke Richardson of the Ottawa Senators hockey team and former finance minister and diplomat Michael Wilson speaking out about losing a child to suicide, we thought discussion about suicide may be increasing in the media. There have not been any recent quantitative studies to measure trends in suicide coverage in Canadian newspapers, or to measure any potential impacts of reporting guidelines on suicide (in Canada), such as the ones detailed in Chapter Three from the World Health Organization and the Canadian Psychiatric Association (CPA). Our motivation for conducting the research in this chapter was to find out what the actual coverage entailed, in a quantified manner, and to determine whether the perceptions of increasing suicide coverage are actually borne out. The data we collected on the coverage in two major daily newspapers (the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*) allowed not only for comparisons with the historical coverage outlined in Chapter Two, but also comparisons with the limited amount of statistical information available on suicide in Canada.⁵² The key questions guiding this research were:

RQ1a: Do particular types of suicide, such as murder-suicide, receive more coverage in the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star* than other types of suicide?

⁵¹ See the letter of agreement from the second author in Appendix II.

⁵² I discussed the problematic nature of official suicide statistics in Chapter One and the statistics used throughout this chapter are no less flawed.

RQ1b: How does the coverage of particular demographic groups compare to available national suicide statistics?

RQ2: Has mention of mental illness increased between 2000 and 2013 in suicide stories in these two newspapers?

RQ3: Have the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star* reduced particular aspects of suicide coverage that were explicitly warned against in media reporting guidelines (detailed in Chapter Three), such as avoiding suicide stories on the front page, not mentioning suicide in headlines and omitting mention of the method?

Our first set of research questions was to address whether anecdotal suggestions that particular groups or types of suicide received more media attention (than other groups) were accurate; for example, teen suicides seem to have a greater prominence in the media than adult suicides, but this may be an inaccurate perception based on a few high profile cases. In order to properly address whether particular groups received more media attention, we needed to delineate what "more coverage" actually meant. This is why the second part of our first research question called for a comparison of coverage of particular demographic groups to actual suicide rates. By making this comparison, we would be able to determine whether some groups, for example teenagers, received a disproportionate amount of media coverage. This meant that if, for example, there were far more adult men who died by suicide yet the majority of coverage focused on female teenagers, we would then be able to determine that the coverage was not reflective of actual suicide statistics, and that particular groups (in this hypothetical case, female teenagers) received a disproportionate amount of the coverage.

We hypothesized that in addition to particular demographic groups, such as teenagers, receiving more coverage than other groups, particular types of suicide (for example murder-suicide) would also receive more coverage. We believed there would be differences in the coverage of murder-suicides because there are likely not the same taboos involved. Murder-suicide is newsworthy for the crime of the murder, not the suicide, meaning journalists likely approach these stories as crimes first, with suicide being only secondary.

Sources

As with the research detailed in Chapter Two, we required access to digital archives of Canadian newspapers to conduct this content analysis. Throughout this research, we became acutely aware of the problematic aspects of using these resources to obtain samples of coverage.⁵³ Therefore, we want to outline briefly some of these challenges. While digital news archives offer tremendous labour-saving opportunities, we were reluctant to use search engine results as exact measurements of the prevalence of articles on suicide because of the concerns we had with the reliability and validity of these results. David Deacon, Michael Pickering, Peter Golding and Graham Murdock (2007) pointed out that results from digital news archive searches provide things, not themes. This places a great deal of importance on determining the terms of inclusion in studies that look at complex and multifaceted themes, which suicide coverage would fall into,

⁵³ This was also an issue I struggled with while conducting the historical research in Chapter Two.

since single keywords and limited Boolean logical operators are not effective in these types of studies. Numerous "false positives" can be returned in digital archive searches, whereby an article may contain the search term but does not relate to the topic in any direct way. Below, we address how we used complex Boolean operators and manually excluded articles that provided such false positives in the search results. Another issue Deacon *et al.* highlighted with digital archive searches is that the results provide texts, not contexts. How each article is positioned in relation to other articles on the page is often an aspect that is overlooked because texts are examined in isolation. Most importantly, Deacon *et al.* contended that computerized textual searches can deliver inconsistent results—these search engines are not infallible. Search engines have varying levels of sophistication and the comprehensiveness of the archives can be affected by issues associated with publishing rights (Deacon *et al.*, 2007), among other aspects. Put simply, the results can vary with the same search terms when used in different databases. The search results can also include duplicated content and, at times, internally inconsistent results. Deacon *et al.* did not suggest that these validity and reliability concerns mean that digital archives should be avoided for media analysis, but rather they highlighted the need for caution. These concerns were shared by both researchers throughout this study and are reflected in how we present our data below. This issue also resulted in us disqualifying the results of a variable in our content analysis that tracked the use of images because we realized after all the coding was complete that the search results from the *Globe* did not provide consistent results for this category, and in fact after cross-checking with another database we confirmed that several images were included with articles we had coded as having no image.

Since I chose the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* to analyze in Chapter Two, we chose to remain consistent and continue with these two publications for the quantitative analysis. The *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star* are the two highest circulating daily newspapers in Canada (Newspapers Canada, 2014). While both are based in Toronto, the *Globe and Mail* is one of only two newspapers in Canada that is national in scope.⁵⁴ In total, almost a third of all the articles in our sample were from wire services, making it fair to assume that there would be some similarity between coverage of suicide in these two large newspapers as there would be in smaller local ones due to the widespread reliance on wire services by most Canadian dailies.

Method

We chose content analysis as the method for conducting this research because our research questions required answers in a quantified manner. Quantitative research provided for a triangulation of research methods in this dissertation, working as a complement to the interviews, archival work and qualitative analysis in the previous chapters. According to Daniel Riffe, Stephen Lacy and Frederick Fico, quantitative content analysis can be defined as:

...the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, in order

⁵⁴ The *National Post* is the other national newspaper in Canada.

to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption. (1998, p. 20)

This definition of content analysis was used to shape the design and structure of this research study. Content analysis can be used to identify developments over time, describe the content in various media, and assess the image of particular groups in society (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). It is a method that allows coding teams to reduce to numbers large amounts of information (while still retaining meaningful distinctions among data) that would be logistically impossible for close qualitative analysis (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 1998). It is important to also briefly address here the limitations of content analysis. Roger Wimmer and Joseph Dominick (2011) pointed out that the findings of a particular content analysis are limited to the framework of the categories and definitions used in that analysis. Content analysis coding can be time consuming, labourious and at times, tedious. Additionally, content analysis cannot be used as a basis to make statements about the effects of content on an audience (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011); it can only be used to describe what is manifest in the content, not the motivations or impacts behind this content. This content analysis was not undertaken with the aim of making generalizations about suicide coverage in Canadian media or perceptions of suicide in the broader society, or to comment on the impact of this coverage on audiences.

A search was conducted for all articles mentioning suicide from January 1, 2000 to December 31, 2013 in the *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail* using the Canadian Newsstand Major Dailies (ProQuest) database. A complex Boolean search was used to

cut down on irrelevant results (or "false positives") being returned.⁵⁵ Examples of irrelevant uses of the term included contexts where "suicide" was not referring to self-killing, but instead as a term meaning the end of something else, such as political suicide (e.g. if a politician took up a particular line of argument that was highly unpopular with the public, it could be referred to as political suicide); career suicide (e.g. making a professional decision that would severely limit, if not entirely halt, someone's professional career); or social suicide (e.g. doing or saying something that would result in being outcast and shunned by society). In addition to excluding articles that referred to suicide in these non-relevant ways, several terms related to suicide terrorism were also excluded from the search: terms such as suicide attack, suicide raid, suicide hijackers and suicide terrorists.⁵⁶ Any articles mentioning suicide that were not automatically excluded on these grounds, but were still found to be irrelevant in the context of our research questions and the way suicide is defined in Chapter One of this dissertation were manually excluded from the sample. Articles appearing in the editorial and news sections were selected first,⁵⁷ but other sections of the newspapers were included for select years

⁵⁵ The exact search term used was: (suicide* OR "took his own life" OR "took her own life") AND NOT (bomb* OR "political suicide" OR "financial suicide" OR "career suicide" OR "suicide attack*" OR "suicide blast" OR "suicide raid" OR "suicide hijack*" OR "suicide terrorist*" OR "suicide doors" OR "suicide riding" OR "suicide mission" OR "social suicide" OR "Facebook suicide" OR "commercial suicide" OR "cultural suicide")

⁵⁶ The rationale for excluding suicide terrorism from this research was elaborated in Chapter One and this exclusion was consistently applied throughout this entire dissertation.

⁵⁷ The news section is the most widely read section of the newspaper (Newspaper Audience Databank Inc., 2013) and also provided the most articles mentioning suicide. The editorial section of a newspaper often comments on issues addressed in the news section so it seemed appropriate to include this section as well. It also should be noted that excluding the other sections of the newspaper, except when the news and editorial sections fell short of meeting our sampling needs, was necessary due to the high number of fictional results requiring manual exclusion that were returned in searches that included the entertainment and review sections (e.g. fictional suicides in theatre, film and literature discussed in articles in these sections).

where there were not enough eligible articles on particular days for our sample (due to our use of a two-week constructed sampling technique, explained below).⁵⁸ Due to some inconsistencies between the results returned for each newspaper, any letters to the editor were also manually excluded.

Following Jade Au, Paul Yip, Cecilia Chan and Y. W. Law (2004), who conducted a study of newspaper reporting on suicide in Hong Kong, we excluded articles from the sample that generally discussed the problem of suicide. We only included articles where a specific individual was mentioned in relation to suicide because some aspects of our research questions, such as reference to method, required this type of specificity. Therefore, articles that referred to, for example, a “rash of suicides among Indian farmers,” were excluded for not being about any identifiable individual. Articles that made vague mention of suicide were included only if at least one individual was somewhat identifiable (although this may not mean they were named, but just that specific details were given, potentially about their age, gender and location, for example). Articles that mentioned serious suicide attempts were included (and it should be noted in several of these cases where an attempt was reported the person later died from the injuries he or she sustained), but articles that only mentioned threats of suicide or thoughts of suicide without an individual making any serious attempt to end his or her own life were excluded from the sample. The reason for this exclusion was that numerous mentions of “thoughts of suicide” appear in newspaper articles, often with no real relation

⁵⁸ The years in which other sections of the newspaper were included (due to there being a lack of sufficient articles in the news and editorial sections to comprise each day of the two constructed weeks) were 2003, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011 and 2013 in the *Globe and Mail* sample, and 2003 and 2011 in the *Toronto Star* sample.

to suicide or relevance to this study. Including these articles on thoughts or threats of suicide could have potentially brought results of a highly different nature to this sample than what was sought for the purposes of this research. Ultimately, we concluded that these exemptions were necessary otherwise it could lead to far too much ambiguity and defeat the purpose of this content analysis.

Riffe, Aust and Lacy explained that in content analysis, the goal of the researcher is to achieve an acceptable estimate of population parameters, while maximizing efficiency of time and effort: "Selecting too few issues may produce unreliable data and invalid results; selecting too many may be a wasteful misuse of coding resources" (1993, p. 133). Riffe *et al.* (1993) demonstrated that constructed week sampling procedures are more efficient and reliable than random or consecutive day sampling. Constructed week sampling takes into account the cyclic nature of media content, on which advertising cycles often have an impact, resulting in larger issues on certain days of the week. Riffe *et al.* (1993) found that two constructed weeks were necessary to represent an entire year's content. Therefore, we opted to use a random stratified sample technique of constructed two-week samples for each year from 2000 to 2013. Our sample comprised individual articles from the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* that explicitly mentioned an identifiable suicide (or attempt) during this time period. This resulted in us having a total of 364 articles in our sample—196 from the *Toronto Star* since it is published seven days a week, and 168 from the *Globe and Mail* since it is published six days per week with no Sunday edition.

We had extensive discussions to determine the parameters of this study. We coded articles not only for variables directly related to our research questions, but also for

several other aspects we thought may provide for interesting nuances to our research findings.⁵⁹ The code book was revised nine times through the course of these discussions, the test study and the intercoder reliability testing. When we found disagreements in our coding, we discussed our rationales for choosing a particular category and came to a consensus on how to proceed. While this process was time consuming, it worked well and allowed us to think through and modify several variables to ensure exclusivity in each category. Ultimately, we coded for the following variables: page; section within the newspaper; author; location; type (of suicide); method; health (mention of mental health, physical health or other rationale); gender; age; headline; celebrity; focus (of the article); helpline resources; and image (inclusion of image and content of image), which as explained above was later disqualified as a variable.

To determine a suitable subset of our sample to test for intercoder reliability, we calculated the formula for the standard error as outlined by Riffe *et al.* (1998), resulting in us randomly selecting 76 articles from our sample for intercoder reliability testing. This sub-set comprised 21% of our total sample, which is within, or above, the recommended amounts of content to test for intercoder reliability according to several content analysis scholars.⁶⁰ We used the Cohen's *kappa* calculation to determine our level

⁵⁹ The code book can be found in Appendix III.

⁶⁰ Wimmer and Dominick (2011) suggested that between 10% and 25% of the body of content should be tested, while Lynda Kaid and Anne Wadsworth (1989) suggested between 5% and 7% of the total was adequate. We opted to test a large portion to ensure that we had a great deal of variety in our intercoder sample.

of agreement⁶¹ and the score for each of the variables we coded was 0.877 or above (see Table 5.1 for the full set of results). Richard Landis and Gary Koch (1977) interpreted intercoder reliability scores within the 0.81 to 1.00 range as "almost perfect agreement." We do not provide an overall average of our reliability scores here because it has been pointed out that an average score is highly problematic when coding for several variables since the high reliability of easily coded variables could obscure lower reliability estimates of harder-to-code variables (see Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

Table 5.1: Intercoder Reliability Results for Each Nominal Variable

Variable	Level of Agreement (Cohen's <i>kappa</i>)
Section	1.00 (perfect agreement)
Author	1.00
Location	0.942
Type	0.952
Method	0.942
Health	0.922
Gender	1.00
Age	1.00
Headline	1.00
Celebrity	0.877
Focus	1.00
Help box	1.00
Image	1.00

Our unit of analysis was each article. We did not count how many unique cases of suicide were referred to in our sample because numerous articles referred to multiple suicides, often without giving names. To identify exactly how many unique suicides were referred to would require a lot of assumptions to make distinctions in the cases where a

⁶¹ Cohen's *kappa* is a widely used reliability coefficient that takes into account the potential for chance in coder's agreement (Neuendorf, 2002). *Kappa* has a range from .00 (agreement at chance level) to 1.00 (perfect agreement).

name was not used.⁶² Certainly in cases where names were given, we did note recurring mentions of the same suicide in multiple articles but we did not track this data in a quantitative manner.

We did not believe there was a strong enough rationale to warrant comparing the two papers for most variables, but we opted to compare the two newspapers to each other only for the three variables that directly related to aspects warned against by reporting guidelines (front page stories, suicide mentioned in the headline, and details of the method). While we did not anticipate there being any differences between the two newspapers in suicide reporting styles and techniques, we did want to see if either newspaper was more or less in-line with the recommended aspects to avoid when reporting suicide. Should one newspaper emerge as much more compatible with the reporting guidelines than the other, we hypothesized this could be a result of staff familiarity with the guidelines and the level of credibility with which staff regard these guidelines. It also could be argued that with the *Globe* being national in scope and the *Star* having more of a Toronto-specific focus there may be differences between the two and how they report particular events, but we are not making this argument here, nor are we aware of any studies that have found significant differences in the reporting styles of these two daily newspapers.

⁶² For example, several articles focused on a series of suicides in remote Aboriginal communities. A news brief might refer to a male teenager jumping to his death in a particular community, while another article might refer to three recent suicides by young men in the community. It is not clear if the latter article is making reference to the same suicide as in the first article.

Results

We recognize that our results pertain to the sample, which was not the entire population of articles on suicide that occurred during the time period analyzed (see Table 5.2 for the total search results returned for each year and newspaper).

Table 5.2: Total Search Results⁶³ Returned by Year and Paper (Editorial and News Sections Only)

	<i>Globe & Mail</i>	<i>Toronto Star</i>
2000	66	125
2001	50	121
2002	63	90
2003	38	74
2004	50	107
2005	51	65
2006	46	76
2007	46	66
2008	44	60
2009	37	88
2010	23	55
2011	27	80
2012	40	77
2013	29	90

We employed the use of statistical measures to check for significance and ensure results that showed a relationship between variables were not just by chance or due to the size or characteristics of the sample. The statistics and conclusions below apply to the specific sample and provide only an estimate of how they may reflect the actual full population. As mentioned earlier in the method section, there were several variables that we coded for that did not directly relate to our research questions, but which we thought could

⁶³ In light of the problematic aspects mentioned in the section above on the use of digital archive search engines, it should be noted that these are the total *search results*, not the actual amount of articles on suicide during this time period. These results include some articles that were later manually excluded for not being relevant to this study.

potentially provide interesting nuances in the findings. Below, we only present the findings from the variables that ultimately were relevant to our research questions.

Coverage of Particular Types and Demographic Groups

We coded each article for the "type" of suicide that was the primary focus in order to discern whether certain demographic groups or categories of suicide received more coverage. We also wanted to see if we could compare these categories to data on suicide in Canada. These categories were selected based on a preliminary analysis of the coverage, as well as in response to some of the results of the historical coverage contained in Chapter Two. The categories are by no means mutually exclusive, but offer a preliminary breakdown of the coverage. Our code book, contained in Appendix III shows how we had rules on how to categorize each article into only one of the "types", regardless of any potential overlaps with other categories. We were surprised to learn how few of our categories could ultimately be compared to data on suicide in Canada due to the very scant details provided by Statistics Canada on suicide rates. Statistics Canada does not provide information on the ethnicity, profession or potential link to crime for any suicide victims, among various other social and economic indicators.⁶⁴ This means that we were not able to cross-check most of our categories with the available statistics on suicide deaths in Canada to determine if potentially some of these categories received more coverage because there were more incidents that occurred during this time period or because these two newspapers focused on a particular demographic. Only two categories

⁶⁴ The Canadian Vital Statistics Death Database is the main source of data on suicide deaths in Canada. This database only keeps track of the age, sex, marital status, place of residence and birthplace of the deceased (see Statistics Canada, 2013).

of data for this variable (teen and soldier suicide) had corresponding information available, and even for these two categories, the full data set for the entire time span of this study was not readily accessible. This points to a limitation in the design of our research study because national statistics were not available to compare with most of the results for this variable. Despite not being able to compare the majority of these categories with actual suicide statistics, we wanted to tease out some of the distinctions instead of lumping all suicides in the coverage together.

Figure 5.1: Types of Suicide in the Coverage (By Number of Articles)

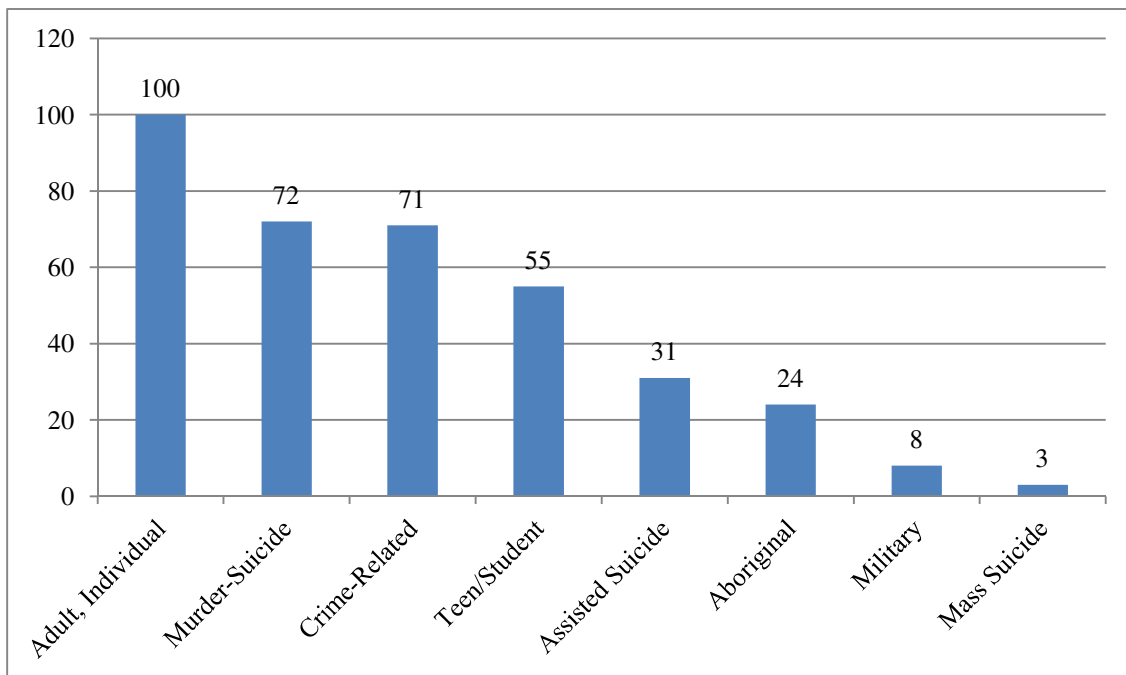


Figure 5.1 shows the breakdown by suicide type for our sample. A sizeable portion of the articles were classified as murder-suicide (19.8%, $n = 72$). Well-known examples of murder-suicide in our sample include the 2007 Virginia Tech school shooting in the US and the case of Suzanne Killinger-Johnson, the psychologist apparently suffering from post-partum depression who jumped in front of a Toronto subway in 2000 while holding

her six-month old son. We classified 19.5% ($n = 71$) of the articles as referring to suicides that took place either in prison or by those who faced criminal charges. Examples of this type of suicide include the 2001 suicide of Kimberly Rogers, who was halfway through a house arrest sentence for welfare fraud when she took her own life, a 68-year-old man who killed himself after a police standoff at a home in Pickering, Ontario in 2002, and the 2007 suicide of Ashley Smith in a juvenile detention centre, which took place while jail guards watched on security cameras without intervening.

Youth, teen or university student suicide was the type of suicide mentioned in 15.1% ($n = 55$) of the articles; perhaps some of the most well-known suicides in this category are those of Amanda Todd, the British Columbian teen who was cyber-bullied and took her own life in 2012, and Rehtaeh Parsons whose sexual assault was captured on video and used to bully her prior to her suicide in 2013. Since age is one of the few details made available with statistics on suicide deaths in Canada, we were able to compare the average suicide rate of people under 25 per 100,000 population from 2007 to 2011 (see Statistics Canada, 2014), and the percentage of articles in our sample for those years that focused on suicides in this age group. The average suicide rate per 100,000 was used because our teen and student category spanned three different age categories used by the Canadian Vital Statistics Database.⁶⁵ Figure 5.2 shows the suicide rate for young people in Canada compared to the percentage of articles focused on teen and university student suicide.

⁶⁵ The age categories averaged were 10 to 14, 15 to 19 and 20 to 24. This is clearly not a perfect correlation between the defining boundaries of our category and the age-related statistics, but there is significant overlap between our teen/student suicide category and suicides rates for this age group so we felt it was appropriate to make this comparison.

Figure 5.2: Youth/Young Adult Suicide Rate Compared to Percentage of Articles Focused on Teen/Student Suicide

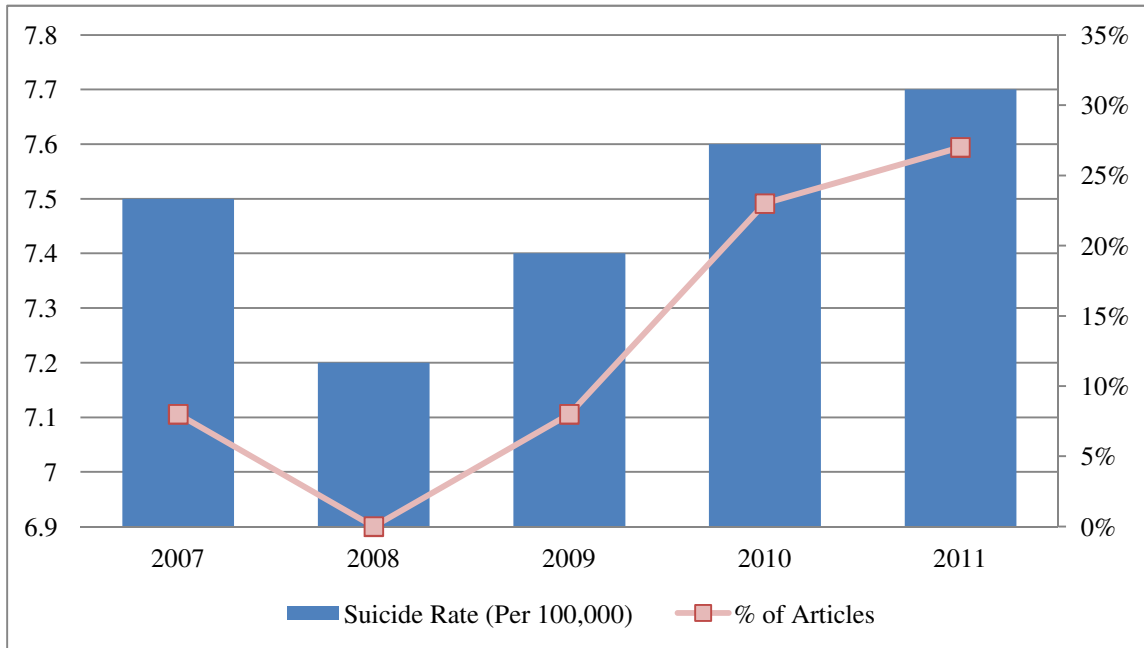
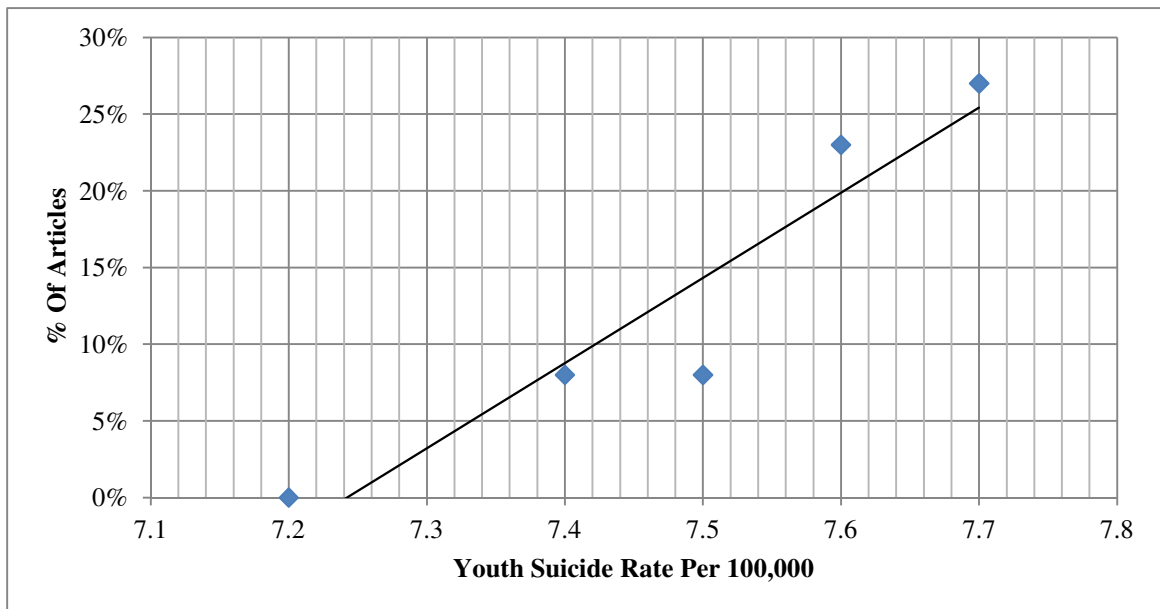


Figure 5.3: Scatter Plot of Correlation Between Youth Under 25 Suicide Rate and Percentage of Articles Focused on Teen or Student Suicide



A Pearson's correlation coefficient showed a strong positive relationship at the 0.05 level between the youth suicide rate and percentage of articles focused on youth suicide, $r(5) =$

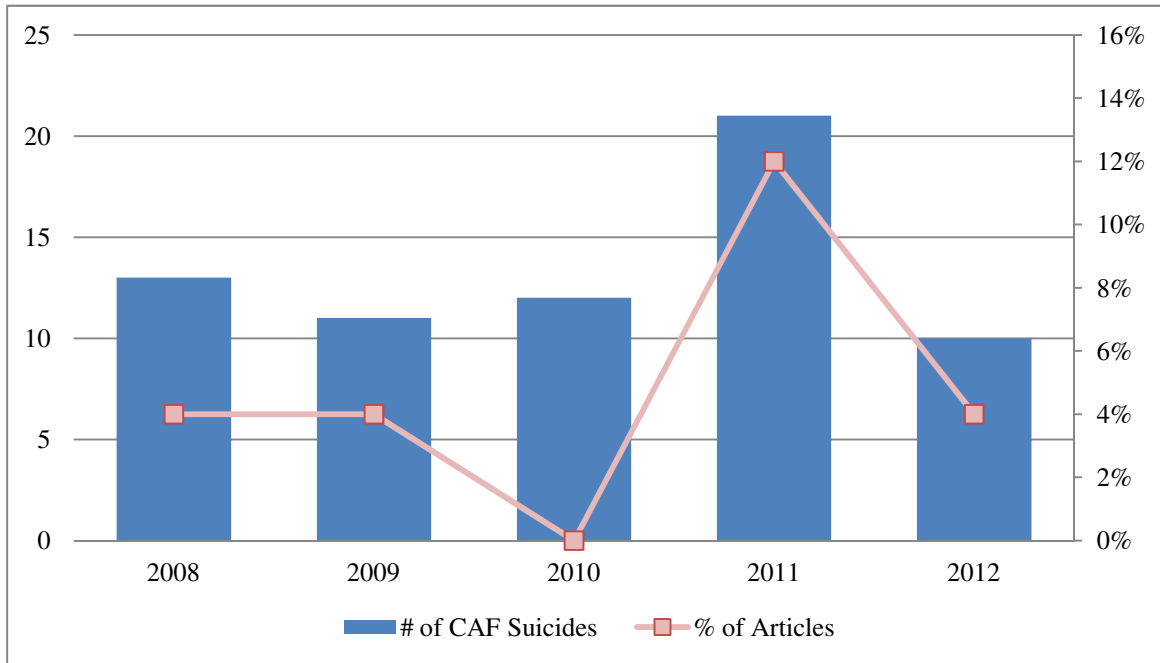
0.942, $p = 0.017$.⁶⁶ This means that as the under-25 suicide rate increased, so did the percentage of articles on this age group. The scatter plot above (Figure 5.3) shows the linear relationship between the two variables and the positive correlation, albeit for a very small count of items.

Assisted suicide was the type of suicide classified for 8.5% ($n = 31$) of the sample, with many of the articles on assisted suicide mentioning the 1994 death of Sue Rodriguez who had the help of an anonymous doctor following the loss of her landmark Supreme Court case. Aboriginal suicide in Canada comprised 6.6% ($n = 24$) of the articles, many focusing on remote reserve communities that suffered through numerous strings of suicides, including Nain, Labrador and Pikangikum, Ontario. Military-related suicides were only 2.2% ($n = 8$) of the sample but were an increasingly talked about topic in the latter years of the study time period. National Defense and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) made available the data on the number suicide deaths by male regular forces personnel from 1995-2012.⁶⁷ Our sample did not include any articles categorized as soldier suicide until 2008, so the years prior to this were not included in Figure 5.4.

⁶⁶ The Pearson's r correlation coefficient measure was chosen to compare these two particular variables because they are both at the ratio level, making a chi square calculation unsuitable.

⁶⁷ They claim to only include male regular forces personnel because the low number of suicides amongst female Canadian Armed Forces members makes the statistical analysis of female rates unreliable (see National Defense, 2013). This is a puzzling statement, as the suicide data is by actual number of suicides, not by rate so how adding in female suicides (for a total suicide count) would complicate this measurement statistically is not clear.

Figure 5.4: Number of Reported Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Suicides Compared to Percentage of Articles Focused on Military Suicide



As shown, there was a spike in the number of suicide deaths reported by the CAF in 2011. This corresponded with an increase in the percentage of articles in our sample that year that focused on military suicide; however, this was not deemed to be a statistically significant correlation: $r(5) = 0.862$, $p = 0.060$, meaning it could be due to chance that this increase in articles occurred.

Rare cases of mass suicide comprised less than 1% ($n = 3$) of the sample. Finally, the remaining 27.5% ($n = 100$) were adult suicide deaths and attempts that did not fit into any of the other categories. Examples in this category included a Montreal police officer who shot himself inside the major crimes unit office in 2005, the 2003 suicide of UK Iraqi weapons inspector David Kelly, and Martin Kruze, the first victim to reveal the sexual abuse that had taken place at Maple Leaf Gardens, who jumped to his death from

the Bloor Viaduct in 1997 (while his death did not occur during our study time period, he was frequently referred to in our sample articles).

The most recent available statistics on suicide in Canada showed that the highest rate of suicide was for men between the ages of 40 and 59 (see Statistics Canada, 2014). We wanted to see if this was reflected in the coverage so we coded for the gender and age of each person; however, this comparison ultimately could not be accomplished because of the ambiguous age category of many of the suicides in our sample. Our categorization by age also proved problematic in articles where there was not a focus on one particular suicide, but several mentioned of equal prominence in the article. We ended up classifying 9.6% ($n = 35$) of articles as being either ambiguous or giving equal prominence to suicides of both male and female victims (or mentioning the victim was transgendered), and 13.7% ($n = 50$) of articles as either being unspecified on the age (could have been adult or youth) or involving multiple people different categories. Our sample data did show that male victims were more frequently reported on (67%, $n = 244$) than female victims (23.4%, $n = 85$), and the unspecified adult (no age provided but clear indications the person was an adult over 18) age group was more widely covered than the other age groups (24.2%, $n = 88$). Teenagers aged 15 to 19 followed as the next most covered age group, with 15.4% ($n = 56$) of articles focusing on this demographic.

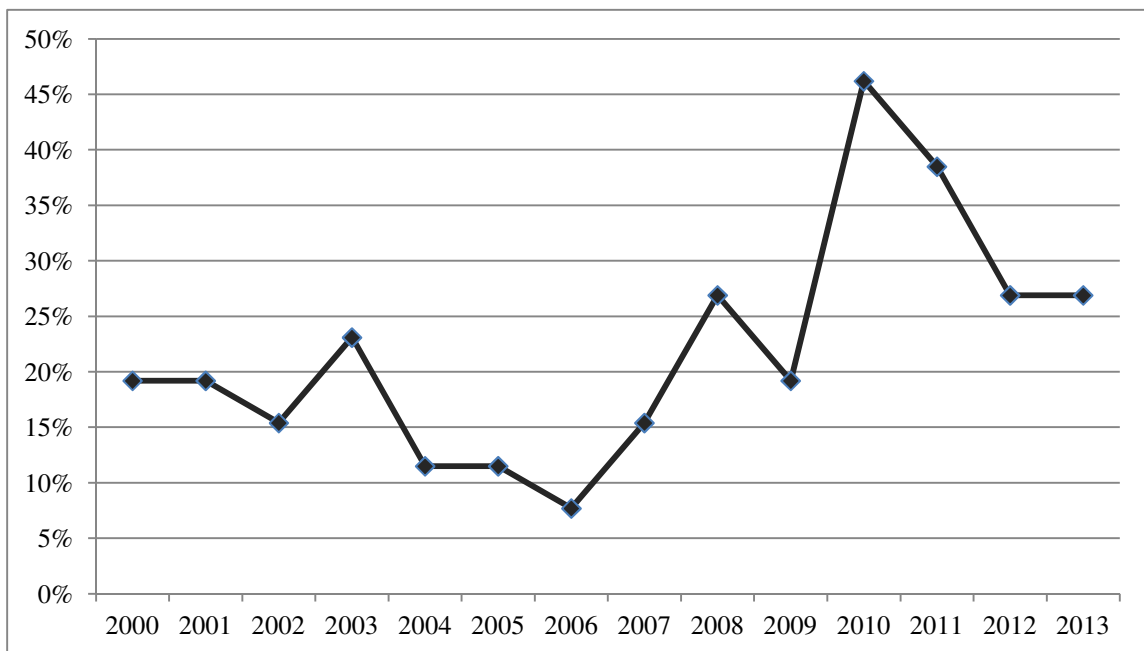
Only 9.1% ($n = 33$) of our sample were articles that mentioned a celebrity or person of a high public profile, such as a politician, musician, actor, or well-known writer. High profile people who died by suicide and were mentioned in our sample included former South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun, former Saskatchewan Conservative MP David Batters, and American writer Hunter S. Thompson. Additionally,

7.1% ($n = 26$) of articles featured the suicides of individuals who were related to people of high public profile, such as the son of writer Danielle Steele, the son of former minister and ambassador Michael Wilson, and the daughter of Luke Richardson of the Ottawa Senators.

Mention of Mental Illness

In light of the increasing medicalization of suicide, detailed in Chapter One, we analyzed each article for mention of mental illness in order to determine whether there was an increase over time. In total, 22% ($n = 80$) of articles mentioned mental illness. A chi square calculation found the change in the number of articles mentioning mental illness to be of significance, $\chi^2(13, n = 364) = 22.173, p = 0.053$. As shown below in Figure 5.5, there was an increase in the percentage of articles mentioning mental illness in the latter years of the study.

Figure 5.5: Percentage of Articles Mentioning Mental Illness



Our data also showed that 8.5% ($n = 31$) of the articles specifically referred to the physical health of the person who died by or attempted suicide, usually in articles with a focus on assisted suicide. The majority of articles (47.3%, $n = 172$) did not include mention of physical or mental illness, but did indicate another potential rationale for the suicide: these rationales ranged from the lack of adequate housing and employment in remote aboriginal communities, to various professional embarrassments, to the pressures of upcoming criminal trials and proceedings.

Aspects Warned Against in Reporting Guidelines

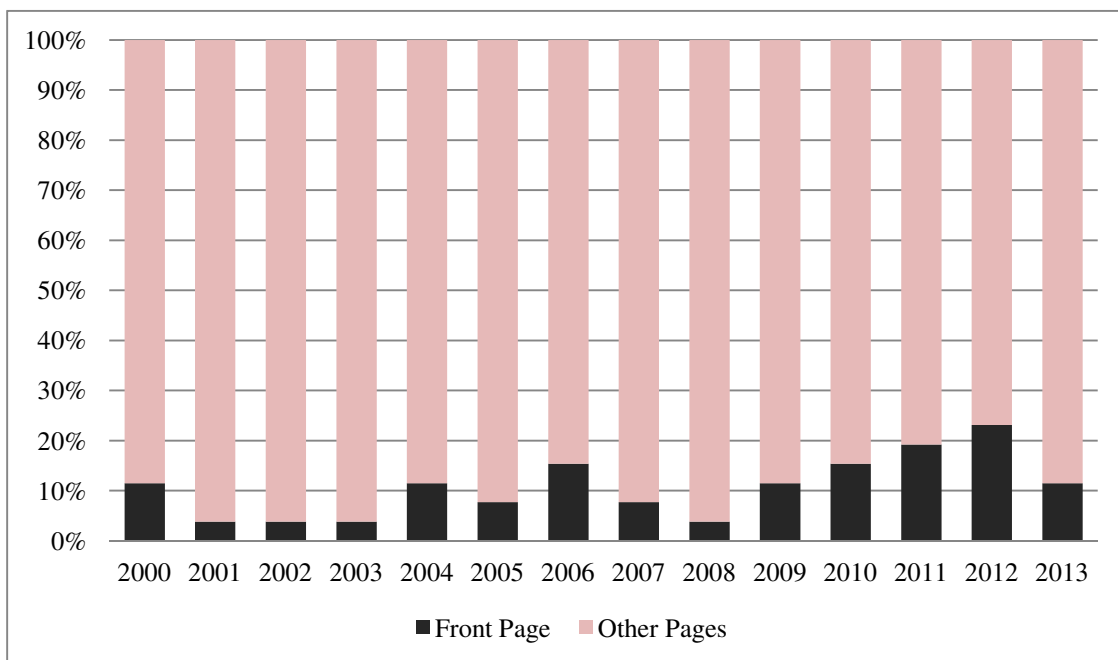
Front Page Placement

In their 2009 paper on media guidelines for reporting suicide, the CPA listed several aspects that should be avoided including front page coverage (see Nepon *et al.*, 2009). Our data showed that very few articles on suicide were placed on the front page for either newspaper (see Figure 5.6). In fact, just 10.7% ($n = 39$) of articles in our total sample were published on the front page throughout the time period analyzed. That being said, we were surprised by the findings when we compared pre-2009 coverage to the coverage from 2009 onwards to determine if there was any noticeable difference after the CPA policy paper was released—the percentage of articles appearing on the front page doubled following the release of the CPA policy paper.⁶⁸ As mentioned earlier, we opted to compare the two newspapers only for the three variables that were directly related to

⁶⁸ Prior to 2009, just 7.7% of articles in our sample appeared on the front page. This jumped to 16.2% of articles from 2009 onwards. A chi square test showed this change was significant, meaning that this difference over time was likely not due to chance, $\chi^2(1, n = 364) = 6.255, p = 0.012$.

the aspects warned against in reporting guidelines to determine if either was potentially following the guidelines more closely. When we compared the two newspapers to see if one used suicide headlines more than the other, we found the *Toronto Star* had a higher percentage over the time period analyzed than the *Globe and Mail*—13.8% ($n = 27$) of the *Toronto Star* sample had front page articles on suicide, compared to 7.1% ($n = 12$) of the *Globe and Mail* sample. A chi square test showed that this difference between the percentage of front page articles in each newspaper was likely not due to chance, $\chi^2(1, n = 364) = 4.160, p = 0.041$.

Figure 5.6: Percentage of Articles on Front Page



In terms of measuring potential impacts of the CPA policy paper on reporting styles for each newspaper, the *Toronto Star* had 10.3% of suicide articles on the front page prior to

2009, but this increased to 20% of articles from 2009 to 2013.⁶⁹ The *Globe and Mail* had just 4.6% of suicide articles on the front page prior to 2009, with an increase to 11.7% for articles published between 2009 and 2013.⁷⁰

Detailing Method

We found that the method was often included in articles on suicide—62.6% of articles ($n = 228$) detailed a specific method. The *Globe and Mail* sample had 59.5% ($n = 100$) of articles mention the method compared to 65.3% ($n = 128$) for the *Toronto Star*. There was a noticeable decrease in the latter years of the study of the number of articles mentioning the method (see Figure 5.7). Prior to the release of the CPA policy paper in 2009, 69.7% of articles included mention of the method. This dropped to 50% of articles in the coverage post-release of the CPA guideline paper.⁷¹ This decrease was reflected at both newspapers: the *Toronto Star* had 70.6% of articles pre-2009 detail the method, dropping to 55.7% from 2009 onward. The *Globe and Mail* had 68.5% of articles mention method pre-2009, and detail on the method dropped to 43.5% of the coverage following the release of the CPA policy paper. Both of these findings were significant according to chi square analyses.⁷²

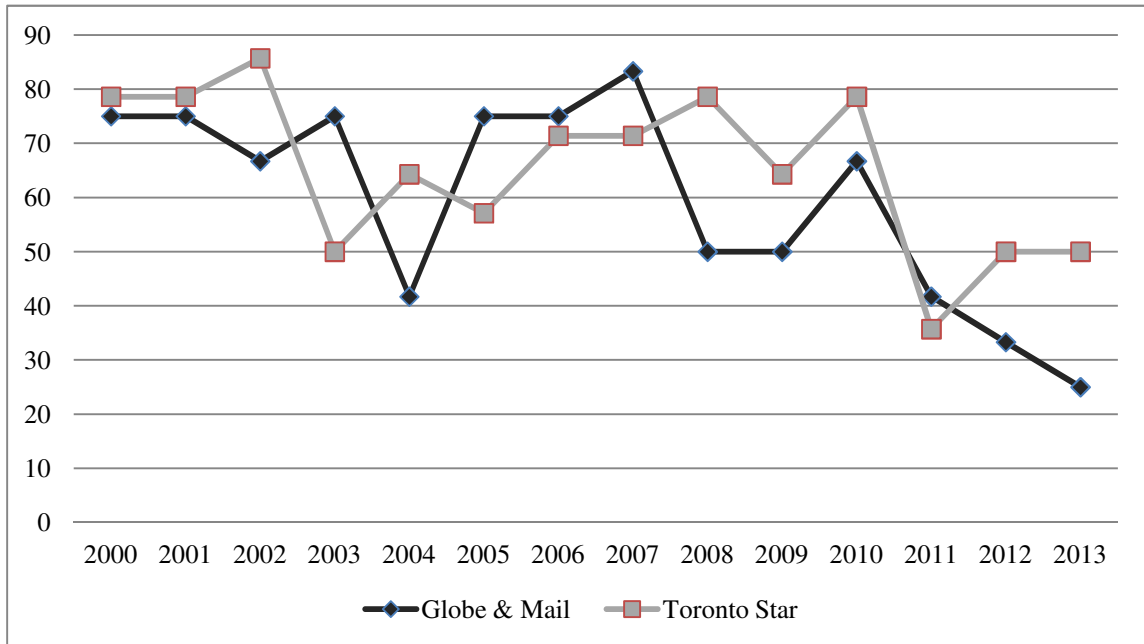
⁶⁹ A chi square test showed that this difference over time was not of significance, $\chi^2(1, n = 196) = 3.552, p = 0.059$.

⁷⁰ A chi square test showed that this difference over time was also not of significance, $\chi^2(1, n = 168) = 2.880, p = 0.090$.

⁷¹ A chi square test showed this finding was significant, meaning that this difference over time was likely not due to chance, $\chi^2(1, n = 364) = 13.800, p < 0.001$.

⁷² The difference in percentages of articles at the *Toronto Star* was significant at the 0.05 level: $\chi^2(1, n = 196) = 4.422, p = 0.035$, while the difference in percentages of articles at the *Globe and Mail* was significant at the 0.001 level: $\chi^2(1, n = 168) = 10.155, p = 0.001$.

Figure 5.7: Percentage of Articles Detailing the Method of Suicide (Each Newspaper)



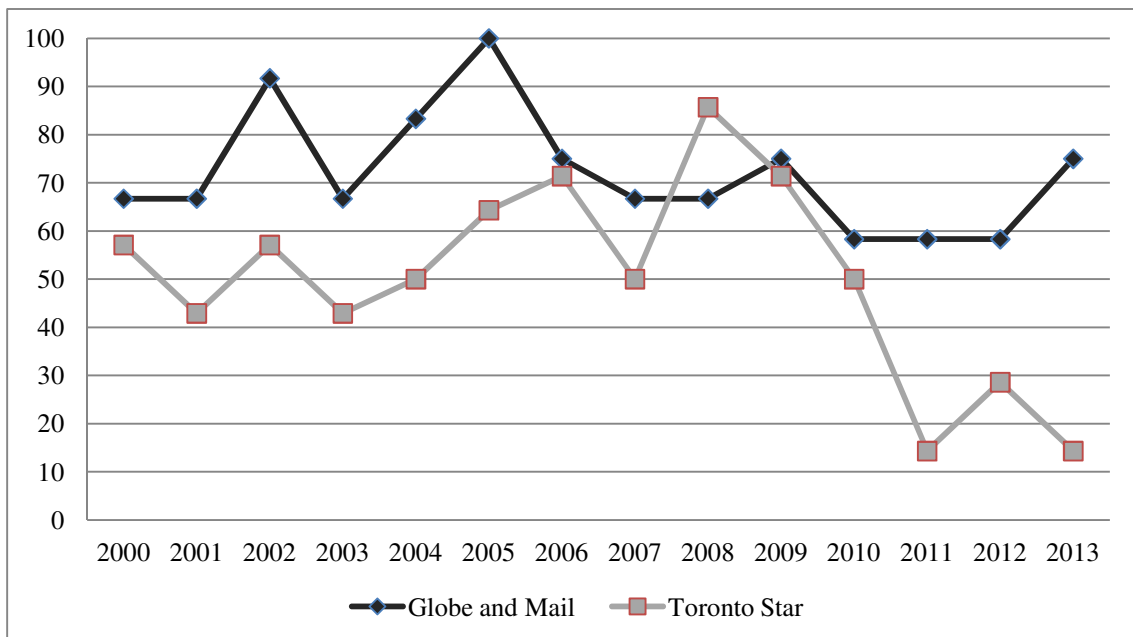
Future research will be better situated to determine if this trend of less articles detailing the method of suicide continues at both newspapers.

Suicide Headlines

We found a marked difference between the two newspapers in how they approached headlines on suicide stories (see Figure 5.8). The *Globe and Mail* included explicit mention of suicide in 72% ($n = 121$) of the headlines, while the *Toronto Star* included mention of suicide in 50% ($n = 98$) of headlines. A chi square calculation indicated this difference between the newspapers and mention of suicide in the headline was of strong significance, $\chi^2(1, n = 364) = 18.308, p = <0.001$. Except in the case of one year (2008), the *Globe and Mail* had a consistently higher percentage of articles featuring suicide in the headline than the *Toronto Star*. Examples of headlines carried by the *Globe* during this time included "Third high-school suicide in Brampton prompts a grieving father to

speak out" (Mackrael, 2012, April 13, A1), "Rape suspect hanged himself, jail officials say" (Nolen, 2013, March 12, A13), and "Suspect in anthrax case commits suicide" (Associated Press, 2008, August 2, A12). There were opportunities in our sample where we were able to compare articles on the same topic and publication date from the *Globe* to those in the *Star* and the difference in how headlines were approached was quite apparent. For example, on December 5, 2013, both newspapers ran stories about military suicides after reports came in about another Canadian soldier taking his own life, spurring the Prime Minister to speak about the issue in the House of Commons. The *Globe and Mail's* headline for the story was: "Another soldier's suicide spurs new round of questions" (Galloway, 2013, December 5, A3), while the headline for the *Toronto Star* did not include explicit mention of suicide: "PM urges troubled troops to get help" (Campion-Smith, 2013, December 5, A6).

Figure 5.8: Percentage of Articles with Suicide in the Headline (Each Newspaper)



Both newspapers showed a decrease when coverage prior to 2009 was compared to coverage from 2009 onwards. In total, 66.2% of articles featured headlines on suicide from 2000 to 2008. This dropped to 49.2% from 2009 to 2013. A chi square calculation showed that this change was likely not due to chance, $\chi^2(1, n = 364) = 10.087, p = 0.001$. The *Star* had a particularly noticeable decrease in the number of headlines on suicide from 2011 onwards. A chi square calculation showed the difference in the *Toronto Star's* percentage prior to the CPA paper release (57.9%) compared to the post-CPA paper release coverage (35.7%) was significant: $\chi^2(1, n = 196) = 8.889, p = 0.003$. The same test showed an insignificant relationship between differences in percentages for suicide headlines in the *Globe*.⁷³

Information on Resources for Vulnerable People

All media guidelines on suicide reporting encouraged reporters and editors to include resource information for those seeking help in any articles that discuss suicide. We analyzed each article to determine if any information was provided about crisis telephone lines or any other help-related information encouraged by mental health professionals. Only three articles (1%) included information for crisis lines at the end of the article, including one article that provided a telephone crisis line for military members and their families (Campion-Smith, 2013, December 5). We were cognizant though that some articles may not have included this information within the text, but instead in an accompanying text box that perhaps was not returned in our search results. As mentioned

⁷³ $\chi^2(1, n = 168) = 2.285, p = 0.131$. (75.9% of *Globe and Mail* articles from 2000 to 2008 featured suicide headlines, compared to 65% of articles from 2009 to 2013).

in the sources section above, the search results did not allow for the context of the articles to be examined because the articles were returned as independent results in isolation from other content, meaning we were not able to examine the contents of the rest of the page for related material.

Author and Location

As we already outlined, almost a third of the sample was authored by wire services (31%, $n = 113$). Staff reporters and columnists (and editors for editorials) authored 65.1% ($n = 237$) of the articles, and the remaining 1.9% ($n = 7$) were authored by special reporters (likely freelance journalists) or no byline was provided (1.9%, $n = 7$).

The majority of the articles in our sample reported on suicides that took place in Canada (67.9%, $n = 247$). The remaining articles were focused on suicides that took place in the US (14.3%, $n = 52$), or suicides that took place internationally, outside of Canada or the US (17%, $n = 62$).⁷⁴ We cross-tabulated this data on location with the author data and found a greater reliance on wire services for stories on suicides outside of Canada. It is not surprising that the majority (79.8%, $n = 190$) of stories focused on Canadian suicides were written by staff reporters at the *Star* and *Globe*, whereas the majority of stories on US suicides (59.2%, $n = 29$) and international suicides (58.3%, $n = 35$) came from wire services. A chi square calculation found this relationship between the variables of location and author to be of strong significance, $\chi^2(2, n = 347) = 50.830, p =$

⁷⁴ There were also three articles (less than 1%) that were either ambiguous on the location or involved multiple suicides in locations that fell into more than one category.

<0.001).⁷⁵ This result suggests it is likely not due to chance that a high number of articles on suicides in Canada were written by staff reporters, or that a majority of the articles on suicides outside of Canada were written by wire services. The relevance of this finding to our third research question regarding reporting guidelines is explained in the discussion section below.

Discussion

Demographics Reflected in Coverage

A large volume of data was collected in this study on contemporary suicide coverage in the *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail*. Our first key research question was whether any particular types of suicide or select demographic groups received more coverage. We were surprised to find the largest portion of the articles addressed individual cases of adult suicide (that did not fall into any of the other categories). This was followed next by murder-suicide and crime-related suicides. In Chapter Two, I noted that the suicides of everyday, local people began to dwindle away from the news pages in the mid-20th century and a growing emphasis was placed on suicides related to crime or those of a sensational manner. Our findings indicated that the suicides of everyday people are finding their way back into the news pages of these two newspapers. Certainly a sizeable portion of the articles were focused on crime-related suicides and murder-suicides, but

⁷⁵ Only the wire service and staff author categories were included in this test for the author variable, and only the Canadian, international and US categories were included for location because there were so few outside of these categories to warrant their inclusion in the chi square test.

even combined these categories did not receive more coverage than the other categories. There is still an interest, and newsworthiness, attached to suicides related to criminals and criminal activity, but a major reason for this is that these suicides often result in inquests being held. Most official inquests are covered by the media because it is in the public interest to hear about these proceedings and ensure that those in positions of power are held accountable.

We were initially concerned about the impact articles focused on murder-suicide and assisted suicide would have on the results of our overall sample because we hypothesized that these types of suicide would be reported differently. Murder-suicide is newsworthy first and foremost for the deaths of multiple individuals and the crime of murder. A suicide in these situations must be reported by the media or else the public could be led to believe that there is a murderer at-large, whereas in the other types of suicide it is not always necessary to reveal these deaths have occurred. We argue that there are not the same potential taboos when reporting a murder-suicide as there are for an individual suicide with no accompanying murder involved. We thought that articles focused on murder-suicide would skew our results particularly for the headline and front page variables, yet this did not occur.⁷⁶ In regards to assisted suicide stories, we found almost every article referenced the Rodriguez case. We also found that assisted suicide

⁷⁶ We re-analyzed all of the results presented in this chapter with articles classified as murder-suicide and assisted suicides removed from the sample to determine if there were any major differences in the findings. The results were quite similar for each of the variables discussed (such as headline, front page, method mentioned), indicating that our hypothesis was incorrect.

stories were focused on the physical health of the individual⁷⁷ and often had an empathetic tone. Many of the articles on assisted suicide discussed the suffering of the individuals, highlighting incurable and debilitating diseases such as ALS and cancer, and consequently the relief these individuals received through death. In a *Toronto Star* article in July 2009, an *Associated Press* report opened with the following first paragraph:

He spent his life conducting world-renowned orchestras but was almost blind and growing deaf—the music he loved increasingly out of reach. His wife of 54 years had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. So Edward and Joan Downes decided to die together. (Lawless, 2009, July 15, A2)

In a lengthy September 2012 article in *Toronto Star*, reporter Robert Cribb documented the assisted suicide death of Nagui Morcos, a man who was suffering from Huntington's disease. Throughout, Cribb referred to Morcos by his first name, creating a particularly personal account, and stated: "With a terminal diagnosis, he decided to seize what little control he had over his life: to end it. He would pre-empt his disease. He would leave his life as himself" (A1). These articles were in stark contrast to individual suicide reports in which the suffering of the individual was rarely discussed. Rather, these articles discussed the tragedy of suicide and how it could be prevented—which differs from many of the assisted suicide articles that focused on passing legislation to legalize the practice in Canada. Based on our findings, we believe a detailed qualitative analysis of

⁷⁷ Of all the assisted suicide stories ($n = 31$), we found 81% ($n = 25$) explicitly referenced the physical health of the individual. This is in comparison to less than 2% ($n = 6$) of all other articles that referred to the physical health of the individual.

articles on assisted suicide compared to articles on other forms of suicide would provide a great deal of contrast and further highlight the empathetic tone of these articles.

We opted to compare the coverage in our sample with available national suicide statistics in order to provide some context and to determine whether coverage was reflective of actual suicide trends. We found the recent increase in articles on teen (and student) suicide correlated with the slight rise in the suicide rate (albeit this was a minor increase to 7.7 per 100,000 in 2011 from 7.2 per 100,000 in 2008). Our data indicated that both newspapers not only had a sizeable proportion of coverage focused on teen suicide in recent years, but also in the early 2000s. Teen suicide linked to bullying was talked about in the early years of this study, not just in the latter years. Perhaps public memory has faded on these incidents so it may seem like there is suddenly a great deal in the media about bullying and suicide, but our data shows that this was a topic that also received attention by both newspapers a decade earlier. We also noted an increase in coverage of military suicides with an increase in the numbers of soldier suicides in 2011; however, this was not a statistically significant correlation. The Canadian Armed Forces warned that the increase in suicide for male regular force personnel noted in 2011 may have just been an outlier and not indicative of a growing trend (see National Defense, 2013); our data indicates that if this does indeed turn out to be a growing trend, the coverage in both newspapers will likely reflect the increase in numbers. This is reassuring to know that these news outlets appear to have reflected the actual increase in suicide deaths (at least in the case of those under age 25), meaning that an increase in suicide for these groups does not go unnoticed or unspoken about.

This begs the question of Aboriginal suicide, which is notoriously higher than the rates for the rest of the country. There are credible estimates that the rate of suicide for First Nations males is five times that of non-First Nations males, while the rate of suicide for First Nations females is seven times that of non-First Nations females (Health Canada, 2013). The rates for Inuit communities are often even higher (see Kirmayer *et al.*, 2007). Despite the overall elevated rates, it is important to note that there are enormous variations among Aboriginal groups in Canada, including the prevalence of suicide from community to community. The Canadian Vital Statistics Death Database does not provide a breakdown of death rates for Aboriginal peoples in Canada (or any ethnicity for that matter) and recent statistical estimates (usually only conducted within select Aboriginal communities) broken down by year were not readily available for comparison in our study. The lack of information accompanying suicide statistics in Canada is quite shocking. Without data on social, cultural and economic factors, very little is actually known about Canadians who kill themselves. It seems this data could play a major role in prevention efforts and give greater insights into the complex phenomenon of suicide. A final comment we believe is noteworthy after analyzing the coverage of Aboriginal suicide is that the largest area of focus for the coverage on Aboriginal suicide in our sample was on prevention and policy (54.2%, $n = 13$). This was the highest percentage of articles focused on prevention and policy in our sample. There were several lengthy features on Aboriginal suicide that provided in-depth reports on select communities; these articles gave far more context than most suicide stories, giving an intimate look into the lives of several First Nations and Inuit people living in communities struggling with high suicide rates. This type of context and in-depth

reporting on suicide is to be commended for bringing the social and economic issues deeply linked to the high suicide rates in Aboriginal communities to the wider Canadian public.

The most common demographic group in our sample was adult men and this was reflective of the actual suicide rates in Canada. While teen or Aboriginal suicide received in-depth features from time-to-time, it was the consistent peppering of suicides of adult men in news reports that led to this group being the most represented in coverage. Stories about adult suicides (that did not fall into the other categories) were much less likely to have a prevention focus though than teen, aboriginal or soldier suicides. This likely reflected less prevention initiatives aimed at adults, whereas for teens, Aboriginal people and military personnel, several new prevention or policy initiatives were introduced during the study's time span, generating news coverage in the process. This hearkens back to the argument made in Chapter Four that death (including suicide) is not news *per se*. There has to be a newsworthy element, and when policy and prevention initiatives are introduced, debated or implemented, these are angles that generate news coverage on suicide.

Articles on the suicides of high-profile individuals were a rather small proportion of our sample (9.1%), countering the perception that most suicide coverage revolves around those with a public profile. An additional 7.1% of articles focused on the suicides of those connected to high profile people. Several well-known individuals have spoken out in recent years about losing a loved one to suicide, often the parents of teenage children. These family members play an important role in raising awareness and education for suicide prevention initiatives, and provide journalists opportunities to cover

suicide without seeming intrusive or insensitive. This again creates a newsworthy element to suicides that would otherwise most likely go unreported.

Growing Mention of Mental Illness

Our second research question was to determine if mental illness was increasingly mentioned in suicide stories. We found that it was indeed increasing, yet this increase only really took shape in the latter years of the study. Further longitudinal studies on this trend in another five to ten years will prove more fruitful in determining if this is an actual trend that results in a much higher percentage of coverage referring to the mental health of those who die by suicide.

Alignment of Reporting with Guidelines

For our third research question regarding decreases in the aspects of suicide coverage explicitly warned against in reporting guidelines, we found that each paper differed in approach to suicide articles. The *Globe* had a significant proportion of articles featuring a headline that mentioned suicide and this was in direct contrast to the advice of most reporting guidelines. While the *Globe* had an average of 72% of articles featuring a headline on suicide, the *Star* had an average of 50%. Both newspapers had a decrease in percentage of articles with suicide headlines from 2009 onwards, but for the *Toronto Star* this was a significant decrease especially prominent since 2011. The noticeable drop in headlines with suicide included in the *Toronto Star* can perhaps be attributed to the release of the CPA's policy paper in 2009, which explicitly advised media outlets not to include suicide in headlines. While the *Globe and Mail* also had a slight decrease in the number of suicide headlines from 2010 to 2012, this was reversed in 2013 when the

number went back up (75% of articles in the *Globe and Mail* 2013 sample had headlines mentioning suicide). This could be coincidence, due to a sampling anomaly, or even result from a change in staff who were assigned to write headlines. With many potential rationales for the decrease in 2010 and subsequent increase in 2013, it makes speculating on the real reason difficult.

Both papers had low numbers of articles on suicide placed on the front page, but there was a still significant difference between the two newspapers. The *Toronto Star* had 13.8% of articles on A1 compared to just 7.1% for the *Globe and Mail*. The rationale behind the greater percentage of front page stories for the *Star* could be either due to the fact it is more locally-oriented than the *Globe*, meaning that suicides in the city of Toronto may receive more prominence in the newspaper than they would in the pages of the *Globe and Mail*, a paper that has a national focus. The other reason could be the style and tone of *Star* reporting compared to that of the *Globe*, since front page suicide stories, particularly ones involving murder-suicides, could be interpreted as more sensational in tone. This latter rationale does not seem accurate though in light of the overall lower number of headlines mentioning suicide in the *Star*; if a newspaper were more prone to sensationalism, certainly headlines featuring titillating details would be a tactic employed to capture reader attention. Perhaps most surprisingly, both newspapers showed a large increase in front page articles on suicide from 2009 onwards. Keeping suicide stories off the front page was recommended in most media guidelines, including the paper issued by the CPA. The CPA did not provide a specific rationale as to why front page suicide stories should be avoided, but they argued that repetitive, excessive, sensational and/or morbid reporting were generally regarded as aspects that promote suicide contagion

(Nepon *et al.*, 2009). Potentially a front page story on a suicide could be viewed by the CPA as excessive or sensational, but clearly the news editors at both newspapers were not convinced by this recommendation, resulting in the percentage of suicide articles on the front page doubling in the latter years of the study.

Another result that may show the influence of the reporting guidelines on suicide was the decrease in mention of method in both newspapers, particularly noticeable in the *Globe and Mail* every year from 2011 onwards. Future research will be better situated to measure this potential trend because the decrease noted here is only three years in at present. Mention of the method was discouraged in reporting guidelines, yet half of all articles from 2009 onward included this detail. The CPA paper included details of the method as another element that was "generally regarded to promote suicide contagion" (Nepon *et al.*, 2009, p. 4). The noticeable decrease in articles mentioning method at the *Globe and Mail* could be in response to the recommendations from the CPA policy paper and other guidelines to avoid mention of this detail. The differences between the *Globe* and the *Star's* coverage for these aspects of the guidelines could be due to the priorities of editorial staff. The interviews I conducted with the public editors at both newspapers were prior to this data being collected and analyzed. A future research project could begin with a return to both of these editors with this data and ask if they were providing any particular directives to staff (or knowledgeable of other editorial staff providing such directives), or if they have any other insights into why these differences and changes occurred.

Suicide Prevention Resources

Very few articles gave crisis line information to vulnerable readers. As noted, this could be an issue with how news articles were returned in digital archive searches, but it also could be a factor that differs for online coverage. While space is finite in hardcopy newspapers, there is a greater degree of freedom for editors to add fact boxes, links and additional information when publishing articles online. An interesting future study would be to compare hardcopy suicide articles with online versions to determine if there are any differences. We hypothesize that the inclusion of suicide prevention resources may be much more likely for online articles than for hardcopy articles.

Significance of Authorship

Our analysis showed that almost a third of the articles in our sample were written by wire service reporters, not in-house staff at the two newspapers. This is an important consideration for those issuing guidelines or seeking to provide education and consultation to journalists on suicide coverage—it is not just the major national newspapers that must be involved, but also national and international wire services. In fact, when it came to reports on suicides outside of Canada, the majority of articles were written by wire services. The international span of the reports indicated that advocacy efforts to influence how suicides are reported will require multi-faceted efforts, and change on such a global level will require a great deal of time. Organizations that issue guidelines should be aware that it is not just Canadian journalism schools and news outlets that must be targeted with education efforts because a significant portion of news

reports come from wire service reporters, some of whom are not even located in the country.

Future Research

This research has identified several potential trends that can be confirmed through future longitudinal studies to determine whether the decrease in mention of method, the increase of placement of suicide stories on the front page, or the difference between the two newspapers in use of suicide headlines continues, as well as the increase in discussion of mental illness in suicide articles. Future research should also examine a broader scope of daily newspapers, taking into account any potential regional differences that may occur across Canada. Another line of future research might examine the potential differences in online news content versus hardcopy, such as the suggested study above on content comparison. With the growing reliance on online news sites, the front page placement of suicide stories may become an outdated mode of measurement (or matter of concern in reporting guidelines). How suicide stories are presented in online news contexts is a new avenue that may provide for numerous interesting observations, as well as comparisons with hardcopy news coverage.

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6. Conclusion: Bringing an Ethics of Care to Suicide Reporting⁷⁸

Summarizing and Assessing Coverage of Suicide

In Chapter Two, I illustrated how reports of suicides were regular news items in the 19th century pages of *The Globe* and *The Evening Star*. In the 20th century taboos around reporting suicide meant that the suicides of everyday people usually went unreported, leaving most reports to focus on criminal, high profile or the occasionally sensational and bizarre. In Chapter Five, I demonstrated how the coverage analyzed in the *Globe* and the *Star* to date in the 21st century generally was reflective of suicide demographics in Canada, with the largest proportion of suicide deaths being those of adult men. The coverage also showed an increase in the emphasis put on mental illness. As prevention initiatives have increased so has coverage of these initiatives; families who have lost a loved one and then speak out about their loss and grief provide media with an opportunity to discuss suicide in a manner that is usually respectful to family members and aligns with their wishes.

While the nature of suicide reporting in these two newspapers has changed over the course of the century and a half analyzed in this research, there are some constants. First, suicide never completely disappeared from the news pages. While the coverage of suicides of everyday people did dwindle in the mid-20th century, stories about this type of death were never completely silenced. Second, mention and inclusion of suicide notes

⁷⁸ A version of this chapter was approved for the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) annual conference in Montreal (August 6-9, 2014) and won second place in the Carol Burnett Award for Responsible Journalism Ethics.

was an element of news coverage throughout the time period analyzed. In Chapter Two, I showed how suicide notes were often mentioned in articles in the 19th and early 20th century and that some were even reprinted in full. Mention of suicide notes continued throughout the 20th century, and there were several articles in the sample of 21st century coverage that also contained not just mention of these letters, but also excerpts. A *Globe and Mail* article on December 1, 2011 about the suicide of a 15-year-old high school student who was being bullied in Quebec included extensive excerpts from the note she left her mother:

It's hard to leave this world but I think it will be for a better world elsewhere. I blame it on life, on jealous people who want to ruin our happiness...Mom, I'm sorry for what I did. You are the best mom in the world. I will be your guardian angel. My place is in heaven. (Peritz & Howlett, December 1, pp. A1, A16)

Where suicide notes were mentioned or reprinted in the newspapers, it appeared in most cases this was done for context, to show a clear link between the suicide and a particular rationale. For example, in a *Toronto Star* article on the inquest into the prison suicide of convicted sex offender, and likely murderer, Donald Douglas Moore, the headline was "'I'm sorry... I'm finally free' Killer; Suicide note in murderer Doug Moore's cell says he planned his final act for some time, inquest told" (Mitchell, 2008, March 21, A6). The article included excerpts from his suicide note that were presented at the inquest into his death:

"I have been planning to kill myself for some time. I no longer wish to deal with any of this mess any longer," Moore, 36, said in the hand-written note found on a

table in his cell at the Maplehurst Detention Centre in Milton on April 2, 2004. On the back of the note, Moore wrote in big letters "FINAL THOUGHT," then signed his name and wrote "I'm sorry... I'm finally free."

I would argue the inclusion of the suicide note provided context by allowing the audience to read about key evidence presented at the inquest.

In another case where empathy may have been less controversial, a *Toronto Star* article that focused on failed laser eye surgery and the impact on the quality of life for those who suffered post-surgical complications included excerpts from the suicide note of an American man (as reported by the *Chicago Tribune*). In this instance, the excerpts from his note were provided to show the clear links his death had to his failed eye surgery:

"If I cannot get my eyes fixed, I'm going to kill myself," he wrote in a note police found, the paper reported. "I fell into a deeper depression than I had ever experienced, and I never really came out of it." (Javed, 2008, February 26, p. A3)

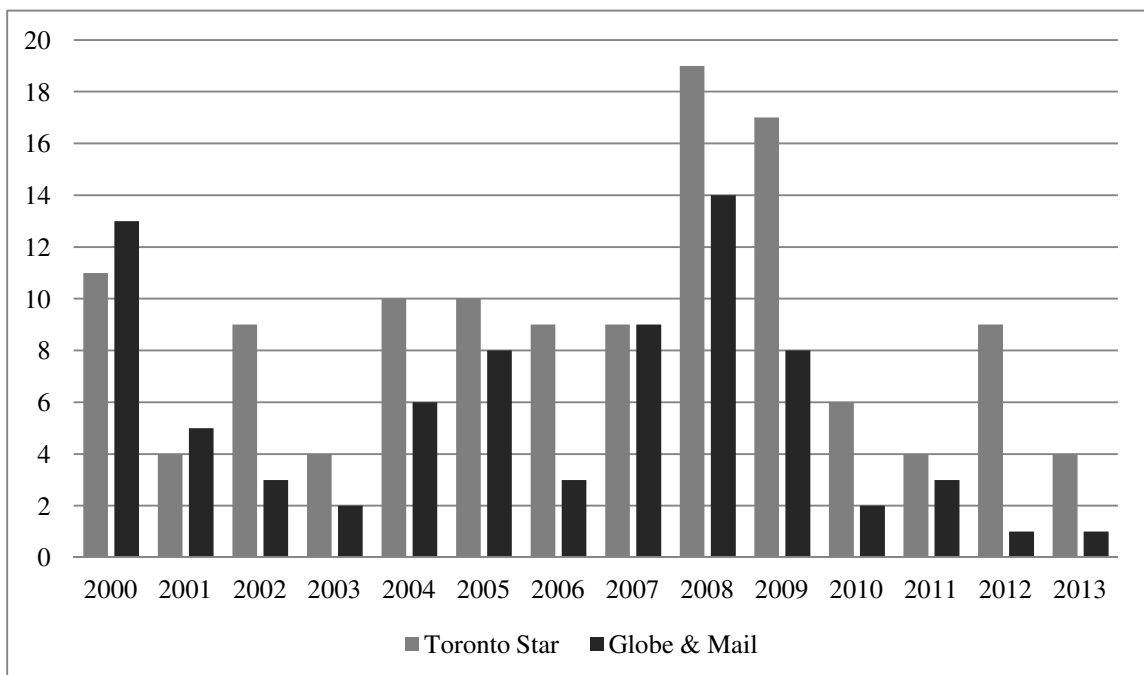
It was only in very rare cases where the note itself was the news story, such as the small Associated Press brief the *Globe and Mail* carried on May 6, 2008 entitled "Suicide only way out, D.C. Madam's note says" (p. A15). The brief was based entirely on the note the woman left before hanging herself in prison. My research demonstrated that mention of and even quoting from suicide notes is still practiced by both the *Globe* and the *Star*. The historical research in Chapter Two showed there were even cases where the entire suicide note was printed in full. While none of the articles analyzed in the sample of 21st century coverage reprinted entire suicide notes, several did quote from notes at length. As with

the examples I just cited, this was usually done to show a link between the death and a particular rationale for the suicide, such as bullying, despair over legal matters, or frustration with personal circumstances. The reporting guidelines from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (detailed in Chapter Three), advised reporters not to quote from suicide notes. The guidelines suggested that instead of reporting that an individual left a note and quoting directly from it, reporters should instead opt to simply state: "A note from the deceased was found and is being reviewed by the medical examiner" (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2012). No explanation was given in the guidelines as to why quoting directly from suicide notes was advised against. The CPA policy paper did not mention suicide notes, nor did the guidelines from the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention or the new Mind Set guidelines (also detailed in Chapter Three).

In addition to the research conducted on articles explicitly mentioning suicide, an entirely different search was also conducted to check for occurrences of the phrase "no foul play is suspected" (and variations on this phrase) in both newspapers. In Chapter Two, I outlined how this term was first used in 1903, but did not become part of common parlance until the mid-20th century, with a sharp increase in the use of this phrase in 1980. While not at the level of 1980, the term continued to be employed throughout the coverage from 2000 to 2013 (see Figure 6.1). While this term could be describing deaths by accidents or natural causes, as well as some situations involving missing persons or even fires to assure the public that no malicious intent was behind these incidents, in some cases it is quite likely the deaths detailed were suicides, but the term was not mentioned other than to say the death was not the result of foul play. For example, an

article from the *Globe and Mail* in 2011 detailed how "a 16-year-old girl with suicidal tendencies" went missing from a youth psychiatric facility and was found dead on a nearby beach 45 minutes later (Brennan, 2011, January 6, p. S1). While the teenager's name and cause of death had not been officially released by the coroner, the article included a confirmation from police "that foul play is not suspected."

Figure 6.1: "No Foul Play Suspected" (and similar terminology) Search Results Returned by Year and Newspaper (All Sections, 2000-2013)



In a *Globe* article in 2007 entitled, "Jump from overpass causes chaos", the story of a young man jumping from a highway overpass to his death was detailed. At the end of the article, the reporter still included the confirmation from a police spokesperson that "police do not suspect foul play in the incident" (Gandhi, 2007, September 15, p. A7). It is clear in articles such as these that the person died of suicide through the wording and evidence included surrounding the death, but the word suicide did not appear in the article. How much of this practice is guided by taboos around mentioning suicide or

technicalities in reporting deaths before the coroner has made an official ruling are unclear.

The use of "no foul play is suspected" in articles on suicide is a peculiar linguistic device for journalists who pride themselves on clear and concise writing that gets to the heart of the matter. Is mentioning the distinct possibility of suicide (or in some cases, the confirmed manner of death) really so frowned upon that instead audiences are left to read between the lines and make assumptions? I contend that journalism that rests on readers having to make assumptions because of the cryptic word choices of journalists is a weak journalism indeed. My research shows that suicide is not so taboo that it is never mentioned in the press, nor has this ever been the case; yet there are still these strange instances where the suicides of everyday people, the most common of all suicides, are tip-toed around and only alluded to, if mentioned at all. Stigma is only perpetuated by silences and linguistic conventions that allude to suicide without ever daring to utter the word itself. As I outlined in the prelude, suicide prevention experts urge that direct discussion about suicide is the only way to approach the topic. If this is the case, why do media guidelines often suggest reports on suicide be kept from the front page and headlines mentioning suicide should be avoided? What may be perceived as elements of sensationalism to some could instead be direct attempts to address this subject. Suggestions like these seem to contradict the direct and frank manner of discussion on suicide that is advocated for by suicide prevention programs such as ASIST (mentioned in the prelude). I believe journalists must be direct and clear when reporting on suicide, while taking an ethics of care approach (outlined below) that ensures sensitivity and contextual elements are always included. Instead of looking only at guidelines (that are

problematic for the reasons outlined earlier), journalists and editors must also look within their professional circles, to their own colleagues and the fine examples of suicide reporting that have been, and continue to be, produced.

Journalistic Excellence

While there has been much focus on the problematic aspects surrounding media coverage of suicide, it must be acknowledged that there have been, and continue to be, extremely well done pieces on suicide that are highly regarded not just for their skill at sensitively navigating such an emotionally-charged and stigmatizing subject, but also for just plain excellence in journalistic writing. One such piece is Walt Harrington's *Washington Post* article "In Ricky's Wake" that was published in 1987 (reproduced in Harrington's [1992] book *American Profiles*). In a glowing summary of Harrington's piece, media ethicist Christians said:

His suicide coverage embraces human solidarity and in the process irrigates the public sphere. Harrington weaves together with finesse and psychological savvy the story of Ruth and Bucky Jenkins after their son killed himself at 22. The result is an equivalent in news to Hemingway in literature. As readers situate themselves in the family pathos, their preoccupation is not beleaguered parents or a contrary kid, but the universal human struggle with guilt in the deepest recesses of our being. As we reach into the mysteries and the power of intimacy, Harrington asks, when ought we like Ricky's parents accept responsibility but not the blame? Harrington crafts Ricky into Sartre's universal singular. Readers wrestle through

the drama not as a remote suicide but with their own version of coming to peace with guilt. (1997, p. 30)

Apparently, Harrington even read the story out loud to the Jenkins family before publication to test the article's ambience and accuracy (Christians, Ferré & Fackler, 1993). It is a beautifully written piece that masterfully exposed the open wounds of this family with grace and sensitivity.

One of the most prominent and highly regarded journalistic pieces on suicide in the Canadian context, noted especially by journalists in the Toronto region, is the article by Liam Casey that appeared in the *Ryerson Review of Journalism* in 2011. Casey opened up about his own struggle with depression and contemplation of suicide, as well as addressed the media taboo of reporting on suicide. While an intern at the *Ottawa Citizen*, he was confused by the newspaper's policy to drop a story he had been following of a body being pulled from a river when the police deemed the person "a jumper". Even though it turned out the man in the river had most likely accidentally fallen in, the newspaper never told the story because as soon as suicide was a distinct possibility, the story was dropped. Casey looked into the matter, resulting in his article, and ended up questioning the logic of the CPA guidelines and the credibility of the contagion effect that had scared editors away from covering most suicide stories, other than celebrity suicides and murder-suicides. He urged reporters to bring suicide out from the dark and inform Canadians about the prevalence and real pain left behind for the families of thousands of Canadians. Public Editor Kathy English, who worked with Casey at the *Toronto Star*, said Casey's piece opened up the eyes of journalists in Toronto. She said Casey urged the editors at the *Star* to run help boxes with suicide stories, but this has not

become a routine practice yet (K. English, personal communication, September 30, 2013). Recently, Casey wrote another excellent piece, this time providing an inside look at the grief of Toronto politician George Smitherman as he prepared for his husband's funeral (see Casey, 2014, January 3). Smitherman's husband, Christopher Peloso, died by suicide on December 29, 2013, and with Smitherman being such a high-profile local politician, Peloso's death was widely reported in the local media. I would note that Casey's article included the word "suicide" in the headline and did not convey any of the aspects recommended in the CPA policy paper; to me, this indicates that these prescriptive guidelines that take a one-size-fits-all approach to reporting on suicide need to be re-examined and reconsidered. Casey wrote about Peloso's suicide in an empathetic and respectful manner, and by showcasing the pain of a family preparing to bury a loved one, Casey provided a nuanced way of highlighting the grief and devastation brought by this type of death. Casey's reporting about Peloso, as well as Harrington's piece mentioned above, stand out as fine examples of what reporters embracing an ethics of care can produce on this sensitive subject.

Ethics of Care: A Way Forward

For several decades, the threat of a copy-cat effect loomed over many news editors who feared covering suicide could be construed as questionable ethical conduct. According to Russell (2006), many newsrooms had a standing rule against covering suicides, in part because of the evidence of imitative suicides resulting from coverage. Recently, with the stigma and shame surrounding suicide seemingly beginning to lift, families impacted by

suicide are speaking out and their words and stories are becoming almost routine fixtures in news coverage. There are numerous guidelines available to journalists on how to report on suicide, usually issued by mental health organizations and often of a highly prescriptive nature—outlining what journalists can and cannot do when covering suicide. In Chapter Three I provided an overview of the guidelines and the various criticisms of them by journalists and editors, as well as the literature on contagion that spurred many of these guidelines. While these suggestions were motivated by the good intentions of organizations that wanted to avoid potential copycat impacts of media reporting on suicide, they end up further perpetuating the stigma around suicide. I argue that an ethics of care is a useful approach to reporting on suicide because such a framework can address stigma and the shortcomings of third-party issued guidelines. It is an approach that will not constrain journalistic judgments of news value, while at the same time it will allow for a sensitive and compassionate approach to this topic and all those involved.

The ethics of care began with the work of feminist psychologist Carole Gilligan. Thirty years ago she took issue with Lawrence Kohlberg's explanations of moral development because he assumed that the world was made up of individual rights, rather than social connections, duties and obligations (Plaisance, 2009). Gilligan (1982) rejected her former mentor's conception of the stages of moral development because he based his research entirely on interviews with males.⁷⁹ She argued that Kohlberg had missed out on capturing women's distinctive ways of thinking, resulting in his masculinist formal and

⁷⁹ As Steiner (2009) pointed out, it should be noted that Gilligan herself also failed to incorporate a broad spectrum of viewpoints into her own research, interviewing exclusively white, middle-class North American women.

abstract notions of morality based on rules, rights and justice. As media ethicist Patrick Plaisance summarized:

[Gilligan] found that many women expressed a moral framework that was contextual and tied to relationships with others rather than lofty principles of justice or fairness. Instead, for many women, ethics meant the ability to put oneself in another's shoes and act on feelings of empathy. (2009, p. 93)

Gilligan argued that instead of only considering ethics of justice, which proceed from the premise of equality, an ethics of care must be taken into account and not treated as an inferior set of values.⁸⁰ Gilligan's approach rested on the premise of nonviolence, but as media ethicists Clifford Christians, Mark Fackler, Kathy Brittain Richardson, Peggy Kreshel and Robert Woods (2009) explained, "[r]ather than the basic standard of avoiding harm to others, [Gilligan] insists on compassion and nurturance for resolving conflicts among people" (p. 23). Instead of subscribing to lofty and abstract ethical principles, the ethics of care requires that individuals generate their philosophical and political positions by returning to the real world of daily-lived lives (Tronto, 1995). According to political scientist Daniel Engster (2005), caring makes the development and basic well-being of another its direct end; caring can be understood as including "everything we do directly to help others to meet their basic needs, develop or sustain their basic capabilities, and alleviate or avoid pain and suffering, *in an attentive, responsive and respectful manner*" (2005, p. 55, italics in original).

⁸⁰ Gilligan did not privilege care over justice ethics. Instead she supported the idea of a mixed ethos, where care and justice perspectives can be complementary, not oppositional (see Gilligan and Attanuci, 1988). This is also the approach that I advocate for here, not exclusively an ethics of care at the expense of justice ethics.

Building on the work of Gilligan was feminist philosopher Nel Noddings (1984), who took Gilligan's rejection of Kohlberg's stages of moral development a step further in arguing that the moral ideal was in fact maternal care. Noddings argued:

Women, perhaps the majority of women, prefer to discuss moral problems in terms of concrete situations. They approach moral problems not as intellectual problems to be solved by abstract reasoning but as concrete human problems to be lived and to be solved in living. (1984, p. 96)

Noddings did not argue that caring was an innate feature exclusive to women, but instead the result of socialization. She insisted that this type of human caring should play the central role in moral decision making (Christians *et al.*, 2009); however, Noddings' emphasis on maternal care was charged by ethicist Daryl Koehn (1998) with over-privileging the earth mother, too easily dismissing autonomy and being politically naïve. At first glance, an ethics of care, especially as conceived by Noddings, might also seem to be a form of relativism, making it a tough sell as an ethical standard. In response, Noddings argued that an ethic of caring was not a form of relativism because "[t]he caring attitude that lies at the heart of all ethical behaviour is universal" (1982, p. 92). Adding nuance to this discussion on culturally-specific versus universal care, political scientist Joan Tronto added that the ethics of care requires the processes of care to be understood in culturally specific ways: "Thus, while the condition of needing care is universal, standards of care vary by culture" (1995, p. 144). This would mean that how care is perceived by many in Canada may differ from how care is perceived in Japan or Nigeria. Since Gilligan and Noddings, several other feminist scholars have continued to build on the theoretical framework laid out by them for an ethics of care, particularly to

expand upon what can seem to be a limited and gender-specific morality. Tronto (1995) argued that it was a mistake to fail to generalize an analysis of care beyond gender. A morality of care does not imply paternalism or maternalism (Elliott, 1997). Tronto (1995) also argued that an ethics of care is not solely private or parochial because it can concern institutions, societies and even global levels of thinking. Media scholars Linda Steiner and Chad Okrusch (2006) argued that a radicalized reworking of care was needed if the notion was to be useful, because caring that remained at the level of the personal could not suffice as an independent moral value—it must be socialized and given political weight. This is particularly relevant when discussing an ethics of care for newsrooms.

Ethics of Care in the Newsroom

Steiner (2009) pointed out that an ethics of care that is feasible and productive required at a minimum extending the world of the moral beyond family and friendship relationships; to be useful to media professionals, caring must be reconstructed to care for strangers and distant communities. The politicized version of care for which Steiner and Okrusch advocated would mean that journalists:

... privilege the problems, concerns, stories, and counterstories of marginalized or subordinated people and others who need care and pity... Stories that reveal respect for caregiving (at the society and global level) may encourage other people, other sources, to speak in this register. (2006, p. 115)

An ethics of care stresses equality, respect and attachment as experienced in actual relationships, which Ferré (2009) pointed out are values that stand in stark contrast to the distance of journalistic objectivity and abstract rules of professional codes. Yet, while

media codes of ethics may appear to stand in contrast to what an ethics of care calls for, as Ferré (2009) noted, it must be acknowledged that one of the key values that emerges from codes of ethics is indeed social responsibility—minimizing harm and demonstrating care and respect (Black & Roberts, 2011). This is more in line with an ethics of care than perhaps would appear at first glance. I also want to mention here that this approach does not stand in contrast to the notion of journalistic objectivity, provided one understands objectivity as conceptualized by Kovach and Rosenstiel. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) argued that when the concept of objectivity originally migrated to journalism, it was not meant to imply that journalists were free of bias, but rather that their method involved a transparent approach to evidence. Objectivity was originally about developing a consistent method of testing information; however, much of the contemporary understanding of objectivity in journalism has inverted the original intentions: "most people think of objectivity in journalism as an aim, not as a method" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 83). This understanding of journalistic objectivity has important implications, one of which is that the seemingly impartial voice employed by many news organizations is in fact not a fundamental principle of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). This is important to consider when thinking about an ethics of care approach in journalism—emotion and caring can be part of one's evaluative framework rather than something to overcome when objectivity is understood through Kovach and Rosenstiel's conception of the term. Caring does not mean sacrificing thorough and rigorous research and reporting; objectivity is still required on the part of journalists, but in method, not in aim. It is the neutral and distant voice utilized by journalists that may be called into question with an ethics of care approach; Kovach

and Rosenstiel argued that the neutral voice was only employed as a helpful device by news organizations to highlight that they were reporting on something obtained by objective methods.

Martin Bell, a former BBC correspondent, called for a "journalism of attachment" which is "a journalism that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; that will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong" (Bell, 1998, p. 19). Steiner and Okrusch (2006) pointed out that the public journalism movement already blends traditional justice ethics with care. The public journalism movement "calls for revitalizing civic participation in democratic processes and for reconnecting people to one another, to their government, and to the press" (Steiner & Okrusch, 2006, p. 117). This movement emphasizes care, connection and attachment, all key terms in the ethic of care:

...care and public journalism challenge the notions of objectivity, neutrality, and detachment, each favouring the more nuanced stance that the moral agent's role is necessarily subjective. Likewise, care and public journalism eschews the ideal of neutrality, believing instead that citizens are inextricably bound to each other and thus obligated to act for the common (public) good. (Steiner & Okrusch, 2006, p. 117)

Care as a Limited Resource

In contrast, Bastiaan Vanacker and John Breslin argued that replacing detachment with attachment as the cardinal journalistic value was neither desirable nor realistic. Instead care should be considered a limited resource that would only be applied in particular

circumstances, particularly for those who are vulnerable. This respects the origins of care ethics, which are situationist and eschews the notion that general laws and principles can be formulated that everyone must follow under all circumstances (Vanacker & Breslin, 2006). I think this is an important nuance in care ethics and it is easily overlooked in relation to journalism. Vanacker and Breslin's assertion that care should be treated as a limited resource that journalists only apply in particular circumstances makes their formulation of care ethics much more practical. While they specifically referred to journalists dealing with victims of crime, their suggestions on utilizing an ethics of care can also be applied to coverage of suicide:

Care-based ethics can help journalists assess the vulnerability of these involuntary news subjects in balancing the potential cathartic and traumatic effects of media coverage on crime victims, while not surrendering journalistic integrity or autonomy. (Vanacker & Breslin, 2006, p. 212)

In Vanacker and Breslin's formulation of an ethics of care, the journalistic value of detachment is not completely sacrificed for a universal value of caring. Instead each situation is judged by its circumstances and an ethics of care informs news judgments and how journalists interact with story subjects. In relation to crime reporting, Vanacker and Breslin explained that from this perspective the victims of crime deserved a high degree of compassion and should not be exploited. I would suggest the same goes for those impacted by suicide. The shock and grief of people who have lost a loved one to suicide makes them just as vulnerable as Vanacker and Breslin's subjects, and the "more vulnerable a person is, the more the value of compassion should trump values such as objectivity and truth telling" (Vanacker & Breslin, 2006, p. 210).

Vanacker and Breslin pointed out that media coverage could be detrimental because media investigations can sometimes uncover embarrassing private facts, whether relevant or not to the actual story. Extended coverage can also be detrimental to families who are trying to move on and obtain closure; yet media exposure can be beneficial to victims since telling their story can be a cathartic experience or help their cause.⁸¹ Once again, I would suggest this could be equally applied to those who have felt the impact of suicide. While some families go to great lengths to conceal this type of death, in recent years there have been a growing number of family members who have gone public with their story of losing a loved one to suicide, in particular parents who have lost a teenage child. Going public was what Ottawa Senator's assistant coach Luke Richardson and his family chose to do after his 14-year-old daughter, Daron, died by suicide in 2010. Instead of grieving privately, the family held a public memorial for their daughter at the Senator's hockey arena. A chaplain speaking at the arena said that the family "openly shared the circumstances of her death to remove the stigma of pain and fear associated with suicide" (as quoted in Alphonso, 2010, November 18, p. A1). Many of the families who go public hope they can share their stories to help others struggling with grief and loss, or to encourage those who are contemplating suicide to reach out for help. Media coverage of their stories foregrounds the pain left behind by suicide, and I suggest that this perhaps could be a factor that suicidal individuals will take into greater consideration after hearing about this impact on families and friends.

⁸¹ I wish to clarify here that in no way do I conflate issues of crime coverage, as discussed by Vanacker and Breslin, with those of suicide coverage, nor do I wish to draw parallels to suicide as being similar to crime.

Vanacker and Breslin remind us that not all victims are vulnerable or voiceless; some become quite powerful advocates. Some parents impacted by the suicides of their children go on to form organizations to bring awareness to suicide and mental illness, lobby governments for policy changes, or fundraise for research and advocacy. After Eric Windeler's 18-year-old son, Jack, died by suicide in his Queen's University dorm room in March 2010, he started The Jack Project with Kids Help Phone. The project aims to open up discussion about mental health, and encourage young people to take care of themselves and their peers (The Jack Project, 2014). Its success speaks for itself: in a little over a year, the memorial fund for The Jack Project had already brought in \$1 million (Hunter, 2011, December 3). The project has visited hundreds of schools and Windeler has become a public speaker on issues of mental health and suicide, including giving a TED talk at Queen's University in 2012. This is an example of how changes to the level of care and attentiveness are required on behalf of reporters because some these individuals have become spokespeople, who are themselves often quite adept at manipulating media coverage for their own ends, as worthy as these causes may be.

Ethics of Care in Suicide Reporting

An ethics of care approach in journalism would emphasize compassion, requiring sensitivity on the part of journalists towards their story subjects and sources (Ward, 2009). I would point out that an ethics of care in suicide reporting is not *just* about the story subjects and sources, but also about the audience. Noddings argued that all institutions ought to construct their practices in order to help the institution's constituents improve their ability to provide caring-for relations to others (Pech & Leibel, 2006). This is a key factor in how an ethics of care would inform reporting on suicide because the

journalist would not just be caring for the story subject and sources, but also facilitating and building the capacity of audiences to care for the story subject, sources, and perhaps more importantly, others they may encounter in similar circumstances. This could involve widening the caring capacity of readers to understand the pain of families impacted by suicide, the pain of individuals considering suicide, and the pain of a nation grappling with more than 3,500 suicides and tens of thousands of suicide attempts each and every year.

Journalist Frank McCulloch said that "[t]oo often, sensitivity is sacrificed to the pressure of deadline and the threat of competition" (1984, p. 47), pointing out the political economy factors within the journalism industry that have an impact on ethical decision-making. Quality journalism that results from the guidance of an ethics of care must rise above these factors and put people first. Certainly one can imagine the difference in coverage and care shown if the Jenkins family Harrington (1992) painstakingly featured in his piece "In Ricky's Wake", discussed above, were instead interviewed by multiple journalists from multiple outlets, with only small sound bites from them included in quickly drafted hard news reports. If all newsrooms were to embrace ethics of care in these situations, it would decrease the amount or perhaps even limit pack journalism⁸² because caring for story sources requires a far more thoughtful approach. These vulnerable people would need to be cared for and to me, this is conceivable of in a situation where a single journalist closely were to work with the family to convey the story of their loss and pain. I would make the same argument for

⁸² This concept was discussed in Chapter Four in the section on political economy factors impacting ethical decision-making in journalism.

Casey's (2014) piece on the suicide of Peloso, which I have also detailed above. What made Casey's article stand out is that he demonstrated care and empathy for Peloso's husband, by choosing to tell the story from inside the family home and not just with quick sound bites from police or Smitherman's official statement. These types of stories—ones about specific individuals but that simultaneously illuminate universal themes like grief, shock, loss and guilt, would be the standard if an ethics of care were embraced by journalists, editors and newsrooms covering suicide.

In relation to media guidelines, applying an ethics of care would mean removing prescriptive universal statements in favour of highlighting the importance of weighing each situation according to the circumstances. Blanket statements, such as "always avoid mention of suicide in the headline", are not helpful or productive because they are too restrictive. Casey's article included mention of suicide in the headline, yet his piece was in no way sensational or simplistic. The organizations issuing guidelines of generalized rules and regulations need to take these factors into account and instead urge journalists to understand the parameters of and embrace an ethics of care approach to ensure they take into account the needs and circumstances of each story subject. Suicide is a complex phenomenon. While these guidelines all urge journalists to appreciate this fact and avoid simplistic treatments of the subject, the guidelines themselves in many ways approach the issue of reporting on suicide as simplistic and universal. Just as Romaine Smith Fullerton and Maggie Patterson (2006) argued in relation to coverage of murder, an ethics of care in suicide reporting would mean a deeper and more caring probe into the causes and consequences, leading the community to wider conversations about mental health, social justice, and reconciliation. Finally, I would argue that encouraging journalists who are

reporting on suicide to be guided by an ethics of care would likely be far more effective than third-party groups issuing prescriptive guidelines because ultimately, what newsrooms and the communities they serve truly need is a sensitive, empathetic and respectful way to open up the national dialogue on suicide in Canada.

The Future of Research on Media Coverage of Suicide

In Chapter Two, I explained why additional historical research of the nature I conducted is difficult because of the lack of comprehensive digital archives of early Canadian newspapers. Contemporary coverage is much more accessible—so future research of a broader scope could involve sampling newspapers from different regions of Canada to determine whether there are differences based on geographical region, or among smaller, local dailies or weeklies compared to the large dailies analyzed in Chapter Five.

Questions that could be addressed in this research include: What differences can be found in suicide coverage in smaller local dailies and weeklies compared to the large dailies analyzed in this dissertation research? Is suicide approached differently by newspapers in Eastern or Western Canada, or in Quebec? Do smaller dailies comply with reporting guidelines more or less than the large dailies? The answers to these questions would allow for a nuanced understanding of suicide reporting in Canada. The findings could indicate that organizations interested in trying to influence suicide reporting (such as the organizations that have issued guidelines) need to take different approaches depending on the location or size of a newspaper.

I also firmly believe this is research needs to be conducted across mediums. While I limited myself to two newspapers, there is no way to extrapolate accurately what my findings might mean and whether they would have any correlation with how television and radio stories might be presented. I suspect that broadcast coverage may differ dramatically from that of newspapers because these media have different requirements and restrictions, as well as offering other possibilities for exploring story subjects. Finally, perhaps one of the largest areas for future research involves a systematic consideration of the Internet and how this medium covers suicide. While newspapers used to be the "go to" places for formal obituaries, social media in a variety of guises now offer ordinary people an opportunity to write or record and present material as they themselves choose; reporters and mainstream news outlets are no longer the solitary gatekeepers.

Implications of New Media

In the interviews I conducted for this research with journalists, editors, ombudspersons, and journalism instructors, it became clear that the shift to online information and communication has had profound impacts not just on journalism, but also on how mental health issues in general are discussed. After investigating selected print media in this dissertation research, one of my future research projects will be to shift focus to online platforms in relation to discussion and dissemination of information and news about suicide—both user-generated content and that created by media professionals. With both the public and professionals increasingly turning to online and mobile platforms, interrogating online communication practices has never been more important. Social media in particular are creating new precedents for the study of suicide. These forms of

digital technology are being used to document suicide in ways communities have never seen before; in fact, I would argue they are creating communities of mourning or of advocacy. As a researcher interested in the implications of this relatively new technology on critical social and health issues like suicide, future lines of investigation could address questions such as: what role, if any, can media guidelines and ethics codes play in this age of ubiquitous online information about suicide? Do social media allow for greater opportunities to intervene and reach out to suicidal people? How do editors navigate the sensitive issue of allowing online commentary on news articles dealing with suicide?

There is evidence that the availability of online information on effective methods may lead to an increase in completed suicides (see Bell, 2007). Whether sites that provide this type of information should be regulated and how that would even be possible are large and difficult questions to answer, but nevertheless, important queries to discuss and debate. Social media technologies are still relatively new phenomena and research on how they may be having an impact on suicidal behaviour, and media coverage of this behaviour, is a unique angle that has not yet received in-depth analysis. In fact David Luxton, Jennifer June and Julie Kinn (2011) of the National Centre for Telehealth and Technology pointed out that there is currently a dearth of published research on technology-based suicide prevention programs, as well as research that evaluates the preferences for and use of evolving technologies like social networking sites, smart phones and virtual worlds. Future research is needed to fill what they argue is a gap existing in "research regarding the effectiveness of social networking sites to connect persons to behavioural health resources or on how these sites might influence behaviour or attitudes towards suicide prevention" (p. 53). Robert Hsiung (2007) of the University

of Chicago also called for more research on this topic because the risks and protective factors, and relative effectiveness of various responses to suicidality, are all unknown. I believe these topics must be pursued and given the in-depth analysis that is required in order to address what Nepon *et al.* (2009) termed “a very important future direction of research” (p. 4) in their policy paper *Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide*. This future research opens up multiple avenues for collaboration, and opportunities to work with those researching hate on social media in light of the recent high-profile cases of cyber-bullying and subsequent suicides; these stories have generated a great deal of concern about the impact of hateful social media commentary on suicidal behaviour.

There are numerous avenues potential research on media coverage of suicide and related issues may take, but regardless this research must take into consideration and avoid the pitfalls of previous research. In particular, numerous studies conducted on media coverage of suicide leading to imitation are criticized for being methodologically flawed and making correlations (of increased suicides) out to be clear-cut cases of causation (by media coverage). Future research should not be deterred and must avoid these problems to move in a direction that does not eschew journalists and newsroom norms in favour of highly impractical and prescriptive guidelines. A bridge between those working in suicide prevention and journalists must be forged, but this cannot be done without respect and consideration for the realities and constraints of modern newsrooms. Most importantly, future researchers must incorporate a complex understanding of suicide into their work, one that does not favour exclusively medical over sociological understandings. Again I turn to Shneidman's statement that "we cannot hope to find a single cause for human phenomena as complex as self-destruction" (1985,

p. 225). Media reporting must reflect this sentiment and refrain from simplifying suicide. By respecting suicide as the complex issue that it is, perhaps journalists, newsrooms and the communities they aim to serve can edge closer to an understanding of how to discuss this topic in new and open ways, free from *all* forms stigma.

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Appendix I: Ethics Approval



**Western
FIMS**

Faculty of Information & Media Studies

Office of the Dean

Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Subjects

All non-medical research involving human subjects at the University of Western Ontario is carried out in compliance with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Guidelines (2010). The Faculty of Information Media Studies (FIMS) Research Committee has the mandate to review minimal-risk FIMS research proposals for adherence to these guidelines.

2012 – 2013 FIMS Research Committee Membership

- | | | | |
|----|--------------------|-----|---------------|
| 1. | R. Babe | 7. | H. Hill* |
| 2. | A. Benoit (alt) | 8. | A. Quan-Haase |
| 3. | J. Burkell (Chair) | 9. | D. Robinson |
| 4. | E. Comor* | 10. | C. Whippey |
| 5. | A. Hearn (alt) | 11. | L. Xiao |
| 6. | P. McKenzie (alt) | | |

Research Committee member(s) marked with * have examined the research project **FIMS-2012-13-024** entitled:

How Far Have We Come? An Historical Analysis of Suicide Coverage in Canadian Newspapers

as submitted by: Carole Farber (Principal Investigator)
Gemma Richardson

and consider it to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects under the conditions of the University's Policy on Research Involving Human Subjects. Approval is given for the period from 1 March 2013 to 30 June 2014.

Approval Date: 21 February 2013


Jacquelyn Burkell, Assistant Dean (Research)
FIMS Research Committee Chair

Appendix II: Letter of Permission

To whom it may concern,

This note is with respect to "An Analysis of Contemporary Canadian Newspaper Coverage of Suicide: 2000-2013" an article to which I contributed. I am aware of, and consent to, the use of a version of this article in Gemma Richardson's dissertation (Un)Covering Suicide: The Changing Ethical Norms in Canadian Journalism.

Regards,

Jessica Thom

Appendix III: Code Book

Each of the articles will be entered into an Excel database and coded as outlined below. In some articles several suicides (and attempts) may be mentioned that fall into different categories. In these cases where multiple suicides are mentioned, the coders should analyze the particular suicide that is the focus of the article and code according to that one case as much as possible. Where this is not possible, coding categories have been provided.

1. **ID #** - Each article will be given a unique number ID code to identify it. Articles will be numbered 1 through to 364 so they can be quickly identified.
2. **Paper** - Articles published in the *Globe and Mail* will be coded as **GM**, while articles published in the *Toronto Star* will be coded as **TS**.
3. **Year** - The year each article was published will be recorded (e.g. 2000, 2012).
4. **Date** - The date each article was published will be recorded by month and day (since the year is already captured in the previous category). This will be done in the mm/dd format (e.g. 01/01, 05/17, 12/29).
5. **Page** - The location in the hardcopy newspaper of each article will be recorded by identifying the page number (e.g. R5, A2).
6. **Words** - The word count for each article will be recorded. For multiple briefs that appear as one article, only the word count for the brief relevant to suicide will be counted, not all the other briefs listed along with it.
7. **Section** - The section each article appears in will be coded according to the numbers listed below.
 - ❖ **1** - News (general, unspecified if national, international, local)
 - ❖ **2** - Editorial
 - ❖ **3** - Commentary (must be decided by the coder based on the tone of the article. Unless the distinctive commentary style of writing is employed, articles will be considered news).
 - ❖ **4** - Other sections (sports, entertainment, life, etc.)

8. **Author** - The author of the article will be coded as follows:
- ❖ **0** - No author specified
 - ❖ **1** - Internal staff, no specific individual (e.g. Globe staff, or for editorials)
 - ❖ **2** - Byline of staff reporter (with specific name or names)
 - ❖ **3** - Wire service, no specific individual (e.g. CP, AP, Reuters, Star's Wire Services)
 - ❖ **4** - Byline of wire service reporter (with specific name or names)
 - ❖ **5** - Byline of special to the newspaper (e.g. freelancers)
9. **Name** - For articles that are coded as either 2, 4 or 5 in the author section, the name of the reporter or columnist(s) will be recorded to gather data on reporters that frequently write on the topic of suicide.
10. **Location** - The location (of the suicide, not the city where the report was written or where the individual may have origins) will be recorded as one of the three categories below based on the information contained in the article. If the article does not specify the exact location of death, a reasonable estimate can usually be made based on the nationality of the individual or the location in the dateline of the article.
- ❖ **1** - Within Canada
 - ❖ **2** - Within the United States
 - ❖ **3** - International (Anywhere outside of Canada and the United States)
 - ❖ **4** - Multiple specific individuals mentioned in the article, resulting in a combination of different location categories
 - ❖ **5** - Completely ambiguous, no way of determining location
11. **Type** - Each article on suicide will be categorized based on the "type" of suicide—important details can be obtained through an analysis of what types of suicides get coverage. In some articles, several suicides may be mentioned that fall into different categories. In articles where both attempted suicide and suicide deaths are discussed, the suicide death should be the central item for analysis of the category code, not the attempt.
- ❖ **0** - ambiguous
 - ❖ **1** - Individual(s) (adult), isolated, regardless of public status of person. This code can only be used for cases that do not overlap with any of the below codes.
 - ❖ **2** - Murder-suicide (including murder-suicide attempts). Regardless of possibly fitting into any other category here, if the article focuses on a

person who tried or did kill others immediately prior to a suicide or attempt, the article will be coded as 2.

- ❖ **3** - Crime-related (not murder-suicide, but other individuals facing criminal charges or who have committed criminal acts, e.g. someone in custody on charges who dies by suicide while in prison, or a suspect in a crime who attempts suicide as police close in). Regardless of possibly fitting into any other category, if the person is linked to a crime or is in prison when they attempt or complete suicide, the article will be coded as 3.
- ❖ **4** - Assisted suicide (e.g. Death with Dignity movement, choice to die by those suffering terminal or chronic health problems, assisted by a relative due to terminal illness, NOT for cases where an individual has been encouraged to kill themselves but only when the suffering person themselves pursues suicide). Regardless of fitting into any other category, if the death or attempt is related to an assisted suicide issue, the article will be coded as 4.
- ❖ **5** - Youth, teen suicide and university student suicide (often from bullying or depression-related but regardless of motivating factors, main angle of coverage is about a young person taking their own life). Some university students may not technically be teenagers, but as young adults they will be categorized 5. The only categories that can trump this one are 7, if story of the teen suicide is focused on the fact they are from an Aboriginal community, or category 3 if the young person is in prison or facing criminal charges at the time of the suicide.
- ❖ **6** - Mass suicide (e.g. cult followers)
- ❖ **7** - Aboriginal suicide. Unless the case involved an assisted suicide or murder-suicide, if the person who attempted or completed suicide is clearly stated to be living in an Aboriginal community, this category trumps others.
- ❖ **8** - Soldier suicide (e.g. Canadian Forces in Afghanistan). Unless involving assisted suicide or murder-suicide, this category trumps others if the individual is serving in the Canadian military (whether on active duty or having returned from active duty).

12. Method - The articles will be analyzed to determine whether or not a specific method of suicide is attributed to the individual(s) mentioned. If a method is mentioned, it will be coded as 1 and if no method is mentioned it will simply be coded as '0'. If different individuals are mentioned but the method of suicide is only mentioned for one person and not the others, the article will be coded according to that one method.

- ❖ **0** – No method mentioned
- ❖ **1** – Method mentioned

13. **Health** - Each article will be analyzed for any explicit mention of the mental or physical illnesses of the individual(s) who died by suicide and will be coded as outlined below. For this category, mental or physical health must be explicitly mentioned in the article, it cannot be due to what the coders perceive being a health issue or what they have heard (perhaps what was revealed at a later date), but only what is mentioned explicitly in the article being coded. There is a category code for cases where reporters have alluded to there being some other rationale for the suicide that does not fall into a mental or physical illness category, which will be noted in a separate text box:

- ❖ **0** - No mention of mental or physical illness
- ❖ **1** - See text box for qualitative mention of potential rationales alluded to in the report on suicide, but ones that are not explicitly referred to as mental or physically illnesses (e.g. abuse, bullying, rape, loss of job, etc.)
- ❖ **2** - Mention of mental illness and/or addiction (e.g. history of depression, suffered from schizophrenia, drug addiction)
- ❖ **3** - Mention of physical illness (e.g. terminal illness, chronic pain, MS, etc.)

14. **Gender** - The gender of the person who died by (or attempted) suicide will be recorded based on the information provided in the article by using the following categories.

- ❖ **0** – Unknown gender of individual or group
- ❖ **1** - Male
- ❖ **2** - Female
- ❖ **3** - Multiple suicides of multiple gendered people specifically mentioned (with no particular focus on one)
- ❖ **4** – Transgendered

15. **Age** - The age group of the suicide victim will be recorded based on the following categories.

- ❖ **0** – Unknown age of individual or group, could have been youth or adult
- ❖ **1** – Unspecified, but clear indications person was an adult over 18 years old
- ❖ **2** – Unspecified, but clear indications person was a teenager or youth, below the age of 18
- ❖ **3** – Youth aged nine and below
- ❖ **4** – Youth between ages 10 and 14

- ❖ **5** – Teenager between ages 15 to 19
- ❖ **6** – Adult between 20 to 24 years old
- ❖ **7** – Adult between 25 to 29 years old
- ❖ **8** – Adult between 30 to 39 years old
- ❖ **9** – Adult between 40 to 49 years old
- ❖ **10** – Adult between 50 to 59 years old
- ❖ **11** – Adult between 60 to 69 years old
- ❖ **12** – Adult age 70 and over
- ❖ **13** – Several specific individual ages identified, all individuals aged 19 and below
- ❖ **14** – Several specific individual ages identified, all individuals age 20 and above
- ❖ **15** – Several specific individual ages identified, some youth, teenagers and adults

16. **Headline** - Each article's headline will be scanned for the inclusion of particular terms. If no explicit mention of the suicide is mentioned, the headline will be coded as '0', however if the term "suicide" appears or any explicit mention of a person killing themselves, including the method of how they died in the title, the headline will be coded as '1'.

17. **Celebrity** - Each article will be coded according to the "celebrity status" of the individual(s) featured in the article (this status must be attained prior to the suicide, not due to it), based on the following categories:

- ❖ **0** – Suicide victim has no celebrity or high profile status
- ❖ **1** – Suicide victim connected to someone with a celebrity or high profile status, but not a celebrity themselves (e.g. the child of a celebrity)
- ❖ **2** – Suicide victim is an individual with a high profile status or celebrity status, including political leaders, famous musicians, artists, writers, etc.

18. **Focus** - The coders will decide what the focus of the article is about, which may not even be suicide:

- ❖ **0** - Not focused on suicide, only mentioned in passing
- ❖ **1** - Focus is on suicide (usually at the time of death, however whenever an article is about suicide but doesn't fall into the other categories, it is coded as 1)
- ❖ **2** - Focus is on prevention, raising awareness, government or policy related (e.g. family speaking out and taking advocacy role, not at time of death; debating suicide policies, laws or funding for prevention initiatives)

- ❖ **4** - Law-related proceedings revisiting a suicide (not immediately after, e.g. inquest, trial)

19. **Help-Box** - Many guidelines on reporting on suicide urge editors to include help boxes after stories that mention suicide, with information about crisis lines and warning sign. Each article that mentions suicide will be coded based on any help-box information at the end of the article:

- ❖ **0** - No
- ❖ **1** - Yes, a crisis line or help box with other relevant information provided

20. **Image** - Any images included with the articles will be coded for their content. For articles with multiple images that fall into more than one category (other than category 1), the most prominent/largest photo should be coded. For articles that have several images and the most prominent is one unrelated to the suicide (category 1), the images related to the suicide should take precedence in coding:

- ❖ **0** - No picture included
- ❖ **1** - Picture included not related to the suicide
- ❖ **2** - Picture included of deceased
- ❖ **3** - Picture included of grieving friends and family or the funeral of the suicide victim
- ❖ **4** - Picture included of the location or scene where the suicide occurred
- ❖ **5** - Image included of suicide rates or other info-graphic
- ❖ **6** - Image included of map of location of suicide(s)
- ❖ **7** - Image included of family of suicide victim not grieving (e.g. speaking out to other families impacted by suicide, at a courthouse, an inquest judge, etc.)
- ❖ **8** - Picture of victims killed or injured by person who died of suicide

21. **Notes** - A small note will be made on each article, including the individual name of the person who is mentioned (to keep track of reoccurring names in coverage of suicide). In the rare case where suicide is treated as a verb (e.g. "he suicided"), this will also be noted here. Also in any cases where a suicide note is mentioned or reprinted, it should be noted here as well.

22. **Rationale Notes** - This is the text box where the coders will input any rationale they detect being assigned by reporters for the suicide (all items coded 1 in the Health category must include mention here of the mental state or issue leading up to the suicide that appears to be the rationale given for the suicide).

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Gemma Richardson

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: 2000-2004: Carleton University
Bachelor of Journalism (and Combined Honours in Human Rights)

2007-2009: University of Windsor
M.A. (Communication and Social Justice)

2010-2014: The University of Western Ontario
Ph.D (Media Studies)

Honours and Awards: 2014: Carol Burnett Award for Responsible Journalism Ethics (2nd)
Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication

2007/2008: Charles Clark Graduate Award
University of Windsor

2007/2008: Performance Excellence/Thesis Writing Fellowship
University of Windsor

Related Work Experience: 2014: Lecturer
The University of Western Ontario

2011-2014: Graduate Research Assistant
The University of Western Ontario

2010: 2014: Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario

2010: Part-time Faculty
Centennial College

2007-2008: Teaching Assistant
University of Windsor

Publications:

Pennington-Rasmussen, D. M., Richardson, G., Garinger, C., & Contursi, M. L. (2013) "I could be on Facebook by now": Insights from Canadian youth on online mental health information. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 37(3), 183-200.