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**SUICIDE CONTAGION: IS THE MEDIA  
PLACING THE PUBLIC AT RISK?  
AN ANALYSIS OF SUICIDE  
REPORTING IN NEW ZEALAND  
NEWSPAPERS**

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# ABSTRACT

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The media's reporting of suicide has been shown to increase subsequent community suicide rates through a process called suicide contagion. It is not necessarily the reporting of suicide that causes suicide contagion, but rather it is the manner in which it is reported. As a result, within New Zealand a number of legislative (the Coroners Act, 2006) and industry guidelines (Reporting Suicide: A resource for the media, 2011) have been introduced to decrease any risk of suicide contagion. The aim of the present study was to investigate how suicide is portrayed in newspapers, examine whether suicide reporting has changed between two timeframes, and explore journalists' beliefs and behaviour about suicide reporting. The present thesis is divided into two parts. Study One uses quantitative and qualitative methods to compare and contrast all suicide newspaper articles from leading New Zealand newspapers from 12 month periods in 1997 (pre-suicide guidelines) and 2009 (post-suicide guidelines). The results revealed that reporting quality had improved where there was a decrease in the occurrence of elements known to contribute to suicide contagion. However, despite reporting quality improving the study identified that articles continued to include a number of areas where suicide reporting could be improved upon. Study Two complemented Study One by interviewing journalists about their knowledge of contagion, reporting practices and barriers and difficulties in suicide reporting. The rhetorical analysis demonstrated that participants argued that evidence for suicide contagion was inconclusive and problematic. This had important implications as the media argued their reporting was to a high standard and consequently did not view reporting guidelines or the Coroners Act as necessary. As a result, participants largely avoided these restrictions and viewed them as a threat to media freedom. Together these studies demonstrated that suicide reporting quality can still be improved, however, in order to improve writing styles, implementing suicide guidelines does not appear enough. Instead, this study demonstrates that it is necessary to increase media awareness of suicide contagion, so the media understand the importance of applying reporting guidelines.

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# PREFACE

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The reporting of suicide within New Zealand has become a very topical subject as many people have begun to question the appropriateness of the Coroners Act which specifically limits what suicide information the media can or cannot report (Armstrong, 2012; Carvill, 2012; Clements, 2011; Fleming, 2012; O'Neill, 2012). This thesis expands on this interest to explore suicide reporting practices in New Zealand newspapers. The thesis begins with a general introduction which guides the reader through relevant literature, providing necessary background information and orients readers towards the two studies completed. Study One explored how suicide was portrayed in newspapers, and Study Two, explored editors and journalists attitudes, opinions, processes and constraints of suicide reporting. Although the two studies are both about suicide reporting, each was distinct and involved different data collection methods, types of data and forms of analysis. Therefore, following the general introduction, Study One's method and result sections is followed by Study Two's method and results. Finally, a general discussion chapter is used to conclude and bring the two studies together.

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## INTRODUCTION

*"There are laws to protect the freedom of the press's speech, but none that are worth anything to protect the people from the press"*

*Mark Twain*

Suicide is a serious public health issue that can be used as an indicator of the mental health and wellbeing of a population. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recognised suicide as a growing international problem needing urgent attention, where suicide is one of the leading causes of death and injury worldwide (WHO, 2014). Each year well over one million people die from suicide, with an estimated 10 to 20 million attempting suicide (Stone, Chishi, & Roulston, 2002). In an effort to put this in context, suicide represents more deaths than all wars and homicides in the world combined (WHO, 2014). Since initial records began in 1950, worldwide suicide rates have steadily climbed. Reports over the last 45 years demonstrate that suicide rates have increased by 60% and are showing no signs of slowing (WHO, 2009). Internationally, New Zealand's suicide rates are high, and there are approximately 11.5 suicides per 100,000 people (Ministry of Health, 2010a). Recent suicide statistics reveal that New Zealand has one of the highest youth suicide rates in the industrial world (WHO, 2014).

Despite suicide being a leading public health concern, much still remains unknown about the precise influences on suicidal behaviour. In order to prevent suicide, it is imperative that government policymakers and researchers are able to identify and understand how different factors interact and contribute to suicidal behaviour. The present thesis explores one aspect that has been shown to contribute to suicidal behaviour, suicide contagion. Specifically, the role newspapers in contagion will be explored and investigated.

Suicide encompasses a wide range of thoughts and behaviours, ranging from thinking about ending one's life, developing a plan to do so, obtaining necessary materials, attempting to kill oneself, and finally, the physical act of ending one's own life. It is believed that the English physician and philosopher Sir Thomas Browne was the first person to coin the word suicide in his 1642 work *Religio medici* (Minois, 2001). Browne derived the word "suicide" from Latin

where the word literally translates from two words, *sui* meaning “onto oneself” and *caedere* “to kill”. In English it came to mean “to kill oneself” (Evans & Farberow, 1988). The creation of this new word reflected Browne’s desire to differentiate between the killing of oneself and the killing of another (Minois, 2001). Depending upon one’s philosophical orientation and educational or personal background, the term “suicide” can be defined in different ways, including a brain chemical imbalance (Sandler & Tsitolovsky, 2008), a mental illness (Pompili, Mancinelli, & Tatarelli, 2003) or an honourable act (Takahashi, 1997). Despite the range of suicide definitions, one well-used definition that appears in the 1973 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and quoted by Shneidman (1985, p. 5) states that suicide is “*The human act of self-inflicting one’s own life cessation.*” Similarly, O’Carroll and Potter (1994, p.10) offer a more descriptive explanation of suicide as “*Death from injury, poisoning, or suffocation where there is evidence (either explicit or implicit) that the injury was self-inflicted and that the decedent intended to kill himself/herself.*” These definitions signal that the intention to cause one’s own death is an essential element of any suicide definition. As a result, unless someone has made clear statements of their intentions before their death (such as a suicide note), it is extremely difficult to accurately determine a suicide victim’s precise intentions from their outcomes (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002).

As well as definitions of the broad term suicide, there are also different terms used regarding specific aspects of suicide. These definitions demonstrate that there are a range of different suicidal behaviours and that these are associated with differing frequencies, levels of pathology and distress. Suicide ideation is relatively common and describes the process of thinking seriously about suicide (Shneidman, 1985). Where suicide plans describe a specific type of suicide ideation which involves making a plan for suicide, such plans may be vague or highly specific (Mann, 2002). Then attempted suicide and incomplete suicide are terms used to describe non-fatal suicide behaviours, suicide attempts may range in severity from mild to near lethal injuries (Minois, 2001). Oakley Browne, Wells and Scott (2006) reported New Zealand lifetime prevalence of these behaviours and reported suicidal ideation was relatively common human experience (15.7%), while suicide plans (5.5%) and suicide attempts (4.5%) were less common and associated with greater levels of pathology.

A wide variety of related terms are also used to describe the transmission of suicide ideas or behaviour, including suicide cluster, suicide outbreak, suicide epidemic, suicide contagion, copycat suicide, and suicide imitation. While these phrases all share several characteristics, they have subtle but important distinctions and can be broken down into at least two different categories of a physical event or a hypothetical process. Suicide cluster, suicide outbreak and suicide epidemic are all terms that define the same phenomenon, referring to the

physical occurrence of at least two suicides that are non-randomly grouped together in space or time (Gould, 2001). Suicide outbreak and suicide epidemic are colloquial terms which are largely used by the general public and news media, while suicide cluster is a technical phrase which is almost exclusively used within experimental literature. It is important to note that two general types of clusters have been identified in the literature, these can be roughly classified as *point clusters* or *mass clusters*. A point cluster (also called a *spatiotemporal cluster*) occurs when suicides occur close together in time and space (Zenere, 2009). There is no mistaking of point clusters as these often occur within institutional settings such as schools or distinct communities. Whereas, mass clusters (also called *spatiotemporal clusters*) are more continuous and describe suicides that occur together over time irrespective of geography (Masecar, 2009). This thesis is primarily concerned with mass suicides as they are often associated with the influence of media suicide reports. In contrast, suicide contagion refers to a hypothetical process where suicidal thoughts and behaviours are socially transmitted, explaining why suicide clusters occur (Joiner, 1999). Consequently, copycat suicide or suicide imitation describe one hypothetical process of suicide contagion, where exposure to a suicide may provide a role model for individuals contemplating suicide (Wasserman, 1984).

### **An Historical Review of Suicide**

Before suicide contagion and suicide reporting practices are explored, it is important that current views and attitudes towards suicide are first understood. In current Western society, suicide often carries a social stigma of shame, weakness, and selfishness (Sudak, Maxim & Carpenter, 2008). This negative image of suicide continues to provide a barrier to understanding and discussing why people attempt suicide and how it can be prevented. Current attitudes toward suicide derive from how society has viewed suicide in the past, therefore, before it can be concluded that suicide is a negative behaviour to be controlled, it is important to objectively evaluate suicide throughout different historical and social contexts, in order to provide a more complete understanding of the history of suicide. In addition, the review of suicide throughout history provides an opportunity to contemplate moral, cultural and ethical considerations, where different views of suicide may encourage philosophical debate regarding the right to die.

The topic of suicide has been a rich source of moral and philosophical discussion, where the central debate revolves around balancing an individual's right to choose their own destiny versus the protective concerns of society (Rosenfeld, 2004). Throughout Western cultures, it is commonly agreed amongst government officials and health professionals that actions should be taken to prevent or minimise the likelihood of suicide behaviour. However, the

intervention for individuals who have independently planned to end their own lives remains less certain. The literature review of the history of suicide sets the tone for the thesis, exploring historical attitudes surrounding suicide, while increasing our understanding of why society's current attitudes towards suicide are the way they are. It is further hoped a historical examination of suicide may help explain current Western society's desires to completely control and eliminate suicide. It further provides a backdrop for this research and a foundation from which to understand and unpack the findings.

## **A History of Suicide in Western Culture**

### *Suicide in Ancient Greece and Rome*

Attitudes toward suicide have greatly varied throughout history and society, and depending upon the time and place, suicide may be considered a crime, a sin, or a heroic act. In many cultures, suicide was often considered the best option in certain circumstances. The earliest accounts of suicide appear in ancient Greek times, where the Greeks and subsequently Romans regarded suicide as a shameful act to be punished (Retterstøl, 1990). If a person killed themselves without the approval of the state, they were denied their customary death ritual. In ancient Greece, life was seen as a gift of the gods, and taking one's own life defied the will of the gods and was seen as a form of rebellion (Watt, 2004). Similarly, Plato opposed suicide on religious grounds, believing that people were gods' possessions and risked punishment if they decided when to die (Lieberman, 2003). In one of his earliest writings, Plato stated that a person who commits suicide should be buried alone on the outskirts of the city, under an unmarked grave. In Plato's time, a suicide victim's hand was cut off and buried separately, while their body was burnt on the outskirts of the town (Retterstøl, 1990). Similarly, Aristotle condemned suicide and believed that men owed their life to their fatherland, so suicide was seen as a criminal offence against their civil duties (Retterstøl, 1990). However, this appears selective as it appears only in specific situations suicide was punished, where the victim's status combined with their presumed motivations determined whether an individual was blamed and deserved punishment. For instance, slaves were not allowed to end a life that was not theirs to end (it is also important to remember that the legal status of a woman was parallel to a slave), and similarly suicide due to cowardliness was not accepted (Kushner, 1989).

In ancient Rome, there were several instances where suicide was seen as positive and even endorsed by the state. Heroic suicides for the state were revered, and suicides were seen as positive if they were to avoid disgrace, avoid pain, express sorrow over the loss of a loved one, or serve the state (Retterstøl, 1990). First century statesman and philosopher Seneca glorified death and appeared to advocate suicide. His own death ordered by Emperor Nero

appears entirely consistent with his principles. Observers reported his death was stretched out over an entire day, where he drank wine with friends while regularly opening his veins until he bled to death (Lieberman, 2003). Seneca's death was admired by many of his contemporaries and served as a model of heroic suicide. Suicides such as those by Kodios, Themistocles, Cato, Brutus, Antony and Cleopatra became further models of honour suicides, dying for a higher ideal, virtue, loyalty, or faith (Kushner, 1989).

Suicide was supported in other quarters around the world. The ancient Greek Stoic School, which was founded around 400BC and flourished within the Roman Empire, had very distinct views on suicide (Pridmore & McArthur, 2009). The principal law of Stoics was to live in harmony with nature and reason. They viewed the existence of poisonous plants, insects, and animals to be evidence from gods that man may kill himself without pain (Retterstøl, 1990). Retterstøl (1990) outlined that the Stoic School supported the use of suicide in three situations: (1) When suicide is done for others, such as the fatherland, (2) When the victim commits suicide to avoid unlawful or immoral acts, and (3) When poverty, chronic disease, or mental illness makes death more attractive than life. Stoic followers believed it was important to first carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of suicide, in these situations. In Stoic beliefs, the careful voluntary consideration of the costs and benefits of ending one's life was seen as the "decision of a great soul" (Pridmore & McArthur, 2009, p.44). It appears euthanasia was widely practiced among elderly members of the Stoic School (Lieberman, 2003). Furthermore, Stoics appeared to have strict rules for how suicides should be carried out, that it should be performed quickly and quietly without theatrics (Lieberman, 2003).

The Roman Empire was lenient upon those who killed themselves, even criminals, where Romans believed the crime and the punishment died with the criminal (Jeffrey, 2004). However, as the economic costs of suicide became increasingly noticeable, where the suicide of a slave cost the master money and the suicide of a soldier weakened the Roman army, the economics of suicide began to shape suicide law. Attempting suicide became a punishable offence. For soldiers, attempted suicide was considered equal to desertion, where ironically the penalty was death (Jeffrey, 2004), while slaves who were considered properties of their masters were banned from suicide (Lieberman, 2003).

### *Early Christian Period*

Throughout the early Christian period, acts of martyrdom and suicide were common as many Christians wished to be close to God (Minois, 2001). At this time, there was a certain pessimistic attitude towards life and a large yearning for eternity in heaven (Retterstøl,

1990). It was not until many centuries later that Christianity prohibited suicide. Society's acceptance of suicide was dramatically changed by St Augustine, who in the fifth century implemented a law prohibiting suicide as a breach of the sixth commandment of "Thou shalt not kill" (Lieberman, 2003). Suicide was then technically seen as a double crime of murdering oneself and killing the "image of God". He viewed life as a gift from God, where suicide was seen as a sin against God's dominion over life and death (Kushner, 1989). St Augustine even denounced suicide by women after rape, suggesting the act of suicide was equally as sinful as the rape (Retterstøl, 1990). St Augustine believed the story of Job described in the Bible that a true and noble soul will bear suffering without taking their life (Minois, 2001). Augustine's Act laid the long future foundation of anti-suicide beliefs. These beliefs even appear to have developed in a time when Judas' betrayal of Christ was regarded as a smaller sin than his subsequent suicide (Lieberman, 2003). To help solidify the negative view of suicide, in 563AD a Synod banned all religious rituals following a suicide (Retterstøl, 1990).

However, there was one situation in which Augustine permitted suicide, which was where the individual was believed to have behaved with "divine sanction" (Watt, 2004). It appears this sanction was needed to explain the voluntary sacrifice of Jesus, who freely chose to die for others' sins (Watt, 2004). In the following years, this clause was extended to incorporate the behaviour of early Christian martyrs. Suicide was further permitted in instances of death by asceticism and the suicide of a virgin or married woman to preserve their virtue (Retterstøl, 1990). Many people may consider a person who has killed themselves as being beyond the reach of the law, however, there may be many consequences to the treatment of the person's corpse, assets, and relatives (Jeffrey, 2004). For example, a Synod in 1096AD denied the right of suicide victims to be buried in holy soil (Jeffrey, 2004). Following this development, it appears the treatment of suicide victims' bodies began to gradually deteriorate. Victims were initially buried alongside the outside of church walls (Minois, 2001). Then, in other parts of Europe, the body was dragged as cruelly as possible through the streets and buried at a crossroad with a stake driven through it and a stone placed over the head (Retterstøl, 1990). In Metz, the body of a suicide victim was not allowed to be taken out through the door, and instead had to be passed out a window, and if no window existed, a hole was made through the wall, and the body was then nailed in a barrel and thrown in the river (Minois, 2001). In Zurich, bodies of suicide victims were treated in accordance with the method they died, so that stab victims for example had a wedge driven through their heads, and drowning victims were buried in the sand next to the water's edge (Minois, 2001). Estate and money was frequently confiscated from the victims' families (Lieberman, 2003). In France, the practice of ravaire or ravoyre allowed locals to remove the

roof of a house where a suicide occurred and dismantle all the walls surrounding the fireplace (Minois, 2001). These practices were believed to strongly discourage future decisions of self-murder and support the church's view that suicide was a sin.

### *The Middle Ages*

Society's negative views of suicide continued throughout the middle ages. Interestingly, the negative image of suicide appears to have done little to prevent many suicides from occurring, as there are numerous accounts of suicide to escape prosecution or persecution, such as the mass suicide of 5,000 Albigensians in Southern France, and 600 Jewish suicides in York during Richard the Lion-Heart's reign in 1190. Following the thirteenth century, publication of the *Summa Theologiae* by Saint Thomas Aquinas, the official Christian view of suicide was seen as a crime against society (McInerney & Grace, 2000). Suicide was again seen as an act of social rebellion and political disobedience. Aquinas' book appears to have laid the foundation for implementation of punishment against suicide. It was during this time that laws against suicide were passed across Western Europe, where unless the person was acting under divine motives, no-one was legally allowed to kill themselves or place their needs above the needs of their community, and those who attempted suicide were punished (McInerney & Grace, 2000). Dante's *Divine Comedy* was written around this time (1308-1321), and the chapter *Inferno* is believed to highlight society's attitudes towards suicide. According to this poem, suicide victims go to hell. It is explained that, since suicide victims choose to give their bodies away, their bodies are not resurrected in the afterlife, and are instead transformed into thorny bushes where their decaying corpses hang from the branches, where the mythical monstrous creatures, Harpies fed upon them (Birk & Sanders, 2004). Suicide victims were condemned to the seventh circle of hell, which was shared with murderers and heretics (McInerney & Grace, 2000). Both Aquinas and Dante paint a dramatic negative picture of suicide, where suicide was now seen to adversely affect the society left behind and to result in eternal suffering, and was viewed in the same category as unrepentant murderers and blasphemers.

### *Renaissance Period to Nineteenth Century*

Throughout the Renaissance period, a cultural movement began to affect society's attitudes towards suicide, which began to move away from absolute rules towards a personal decision (Jackson, 2003). By the fifteenth century in Europe, people started to distinguish between those who knowingly killed themselves with a rational mind and those whose suicide was the result of lunacy (Watt, 2004). This distinction was important because the families of individuals who killed themselves in a state of lunacy were absolved of all harsh public treatments and spared from private forfeiture of property (Watt, 2004). Authors started to



challenge long-standing ideas surrounding suicide. Thomas Moore's *Utopia* in 1516 presented suicide for the terminally ill as a positive decision (Lieberman, 2003), while Burton's famous 1621 book *Anatomy of Melancholy* appears to be one of the first Western books to directly and openly challenge the church's view on suicide, particularly questioning whether suicide victims were damned for eternity (Jackson, 2003). Within the upper class, suicide slowly became a tolerated aspect of society, but was still condemned amongst the lower class (Retterstøl, 1990). It appears suicide slowly became more prominent in daily life (Birk & Sanders, 2004). In Shakespeare's plays, there are 52 cases of suicide, including one famous passage from *Hamlet* "to be or not to be" where he argues reasons for and against committing suicide, although this ignores religious reasons (Kellogg, 2009).

David Hume's publication titled *An Essay on Suicide* (1783) was an extremely influential text (Radcliffe, 2008). The radical nature of its contents meant that it was not published until after Hume's death (Radcliffe, 2008). In this essay, Hume systematically argued that suicide is an acceptable course of action and does not violate any duty to God. He advocated that man has the right to choose suicide if pain, illness, shame or poverty make life insufferable (Radcliffe, 2008). Across the nineteenth century, German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was generally regarded as being one of the leading spokespeople for suicide. This view was actually incorrect, as in reality he viewed suicide as a "mistake" and a "foolish act" (Retterstøl, 1990, p.15). Schopenhauer was heavily influenced by eastern philosophy, and what made him seem by many to be considered pro-suicide was his strong opinion that suicide should not be viewed as a sin or crime (Janaway, 2002). Rather, he believed that it was within man's own right to take their life and he criticised the strict opposing view of the church. Schopenhauer's views on suicide in some ways reflected modern psychiatric views, as he argued that a person did not commit suicide because they wanted to take their own life but because they were not satisfied with the conditions they lived in (Janaway, 2002). As a result of these changes, throughout the nineteenth century, suicide was increasingly seen with shame rather than as a sin or crime (Retterstøl, 1990). In this century where family was important to maintain social status, suicide slowly started to be denied, hidden or was a family's dark secret (Minois, 2001).

One of the most important texts on suicide was Durkheim's (1897) book, *Le Suicide*. Even today, his ideas are still held in high regard. The central idea of this book was that, if society fails to provide psychological satisfaction for one's life, a person's mental health is then compromised, leading vulnerable individuals to take their own lives (Robertson, 2006). Durkheim (1897) categorised three different types of suicide, which are anomic, egoistic and obligatory (altruistic) forms, where each form of suicide was seen as a specific disparity

between the suicide victim and the social environment they lived in. As a result, suicide was beginning to be seen as a product of an individual's social environment, where if social unity was strong, the tendency towards suicide will be low, while conversely if social unity was weak, suicide will be more common (Robertson, 2006). Following this development, suicide slowly started to become increasingly associated with mental illness, where many founders of psychiatry such as Jean Esquirol believed suicide was almost exclusively engaged in by those who are mentally ill (Huertas, 2008; Robertson, 2006). The emergence of psychiatry meant suicide was seen as a consequence of psychological problems that could be diagnosed and treated (Kushner, 1989). This concept paved the way for the subsequent medicalisation and treatment of suicide (Kushner, 1989). While churches continued to view suicide as a sin, suicide victims were slowly entitled to religious burials (Lieberman, 2003). As a result, magistrates and juries became hesitant to impose penalties of desecrating bodies and penalising estates of suicide victims and their families (Watt, 2004).

In summary, until the nineteenth century, suicide was seen largely as a crime and attack against God and society, and remained illegal (Minois, 2001). As a result, a victim of suicide was seen as weak and had to be attacked. Ironically, the consequence of attempting suicide in countries such as Britain and France was to hang the accused (Stone, 1999). However, the following century saw a shift to understand and prevent suicide. Explaining suicide behaviour then became a key focus, particularly concerning an individual's control over their behaviour (Minois, 2001). It appears that at the end of the nineteenth century, the brutal treatment of suicide attempters eased, and across many European countries such as France and Prussia suicide was no longer punished (Minois, 2001). However, in England suicide remained a crime until 1961, and was only decriminalised to encourage suicidal people to seek treatment (Kastenbaum, 2002). One key effect of these changes was the conceptual move away from suicide being a moral or social crime. Instead, the responsibility of suicide moved to society, mental illness, or chemical imbalances, factors for which an individual cannot be blamed (Stone, 1999).

### **Suicide in the Non-Western World**

Different religions and societies across the world have very different ways of viewing suicide. Eastern religions do not have the same traditional negative view of suicide as the West. In Hinduism, early scriptures permitted suicide for religious reasons, where suicide was seen as one route to salvation for a widow who wanted to join her husband (Retterstøl, 1990). Suicide by starvation, known as *sallekhana*, was also permitted in Indian culture. Gandhi used this form of fasting as a political tool to fight British rule, and threats of this type of fasting to fight political injustice are common today (Sen & Wagner, 2009). In Buddhism,

suicide is seen as an appropriate choice of action in certain situations, and it is stated the best sacrifice one can make is to free oneself from your own existence (Kamal & Loewenthal, 2002). However, despite some exceptions, Buddhism generally views suicide in a negative light, believing it is one of man's duties to withstand the suffering and stress of human life (Retterstøl, 1990). Buddhism further upholds this by noting individuals who freely choose to end their own lives may face obstacles to reincarnation (Kamal & Loewenthal, 2002).

Despite the recent development of suicide bombers, Islamic historical views on suicide have consistently been condemnatory (Kamal & Loewenthal, 2002). Some authors would go as far as to say that no religion has such a negative, judgmental view on suicide as Islam (Retterstøl, 1990). The Qur'an states that God alone determines the time when a person will die and suicide victims are sent to hell where they will never be forgiven (Haleem, 2005). However, unlike many other religions, the Qur'an does appear to offer some sympathy towards families of suicide victims (Ladha, Bhat, & D'Souza, 1996). Despite these beliefs, over the last ten or so years, self-destruction through the method of suicide bombing has become increasingly widespread in Islamic societies. It appears minority Islamic suicide bombers are permitted to kill themselves because they do not consider their behaviour as suicide, but rather a heroic act that will be highly rewarded in the afterlife (Khosrokhavar, 2005). It is believed that similar differing interpretations of the Qur'an permit the expressly forbidden killing of non-combatants like children, women and elderly people associated with suicide bombing (Khosrokhavar, 2005).

Japan appears unique because, unlike anywhere else in the world, suicide appears to play a very ingrained role in their national tradition. Japanese rituals such as Hara-kiri, junshi, and Kamikaze have been practiced for thousands of years and are an essential part of Japan's national identity (Takahashi, 1997). Junshi is a suicide practice that was usually performed after someone of high status died. The person who performed Junshi did so under the belief that the spirit of the dead superior was essential for them in the afterlife (Retterstøl, 1990). Hara-kiri is considered an honourable and brave act, and was first performed in feudal Japan to escape capture (Takahashi, 1997). This is a highly ritualistic ceremony requiring a specific sword, precise cuts to the abdomen and throat, and usually requires an assistant (Fuse, 1980). Hara-kiri was performed voluntarily or could be enforced. Enforced Hara-kiri was a privileged alternative to execution that was performed to atone for criminal acts, while voluntary suicide was usually used to protest against a superior or due to mourning a death (Fuse, 1980; Retterstøl, 1990). Although this act has been made illegal since 1868, it is believed that it is still performed today (Retterstøl, 1990). Kamikaze is arguably the most

famous form of suicide and was developed during the last years of World War II, following a significant decrease in Japan's ability to fight the war (Takahashi, 1997). Kamikazes were special pilots who flew their planes (usually laden with explosives) directly into enemy naval ships and targets (Takahashi, 1997). The honour and prestige associated with kamikaze meant that Japan had no difficulty recruiting men for these one-way missions (Fuse, 1980).

### **Suicide in New Zealand**

Suicide is believed to have played an important part in New Zealand Māori culture prior to European colonisation. While there is no concrete information about Māori suicide rates prior to European arrival, Māori oral history and early ethnographic information suggests it did occur, and the popular idea that suicides were rare prior to colonisation and high after it appears incorrect (Spiller, 1995). The key motives for pre-European suicide appear to revolve around themes of shame, passion, unreturned love and embarrassment ("Suicide Was Here Before Europeans", 1997). Upon early European arrival, it appears that Māori suicide was common knowledge amongst early settlers. In 1840, it was reported that suicide was common among Māori women, especially wives in that the head widow was particularly likely to kill herself following her husband's death (McManus, 2003). Māori men were recorded as being likely to kill themselves in anger due to shame or humiliation and to preserve the mana and dignity of the tribe (McManus, 2003).

The criminalisation of suicide in New Zealand began on the 6th of February 1840, following the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. From that moment on, New Zealand suicide was governed by British legislation and authority (Spiller, 1995). New Zealand remained tied to British common law regarding punishment until 1893, when attempted suicide was amended and was no longer classified as a felony but a misdemeanour (Spiller, 1995). As a result, the punishment for attempting suicide, death by hanging, was replaced by a fine or an imprisonment with hard labour, or both (Spiller, 1995). The Crimes Act of 1961 repealed suicide laws, where it no longer became an offence to commit or attempt suicide. However, it still remained a crime to (1) incite, counsel, or procure anyone to commit suicide, or (2) aid or abet someone in committing suicide (Robertson, 1992).

Literature on suicide and suicide bereavement reveals that today's suicide victims and survivors are highly stigmatised (Cvinar, 2005). While suicide victims are no longer stripped of their money and estate, remnants of this behaviour can still be found in today's society. Insurance companies will frequently deny the claims of families of suicide victims, stating that suicide invalidated their policy (Bleed, 2007). In 2008, there was much public controversy as the Labour government introduced an Accident Compensation Corporation

(ACC) entitlement for families of suicide victims for victims who were suffering a mental injury resulting from a previous physical injury or sexual abuse (Savage, 2009). However, in 2011, the law was tightened, where families of suicide victims only receive entitlements if ACC establish the person who committed suicide was not able to appreciate the consequences of their actions, or if a previously covered mental injury contributed to the suicide (Sharpe, 2012). As a result, despite the average number of suicides each year being 543, the number of suicide claims accepted by ACC dropped from 347 in the 2009-10 year to 51 in the 2011-12 year (Sharpe). In daily life, today's stigmatisation of suicide is often very subtle. It appears the largest problem facing suicide revolves around social disapproval. Families of suicide victims are often considered responsible, and are likely to be isolated and avoided (Feigelman, Corman, & Jordan, 2009). Unlike most other causes of sudden death where close friends are generally expected to comfort and support the family, families of suicide victims report feeling abandoned and offended (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002). Further complicating society's attitudes towards suicide are the dismissal of some suicide behaviour as "merely attention-seeking gestures" (Sudak et al., 2000 p.137). Unfortunately, the negative stigma surrounding suicide has been demonstrated to prevent people from seeking help (Burke, 2007). For those under 25-years-old in New Zealand, the most common source of suicide information is from the media (Beautrais, Horwood & Fergusson, 2004), which raises concerns about the messages the media is sending. Further reinforcing this stigma is the current social atmosphere where suicide is viewed as a topic that is too difficult, uncomfortable and dangerous to discuss. As a result suicide is a topic that is generally silenced (Christiansona & Everall, 2009).

Today, one of the largest issues surrounding self-inflicted death concerns assisted suicide. Continuous medical advances have meant that people are able to be kept alive for longer. This can be viewed as positive, where more individuals are being able to live full lives well into their 80's and beyond. However, the disadvantage is that people with chronic terminal conditions are being kept alive in sometimes painful and/or degrading situations. It is not uncommon for people in this situation to wish for a quick and painless death (Kushner, 1989). As previously mentioned, while it is legal to commit suicide, it remains illegal to help someone commit suicide. In effect, this means that only those who are physically able to kill themselves are able to legally commit suicide. This is because individuals who are chronically ill are frequently physically unable to kill themselves without assistance. In New Zealand, it appears the major debate against the legalisation of euthanasia centres around the view of assisted suicide as murder, in conflict with religious views, and the physician's Hippocratic Oath "to do no harm" (Tallis, 2005), while proponents of the law change argue

for a consented death with dignity, without prolonging an individual's pain or suffering (Kushner, 1989).

### **The Future**

Society's evolution of acceptance and rejection of suicide does not represent a linear progression, and it should be expected that more recent trends around suicide will continue to evolve into the not-too-distant future. It is believed that current Western taboos and stigma surrounding suicide may continue to limit society's acceptance of suicidal behaviour. Suicide may continue to be seen as a dark secret and a topic that is difficult to discuss in both public and private settings. While there appears to be a strong desire from some officials and media organisations to talk openly about suicide, the reality is that this has not been the case (NZPC, 2001). Media restrictions and social taboos concerning suicide are likely to reinforce the view that suicide should not be discussed. The mysterious nature of suicide and the perception that it can affect anyone at any time may only serve to reinforce the fear and uncertainty surrounding suicide. Fear surrounding a topic may continue until suicide can be reliably prevented in identified at-risk individuals.

With increased globalisation, it is reasonable to expect an increasing influence of Eastern culture, which may alter society's views on suicide. In New Zealand, the latest census figures revealed that the Asian population is the country's fastest growing group (New Zealand Census, 2006). Eastern cultures do not have a long negative tradition associated with suicide. As Eastern ideas spread into New Zealand culture, it might be expected that New Zealand views on suicide will change, which may be necessary to break taboos and remove the stigmatisation surrounding suicide within New Zealand.

It is believed that, with the increasing number of elderly within the New Zealand population (the aging "baby boomers"), more individuals may seek assisted suicide as a solution for their growing difficulties. As this happens, assisted suicide will become increasingly topical and debated within the media and in government. New Zealand may even follow the Netherlands' lead and legalise consented physician-assisted suicide (Smith, 2002). Currently there is a wide vocabulary that can be used to describe assisted suicide, including euthanasia, mercy killing, physician-assisted suicide, death with dignity, passive euthanasia, and active euthanasia. Wesley Smith (2002), an attorney for the internal task force on euthanasia in America, suggested that the constant name changes reflect an effort to find a term that may help convince people to support the legalisation of assisted suicide. As a result, it is could be expected that the language associated with assisted suicide will

continue to evolve until a phrase is found that will break traditional barriers and subtly persuade people to support pro-assisted suicide attitudes and legislation.

This section demonstrates that attitudes towards suicide have greatly changed depending upon the time period and location. Throughout history, it appears social forces such as economics and religious beliefs have been used to alter how society perceives suicide. Despite advances in the understanding of suicide, such as the role of mental illness, within New Zealand suicide carries a negative stigma and consequently suicide is not discussed. This stigma not only prevents help seeking behaviour but also results in suicide being viewed negatively. With changing social forces, it appears that there is a growing public appetite to tolerate suicides occurring from individuals with a rationale and competent mind, such as euthanasia and suicidal behaviour to save others. However, there appears to be little tolerance to allow individuals who are not deemed competent such as those who are mentally ill or those temporarily distressed. Therefore, suicide prevention, particularly among these groups is likely to remain of importance.

### **Suicide Risk Factors**

The ability to accurately predict and identify individuals at risk of attempting or completing suicide is an extremely difficult and complex task. What makes accurate suicide identification particularly challenging is that suicide occurs at a low base rate and is an unstable behaviour affecting individuals of any social or demographic makeup (American Psychiatric Association, 2003). Over the last century, researchers have attempted to increase our understanding of suicide by identifying features associated with it (Maris, Berman, & Silverman, 2000). Such risk factors increase the likelihood of engaging in suicidal actions. Suicide risk factors are diverse and encompass a range of social, biological, and psychological variables (Goldney, 2003).

The strongest risk factor for suicide is frequently reported to be a history of previous suicide attempts (Beautrais, 2004; Kutcher & Chehil, 2007). Research has demonstrated that approximately 50% of those who complete suicide have made at least one previous suicide attempt (Kutcher & Chehil, 2007). In addition, individuals who attempt suicide are almost 50 times more likely to die by suicide (Beautrais, 2004). Other prominent suicide risk factors include the presence of mental health difficulties, substance abuse, impulsivity, psychosocial stressors, family history of suicide, suicidal ideation, and hopelessness (Curry, 2000; Barlow & Durand, 2012; Fowler, 2012; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2008). In addition to suicide risk factors, suicide rates have been shown to be influenced by gender, ethnicity and age (Goldney, 2003).

The presence of mental illness is a strong predictor of suicide, where it is estimated between 80-90% of suicide victims have a diagnosable mental disorder (Curry, 2000; McKeown, Cuffe, & Schultz, 2006; Quin, 2005). Substance abuse disorders are associated with four to six times the likelihood of serious suicide attempts (Goldsmith, 2002). Furthermore, approximately 40-60% of those who die by suicide are intoxicated at the time of their death (Centre of Substance Abuse Treatment, 2008). When exploring gender, New Zealand researchers have found that the suicide rate for men is almost three times higher than that for women, although females are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide (Krug et al., 2002; Ministry of Health, 2010a). Being part of an ethnic minority also increases an individual's suicide risk, and New Zealand Māori are 66% more likely to die from suicide than non-Māori (Ministry of Health, 2010b). Age is also a suicide risk factor, as within New Zealand, 20-24-year olds have the highest overall suicide rate with 19 deaths per 100,000 (Ministry of Health, 2010a).

Suicide behaviour often occurs in the context of acute and chronic stressors such as physical illness, unemployment or relationship breakdown (Lorant, Kunst, Huismam, & Macenbach, 2005; Qin, Agerbo, & Mortensen, 2003). Furthermore, a family history of suicide increases an individual's likelihood of attempting or completing suicide (Barlow & Durand, 2012; Fowler, 2012). When controlling for age, sex and date of suicide, an individual with a first degree relative (parent, sibling or offspring) who has died from suicide is themselves 3.5 times more likely to complete suicide (Qin, Agerbo, & Mortensen, 2003). The literature further demonstrates there is an evolution from suicide ideation to actual suicidal behaviour (Barlow & Durand, 2012; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2008). One third of those who think about suicide make a plan and three quarters of suicide planners make a suicide attempt (Kessler, Borges, & Walters, 1999). Then finally, hopelessness or negative thinking style is a suicide risk factor. Beck, Steer, Kovacs and Garrison (1985) discovered that a score of ten or higher on the Beck Hopelessness Scale predicted 91% of eventual suicides.

The assumption underlying the desire to identify suicide risk factors is that, if suicide can be predicted, then lives can be saved. However, despite decades of research, the ability to accurately detect and predict suicidal behaviour continues to remain elusive. Even today, highly trained mental health professionals continue to fail to correctly identify individuals at most risk of suicide. Research has demonstrated that approximately 20% to 28% of psychologists and counsellors and 50%-62% of psychiatrists fail to identify those most at risk and consequently lose a client to suicide during their career (Chemtob, Hamada, Bauer,



Kinney, & Torigoe, 1988; McAdams & Foster, 2000; Ruskin, Sakinofsky, Bagby, Dickens, & Sousa, 2004). Our inability to accurately predict and detect suicide demonstrates that suicide is a complex phenomenon and to date we do not fully understand the role of all factors influencing suicidal behaviour.

In addition to risk factors, there are a range of protective factors that can enhance an individual's wellbeing, improve their resilience and reduce their risk of suicide. Protective factors include access to community health resources (Lorant et al., 2005), supportive family members (Curry, 2000), firm cultural identity (Ministry of Health, 2010b), and ability to cope with stressors (Quin, 2005). As a result, suicide prevention initiatives aim to reduce suicide risk factors while promoting protective factors.

### **The Influence of the Media**

Although much has been written on the topic of suicide such as risk factors, and effectiveness of interventions, relatively little focus has been paid to how everyday stimuli such as suicide reports in newspapers may influence suicide behaviour. The media is a powerful influence that can have far-reaching social and cultural consequences. The media plays a large role in today's society, where each day hundreds of millions of individuals are exposed to a wide range of media images and messages. Today's media use a variety of methods such as internet, radio, written media, mobile technology and television. In Western countries media exposure has become so pervasive and interwoven with daily life that it has become difficult if not impossible for anyone to completely avoid or ignore media messages. A recent American census revealed that adults and teens spend approximately five months (3,518 hours) a year either watching television, using the internet, reading daily newspapers, or listening to music (Bureau Statistical Abstract, 2006). As exposure to media becomes increasingly widespread, it raises concerns regarding how increasing levels of media exposure affect us. Researchers have begun to fear that prolonged heavy media exposure could cause different long-term effects that are not yet fully realised (Baron & Reiss, 1985; Gunnell, 1994; McQuail, 1981). The diverse nature of mass media's content means that there is a wide range of activities that the media may affect.

In the early 1900's, the widely accepted *mass communication theory* stated that the wisdom held in media (such as radio, film and books) created dramatic and powerful effects upon audiences. At this time it was believed that honest media representations could drastically shape public opinion (McQuail, 1981). Researchers and officials believed that the media could shape audience opinion, mould behaviour and impose political systems, even against any audience resistance (McQuail, 1981). However, in the 1940's, research evidence

demonstrated that media representations only minimally altered audience attitudes and behaviours (Pirkis & Blood, 2001). As a result, it was argued that the media had little effect upon changing attitudes, but simply reinforced existing attitudes and behaviours, where interpersonal communication was believed to have the largest impact upon the audience.

Over time, research into this field began to demonstrate that, given the right pre-conditions, media coverage alone may be enough to transmit or spread public disturbances (McQuail, 1981). The imitative and transmission effects of media almost appear undeniable (Paluck, 2009; Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess, & Skehan, 2006). In the sphere of music, merchandise, and fashion, the imitative effects of the media are happening constantly. The media may influence audience behaviour for a variety of reasons including attracting attention to problems or solutions, conveying themes of power and legitimacy, or the media may simply be a form of persuasion (McQuail, 1981). It is believed the media plays an important role in the development of shaping an individual's own behaviour and self-concept, where the media may either intentionally or inadvertently reinforce certain behaviours, views or values, and in doing this the media can affect the future (McQuail, 1981).

The Western world's media obsession is not only time-consuming but can have many negative spin-off consequences. The media has been shown to influence a variety of health issues including early sexual behaviour (Collins et al., 2004), drug use (Montagne, 1988), and violent behaviour, where researchers conservatively estimate that the media is associated with 10% of all violence (Felson, 1996; Berman & Walley, 2003), smoking (Flay, 1987), alcohol use (Montagne, 1988), obesity (Jordan, Kramer-Golinkoff, & Strasburger, 2008), and eating disorders (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007). However it would be inaccurate to state that the media only has a negative impact upon the audience. The media provides us with a great source of information allowing the public to make informed decisions. Many studies have demonstrated the pro-social effects of the media including the development of anti-violence attitudes (Felson, 1996), racial tolerance (Paluck, 2009), and reducing tobacco use (Davis, Gilpin, Loken, Viswanath, & Wakefield, 2008). This distinction demonstrates that it is not the total number of hours exposed to media that is important *per se*, rather it is the message or content of the media that is of critical importance (Romer, Jamieson, & Jamieson, 2006).

### **Suicide and the Media**

Researchers have long recognised the media as being a strong force that is able to influence individual and community attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour (WHO, 2009). The powerful effects of media has led many people to question what role the media plays in

preventing or encouraging suicide (Phillips, 1974; Pirkis & Blood, 2001; Stack, 2003). Therefore, it may only be reasonable to consider that the media's portrayal of suicide is one of many factors that may lead a vulnerable ambivalent person to commit suicide.

Media reports of suicide, through newspapers, television, internet or radio, may also create a unique opportunity for the transmission of information about suicide, where one person's suicide may become the model for the subsequent suicide behaviour of others. Suicide is frequently viewed as newsworthy and is consequently reported by the media. Suicide attracts media attention as it's an unusual event that captures audience interest and attention, and it is also believed to reflect important public social, economic and cultural issues (Ward, 2012). Media reports on suicide have repeatedly been demonstrated to affect the attitudes and behaviours of the general public. Over 100 published articles have examined the effects of the media's influence on suicide behaviour and have found that suicide media reports are associated with actual increases in subsequent suicide rates (Gould, 2001; O'Carroll, 1993; Phillips, 1974; Stack, 2003). It is important to consider that the media's reporting of suicide occurs within a backdrop of silence, where suicide is not often discussed within New Zealand society. This silence is likely to reflect perceptions that suicide is too difficult, uncomfortable or dangerous to discuss (Christiansona & Everall, 2009, Goldman, 2014). Therefore, as a result of being a silent topic when the media occasionally report on suicide, the consequences of this reporting are likely to be magnified.

Mishara's (1997) study has demonstrated the media plays an important role in the formation of suicide thoughts and beliefs. Mishara asked school children a variety of open-ended questions like "What does suicide mean?" and "How did you first learn about suicide?" The results showed that many children identified the media as the source they identified learning about suicide from. Canadian research has further revealed that half of all children between five and seven years of age have been exposed to at least one suicide on television (Mishara, 2003). Similarly, Zahl and Hawton (2004) investigated the media impact on twelve patients who attempted suicide. Their results revealed that these patients identified the media as a key influence on their attitudes relating to suicide and self-harm. Some patients acknowledged that, while they first learnt about suicide through the media, it was not until years later that they attempted suicide. This suggests that suicide media could possess some long term consequences, which may go well beyond the frequently documented contagion period of two weeks.

Media influences are seen as both an environmental and contextual risk factor for suicide or attempted suicide. Television, film and print media may positively or negatively influence an

individual's suicide attitudes. While the media can promote messages of suicide help-seeking and other alternatives to suicide, they may also present suicide as a normal reaction to stressful events (Romer et al., 2006). It is believed that the media may provoke suicide behaviour from vulnerable individuals, such as teenagers (Beautrais, 2000).

### **Suicide Contagion**

There is strong evidence demonstrating that suicides may group within populations and communities (Exeter, & Boyle, 2007, Hazel, 1993; Joiner, 1999; O'Carroll, 1990). These suicide clusters have been recorded throughout history and across a diverse range of populations and age groups. Media publicity of the occurrence of several recent suicide clusters has led researchers to try and discover the factors underlying these events. A rapidly growing body of research demonstrates that exposure to suicide through television or newspapers increases the suicide risk in vulnerable individuals (Blood & Pirkis, 2001; Stack, 2003). Recent studies have revealed that the media's portrayal of suicide can contribute to suicide contagion (Pirkis et al., 2006). It is believed that suicide contagion contributes to approximately 1-5% of all suicides, with some estimates as high as 13% (Gould, Wallenstein, Kleinman, O'Carroll, & Mercy, 1990; Hazell, 1993; Velting & Gould, 1997). Although suicide contagion may affect all age groups, suicide contagion has been shown to predominantly occur in the teenage population, where approximately 5-10% of all teenage suicides are believed to be the result of suicide contagion (Gould et al., 1990; Phillips & Cartensen, 1986; 1988). Gould et al. (1990) have shown that exposure to suicide increases an individual's relative risk of suicide by two to four times among 15 to 19-year olds.

However, there are several problems with the definition and use of the term suicide contagion. One current definition states that, in order to be labelled a contagious suicide, resulting suicides need only occur close together in time or space (O'Carroll, 1990). As a consequence, many researchers may wrongly categorise independent single suicide cases as inter-related clusters that illustrate contagion. Another popular alternative definition of suicide contagion states that vulnerable individuals with a pre-existing suicidal disposition to imitate the act of suicide are at an increased risk following suicide exposure (Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003; Romer et al., 2006). While this definition attempts to explain why exposure to suicidal material only affects a minority of the audience, it fails to identify specific features that define a "vulnerable individual", and likewise fails to describe what is classified as a "pre-existing" suicidal disposition.

The definition of contagion is made further ambiguous by the lack of criteria for defining how close in time or space corresponding suicides need to be. Despite the knowledge that not all

suicides that share a similar temporal and/or geographical pattern are related contagious suicides, researchers may continue to place them together for analysis. Alternately, some apparent cases of single suicides may wrongly be classified as an independent suicide, where in reality the individual may have consciously or unconsciously been influenced by exposure to previous suicide material, demonstrating suicide contagion. Fortunately, the development of sophisticated statistical techniques which control for seasonal trends and widespread suicide exposure has made the identification of potential suicide cluster much more accurate (Gould, Wallenstein, & Davidson, 1989). Dubé (1986) has outlined several important reasons to develop a precise operational definition of suicide contagion, including (1) to provide context and clarity on assessing the risk levels of suicidal individuals, (2) to assist the medical examiner on the cause of death, (3) to provide clarity for professionals working with those at risk, (4) to provide context for families working through the bereavement process, and (5) to provide context, clarity and consistency for researchers.

An essential element of the suicide contagion hypothesis is that there is an established link between the initial suicide and subsequent suicide exposure (through media or social contact) for later suicide victims. Therefore, before investigators can suggest any form of contagion effect, they need to first determine whether suicide victims were exposed to stories about real or fictional suicides. To date, the major problem facing suicide contagion research is that investigators are unable to accurately determine the extent to which victims were aware of another suicide story (Mercy et al., 2001; Stack, 2003). Several contagion investigations have been criticised for failing to provide any evidence demonstrating that suicidal individuals were aware of another person's actions (Berman, 1988; Steede & Range, 1989). However, despite it frequently being assumed that individuals are exposed to suicide reported by the media, there is a wealth of evidence demonstrating that the publication of suicide is associated with increases in real world suicide rates (Phillips, 1974; Stack 2003).

## **Evidence for and Dynamics of Suicide Contagion**

### **The Sorrows of Young Werther**

Research investigating media contagion effects have had a long and controversial history. Debate surrounding the possible contagious effects of suicide can be traced as far back as eighteenth century Europe, when the 1774 publication of Goethe's novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) brought it to widespread attention. The story follows a young protagonist called Werther who falls in love with a beautiful woman

called Lotte. The tragedy of the story is revealed when Lotte is not only undeniably attracted to Werther, but is already engaged to an honest, wealthy, older man named Albert. Unable to endure the situation, Werther decides to end his life by shooting himself with Albert's pistol (Thorson & Öberg, 2003). It is believed that the story was loosely based on Goethe's own fiery love affair with 19-year-old Charlotte Buff, and the suicide by gun of one of his closest friends who was heartbroken after falling in love with a married woman (Retterstøl, 1990).

At the time, it was believed that the novel was the most widely read book in Europe (Thorson & Öberg, 2003). The book appeared to have a large effect upon its readers as there was an increase in suicide rates in Europe shortly after it was published (Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess, & Skehan, 2006). While the precise size of this effect remains unknown, several historical sources have described numerous single cases of young men who killed themselves with the same apparent motive (unrequited love), using the same method (a pistol to the head), or with Goethe's book near the suicide site (Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2006; Pirkis et al., 2006, Thorson & Öberg, 2003). Furthermore, a number of the victims were found dressed in the same distinctive fashion of Werther (Pirkis et al., 2006). Government officials banned the book fearing it may cause more suicides (Phillips, 1974). In Milan, Italy, it was reported that one reader was so upset by the book that he bought and destroyed every available copy to prevent his congregation from getting ideas about committing suicide (Thorson & Öberg, 2003). Eventually, Goethe began to blame himself for the wave of suicides, reporting that *"My ...friends thought that they must transform poetry into reality, imitate a novel like this in real life and, in any case, shoot themselves; and what occurred at first among few took place among the general public..."* (Goethe quoted in Phillips, 1974, p.340). Goethe was apparently so distressed by the idea that his book may encourage other people to take their lives that in subsequent editions he concluded the book with *"Be a man, he said; do not follow my example"* (Goethe quoted in Minois, 2001: Pg 77).

It is believed there are several features of Goethe's story that may have made it prone to imitation. Firstly, the story not only defended suicide, but demonstrated it as a righteous and courageous action (Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2006). Secondly, the highly emotional and very detailed nature of the novel encouraged readers to identify with the characters, and created the mood and explained the means to replicate Werther. Thirdly, the story had a significant impact on contemporary society. It is reported that the book created a fashion craze, where individuals who were "better off" were reported to have worn a *Weltschmerz Uniform*, a distinctive outfit comprised of boots, a blue coat, open-necked shirts and a yellow vest, directly inspired from the novel (Pirkis et al., 2006; Thorson & Öberg, 2003).

## Modern Research

Since Werther, any ideas about the relationship between the media and suicide were initially anecdotal and based on casual observations stating that people who attempted suicide had an unusually large number of suicidal friends (Thorson & Öberg, 2003). By the nineteenth century, medical practitioners across the United States began to believe that the imitative effects of suicide were widespread and severe (Leonard, 2001). Medical practitioners began to voice opposition to the publication of suicide stories for fear of imitative effects (Tully & Elsaka, 2004). Despite these concerns, it was not until the twentieth century that the first systematic scientific investigations into the hypothesised media-suicide relationship were performed.

Phillips (1974) is generally regarded as the first person to conduct a systematic scientific investigation into the relationship between mass media reports of suicide and actual suicide. Phillips designed a series of large-scale ecological correlation studies to examine the relationships between the publication of suicide newspaper reports and subsequent suicide rates. The study analysed a 21-year period between 1947 and 1968 to identify months where a suicide appeared on the front page of a major United States newspaper and months where no such article appeared. After statistically controlling for changing trends such as seasonal and other biasing effects, Phillips' correlational study found a significant increase in suicide rates for the months that featured front-page suicide articles. He reported an average of 58.1 excess suicides per suicide story. This appeared to be a dose-response relationship where the power of the suicide effect increased the amount of suicide publicity and exposure. In honour of Goethe's novel, Phillips coined the term the *Werther Effect* to describe this process. However, overtime this term has been replaced with the phrase suicide contagion.

Believing that many motor vehicle fatalities were covert or unrecognised suicide attempts, Phillips (1977, 1979) extended this study to examine the impact of suicide stories on motor vehicle fatalities. These studies found that, the week following newspaper suicide stories, the number of motor vehicle fatalities, particularly single-vehicle accidents, was 9.12% higher than what was expected (this was significant and based on comparison periods). Furthermore, the age of the drivers was significantly correlated to the age of the newspaper-reported suicide victims ( $r = 0.46$ ). The study further showed that the increase in car fatalities was at its peak three days following the newspaper article. In a similar study on plane crashes that were thought to be murder-suicides, Phillips (1978, 1980) found that fatal aeroplane crashes occurred 14 times more often following the publication of murder-suicide stories, this difference was significant ( $r = 0.64$ ). The number of fatal plane crashes peaked

after three days before disappearing after nine. In concordance with previous findings, the results demonstrate the magnitude of the imitation suicide effect was determined both by the amount of suicide publicity and the geographic proximity of suicide victims.

Following Phillips' landmark studies, over 100 international research articles have tested and highlighted the robustness and endurance of the contagious effect of suicide reporting in the media (de Leo & Heller, 2008; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2006; Pirkis, Burgess, Blood, & Francis, 2007). In addition to these studies, Pirkis and Blood (2001) have reviewed the available literature and Stack (2003) has provided a meta-analysis of literature findings. A majority of these studies have been large-scale ecological designs measuring any relationship between media suicide reporting and actual suicide behaviour.

Stack (1987a) re-examined Phillips' original 1974 findings but used more advanced statistical techniques to control for confounding factors such as seasonal effects, unemployment rates, and war. Stack extended the period studied by 12 years (1948-1980) and further considered the impact of the subcategory of celebrity suicide. Stack reported that suicides of entertainers and politicians were correlated with a significantly larger increase in suicide rates than non-celebrity suicides. As previously stated, it is believed that increased suicide publicity and celebrity status affected the size of the suicide rate increase. Furthermore, similarities between victim and celebrity age, gender and race was used to support the theory that victims are more vulnerable if they can identify with the deceased.

Pirkis and Blood (2001) and Stack (1987a, 2003) believe this contagion effect is moderated by a model/observer relationship, where the effect is greatest when the observer identifies strongly with the model (in terms of age and sex) and/or if the model is revered in some way, such as having celebrity status. This may explain why contagion effects appear larger in real-life events and for victims of similar age and sex and why fictional suicide stories produce the smallest contagion effect (Stack, 2003). Vulnerable individuals may find it easier to identify with highly publicised difficulties of a celebrity (Romer et al., 2006). However, the effect of celebrity suicides may also be due to the increased publicity their deaths receive.

Prior to 2004, it was unknown whether the distribution of media (which is associated with the number of readers) correlates with suicide contagion. Until recently, this relationship has only been hypothesised (Hazell, 1993) or indirectly tested (Phillips, 1974, 1977, 1978; Pirkis & Blood, 2001). Etzersdorfer, Voracek, and Sonneck (2004) appear to have been the first to explicitly investigate the presence of a dose-response relationship between reported and actual suicides. Their study followed the reporting of an Austrian celebrity firearm suicide in a



national newspaper (Neue Kronenzeitung), whose distribution reached almost 50% of the country. Etzersdorfer et al. (2004) gathered Austrian suicide data three weeks around the celebrity suicide, and for a control period of eight years leading up to the suicide. Their results revealed that firearm suicides increased during the three weeks following the celebrity suicide. A subsequent regional analysis revealed a strong correlation (.62) between newspaper county distribution and the increase in suicide by firearm, that 40% of the variance in changes of suicide by firearm could be explained by the newspaper's distribution (Etzersdorfer et al., 2004). There was no relationship in the control period, highlighting how the media can influence suicide and suicide method.

### **Influences on suicide contagion**

A range of studies have revealed that the magnitude of the increase in suicidal behaviour as a result of media exposure is related to a wide variety of factors (refer to Table 1 for a summary list). Research suggests the media's ability to influence suicide rates depends upon the manner of reporting, language used, how the reports are highlighted, and whether they are accompanied by graphic material. Firstly, the effect size is related to the amount of suicide in the media coverage and public exposure, where increased coverage is associated with a stronger imitative effect (Phillips, 1974; Pirkis & Blood, 2001). Many investigators believe that repetition of suicide stories is a crucial factor determining the imitative effects of suicide (Beautrais, 2000). The reporting (especially over-reporting) of suicide may also serve to normalise suicide as an appropriate response to stressors. Frequent suicide exposure may weaken existing social taboos where suicide may become viewed as a common and understandable option or problem-solving strategy in a stressful situation (Beautrais, 2000, 2003; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988). The power of suicide contagion appears to vary as a function of time, where imitative effects peak after three days and disappear after approximately two weeks (Pirkis & Blood, 2001).

The prominence, location and coverage of suicide in media items also influence the power of the effect, where highly prominent articles are more likely to lead to copycat behaviours (Etzersdorfer et al., 2004). The very nature of suicide coverage tends to heighten the general public's interest in suicide. Minimising the sensational atmosphere of suicide through decreasing article prominence, avoiding morbid details and dramatic photographs has been suggested to help minimise suicide contagion (Pirkis & Blood, 2001). Media coverage of suicide is less likely to contribute to suicide contagion if reports of community grief are minimised (O'Carroll & Potter, 1994). Descriptions of grief may suggest to vulnerable individuals that the act of suicide may make them famous and society is honouring them, thereby glorifying or romanticising suicide (Bandura, 1977). Empathy for family and friends

often leads journalists to focus on positive aspects of the suicide victim's life (O'Carroll & Potter, 1994). However, if the victim's problems are not mentioned in association with these statements, the presence of positive statements may make suicide appear more attractive, especially among individuals who rarely receive positive attention (O'Carroll & Potter, 1994).

Stack's (2003) meta-analysis looked at 293 findings from 42 studies on the impact of publicised suicide stories, and found the celebrity status of victims has consistently been related to the power of the imitative effect. In relation to previously unknown individual reports of suicide, highly publicised reports of political or entertainment celebrity suicides were 14.3 times more likely to result in a contagious suicide effect than non-celebrity suicides. Stack's meta-analysis demonstrated that highly publicised celebrity suicides generally positively portrayed by the media (in terms of sensationalism and rationalisation of the act) were more likely to have an imitative effect. The largest recorded suicide contagion effect was found following the suicide of Marilyn Monroe (Joiner, 2003). The month following her death in August 1962 was associated with a 12% increase in national suicide rates within the United States, whereas it is normally expected that highly publicised suicide stories will increase the national United States suicide rate by 2.5%. Stories based on real-life events were 4.03 times as likely as fictional suicide portrayals to result in suicide contagion. Stack's (2003) meta-analysis also revealed that newspaper stories were almost twice as likely as television reports to lead to suicide imitation. A number of hypotheses have been used to explain why this is the case, the most frequently cited explanations use elements of Social Learning Theory to explain these consequences (which is discussed later).

A range of studies have found that media reports of suicide are associated with an actual increase in suicide rates employing the method reported in the news article (Etzendorfer et al., 2004). Explicit details outlining the exact suicide method employed is associated with an actual rise in suicide employing that method (Pirkis & Blood, 2001). Pirkis and Blood (2001) further demonstrated that providing methodological information such as the time, place, and a detailed description of method used will further increase the likelihood of suicide contagion. For example, reporting that an individual died from carbon monoxide poisoning may not significantly increase suicide imitation. Alternatively, providing explicit details of the mechanism and procedures involved by stating the "victim attached a hose to the exhaust of his/her car..." is likely to greatly increase suicide contagion and encourage imitation in other vulnerable individuals. As a further example, the book *The Final Exit* resulted in an increase in suicides using methods employed in the book (Pirkis & Blood, 2001).

More recently, Gould, Kleinman, Lake, Forman and Midle (2014), retrospectively analysed suicide reporting during identified teenage suicide clusters and compared reporting styles to matched non-cluster suicides. Their results found a difference in reporting, where reporting during cluster suicides included in the front page, and contain more method descriptors, more victim details, and contain a headline with the word suicide. This study was valuable as it demonstrated that suicide reporting does not only contribute to mass clusters but media reporting may also influence point clusters.

**Table 1:** Summary of factors demonstrated to influence suicide contagion

Contagion Factor
Prominence of suicide material
Amount of exposure to suicide material
Word “suicide” in article title
Suicide method details
Details of suicide location
Identification with suicide victim
Positive portrayals of the victim
Pictures of suicide victim
Details of grieving reactions
Simplification of suicide motives
Normalisation of suicide
Sensationalising, romanticising or trivialising of suicide
Celebrity suicides
Suicides involving real world victims

### **Suicide Contagion Vulnerability Factors**

Suicide contagion is not simply the product of suicide media but interacts with the characteristics of the media audience. As a result, suicide contagion doesn’t affect all audience members equally and it primarily affects the vulnerable (Beautrais, 2000). The majority of factors that will increase an individual’s susceptibility to suicide contagion are general suicide risk factors such as previous history of suicidal behaviour, a history of mental illness and impulsivity (Dafoe & Monk, 2005). However, there are contagion specific factors that may increase an individual’s vulnerability including such as being the same age and sex of the “model”, sharing environmental stressors, audience identification with the victim and being a youth or teenager (Gould et al., 2003; Romer et al., 2006).

## **Medium of Suicide Coverage**

The Werther Effect has been found across almost every media domain. However, the type of media domain appears to significantly influence the power of the contagion effect. A meta-analysis has revealed that newspaper suicide stories have been shown to be two to four times more likely to contribute to suicide contagion than television stories (Niederkröthaler et al., 2009; Stack 2000 & 2003). It is believed an individual's ability to save and re-read newspaper articles may contribute to this effect (Stack 2003), whereas television or radio reports on suicide stories are relatively brief with a median of 51 seconds (Henzinger et al., 2005). In addition, the nature of television or radio media broadcasts means they may occur when the audience is not attending and therefore may go unnoticed or be quickly forgotten. Furthermore, newspapers are generally regarded as the most credible source of news information and typically report events in more detail (Malphurs & Maria, 2006). Unfortunately, to date there appears to be no evidence comparing the contagion effect from news radio or the internet. Thom, Mckenna, Edwards, O'Brien, and Nakarada-Kordic (2012) found that, within New Zealand, newspapers report most frequently about suicide and are responsible for 50% of all mainstream media suicide portrayals, with internet news sites representing 40%, radio 7% and television 2.5%.

Newspaper circulations have been decreasing steadily since the mid 1980's (Meyer, 2009). It appears the newspaper industry has struggled to cope with the development and proliferation of internet and satellite technologies (Herndon, 2012). However, despite the decreasing power and popularity of newspapers, they continue to play a leading role in setting the news agenda (Cottle, 2006). Mainstream newspaper outlets have been shown to play an influential role in news flow and the stories across other media domains (Bardoel, 2002). Lee (2004) reported that mainstream newspaper media exert a significant influence over their online counterparts. Cottle (2006) found that mainstream newspapers are the dominant influence on the editorial decisions of other news agencies to run a story or not. This demonstrates that a newspaper's decision to publish a suicide story plays a key role in determining whether other media domains will release a similar story. It is also hypothesised that the style and tone of newspaper reports will set the tone for internet domains (Lee, 2004).

## **Theoretical Explanations of Contagion**

Despite the growing literature demonstrating a strong relationship between media reporting of suicide and actual suicide behaviour, it is still relatively unknown what mechanisms underlie this process. What is it that makes a person imitate someone's suicidal behaviour? What is it about suicide that makes people want to copy it? A number of different theoretical

explanations, such as the precipitation hypothesis, priming hypothesis and non-contagion hypotheses, have been put forward to explain the underlying mechanisms of this effect, however, they all appear to have significant deficiencies and/or have been shown to be inconsistent with research data (Jonas, 1992; Marsden, 2001; Phillips, 1974; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988). The most robust theory to explain suicide contagion appears to be social learning theory. A strength of this model is that it outlines why specific elements of news media may contribute to suicide contagion.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Elements of *social learning theory* have often been used to explain the link between suicide exposure and actual suicide behaviour (Blood & Pirkis, 2001; Phillips, 1980). According to this theory, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling (Bandura, 1977; Gould et al., 2003). The key concept of social learning theory states the imitator(s) must identify in some way with their observed model (Bandura, 1977). According to Blood and Pirkis (2001), there are two major forms of identification that can take place, vertical and horizontal identification. Vertical identification states that inferior individuals copy the behaviour of superior individuals (Tarde, 1903). When applying this principle to suicide imitation, research demonstrates that celebrity (proposed “superior” individuals) suicide media reports are more likely to be imitated than non-celebrity stories (Wasserman, 1984; Stack, 1987a). Vulnerable individuals may find it easier to identify with highly publicised difficulties of the celebrity (Romer et al., 2006). Horizontal identification describes situations where imitators copy models that are the most similar to them (Blood & Pirkis, 2001). Stack (1987a) has shown that the media effect on suicidal behaviour is strongest when the model and observer come from the same demographic group (such as teenagers). This *differential identification hypothesis* proposes that differences between the victim’s characteristics (such as, age, sex, nationality and race) and life situation may influence the effect of the suicide story, where the more an imitator identifies with the model, the more likely they are to copy their behaviour (Stack, 1987a). It is believed that observers demonstrate a stronger sense of identification with non-fictional portrayals of suicide than fictional representations. This idea is consistent with research suggesting the imitative effect of suicide is more powerful in non-fictional stories (Bandura, 1977; Stack, 1987b).

Bandura (1977) additionally stated that the degree of reality is important for modelling. In addition to identifying with the victim, social learning theory states the observer will weigh up how much the behaviour is reinforced before deciding to imitate it (Bandura, 1977).

Observers will be more likely to imitate suicide if it is portrayed positively (O’Carroll & Potter,

1994). Therefore media reports that glamorise or romanticise suicide or portray it as an acceptable course of action may increase the imitative consequences.

The other aspect of social learning theory suggests that suicidal behaviour will be more likely to be imitated if the observer has been exposed to multiple models that reinforce suicide (Blood & Pirkis, 2001). A number of studies support this by showing that increases in suicide publicity result in corresponding increases in magnitude of the imitation effect (Phillips, 1989; Stack, 1987b). It is hypothesised that increased exposure to suicide media may increase the likelihood that an individual will see suicide as an acceptable response to life stressors.

### **Precipitation Hypothesis**

The *precipitation hypothesis* draws heavily upon social learning theory. According to this hypothesis, media reports of suicide should lead to a subsequent rise in suicide rates through modelling (Durkheim, 1897). However, this increased suicide rate should be accompanied by a later corresponding drop in suicides, where the long-term suicide rate remains unchanged (Schmidtke, & Häfner, 1988; Niederkrotenthaler, & Sonneck, 2009). Despite the initial popularity of this hypothesis, research evidence has failed to support it (Phillips, 1974; Schmidtke & Hafner, 1988).

### **Priming Hypothesis**

The *priming hypothesis* refers to the concept that an individual's interpretations of situations may be involuntarily programmed by recent or frequent events (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Leyans & Parke, 1975). Priming explains how an individual's understanding of their environment is influenced by ideas prominent in their memory (Marsden, 2001). This hypothesis predicts exposure to suicide material will increase the likelihood that an individual will use these primed ideas to interpret situations. Marsden (2001) investigated how internet exposure to suicide concepts would influence a participant's interpretation of a distressing and ambiguous situation. He found that exposure to the concept of suicide primed the idea of suicide in participant's minds, greatly facilitating their perception that a situation may result in suicide.

### **Non-contagion Hypotheses**

It is important to note that not all theories used to explain suicide clusters agree that a process of imitation or contagion is involved. One alternate explanation for suicide clusters is that people who share similar qualities (including suicide risk factors) may be more likely to form relationships with one another. Therefore it is possible for vulnerable individuals to cluster together before any overt suicide stimulus (Joiner, 1999). Vulnerable people may

therefore unconsciously gravitate toward each other because they share mutual interests and similar problems (including psychopathology). Surprisingly, there is little empirical evidence to support or challenge this theory.

Similarly, the *Emergent Norm Theory* states that suicide clusters are not the result of a contagion process, but the result of a conscious act to adhere to social norms and rules (Turner, 1964). *Convergence Theory* states that homogeneity and clustering of suicide behaviour is not the result of contagion, but rather pre-existing human tendencies that cause individuals to converge in the first place (Turner & Killian, 1987). *Disinhibition theory* states that contagion is due to the release of a social restraint following the observation of another individual performing an action, that an individual had previously been conflicted about performing (Freedman, 1982). According to this theory, suicidal behaviour is not transmitted, rather exposure to suicide behaviour reduces an individual's inhibition to perform the behaviour.

### **Causal Relationship**

Based on criteria for causality established by Hill (1971), Pirkis et al (2006) believe that the body of media and suicide evidence demonstrates a causal relationship exists between exposure to suicide material and actual suicide behaviour. The relationship between media coverage and suicide satisfy the causality criteria of;

- (1) Consistency, where regardless of research design, methodology, or research sample, the effects have been reliably observed.
- (2) Strength, there is evidence of a dose-response effect, where the greater the exposure to suicide media, the greater the increase in suicide rates.
- (3) Temporality, where in order to establish that event A causes event B, it must first be established that event A occurs chronologically before event B. Ecological studies have demonstrated that suicide media exposure occurred prior to increases in suicide rates (Phillips, 1974).
- (4) Specificity, where in order to establish cause it must first be established that a substantial proportion of people who commit suicide were exposed to media coverage of suicide.
- (5) Coherence in that, experimental findings of media reports of suicide and subsequent suicide rates is consistent with our current knowledge concerning suicidal behaviour. This is of particular importance because previous researchers believed the contagion effect solely increased the probability of future suicides. However, according to Pirkis et al.'s (2006) recent interpretation of the data, they believe that media exposure will cause vulnerable individuals to commit suicide.

In summary, media reporting of suicide has been shown to influence the suicidal behaviour of others. This effect, labelled suicide contagion, is robust and has been supported by over one hundred recent research articles. Some researchers further believe that this relationship is strong enough to meet the criteria of a causal relationship (Pirkis et al., 2006). The power of the effect appears to be largely related to the amount of media suicide exposure, prominence of suicide material and time since exposure, where the contagious effects are believed to disappear after two weeks (Pirkis & Blood, 2001). The power of the contagion effect also depends upon the manner of reporting and the language used. Features of newspaper suicide media reports most likely to contribute to suicide contagion include the presence of graphic suicide details and/or details of methodology (Etzendorfer et al., 2004), the presence of a celebrity victim (Joiner, 2003), descriptions that outline location and time of suicide (Pirkis & Blood, 2001), reports which focus on positive aspects of the victim (O'Carroll & Potter, 1994), descriptions which glorify, minimise, romanticise or sensationalise suicide (Joiner, 1999), and accounts that include descriptions of griever's responses (O'Carroll & Potter, 1994). The Social Learning Model can be used to explain how these different elements may come together and contribute to suicide contagion, where vulnerable individuals identify with the victim and repeated portrayals of suicide are likely to normalise and reinforce suicide (Phillips, 1989; Romer et al., 2006; Stack, 1987a). Of the different media domains, newspapers appear to be the media format that contributes the most to suicide contagion, which may reflect the permanent and physical nature of newspaper articles, while other media domains such as radio and television are fleeting (Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2009). Identifying features and elements that contribute to suicide contagion is important, as it allows government officials, policy makers, researchers and media professionals to devise strategies to minimise any unnecessarily risk of suicide contagion and save lives.

### **Media Reporting Restrictions**

In response to a growing body of literature demonstrating that suicide contagion exists, a number of countries have developed initiatives designed to minimise the risks of media suicide contagion. These strategies have included the development of suicide reporting media guidelines and alterations to journalist codes of ethics. New Zealand's response goes one step further as in addition to these practices there is also government-imposed legislation. This combination of statutory and voluntary restrictions creates a unique reporting environment.



### **The Coroners Act (2006)**

In 1988, with the goals of minimising potential media suicide contagion effects, protecting the privacy of the deceased, and minimising the negative impact on bereaved friends and family, the New Zealand government enacted legislation that prohibiting the publication of information concerning self-inflicted deaths. The New Zealand Coroners Act 1988, amended in 1996 and 2006, significantly constrains media reporting on suicide (Parliamentary Counsel Office, 2006). This legislation limits the publication of specific details of individual cases of New Zealand suicides without the permission of the Coroner. Section 71 of the Coroners Act (2006) states no person may make public specific details in cases of suspected or confirmed self-inflicted death without the Coroner's authority. The only details that can be publicised without such authority are the victim's name, address, and occupation, and the fact the Coroner has found the death to be self-inflicted. Furthermore, in order to protect public safety, the Coroner has the authority to determine which details of a self-inflicted death are reported, which includes details relating to how the death occurred, the motive and circumstances of the death. A review of the Act was completed in late 2011, and no amendments were made to the reporting of New Zealand suicides. Fines of up to \$5,000 may apply to those found guilty of breaching the Act. However, no media in New Zealand has been prosecuted for breaching the Coroners Act (Hollings, 2010). Over the last few years the government has been considering loosening some of the rules as to how suicides can be reported. However, in late 2015 members of parliament rejected calls to relax suicide reporting rules and tightened one aspect of suicide reporting, banning the reporting of suicide location (which could hint at suicide method) (Davison, 2015). Then in 2016, the Coroners Act was again reformed to allow the media to report a death as "suspected suicide" before a coroner's inquiry was completed, if the facts support that conclusion (Jones, 2016).

### **New Zealand's Media Suicide Reporting Guidelines**

As research evidence began to increasingly demonstrate that it was not simply exposure to suicide media that contributed to suicide contagion, but rather the specific style and content of the news media coverage that was important, various governments and health professionals began to devise ways to decrease the power of this effect. As a result, a number of countries have developed guidelines to promote the responsible reporting of suicide (e.g., New Zealand, Australia, US, UK, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong). New Zealand's first guidelines were introduced in 1998, and were based largely upon existing codes of ethics established in Australia and Great Britain (Tully & Elsaka, 2004). These guidelines were developed by the Ministry of Health in relative isolation from media editors or journalists (Pirkis et al., 2006). The New Zealand section of the Commonwealth Press Union (CPU)

was concerned with the lack of consultation with the newspaper industry, and the guidelines were revised and in 1999 were re-named *Suicide and the Media: The reporting and portrayal of suicide in the media* (Ministry of Health, 1999). Then with input from the media industry, the guidelines were revised again in 2011, and were relabelled *Reporting Suicide- A resource for the media* (Ministry of Health, 2011a). One large difference between New Zealand's media suicide reporting guidelines and similar guidelines around the world (such as the UK) is that New Zealand's guidelines do not consider the personal well-being of journalists working on suicide themed stories (Tully & Elsaka, 2004).

New Zealand's suicide reporting guidelines outline a best practice model for reporting suicide. The guidelines encourage the media to (1) consider whether a suicide is newsworthy, (2) explore suicide risk factors (such as mental illness and alcohol abuse), (3) provide support information for those distressed and bereaved, (4) consult reputable sources, and (5) be concise and factual. The guidelines further ask the media to consider (1) the language they use (being careful not to glorify, romanticise or trivialise the suicide), (2) consider the justification for the story, and (3) avoid sensationalising, graphic photos and consider the impact of the story on the community and the bereaved. The guidelines also state the media should not (1) discuss the motives of death, (2) report on the method, or (3) focus on the victim's positive characteristics. A comparison between the 1998, 1999, and 2011 guidelines reveals that, while much of the wording and format has changed, the content essentially remains the same. However, the scope of the 2011 guidelines has expanded to incorporate how the media is to approach and interact with bereaving family and friends, dealing with social media-related suicides, and also prompts the media to consider spiritual and cultural attitudes towards suicide. The current 2011 guidelines appear less prescriptive than the predecessors. The 2011 guidelines ask the media to consider a wide range of important issues, outline positive details the media can include, and details they should avoid. This appears to be a significant improvement, as the previous editions have simply framed the same information as 15 details that should be avoided when reporting on suicide.

Despite the implementation of suicide reporting guidelines, industry insiders expressed concern about the lack of evidence that the New Zealand media, particularly newspapers, report and describe suicide irresponsibly (Ministry of Health, 1999; New Zealand Press Council [NZPC], 2005). The media industry further questioned the relevance of applying overseas research to New Zealand, and the conclusiveness of evidence linking media coverage to suicide imitation (NZPC, 2005; Tully & Elsaka, 2004). Media professionals across the globe believe strongly in the freedom of expression and self-regulation, preferring

to formulate their own guidelines based on their own principles (Michel, Frey, Wyss, & Valach, 2000; Pirkis et al., 2006). The New Zealand media view the guidelines as a serious threat to the freedom of the press and right to self-regulation (NZPC, 2001, 2005). The NZPC state that suicide is increasingly becoming an issue of urgent public interest and a major health problem, but newspapers still face an “impenetrable thicket of legislation” (Tully & Elsaka, 2004, p.10). The NZPC are particularly against the strong restrictions placed on the publication of details of suicide, and consider that this information should be made public (NZPC, 2005). Press organisations believe that New Zealand’s restrictive regimes of suicide reporting have resulted in some of the highest suicide rates in the Western world, demonstrating their view that censorship has been unsuccessful (NZPC, 2005). The NZPC argue that the public are now actively seeking information and guidance, and since the media is a key source of information it is important that suicide can be openly and honestly discussed. The NZPC (2007) states that the press are concerned about suicides, but consider the blanket judgement about the causality of suicide contagion problematic. They further believe that the news media generally take a conservative approach and do not cover suicides in detail (NZPC, 2007).

Media personnel frequently refer to New Zealand’s restrictive suicide reporting as one of the harshest in the world (NZPC, 2005). Periodically, the press express their concerns about the restrictions imposed on the reporting of suicide and consider that people incorrectly attribute blame towards them because of their role as the messenger (NZPC, 2005). In addition, the NZPC often cites a passage from the suicide guidelines to justify the publication of suicide details: “*The factors that lead a person to want to end their own life are complex... just as there is no one cause of suicide there is no one answer.*” (Ministry of Health, 1999, p10). Media officials and policymakers have heatedly debated issues concerning the ability to balance media freedom, public interest, and public safety (NZPC, 2001). Media organisations firmly believe that suicides are a newsworthy event that journalists should convey to the general public (NZPC, 2001). In addition, the media appear firm in their belief that overseas research does not apply to New Zealand (Tully & Elsaka, 2004). In this contestable climate where there is dispute over restrictions to freedom of the press, it is unclear to what extent the media industry has embraced the reporting guidelines.

### **Pasifika Media Guidelines**

In 2016, the Pasifika Media Guidelines were developed with over assistance from 23 Pasifika media organisations (Le Va, 2016). These guidelines share a high degree of similarity with Ministry of Health guidelines, but specifically target Pasifika media

organisations. One noticeable difference between the two guidelines is that the Pasifika guidelines include information regarding preferred ways to refer to suicide (Le Va).

### **Other Suicide Reporting Restrictions**

The New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy 2006-2016 outlines the framework for the country's suicide prevention efforts for the next ten years (Ministry of Health, 2006). The plan draws heavily from international and local knowledge of suicide and suicide prevention. This strategy further allows government agencies to organise and co-ordinate a range of prevention efforts. There are seven goals to this strategy, with goal number five relating directly to the influence of the media. Goal five states "*promote the safe reporting and portrayal of suicide behaviour by the media*" (Ministry of Health, 2006, p. 26). This goal is based on research evidence that some styles of media reporting may, in certain situations, increase suicide rates through imitation or normalising suicide as an acceptable response to life stressors (Ministry of Health, 2006). To combat this effect, the New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy 2006-2016 has identified four main areas of action, which are (1) work with the media to encourage consistent safe suicide reporting, (2) monitor media coverage of suicide, (3) provide the media with easily accessible up-to-date suicide information, and (4) provide guidance to media spokespeople on the importance of safe reporting of suicide material.

Unlike other countries which offer specific strict advice (e.g., the BBC's *Producers Guidelines*), New Zealand Codes of Practice do not specifically deal with suicide. The NZPC statement of principles states that "*those suffering from trauma or grief call for special consideration, and when approached, or enquiries are being undertaken, careful attention is to be given to their sensibilities*" (NZPC, 2009, p.13). This definition is problematic because it does not specifically apply to suicide, nor does it accurately define the nature of the special considerations or the careful attention to be provided.

In May 2012, Justice Minister Judith Collins reported that she had asked the Law Commission to bring forward its recommendations to make it illegal to promote or encourage others to commit suicide (Fisher & Jones, 2012). These recommendations would then make the incitement of suicide a criminal offence. Although these recommendations were designed to reduce the harm caused by cyber-bullies, they could have potentially large ramifications for the media, who could be ruled criminally responsible for any suicide occurring after an individual was exposed to suicide media reports. However, due to differences in intent and difficulties in determining whether contagion has occurred, suicide

news stories might be exempted from this future ruling. Furthermore, even if the media is not made exempt, it appears the government and health professionals have no appetite to challenge the media in court.

In April 2014, it was announced that the New Zealand Law Commission had made recommendations designed to loosen the legal restrictions surrounding the reporting of suicide (Quilliam, 2014). These recommendations included only restricting the reporting of method and the fact the death was a suicide. It was further recommended that the media can report on suspected suicide when supported by the facts. In addition, these restrictions widened to include traditional media, internet blogs and social media. Individuals can apply to the chief coroner to overrule these restrictions. As in existing restrictions, it was recommended that these restrictions only apply to deaths occurring within New Zealand and if implemented these restrictions will result in a significant change in the manner to which New Zealand based suicide can legally be reported.

Thus, in New Zealand there are several different legislations, action plans or codes of practice that recognise the potential harm of media reporting of suicide; it appears the primary goal of all of these is to promote public safety by responsibly reporting suicide. However, with all of these differing levels of restrictions, one must ask are they all important, necessary and, most importantly, are they being purposefully applied by the media and is this reflected in media portrayals of suicide? The present study aims to address some of these questions. An analysis of newspaper suicide articles and interviews with media professionals involved in suicide reporting is one way to start to address these important questions.

### **Impact of Suicide Reporting Guidelines**

Although declining rates of suicide from their peak in 1998 may indicate that New Zealand has been relatively successful in implementing media guidelines, a full 17 years later it is still relatively unknown how effectively personnel have implemented these guidelines and adhered to the Coroners Act. Analysing media coverage of suicide may be performed by analysing quantitative features such as the frequency and length of articles, or alternately it may include an in-depth qualitative examination of the messages and values within the articles.

International researchers have examined a range of suicide news features. This research has been valuable for identifying media themes and potential problem areas of reporting that may increase the likelihood of suicide contagion. Kitzinger (1999) found that the UK media

only report 1% of all suicides. This low level of reporting could be viewed as demonstrating the media's sensitivity to reporting suicide, and possibility of compliance with suicide reporting guidelines. Potential problems of suicide reports in newspapers only begin to be revealed when the content of the reports are analysed. It quickly becomes evident when comparing news reports of suicide to official statistics that media reporting tends to over-report unusual or violent methods (Blood et al., 2007; Kitzinger, 1999; Michel, Frey, Schlaepfer, & Valach, 1995). For example, in 18% of reported suicides, the person died as a result of a gun, where in reality only 10% of people used this method (Blood et al., 2007). Similar figures have also been shown for self-cutting (12% versus 4% in reality) and jumping (12% versus 7%; Blood et al., 2007). The media's emphasis on violent suicide methods may prompt suicidal individuals to use more violent and consequently more lethal methods. In addition, the reporting of atypical suicides may perpetuate misinformation about suicide.

Administrative officials and the wider public have recently begun to voice concerns that news media are presenting a picture of suicide that does not match reality (Pirkis et al., 2006). It is believed that the media's inherent need to maximise audience interest through drama and sensation may encourage the reporting of unusual suicides. This distorted image may consequently influence public opinion about suicide, and increase the likelihood of subsequent suicide contagion (Blood et al., 2007; Pirkis et al., 2006), and may encourage exposed individuals to use suicide methods that are more violent and lethal, decreasing the likelihood of an incomplete suicide attempt (Blood et al., 2007; Chung & Leung, 2001; Gunnell, 1994).

Kitzinger (1999) suggests that the media's values of drama, conflict, and novelty frequently clash with responsibly reporting suicide, as outlined by the reporting guidelines. Many journalists and editors may feel that a story is incomplete without mentioning details concerning the method and location of suicide, or exploring its wider community impact (Blood et al., 2007). This difference was demonstrated in Pirkis and Blood's (2001) suicide case study, where a prescribed skin acne drug was apparently connected to a teenager's suicide. It was discovered that different newspapers portrayed different angles on the same case. Some media outlets tried to maximise the reader audience by using emotionally loaded words such as suicide and hanging, while other reports attempted to maximise the human interest angle by including excerpts from the girl's diary and interviews with her mother (Pirkis & Blood, 2001). Information concerning what suicide cases are likely to be reported by the media appears to be under-investigated. This information appears roughly comparable to the NZPC (2005) report.

It has further been demonstrated that the likelihood that a suicide story will get reported appears to increase when the circumstances or method appeals to the audience's curiosity through how unusual they are ("newsworthiness"), such as the recent case when a couple jumped off a cliff following the death of their disabled son ("Couple jump off UK cliff with dead child," 2009). Media organisations' values are believed to reflect the nature and account of the news coverage of suicide (Blood et al., 2007; Kitzinger, 1999). Perceived industry competitiveness may be a powerful factor in deciding what angle to focus on and what details to publish. If a newspaper fears that another media organisation will publish controversial or sensitive material, they may feel they have no choice but to follow suit (Kitzinger, 1999). For example, an analysis of Swiss newspapers demonstrated that they primarily reported stories about completed suicides, with a focus on young people and victims of violent methods, such as shooting or hanging (Michel et al., 1995).

Several other studies have reported similar results. Blood et al.'s (2007) investigation into Australian media suicide reporting practices revealed that explicit details of both the suicide location and method of suicide are both reported, with an over-emphasis on violent and unusual methods of death. Similarly, Fishman and Weiman (1996) compared suicide motives reported in Israeli newspapers with official government data from 1972 to 1978, and suicide articles tended to heavily concentrate upon young victims and over-represented the minority Arab population, which alarmingly made up almost half of all suicide reports. Furthermore, discrepancies between newspaper-reported motives and official statistics revealed that newspapers were inclined to over-report economic problems and romantic disappointment as the major cause for suicide, while under-representing the evidence-based motives of suicidal behaviour, such as mental distress and drug and alcohol abuse (Fishman & Weiman, 1996). Finally, Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2009) explored the gap between suicide characteristics reported in the Austrian print media and population data. They analysed print media reports of suicide, and found that young victims, foreign citizens, and rare suicide methods (such as jumping and drowning) predicted media reporting of suicide, while the role of mental illness was underreported.

While a large number of researchers have investigated the association between media exposure to suicide stories and actual suicide rates, few researchers have gone the next step to investigate how the media actually represents and reports suicide. This is surprising, because the "active ingredient" that provokes suicidal behaviour is likely to be a result of how the information is conveyed and represented to the public. Most studies exploring suicide article characteristics have solely focused upon quantitative features, such as the number of suicides occurring following suicide media reports, the placement of the story, heading size,

article length, and the presence or absence of pictures. As a result, there are several literature gaps surrounding newspaper content, such as the style, tone, theme, and messages contained within suicide articles.

Research has begun to investigate how newspapers portray these aspects of suicide. Both Italian and Hungarian newspapers have been found to sensationalise suicide, where suicide is often portrayed as a tragic or heroic act (Fekete, Schmidtke, Klara, & Gyorgy, 1994). Furthermore, articles tended to focus on celebrity suicides and provide little if any attention to underlying causes and prevention strategies (Fekete, et al., 1994; Mishara, 1995). Gould, Midle, Insel, and Kleinman (2007) collected a random subset of 151 newspaper articles from the United States between 1988 and 1996. In an effort to identify factors associated with youth imitation, the researchers analysed qualitative (coding features such as romanticising and glorifying the victim) and quantitative features (such as story length, placement and inclusion of pictures) of these articles. The results revealed 60% of the stories used the word suicide, approximately 20% of the headlines sensationalised suicide, presentations were more likely to portray the victim as happy or attractive, 57% of articles provided details of the suicide act, 40% of articles gave simple, single explanations of the suicide, less than 15% of articles provided any preventative content, and while 90% of the victims had some psychiatric difficulties, only 20% of the articles referred to these problems. These results are particularly alarming as these features have been shown to increase the risk of suicide contagion (Stack, 2003).

With the rising global popularity of suicide reporting guidelines, several researchers have investigated how portrayals of suicide have changed following the implementation of their guidelines. Kuess and Hatzinger (1986; 1989) investigated how Austrian newspapers presented suicide. A qualitative and quantitative analysis of newspaper reports between 1984 and 1985 revealed that newspapers generally presented suicide negatively, in the sense that celebrity or unusual suicides were frequently reported and preventative factors were neglected. After Austria's introduction of media guidelines in 1987, newspapers chose not to sensationalise suicide, and decreased the frequency of suicide reports (Kuess & Hatzinger, 1986; 1989). This suggests that media guidelines were effective at altering reporting practices.

Michel et al. (2000) investigated both quantitative and qualitative aspects of suicide reporting in Swiss media for the eight months immediately prior to the implementation of reporting guidelines in 1991 and then again for an eight-month period three years later in 1994. Three years following the implementation of suicide reporting guidelines, the number of suicide



articles had increased by 225%. Despite the dramatic increase in the number of suicide articles, Swiss suicide rates decreased from 20.7 deaths per 100,000 people to 19.6 deaths per 100,000 people. Furthermore, post-guideline articles were deemed to be of a higher quality, where articles were significantly shorter with fewer pictures, and perhaps most importantly there were fewer articles with negative reporting aspects (such as glamorising suicide; Michel et al., 2000).

Pirkis et al., (2009) investigated potential changes in mainstream Australian media reporting of suicide over two twelve-month periods between 2000/01 and 2006/7 (pre and post guideline implantation). Newspaper, television, and radio items were analysed to examine the extent, nature and quality of suicide reporting. The number of suicide stories in the Australian media almost doubled and the quality of the articles drastically improved. The use of inappropriate language (glorifying, sensationalising, or minimising suicide) fell from 42% to 6%, and the detailed reporting of suicide methods decreased from 50% to 14%. Unfortunately, there was a slight decrease in the amount of media providing information about help and support services from 94% to 82% (Pirkis et al., 2009).

### **New Zealand Research**

Thom, Edwards, Nakarada-Kordic, McKenna, O'Brien, & Nairn (2011) appear to be the first to investigate how suicide is portrayed in the New Zealand media. This study followed the development of three separate suicide stories which all involved an online technology component (such as a case of cyber-bullying) over a six-month period. They collected 56 mainstream media stories from print, internet and radio domains and used a qualitative analysis to explore how suicide is reported during instances involving online technology. They found that the role of online technology was overemphasised at the expense of the suicide events themselves. In addition, websites were either labelled as “enablers” or “preventers” of suicide, while the contributions of mental illness were largely marginalised in the news media reports. The strengths of this study include collecting news media from several different domains (internet, radio and print). Another advantage of this study was that two of the three suicide stories were based outside New Zealand. This meant not all of this material was subjected to the Coroners Act, enabling an analysis of the full range of suicide stories the New Zealand public were exposed to.

Thom et al.'s (2011) analysis was one component of McKenna, Thom, Edwards, Nairn, O'Brien and Leary's (2010) larger study, which analysed how the New Zealand media report suicide. In this study commencing in 2008, suicide media was collected over a 12-month period. In part one, a randomly selected 10% sample of the collected data was evaluated by

using a scoring system developed by the Australian Media Monitoring Project (Pirkis et al., 2001). Then in part two, a qualitative Framing Analysis was used to explore five specific case studies. McKenna et al., (2010) found that the media reported extensively on suicide, and the media's portrayals of suicide usually differed from real world statistics, especially in terms of over-reporting completed suicides with a focus on firearms, while under-reporting Māori suicides. In addition, according to the scoring system used, the media's reporting of suicide was determined to be above average in quality. The qualitative case study analysis determined that suicide was never the main focus of the stories, while other elements, such as cyber bullying were used to make the story newsworthy (McKenna et al., 2010). In addition, the authors note that due to the diversity of the selected stories, they were unable to identify a frame to apply to all of the stories, which greatly limited the interpretations that could be drawn from the data.

A reported strength of Thom et al.'s (2012) study was that they included a wide range of mainstream media forms, including internet, print, radio and television. However, an exploration of their internet data sources revealed that online newspaper websites represented a vast majority of their internet data, where all of that data is available in the print newspapers. In addition, their results revealed that 50% of their suicide stories were obtained from newspapers, with 40% being sourced from the internet. The small qualitative case study sample size where no frames could be applied to all of the stories raises questions surrounding the appropriateness of these measures. Finally, all newspaper content analysed were from New Zealand-based suicides. The reporting of these New Zealand based suicides are subject to the Coroners Act which is likely to influence the story details included and consequently the manner in which suicide is portrayed.

### **Media Perspectives**

As demonstrated above a vast majority of investigations into suicide contagion have been "output" studies, which either explored whether suicide reporting was associated with rises in actual suicide rates, or they explored how the media portray and construct suicide to their audience. It has only been relatively recently that studies have begun to develop what Pirkis (2010) labelled as "media production studies" which are designed to explore the media's own perspectives and views relating to suicide reporting. So far these studies appear very rare with only three other studies. Jamieson, Jamieson, and Romer's (2003) were one of the first to investigate media perspectives. In one section of this USA study, they interviewed print journalists to explore their knowledge of contagion and elements they believed necessary to include in a suicide story. They found that journalists had little knowledge of suicide contagion and were unaware that their reporting could contribute to suicide imitation.

These results also showed that they viewed suicide as a topic that was not automatically newsworthy. However, their results showed that journalists had three clear criteria that made suicide newsworthy, (1) the death occurring in a public place, (2) death involving public figures and (3) deaths involving a murder suicide. This study demonstrated that without appropriate education suicide reporting will continue to contribute to contagion.

Similarly, Collings and Kemp (2010) investigated New Zealand journalist views and experience when reporting on suicide. They interviewed 15 newspaper, television and radio journalists concerning their own experiences when reporting on suicide using a grounded hermeneutic approach. They concluded that the issue of suicide reporting is complex, and journalists viewed their role as protecting the public good, believed their work was accurate and fair, described suicide reporting “as part of the job”, and viewed the Coroners Act negatively. This study highlights the importance of getting suicide prevention experts to work with the media to develop effective reporting guidelines. The present study aims to expand on Collings and Kemp’s (2010) work, by not only including journalists but also editors, the people who have ultimate control over deciding not just which stories to investigate but who also have control over the manner, style, and information presented. In addition, the current study was expanded to explore the participant’s decision-making process when choosing to include or omit article information, their views of suicide reporting restrictions and awareness and problems with contagion literature.

In the most recent study, Cheng, Fu, Caine and Yip (2014) investigated the media perspectives of Hong Kong journalists and editors working across different news domains (print, television, radio and online). They found journalists identified commercial pressures, the need to address social problems and reader interest as the key factors that contributed to their reporting style. In addition, participants wanted more evidence to demonstrate the media can influence suicide contagion. If this was established, participants identified that consequently reporting changes should be driven by upper level management, while other participants reported this responsibility should fall on the frontline journalists or consumers (where reporting would change to reflect consumer preference). This study demonstrated scepticism towards suicide contagion, however, once this can be established the media are open to changing reporting practices to decrease the likelihood of suicide contagion.

Suicides are newsworthy events that the public want to be informed about. In an effort to maximise the audience, media organisations have tended to portray certain news events in a dramatic manner, including reporting suicide (Kitzinger, 1999). As researchers have begun to question the relationship between media reports and suicide, certain portrayals of suicide

have been found to contribute to suicide contagion (Phillips, 1974; Pirkis & Blood, 2001; Stack, 2003). The power of the suicide contagion effect appears to be related to the amount of suicide media coverage (Phillips, 1974), method details (Etzendorfer et al., 2004), the prominence, location and coverage of suicide (Etzendorfer et al., 2004), celebrity status of the victim (Romer et al., 2006; Stack, 2003), and audience identification with the suicide model (Stack, 2003). As a result, many countries have implemented media guidelines for suicide reporting to limit the possibility of suicide contagion. Following the implementation of these guidelines, several studies have found the quality of media reports on suicide in Australia, Switzerland, and Austria to have improved (Kuess & Hatzinger, 1986, 1989; Michel et al., 2000; Pirkis et al., 2006; Them et al., 2012).

To date, there is minimal New Zealand research evidence that has investigated how the media present suicide and whether the reporting of suicide has changed following the implementation of suicide reporting guidelines. In addition, there appears to be a lack of local and international “media production” studies investigating the views and experiences of journalists and editors, who are actively involved in constructing suicide articles. Research into this area has revealed a general scepticism towards existing evidence of suicide contagion (Cheng et al., 2014; Jamieson et al., 2003), and dislike of any legal restrictions designed to limit suicide reporting (Collings & Kemp, 2010). The present study aimed to address these issues by exploring how suicide is portrayed by the New Zealand media and investigating journalist’s attitudes and experience of reporting suicide.

### **Study One: An Analysis of Newspaper Articles on Suicide**

The aim of Study One was to explore how the media portrays suicide, and examine whether newspaper reporting of suicide has changed over two timeframes (1997 and 2009). Newspapers were analysed because research has consistently found that there is some unknown feature(s) of newspaper articles that increases suicide contagion (Niederkröthaler & Sonneck, 2009). Therefore, it’s estimated that newspapers are likely to play a key role in suicide contagion. Major New Zealand newspapers were analysed from 1997 (pre-guidelines) and 2009 (post-1999 guidelines). Descriptive statistics and a comprehensive qualitative analysis was used to identify media reporting characteristics. A qualitative Content analysis was used to identify how suicide is portrayed by the media and the social values presented in mass media reports, then validate current impressions of the influence of the media, provide recommendations regarding existing media guidelines, and identify whether media guidelines have changed suicide reporting practices.

A qualitative investigation examined how the media portray suicide, the messages they send, whether post-guideline newspapers are less likely to contribute to suicide contagion than pre-guideline newspapers, and the features of suicide articles that may contribute to suicide contagion in susceptible individuals. This analysis would further identify whether current media guidelines are being adhered to. Similar to studies by Michel et al. (2000), Gould et al. (2007) and Them et al., (2012) study's, qualitative aspects and quantitative features of suicide articles were analysed, including the frequency of suicide reporting, length of articles, presence of pictures, and the location of the article in the newspaper.

### **Study Two: Journalist Reporting on Suicide**

Qualitative data investigating suicide articles has shown the nature, themes and style of suicide reporting in newspapers, but this only gives part of the story. To obtain a more complete picture of suicide reporting practices, it is important to go beyond the physical article outcome and explore the process that goes into constructing a suicide article and the media's perspectives and concerns about reporting on suicide. There are several important reasons for this. Firstly, it would highlight the main issues the media have surrounding the reporting of suicide. Secondly, it would outline the media's experiences and views surrounding the application of existing legislation (Coroners Act) and voluntary reporting guidelines. Thirdly, it would further explore any problems and media perspectives on evidence for suicide contagion. In addition, this study would explore what features make suicide newsworthy, whether there are any situations when they would not report suicide, despite it being newsworthy. This study would further determine the criteria used to judge the newsworthiness of each suicide and explore the elements considered important when constructing a suicide story. Finally, journalist interviews can be used to answer questions regarding the personal consequences of researching and writing suicide articles (such as anxieties or lessons learnt), which is a feature ignored by New Zealand reporting guidelines. This is particularly important because much research has been focussed on the negative audience consequences and little attention has been paid to the personal consequences to the journalists constructing these articles. Although the guidelines are a key method used to promote safe reporting and portrayals of suicide, they may be enhanced by gaining insight into journalists' thoughts and experiences of using the guidelines.

Most research examining the relationship between the media and suicide has been negative, focussing on aspects the media performing negatively, such as sensationalising suicide (Joiner, 1999) and including suicide method (Pirkis & Blood, 2001). Interviewing journalists may provide an opportunity to examine not only negative but also any positive aspects of suicide reporting. It appears studies into this field are primarily concerned with identifying

features which journalists are doing in error, such as providing unnecessary suicide detail (Gould et al., 2007), reporting too many suicides of vulnerable social groups (Michel et al., 1995), and failing to provide resources for readers who may be feeling suicidal (Michel et al., 2000). However, interviewing journalists and editors may help to identify a range of suicide prevention or minimisation strategies they have employed, or instances where their stories may have affected someone's behaviour for the good, such as informing family members of suicide warning signs. This exploratory investigation occurred at a time when newspapers were undergoing rapid change. Perhaps more than ever, newspapers are required to keep up with changing consumer preferences, sourcing advertising revenue, changes in philosophical approaches and remaining up-to-date with advances in technology. It is therefore both timely and important to explore journalist perceptions surrounding the writing and publication of suicide articles in this evolving industry.

### **Statement of Research Objectives**

This thesis primarily explores the role of the media in suicide behaviour. This is of importance because certain media reports of suicide have been repeatedly shown to influence rates of suicide (de Leo, & Heller, 2008; Stack, 2003). The current thesis has several important goals. The first objective is to explore and examine how the New Zealand newspaper media portrays suicide. To do this, a qualitative and quantitative analysis was used to explore what was being written and how this was communicated to the audience. This analysis specifically investigated article features known to contribute towards suicide contagion and explored whether New Zealand's suicide reporting guidelines are being adhered to. The next objectives were to examine how the nature and style of suicide reporting has changed over time and observe the extent to which the introduction of suicide reporting guidelines has altered reporting practices. This was achieved by comparing suicide articles from before and after the introduction of the initial suicide reporting guidelines in 1999. The final objective was to investigate journalist culture, knowledge, attitudes, and barriers in suicide reporting. This was achieved by interviewing newspaper journalists and editors about the practice of suicide reporting in New Zealand. This was of particular importance as it provided information such as identification of factors considered prior to reporting suicide, the writers' concerns when writing about suicide, barriers to reporting suicide, the industry's knowledge and perspectives on suicide contagion literature, and the personal consequences of suicide investigation and reporting. It was hoped this analysis would improve our understanding of suicide reporting and identify factors that may improve the usability and effectiveness of suicide reporting guidelines.

## **Hypotheses**

### **Study One**

In comparison to 1997, it is hypothesised that in 2009 suicide reporting frequency will have decreased. This is based on previous “time comparisons” studies which revealed media reports on suicide are becoming less common overtime (Michel et al., 1995). Consistent with Kuess and Hatzinger (1986, 1989), Michel et al (2000) and Pirkis (2008), it was hypothesised that in comparison to 1997, newspaper articles on suicide in 2009 would contain less features known to contribute to contagion. It is therefore hypothesised that in 2009 there would be a decline in several factors such as; inappropriate language (glorifying, sensationalising, or minimising suicide), detailed reporting of suicide methods, occurrence of the word suicide in titles, glorifying suicide, simplification of suicide and decreased use of photos which accompany suicide articles. In addition, it was further hypothesised that in 2009, suicide reporting would contain an increase in several positive suicide reporting elements such as; inclusion of referral information, identification of risk factors, promote awareness of the relationship to mental illness, acknowledgement of victims problems (in addition to positive attributes), and increased reporting of positive role models (people who have felt suicidal and sort help). It is hypothesised that suicide reporting quality improvement is likely to reflect the implementation of suicide guidelines and growing industry awareness of suicide contagion. However, these improvements are likely to be greatly limited by the lack of industry endorsement of the reporting guidelines (at the time) and strong industry opposition towards reporting guidelines (NZPC, 2001, 2005).

### **Study Two**

Study Two was largely exploratory and provided insight into suicide reporting considerations and decisions the media make when writing about suicide. This study was designed to investigate arguments media personnel use to discuss why they report what they do and why they report in this fashion. Although, multiple previous international studies have demonstrated that voluntary guidelines have been adopted and applied by the media (Fekete, et al., 1994; Gould et al., 2007; Kuess & Hatzinger 1986; 1989; Michel et al., 2000; Pirkis et al., 2008), it was hypothesised that due to previous studies demonstrating that New Zealand media editors and journalists are sceptical of reporting guidelines, this is likely that participants would argue against the need for suicide reporting guidelines (Tully & Elsaka, 2004). In addition, similar to Collings and Kemp (2010), it was predicted that participants would oppose the current level of legislation that limits the reporting of suicide (The Coroners Act, 2006). However, it is unknown what types of arguments participants would use to oppose these suicide reporting initiatives. Particularly, as opposition to applying these initiatives could be viewed as unethical as it may result in the media routinely writing articles

containing elements that may elicit suicide contagion. It is hypothesised that similar to Cheng et al. (2014) and Jamieson et al. (2003) a lack of industry awareness of suicide contagion evidence is likely to influence the arguments participants used. In addition, consistent with Cheng et al. (2014) it is further hypothesised that journalists will advocate that their reporting style will reflect commercial and management pressures. However, as the remaining aspects of this study are exploratory, it is relatively unclear what specific arguments participants will raise and how this impacts on suicide reporting.



# CHAPTER TWO

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## STUDY ONE: METHOD

*The people will believe what the media tells them they believe.*

*George Orwell*

### **Methodological Considerations**

In order to study the ways in which suicide is communicated by newspapers, methodologies that are capable of investigating the complexities of text are required. In this Chapter, the methodological approaches chosen to perform the data analysis are introduced, and their main assumptions and techniques are explored.

### **Reflexivity: Pre-Analysis Considerations**

As a researcher, my own ideas and background cannot be removed from the research. Instead of being an impartial observer to the research data, I am an active participant where multiple factors may influence the creation and reading of the research data. In this study, these influences include my position as a graduate student, my expectations of the research, and my clinical background, especially my previous experiences with mental health which predispose me to desire to intervene and prevent any suicide from occurring. Additionally, during my late teens, a suicide cluster occurred at my high school and involved the deaths of five close friends and acquaintances. This suicide cluster had an impact on my decision to study suicide contagion. Following the deaths of my classmates, I was interested in discovering what factors could lead five teenagers to kill themselves in relatively quick succession. During this suicide cluster, I cannot recall being aware of any media representations of the suicides but I can remember the climate of fear these suicides created. There was much confusion regarding the suicides, and the school and community were unsure of how to cope and respond to the unexpected deaths. As a result of this suicide cluster, I searched for a research topic relevant to my interest in the phenomenon of suicide contagion. I was surprised to learn that, despite over a decade passing since my own personal experience with multiple suicides, that suicide contagion continues to remain a poorly understood and mysterious topic. As a result, I hoped I could research this area and improve our understanding of this topic. Combinations of all of these features are likely to influence my reading of the research data. The qualitative analysis reflects my interpretation

of the results, in order to increase the validity of the results and extracts are used to demonstrate how these findings have arisen from the data.

### **Oral and Written Communication**

Before discussing the different analytical methods, it is important to be aware of the notable distinctions between analysing written text (Study One) and speech (Study Two). Language can be separated into two main forms, oral such as conversations or interviews, and written such as books or newspapers. As the current thesis explores two different language forms, it is important that these differences are noted as they will affect the subsequent analysis and conclusions drawn (Cayer & Sacks, 1979). Although related, oral and written languages are very different forms of communication and have several crucial differences. Each different communication technique has a distinct form, which follows a set of unique rules and conventions (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2004).

Most notably, unlike spoken language which is a product of the moment, written language is often carefully planned, revised and rewritten before reaching its audience (Cayer & Sacks, 1979). There are also significant vocabulary distinctions, where oral languages tend to be less formal, use less complicated words with fewer syllables (Georgakopoulou, & Goutsos, 2004). Written language is organised differently in that topics are divided into paragraphs with gradual changes from one to another, which appears to be less likely in conversations (Schegloff, 1990). Finally, the expression of emotion and attitude is different. In order to convey meanings and emotions, oral languages use a range of subtle cues such as facial expressions, body language and changes in volume and tone (Wennerstrom, 2006). While written language can be just as emotionally expressive, it requires a different tool set such as lexicogrammatical expression, font changes and punctuation (Wennerstrom, 2006). Authors of written text are generally required to consider any group of people that may read their text. In oral conversations however, it is usually possible for the presenter to adjust their language to their audience (through audience feedback or tailoring to their specific audience) (Cayer & Sacks, 1979).

### **Study One: Mixed Methodology Design**

In order to better capture newspaper descriptions of suicide, a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach was selected. Quantitative descriptive summary information was used to provide specific and clear information. This information encouraged categorical information such as whether the suicide method was present to be compared between different time periods. These statistics further encouraged the examination of the proliferation or decline of articles features, such as their prominence and amount of detail. In

order to complement this information, qualitative data was also used to add depth, meaning and rich details to statistics (Creswell, 1998; Gehart, Ratliff, & Lyle, 2001). The basic underlying principle of qualitative approaches argues that not everything of importance can be measured and easily defined; therefore attempting to do so is inappropriate (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2004).

### **Qualitative Content Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis (CA) is a widely used qualitative research technique used to examine meanings, trends, themes, relationships and patterns occurring in narrative materials (Hsieh, & Shannon, 2005; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). CA is an efficient process that allows the intensive examination of language by classifying large amounts of data into categories that represent similar meanings (Weber, 1990). CA goes beyond simply organising and describing a data set as it allows various aspects of the research topic to be interpreted (Cavanagh, 1997). A key strength of CA is that it is a flexible and adaptive technique useful for a wide variety of research purposes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). However it appears that this flexibility, particularly the lack of a firm definition and procedures, has limited the application of CA (Tesch, 1990). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) describe three distinct CA approaches: conventional, directed, and summative. The conventional approach involves deriving coding categories from the raw data, this approach is driven by the data and is not related to specific research questions or the researcher's pre-existing theoretical interest. On the other hand, the directed approach uses research data to develop codes and to validate theories or research findings. Finally, the summative approach begins with counting words or concepts to identify hidden meanings or themes. The main strength of this approach is that it does not infer meaning but explores the usage of words. This study used a directed approach guided by research, which has identified factors known to contribute to suicide contagion. This directed approach enabled the exploration of the presence of elements of contagion in newspapers.

### **Process of CA**

Like many forms of qualitative analysis there is no one precise rulebook for performing the analysis, rather the process is largely informal. However, in order to increase the reliability and wider application of qualitative content analysis a number of researchers have identified a series of general procedures to undertake (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Morgan, 1993; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Weber, 1990). The initial step involves being familiar with the data, which involves transcribing, reading and re-reading the data, and noting early impressions (Cavanagh, 1997). Then, as a directed approach was used, the initial analysis used theory and research into suicide contagion to guide the formation of initial codes. The

next step involved allocating passages of text to the predetermined codes. Following this, any remaining text not assigned to the initial coding process is sorted into new codes. Newly identified codes can offer new or contradictory views or may further enrich existing theory. The final step is producing a report, which should make sense of the themes and categories identified, and convey the complicated story of the data. When writing the report, extracts should be used to justify and provide validity for the analysis (Weber, 1990).

### **CA as the Analytical Method for Newspaper Articles**

CA is an appropriate analytical method that is well suited to the present investigation of newspaper articles. CA was selected for a number of reasons, most notably its ability to accurately capture complex information that quantitative methods may miss. CA is particularly suited to study naturally occurring language, as it expects variation (Hsieh, & Shannon, 2005). In addition, CA has not previously been applied to investigating the portrayal of suicide by New Zealand newspaper media. As these are also areas that are generally unexplored, it is believed that CA would provide valuable information and insight. CA further allows information collected to be treated as neutral, where this information is viewed as representative of an underlying reality. CA is particularly well suited for large data sets, especially useful for documenting changes over time, and is a method which has a high degree of reliability (Weber, 1990).

### **Methodology of Newspaper Analysis**

This study compared two different timeframes to investigate how newspapers reported on attempted or completed suicide. This analysis explored how all suicides were reported and consequently included New Zealand and foreign suicides which were reported in New Zealand. Suicide articles from eleven major mainstream newspapers were analysed. Articles were collected from 1997 (pre-suicide guidelines) and compared to articles from 2009 (post-suicide guidelines). The newspapers searched included the New Zealand Herald, Waikato Times, Sunday Star Times, Southland Times, Dominion Post, Press, Truth, Manawatu Standard, Taranaki Daily News, Nelson Mail, and Timaru Herald. *Table 2* presents the national circulation figures for these newspapers. The distribution of these papers covered the whole of New Zealand. A database search of these newspapers identified articles that contained any suicide-related words. The list below contains the full list of search phrases.

- Autocide
- End/ending it all
- Hanging
- Killed/killing his/him/her/them self/selves

- No suspicious circumstances
- Overdose
- Para suicide
- Police are not looking for anyone else in connection/relation to the death
- Self-inflicted
- Shot him/her/their self/selves
- Suicide
- Suicidal
- Suicidality
- Take/taking of his/her/ones/their life/lives

The current study searched a wide variety of parameters to find suicide-related newspaper articles. Unlike Thom et al's (2012) study, the current word search included the presence of important phrases such as 'non-suspicious' and 'not suspicious'. These are important phrases as they are frequently used as journalist code for suicide (NZPC, 2007). Each identified article was then read to exclude articles that did not relate to the reporting of suicide such as sport, nature or political articles which included the word suicide as a metaphor. Furthermore, suicides that were accompanied by a murder committed by the victim were excluded, as murder-suicides appear to have a unique motive which separates them from non-murder related suicides (Eliason, 2009). Murder-suicides such as suicide bombings appear to be largely motivated by a specific decision to kill oneself during or after inflicting as many deaths upon perceived enemies (Malphurs & Maria 2006). Some experts even go as far as to state that murder-suicide cannot be categorised with either homicide or suicide, but is in its own distinct category (Eliason, 2009). In addition, these stories tend to almost exclusively focus on the homicide and should be less conducive to imitation. Similarly, assisted suicide (or euthanasia) was excluded because these "suicides" require an external person to commit the act and are therefore not consistent with the definition of suicide outlined earlier. Moreover, these articles mainly focus on legal and ethical issues revolving around the right to die. Following data compilation, a decision was also made to further exclude material relating to mass suicide. This was primarily because in 1997, 39 members of the Heaven's Gate community killed themselves. An examination of these stories revealed that the majority of these articles referred to a long list of previous mass suicides throughout history. This was the only mass suicide to occur within either data collection periods, and the inclusion of this information would have dramatically skewed the quantitative results. In addition, unlike individual cases of suicide, mass suicide frequently reflects an ideological point of view.

**Table 2:** Circulation Figures of Selected New Zealand Newspapers

Newspaper	Circulation (2009)
Dominion Post	91,500
New Zealand Herald	174,338
Press	85,071
Southland Times	29,002
Taranaki Daily News	25,020
Waikato Times	41,219
Sunday Star-Times*	174,254
Timaru Herald	14,038
Nelson Mail	16,925
Manawatu Standard	18,028
Dargaville Times	6,970
Truth*	90,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>716,385</b>

\*A weekly newspaper

The non-availability of electronic New Zealand Herald newspaper articles from 1997 meant these articles were obtained through a manual search of microfilms. During this search, I paid special attention to articles involving death. Before an article could be included for analysis, the cause of death (or attempt) needed to be ruled as either a suicide or suspected suicide. The database and microfilm search revealed several articles where suicide was one of several possible causes of death; as it was unclear whether a suicide had occurred, these articles were omitted.

Unlike previous New Zealand research, the current study included both New Zealand-based suicides and overseas suicide stories. This was considered a strength, as suicides occurring within New Zealand are subject to the Coroners Act, which affects details that are written about. Thereby, in order to obtain a more holistic understanding of suicide stories that the general population are exposed to, it is important to explore both New Zealand and overseas based suicide stories. In addition, unlike Thom et al's (2012) analysis which included opinion pieces, research data, policy initiatives, legal issues and statistical overviews, the current analysis was limited to the exploration of specific articles mentioning suicide ideation, attempted suicide and completed suicide. The decision to concentrate on these articles was supported by research suggesting factual suicide stories involving a victim are most likely to

contribute to suicide contagion (Blood et al., 2007; de Leo & Heller, 2008; Gould et al., 2007; Pirkis et al., 2007).

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Once suicide newspaper articles were identified, a range of qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyse them. Quantitative measures included using descriptive statistics to analyse the frequency of suicide reporting, length of articles, geography of the suicide, presence of the word suicide in the article heading, victim age, victim celebrity status, outcome (completed suicide versus attempted or idealised suicide), presence of photos, presence of any mental illness, suicide method and exploring suicide motive.

Suicide articles often contained descriptions of multiple suicide victims or the same individual engaging in a range of suicidal behaviours. As a result, in order to complete any statistical analysis, article data was collated using the following methods:

- Each individual victim described in a suicide article was included in statistics. Accordingly, an article containing descriptions of three suicides was counted as three suicide victims. As a result, there are more suicide victims than suicide articles.
- Articles containing one individual who was described as engaging in previous suicidal behaviour was counted as one individual. However, each identified suicide behaviour separately was counted under lethality (completed, attempted or thoughts), method and separate motives. Accordingly, there are more suicidal acts described than victims.
- In order to aid the understanding of the results, data is presented in percentages with actual numbers presented in brackets.

Initially, all suicide articles published within Zealand were compared across two years (1997 and 2009). This analysis was then repeated by specifically exploring a subgroup of New Zealand origin suicide articles. This subgroup analysis was completed as local suicides are subject to additional statutory reporting restrictions of the Coroners Act (2006). Therefore, investigating this subset of suicide reports will provide an indication as to whether industry adherence to the Coroners Act has changed. The analysis used an omnibus approach where different categories were initially collapsed and then compared across the two years and once this was performed, an analysis of these specific subcategories was carried out. For example, method data was collapsed into either present or absent, then analysis of the subcategories (hanging, jumping, cutting, firearms, overdose/poisoning, or other) was performed using frequency counts.

### *Qualitative Analysis*

A Qualitative Content Analysis of identified newspaper articles was used to explore how suicide was portrayed, and involved coding a range of article features such as attribution of responsibility, victim's problems, details of victim and act (i.e., name, school, celebrity status, site, method, survivors, and suicide note), attitudes towards the victim and/or the act, possible motive, explanatory model, alternative suicide coping resources and the quality of help information. Similar to Pirkis et al (2008) and Michel et al (2000), it was hypothesised that the introduction of New Zealand's suicide reporting guidelines would improve the quality of newspaper articles reporting suicide, by decreasing the amount of article features that may be likely to contribute to suicide contagion.

Before newspaper articles could be qualitatively examined, they were collectively read and reread to identify patterns and themes. Each article was further studied to examine the possible function and consequences arising from the way it was constructed. This process resulted in a number of codes being identified. The suicide articles were then examined to identify passages that were related to suicide contagion and the suicide media reporting guidelines. Articles were further read with the purpose of discovering the similarities and differences in the way that suicide was reported by newspapers in 1997 and 2009.

This chapter examined the method rationale, considerations and procedures used to examine newspaper suicide articles. The following chapter outlines the subsequent results of this analysis.



# CHAPTER THREE

## STUDY ONE: RESULTS

*There are laws to protect the freedom of the press's speech, but none that are worth anything to protect the people from the press*

*Mark Twain*

### Descriptive Features

There were slightly more suicide articles in 1997 than 2009, as shown in Table 3. The majority of suicide articles were published in the New Zealand Herald. Most of these suicides occurred in New Zealand (62% in 1997 and 64% in 2009) and suicide reporting was legally required to adhere to the Coroners Act. Despite this, suicide articles often described more than one instance of suicide and reported an individual's previous history of suicidal behaviour. This explains why in 1997, 155 identified articles reported the suicidal behaviour of 200 individuals, with 203 instances of suicidal behaviour.

**Table 3:** The Number of New Zealand Newspaper Articles Including Suicide as a Target Word in 1997 and 2009.

Newspaper	Number of Articles	
	1997 (n = 155)	2009 (n = 140)
Dominion	14% (22)	11% (16)
New Zealand Herald	43% (67)	47% (66)
Press	8% (13)	12% (17)
Southland Times	6% (10)	4% (6)
Taranaki Daily News	2% (3)	4% (6)
Waikato Times	6% (9)	6% (9)
Sunday Star-Times*	6% (9)	6% (9)
Timaru Herald	2% (3)	1% (1)
Nelson Mail	6% (9)	2% (3)
Manawatu Standard	5% (7)	4% (6)
Dargaville Times	0% (0)	1% (1)
Truth*	2% (3)	0% (0)

\*A weekly newspaper

Data is summarised in Table 4, separated into the year published (1997 or 2009). Initially all articles were analysed, then in order to further explore the impact of the Coroners Act, the analysis focused specifically on suicides occurring within New Zealand.

#### *Article Length*

While suicide was less frequently reported in 2009, the length of suicide articles that year was on average almost 41 words longer than in 1997, although this difference was not statistically significant,  $t(293) = 1.1, p = 0.3$ . Similarly, New Zealand origin suicide stories in 2009 were on average 30 words longer than in 1997,  $t(186) = 0.52, p = 0.3$ .

#### *Number of Articles*

Between 1997 and 2009, there was a decrease in the reporting of both New Zealand and overseas suicides, but this difference was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, n = 295) = 0.18, p = 0.67$ .

#### *Word "Suicide" in the Title*

Between 1997 and 2009, there was a decrease in the frequency of articles that contained the word "suicide" in the title,  $\chi^2(1, n = 295) = 5.32, p < 0.05, \phi = -0.14$  (small effect size), however, when examining New Zealand origin stories this difference was no longer statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, n = 186) = 3.8, p = 0.07, \phi = -0.14$ .

#### *Age of Victim*

Because of small numbers in the >64 year cells, this data was collapsed into the 24 to 64 year age bracket to form a 24 year plus age bracket. Between 1997 and 2009, there was a significant difference between the ages of reported suicide victims,  $\chi^2(2, n = 416) = 24.06, p < 0.05, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.24$ . This meant in 2009, there was decreased reporting of each age category, and it was increasingly common to omit participant age information, this effect size was medium. However, there was no significant difference for New Zealand origin stories  $\chi^2(2, n = 243) = 4.66, p = 0.10, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.13$ .

#### *Sex of Victim*

A comparison of articles reported in 1997 and 2009 revealed there were no statistically significant reporting differences according to the gender of suicide victims,  $\chi^2(2, n = 416) = 5.80, p = 0.06, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.12$ . However, there was a significant difference for the reporting of New Zealand victims,  $\chi^2(2, n = 243) = 13.64, p < 0.05, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.24$  (a medium effect size). This demonstrates that in 2009 suicide articles reported more frequently on New Zealand male suicide.

### *Celebrity Status*

The 2009 articles reported celebrity suicides more often than in 1997,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 295) = 5.57$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\phi = 0.15$  (small effect size). This pattern was not repeated in New Zealand origin suicide data,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 186) = 1.16$ ,  $p = 0.28$ ,  $\phi = 0.08$ .

### *Lethality*

There were no differences between the reporting of completed, attempted or suicidal thoughts between 1997 and 2009. This was both the case for all suicide stories,  $\chi^2 (2, n = 430) = 0.98$ ,  $p = 0.61$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.05$  and suicide stories with a New Zealand origin,  $\chi^2 (2, n = 256) = 0.86$ ,  $p = 0.65$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.06$ .

### *Accompanying Pictures*

In 2009, suicide reports were less likely to contain pictures or images than in 1997,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 295) = 5.45$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\phi = -0.14$ . This was a small effect size. However, there was no difference in New Zealand origin suicide stories,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 186) = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.87$ ,  $\phi = -0.09$ . When analysing whether the pictures were of victim, family or friends, suicide location or other details, there was a significant change between how this was presented in 1997 compared to 2009,  $\chi^2 (3, n = 93) = 10.05$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.33$ . This was a large effect size. In 2009, pictures were more likely to contain images of the victim or the suicide location, and less likely to contain pictures of friends or other images. This same pattern was repeated in New Zealand only data,  $\chi^2 (3, n = 67) = 13.12$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.44$ . Again, this was a large effect size.

### *Mental Illness*

The presence of any mental illness was less frequently reported upon in 2009 for all articles compared with 1997,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 416) = 5.26$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\phi = 0.11$  (a small effect size), as well as New Zealand origin articles,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 243) = 8.83$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\phi = 0.17$  (small effect size). When exploring the specific forms of mental illness reported (depression, alcohol and drugs or general mental illness), between 1997 and 2009 there was no difference in reporting patterns,  $\chi^2 (2, n = 96) = 4.90$ ,  $p = 0.09$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.22$ . Again this pattern was repeated in New Zealand origin articles,  $\chi^2 (2, n = 68) = 2.16$ ,  $p = 0.34$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.17$ .

### *Suicide Method*

Suicide method was significantly less likely to be reported in 2009 than 1997,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 430) = 20.16$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\phi = 0.17$  (a small effect size). Although this pattern was repeated in New Zealand origin articles, the difference was not statistically significant  $\chi^2 (1, n = 256) = 2.10$ ,  $p$

< 0.15,  $\phi = 0.09$ . However, between 1997 and 2009, there was a statistically significant difference between the specific types of suicide method reported (hanging, jumping, cutting, firearms, poisoning, or other categories),  $\chi^2 (5, n = 206) = 20.33, p < 0.05$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.34$  (a strong effect size). In 2009, the reporting of hanging and poisoning decreased, while the reporting of the other suicide motives increased. The proportion of suicide methods reported in New Zealand origin articles in 1997 was not significantly different from 2009 data,  $\chi^2 (5, n = 112) = 7.36, p = 0.20$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.25$ .

#### *Suicide Motive*

The reporting of suicide motive was more common in 2009 than 1997,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 430) = 20.16, p < 0.05, \phi = -0.22$  (a small effect size). This pattern was also observed in New Zealand origin suicide data,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 256) = 14.83, p < 0.05, \phi = -0.24$  (a small effect size). Between 1997 and 2009, there was a significant difference between how motive was reported (crime, relationship, financial, bullying, or other),  $\chi^2 (4, n = 266) = 27.32, p < 0.05$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.32$  (a large effect size). In 2009, the reporting of crime related motives decreased, while the reporting of all other motives increased. However, when looking at New Zealand only data there was no significant difference between 1997 and 2009,  $\chi^2 (4, n = 136) = 7.47, p = 0.11$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.23$ .

**Table 4:** Frequencies (% , *n*) of Various Features of Suicide Newspaper Articles

Article Feature	All Articles		NZ Origin Articles	
	1997 ( <i>n</i> = 155)	2009 ( <i>n</i> = 140)	1997 ( <i>n</i> = 96)	2009 ( <i>n</i> = 90)
Word "Suicide" in Title				
Present	37% (58)	24% (34)	37% (35)	23% (21)
Age of Victim				
<24	27% (54)	22% (48)	29% (35)	20% (24)
24-64	54% (107)	34% (74)	45% (54)	41% (50)
>64	1% (2)	3% (7)	1% (1)	2% (3)
Unknown	19% (37)	40% (87)	26% (31)	37% (45)
Sex				
Male	70% (140)	78% (169)	66% (80)	84% (103)
Female	21% (41)	18% (38)	23% (28)	14% (17)
Unknown	10% (19)	4% (9)	11% (13)	2% (2)
Picture				
Present	30% (47)	19% (26)	33% (32)	26% (23)
Picture of Victim	44% (27)	65% (20)	35% (13)	63% (19)
Picture of Family or Friend	27% (17)	3% (1)	32% (12)	3% (1)
Picture of Suicide location	5% (3)	13% (4)	3% (1)	13% (4)
Other	24% (15)	19% (6)	30% (11)	20% (6)
Status of Victim				
Celebrity Story	5% (7)	13% (18)	1% (1)	3% (3)
Lethality				
Completed	73% (150)	70% (158)	66% (82)	61% (80)
Attempted	19% (38)	22% (50)	23% (28)	26% (34)
Thoughts	7% (15)	8% (19)	11% (14)	14% (18)
Mental Illness				
Present	28% (56)	19% (40)	36% (43)	20% (25)
Depression	9% (18)	10% (21)	7% (8)	6% (7)
Alcohol + Drugs	4% (8)	1% (2)	5% (6)	1% (1)
General/Other	15% (30)	8% (17)	24% (29)	14% (17)
Method				
Present	57% (115)	40% (91)	48% (60)	39% (52)
Hanging	10% (21)	4% (9)	5% (6)	0% (0)
Jumping	4% (8)	8% (19)	3% (4)	3% (4)
Cutting	3% (7)	5% (12)	3% (4)	5% (7)
Firearms	7% (14)	8% (18)	7% (9)	8% (11)
Overdose/Poison	17% (34)	6% (13)	11% (14)	8% (10)
Other	15% (31)	9% (20)	19% (23)	15% (20)
Motive				
Present	51% (104)	72% (164)	41% (51)	65% (86)
Crime Related	22% (45)	11% (26)	18% (22)	17% (22)
Relationship	3% (6)	6% (14)	3% (4)	8% (10)
Financial/Work	5% (11)	18% (41)	4% (5)	4% (5)
Bully	1% (3)	4% (10)	2% (3)	2% (3)
Other	19% (39)	31% (71)	14% (17)	35% (46)

## Qualitative Analysis

This study presents suicide articles from a range of New Zealand newspapers in 1997 and 2009. The data was analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis techniques which facilitated the comparison of data between and within texts (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). In order to aid familiarisation with the data I read through it several times, after which the articles were coded into separate areas that were both prominent and repetitive. The constructed codes were also driven by suicide contagion research, where elements known to contribute to suicide contagion were specifically targeted for investigation. Therefore, careful consideration was paid towards article features such as discussions of suicide method, descriptions of motive and glorification of suicide. Furthermore, distilled themes, were then linked to its year of publication (1997 or 2009). This technique provided an efficient method of discussing the key similarities and differences between the two analysed timeframes. Identified codes included ambiguity, simplification, social changes, responsibility, an illness, sensationalism, and suicide prevention.

## Language

One of the most immediate structural distinctions between 1997 and 2009 newspaper articles on suicide was how suicide was referred to. A number of factors may be responsible for this distinction, but overseas research into suicide guideline implementation suggests the development of reporting guidelines may be responsible for reporting changes (Kuess & Hatzinger, 1989; Michel et al., 2000; Pirkis, 2008). In 1997, references to the occurrence of a suicide were consistently clear and direct. The word suicide was openly and frequently used to explain the occurrence of a self-inflicted death. Extract 1 is typical of suicide articles in 1997 and references to a self-inflicted death are made multiple times within the article.

1. *The family of a suicidal Upper Hutt woman who set fire to herself... The day before the incident she was released from hospital after being treated for another suicide attempt which involved... she attempted suicide again... the woman attempted suicide while inadvertently left unattended.*

(Guyan, 1997, p3)

This extract demonstrates that in 1997 the word suicide was frequently used. This may suggest that there was little concern about labelling a death as suicide and may indicate that the media did not believe that openly referencing a death as suicide was potentially dangerous or, if they did, they likely felt the effects would be minimal. In addition, suicide articles frequently used alternative active phrases to refer to the occurrence of suicide, such as “killed himself”, “took their own life”, and “self-inflicted death”. These phrases can be used interchangeably. However, in 1997, authors also frequently used more precise descriptors of

the suicide method to replace the word “suicide”, such as “hanged himself”, “shot himself” and “overdose”. These phrases appear to make the suicide method explicit and create visual images of how the victim died, going beyond labelling the death as self-inflicted, and serving as more attention-grabbing and sensational than the word “suicide” or “killed himself”. A minority of articles suggested the ambiguity regarding the victim’s death as a suicide, and in these articles the phrases “apparent suicide” and “no suspicious circumstances” were used. Together these results suggest that, in 1997, when a death occurred which appeared consistent with suicide, the death was openly referred to as a suicide. This may possibly reflect suicide being seen as a unique form of death, which was viewed as distinct from other means of death such as homicide, accidents or medical conditions. The frequent use of the word “suicide” appears to demonstrate that the word was not seen as taboo, or despite taboos the media used the word anyway.

In 2009, newspaper articles typically reported suicide in one of two ways. A suicide was either openly labelled as such, or more ambiguous words were used to imply the death was a suicide. Similarly to 1997, a death was directly labelled a suicide or equivalent synonyms such as “killed himself” or “self-inflicted death” were used. Again, in addition to using these labels, precise method descriptors were also used as a substitute, including phrases like “shot himself” and “hanged himself”. Throughout 2009, there was also an increase in the use of the phrase “committed suicide”, which was rarely used in 1997. The phrase “committed suicide” is particularly interesting, as the word “commit” is typically reserved for describing crimes or immoral behaviour, such as to “commit a crime” or “commit adultery” (Smith, 2002). In addition, this appears to present suicide as something that is more wilful. As suicide is not a crime, the rise in prominence of this term may reflect increasing social taboos regarding the use of the word suicide. In addition, the use of phrases describing a death as “a suicide”, or “committed suicide” rather than describing an individual “having died by suicide” serves to further reduce the victim to their mode of death. In so doing, suicide is not simply conveyed as a method of death but is now also a descriptor of the victim. Alternatively, this may suggest that a victim’s actions need illustrating to be interesting. This distinction is important as it is one example of how suicide articles in 1997 and 2009 defined the victim by their suicide. In addition, as demonstrated by the following extract, suicide articles in 2009 increasingly referred to suicide as “a failed suicide attempt” or “a successful suicide”.

2. *The deceased was unsuccessful in his first attempt to take his life, so he and the defendant then found different materials... That attempt was, sadly, successful.*  
(Teenager dies in death pact, 2009, pG1)

As illustrated above, in 2009, words such as “successful” and “unsuccessful” were frequently used to describe a suicide. Typically, the word “success” is associated with positive values and desirable events, while “failure” and “unsuccessful” is generally associated with negative events. However, in suicide reporting, the word success is used to describe a completed suicide, and unsuccessful to describe an attempted suicide. The word success is open to interpretation, with different outcomes depending upon whether we are considering an individual, family, or societal perspective. At the individual level, a completed suicide may be viewed as a success, as the victim’s actions achieved their desired outcome. However, as suicides are typically associated with death, grief, lost potential and social problems it appears incompatible to describe suicide a success. To further complicate the matter, suicide “success” is highly subjective, where there are a multitude of factors that may change the perception as to whether a suicide was a success or failure. In addition, describing a failed attempt has important underlying meanings, as not only does it describe a survivor of a suicide attempt, but it may also carry undertones that the survivor of such an attempt is also a failure.

In 2009, more ambiguous phrases were more typical. Authors often used variations such as “police are not treating any of the deaths as suspicious”, “suspected suicide”, “no suspicious circumstances”, “unnatural deaths” and “end it all”. The wide array of indirect statements referring to suicide suggests authors were less willing to concretely label a death as suicide. It also provides a level of ambiguity regarding the specific cause of death. Unlike in 1997 when suicides were openly stated, in 2009, the open reporting that a death was suicide was increasingly avoided. As a result, readers were required to read “between the lines”. Consequently, readers cannot be entirely sure whether the death was the result of suicide or due to other factors such as an accident, medical conditions or homicide. This increased use of ambiguous statements describing suicide suggests that labelling the death as a suicide was no longer a defining feature of the suicide article. The reduced use of the word suicide and rise in more ambiguous labels may fuel the perception that newspapers are less willing to discuss suicide and that the word suicide is taboo and should be avoided.

The increasing use of ambiguous statements regarding suicide was typically (but not exclusively) found in cases of New Zealand suicides. It is likely these changes reflect the industry’s attempt to adhere to the Coroners Act (2006), which states a New Zealand death cannot be labelled a suicide or suspected suicide until the Coroner (1) has ruled a death was a suicide and (2) permits the media to publish certain details of the suicide or suspected suicide (Coroners Act, 2006). The increased use of ambiguous terms appears to have allowed journalists to avoid the Coroners Act and report on suicides before the Coroner



releases the information or before they determine a suicide has occurred. The use of increasingly ambiguous terms for suicide not only increases the number of suicides that can be legally reported but it additionally serves to reduce the prominence that a suicide has in a news article and may subsequently diminish the power of a contagion effect. However, the indirect referencing of suicide may also reflect an attempt to adhere to reporting guidelines, which discourage using the word suicide in the title. Regardless of intention, the indirect referencing of suicide could be viewed positively as it may serve to avoid the powerful emotions and connotations associated with the word suicide. It may also diminish the attention grabbing and sensational nature of suicide stories. In addition, the use of substitutes makes the method of death less obvious and more ambiguous and, as a consequence, the articles appear to be less focussed on the victim's death being a suicide. In summary, the increasing use of ambiguous or coded phrases means that it is much more difficult for the audience to identify the precise cause of death, where suicide has been increasingly coded as something else. This style of reporting was also repeated in newspaper discussions of suicide motive. In 1997, suicide motive was directly stated while in 2009, references to suicide motive were more ambiguous and indirect. In addition, in 1997, suicide motive was repeatedly simplified to one key factor, while in 2009 there was a greater tendency of articles to consider additional factors. The following section expands on these ideas.

### **Suicide Motive**

Suicide motive describes the background events believed to have triggered an individual's decision to die by suicide. The causes are numerous and, in order to understand suicide, many factors should be taken into consideration such as the complex interaction of factors like psychiatric illness (which may be undetected) (Quin, 2005), external stressors (Lorant et al., 2005) and negative thinking style (Beck et al., 1985). The reporting of suicide motives appeared to be a key feature of suicide articles and in 1997 it was present in 51 per cent of articles, while in 2009 it was reported upon 72 per cent of the time. Discussing suicide motive appears to allow news articles to answer a fundamental question of "why an event did/did not occur" (Elliott, 1986). The reporting of suicide motives may also allow audience members to gain insight into why an individual killed themselves. As demonstrated throughout this section, suicide motive was either implicitly described or directly stated. In addition, motives for suicide tended to be simplified into one key factor.

### **Implicit Referencing of Motive**

In comparison to 1997, in 2009, not only was there an increase in the use of ambiguous terms to reference suicide, but there also appeared to be a change in how suicide motive was reported. In 1997, suicide motive was frequently directly stated, while in 2009 reporting of motive was more indirect. As demonstrated in extract 3, in 1997, suicide was directly reported to the audience.

3. *...committed suicide for fear his homosexual affair with another flyer was about to be exposed.*

(Brief - Air accidents, 1997, p. A11).

Here, the reader is informed that the suicide is causally related to fear that the victim's homosexual affair will be made public. In 1997, if motive was known or suspected, then it was frequently included in suicide articles. In 2009, the reporting of suicide motive was less direct or was implied rather than explicit. Extracts 4 and 5 demonstrate that, suicide motive is inferred by the absence of other information.

4. *He was found dead in his Paremoremo cell on February 5 - hours before he was to be sentenced for gunning down James Te Aute and severing the hands of Simonne Butler and Renee Gunbie during a P-fuelled rampage.*

(Der Stoep, 2009, p7)

5. *Takapuna Grammar School pupil Toran Henry, 17, is found dead at home after a video of him being beaten by other pupils was posted on the internet.... fell 80 meters to his death after teenagers sent him cruel text messages about his disfigured face.*

(Chapman & Watt, 2009, p. A1)

Despite the suicide motive not being explicitly stated, these extracts illustrate how in 2009 the motives for suicide are typically implied. These articles state the occurrence of the victim's death and then note a preceding negative life event (e.g., being sentenced for murder, physical and emotional bullying). At first glance, it seems the authors' state these events are directly related, however, a causal relationship is not overtly stated. Instead, the lack of any other information encourages readers to infer that the suicide was a response to the negative background features identified. This appears to allow the temporal relationship between events to be used to openly speculate about possible suicide motives. In 2009, motives were reported less frequently, although speculation about suicide motives suggests such information was still regarded as an important element of the news article. The following section expands on suicide motive and demonstrates how articles simplified the role of other factors in a victim's suicide.

## **Simplification**

During 1997 and 2009, a vast majority of articles portrayed suicide not as an inexplicable act that occurred without warning, but rather, a behaviour resulting from explainable motives. This repeated link suggests that whenever suicide occurs it always has an explanation and that suicide is a phenomenon that can be understood. Throughout the two timeframes, suicide articles rarely acknowledged the presence of other suicide risk factors and subsequently failed to discuss the complexity related to suicide causality. This was simplistically used to construct suicide as a result of one main identifiable event or factor. This appeared to achieve several purposes, such as allowing motive to be explained briefly, and linking suicide to one key event made an article appear more interesting and dramatic. The following extract illustrates this.

6. *...and on the day he died he had been concerned about the break-up of his relationship with his girlfriend.... Lewis' mother and step father assumed from the Coroner's comments that Lewis had taken his life because he was upset about his girlfriend breaking up with him.*

(Staff reporter, 1997, p3)

Extract 6 demonstrates how suicide motives were treated simplistically. When suicide occurs, the article suggests one reason or contributing factor explains the suicide. This appears to help reduce the fear and uncertainty around suicide, where suicide is not portrayed as something “hanging over” society that can occur without warning, but casts suicide as a response to observable events (even if only discovered in hindsight). The above extract is typical of suicide reporting particularly in 1997, where one negative trigger or event (usually external) is reported as the sole contributor to the victim's decision to kill themselves. It is likely that external factors were commonly used because they can be more easily identified (compared to prolonged emotional and cognitive difficulties which can slowly magnify over time).

Consequently, suicide appears to be portrayed as a way of dealing with apparently insoluble problems. Extract 6 also demonstrates a suicide (see introduction) which was generally viewed as a positive response. Such descriptions were more common in male suicides involving relationship break ups. These extracts appear to suggest that suicide could be viewed as an understandable reaction to personal difficulties. Consistent with social learning theory, this is likely to subsequently encourage readers going through similar experiences to identify with the victim's situation and see suicide as a solution to their problems (Bandura, 1977). The lack of any exploration of alternative actions or behaviours may further reinforce that suicide was an effective means for accomplishing a specific end.

It was uncommon for suicide articles to make a reference to the complex array of factors that may have contributed to an individual's decision to end their own life. This may suggest that when suicide motive is unable to be clearly established, it either goes unreported or is simplified as a single key factor. These extracts appear to reinforce the notion that suicide is frequently the direct result of singular events and triggers. The reported articles appear to diminish the role that multiple factors may have played in influencing an individual's decision to kill themselves. While negative events are likely to have played a significant role in the individual's decision to kill themselves, it is unlikely that these events alone led the victim to kill themselves (Beautrais, 2000).

These explanations of suicide appear to allow the media to satisfy the key question of why this event occurred. This is a fundamental media question and is important to answer when constructing a complete news story (Elliott, 1986). It appears suicide articles contained one main easy to identify, temporally related event that is likely to have played a significant role in a victim's decision to end their own life. This method of reporting suicide motive appears to serve the purpose of writing clear, concise and uncomplicated articles. In addition, as the causes of suicide can be numerous and difficult to identify, it allows suicide articles to be published quickly without extensive investigation. Furthermore, due to the private nature of suicide, the precise causes of suicide are likely to remain unknown, even following a lengthy investigation. However, the repeated failure to acknowledge or even hypothesise the role that other factors such as mental illness played in suicide may lead the causes of suicide being overly simplified to one precipitating event or issue. As demonstrated in extracts 7 and 8, many media reports which represented an oversimplification of the causes of suicide often quoted authority figures, who reinforced the link between the suicide and one precipitating event.

7. ***Suicide blamed on immigrant doctor's job woes*** (title)

*An immigrant doctor living in Auckland killed himself because he couldn't find work as a doctor, the author of a new survey on immigrant doctors claims.*

(Suicide blamed on immigrant doctor's job woes, 1997, p3).

8. *"We are investigating exactly what led to this terrible tragedy but a line of inquiry is that the parents were so overcome with grief at their son's fairly sudden death that they decided they could no longer bear to go on without him". A police source told the Daily Mail.*

(Couple jump off UK cliff with dead child, 2009, World p1).

Although the causes of suicide are diverse, interrelated, and rarely known for certain (Fowler, 2012; McKeown et al., 2006), suicide articles present clear and precise causes of suicide. As demonstrated above, suicide articles commonly contained quotes from "experts"

and authority figures stating that a singular, specific, external, negative life event or crisis has caused or prompted an individual to kill themselves. In the above extracts, Coroner's findings and the focus of police investigations appear to be used to substantiate the claims that the suicide was linked to one precipitating event (employment difficulties and death of a child). These quotes serve to draw upon the power and authority of the "legal establishment" to legitimise claims that suicide was related to one factor. As demonstrated in the above extracts, often no other detail is needed to elaborate how difficult these situations were for the victim.

In the above, it is reported that the presence of difficulties suggests life was no longer worth living and the victims decided to kill themselves. These extracts also appear to send the message that the stated causes became so overwhelming that the difficulties could not be managed by more sustainable and adaptive means. Casting aside the morals of suicide, the decision to kill oneself is conveyed as a method of escaping stressors. It is suggested the presence of these stressors meant that life no longer had value and death was a preferred alternative.

By 2009, reporting styles had slightly changed, where an increasing number of articles were less definitive in identifying singular causes and included other possible suicide motives.

Extract 9 demonstrates how suicide articles in 2009 considered alternative suicide motives.

9. *France Telecom, which is dealing with a spate of suicides many in the company have blamed on excessive work stress.... suicides that unions blame partly on layoffs and restructuring at the telecommunications giant.... Not all the France Telecom suicides were job-related and it wasn't immediately clear if the total of 23 over 18 months was more than would be expected normally in a population of 100,000, the size of the company's French work force.... Unions say some of the suicides are linked to working conditions...."We know that suicides are always a result of number of personal difficulties. But to carry it out in the workplace is a signal that there is a problem directly related to the place," Chereque said on French television station LCI ...-family and friends that said there was "total disorganisation" at France Telecom and that the company and job were responsible for his suicide.*

(Email is causing killer stress: exec, 2009, pG1)

Extract 9 presents the suicides as a possible consequence of work stress, personal difficulties or the result of other unnamed difficulties. The identification of additional suicide motives increases the gravity of the victims' personal situation and makes the suicides appear a more understandable reaction. The use of phrases such as "... many in the company have blamed on ...", "Not all the France Telecom suicides were job-related...", and

“... some of the suicides are linked to...” suggests there is uncertainty regarding the reported suicide motives, and proposes to the audience that other factors may have played a role. However, despite acknowledging other factors as a possibility, these factors are not named. Although the extract refers to the presence of alternative suicide motives, the article’s strong focus on work stress appears to reinforce the idea that alternative motives are unlikely, and that work stress was the major factor contributing to individual’s decision to kill themselves. In fact, subsequent excerpts including “a problem directly related to the place” and “the company and job were responsible for his suicide” further serve to reinforce the perception that work stress contributed to the victim’s suicide. Furthermore, as the article failed to report the suicide rate was 10 per cent higher than national averages (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009), it serves to reinforce the perception that work stress was primarily the motivator for a majority of the 23 suicides, instead of being seen as less causative by representing other factors such as normal suicide variability. Together these factors demonstrate that, while acknowledging the wider possibility that other unnamed factors may play a role in a suicide, the tendency for 2009 articles to focus on one factor simultaneously appears to diminish the role other factors may have played in the suicide.

When discussing suicide motive (in the absence of a suicide note), the topic is rife with speculation as survivors and readers want to make sense of something that (at one level) makes no sense. As a result, suicide articles are not reporting fact or knowledge, but are essentially speculating over what may or may not have contributed to someone’s decision to kill themselves. Suicide articles in New Zealand newspapers appeared to consistently simplify the causes of suicide to one apparent key issue or event. In addition, the implied association of these triggers was most commonly presented as causal. In order to support and legitimise claims that the suicides were the result of one key factor, “expert” opinion, in the form of Coroner and police reports was used to support the published conclusions. The use of simple suicide causes, even in hindsight, may also serve to facilitate blaming (other than the suicide victim) for the death. As a result, simple suicide motives are likely to make it easy to blame health professionals and other individuals for not intervening. In 2009, there was a slight change in the way suicide motive was reported, in that suicide motive was frequently ambiguously reported and journalists were less definitive in identifying singular causes and more likely to consider other contributing factors. In addition, these latter suicide articles frequently acknowledged the presence of alternative factors that may have contributed to the victim’s decision to end their life. However, rarely were these alternative factors specifically identified and the focus on one issue greatly diminished the influence of other factors.

## Social Changes

As demonstrated in the previous section, discussions of suicide motives were used to construct a clear and simplistic cause and effect explanation. The justification of suicide motives suggests that victims' deaths had meaning as they served a clear purpose. In addition to identifying motive, articles would further reinforce the perception that suicides had meaning by regularly referring to wider social changes and learnings resulting from suicide. The following extracts demonstrate that this reporting style was common in both 1997 and 2009.

10. *Ms Morris and Mr English said there had to be better awareness of suicide signals and better coordination of prevention efforts. "It is up to each and every one of us to open our eyes to the emotional state of our young people, to open our ears to what they are really saying, and to spend time with them." The Youth Affairs Ministry is leading government agencies to develop a youth suicide prevention strategy, expected to be completed in September. Ms Morris said the strategy would identify gaps in the system and how to plug them. The Government has increased funding for young people's mental health services, which were criticised by the Mason Report. A fresh mental health awareness programme will be introduced in schools next month.*  
(Bain, 1997, p1)

11. *France Telecom SA was mobilising all 20,000 of its managers in an effort to respond to a string of 23 employee suicides... France Telecom has nonetheless announced a raft of measures in response to the suicides, including suspending around 500 employee transfers that are a part of an ongoing reorganisation. Management has asked employees to watch out for signs of depression and suicidal tendencies among colleagues. On Monday the company's head of human resources held a conference call with France Telecom's 20,000 managers, who were to hold meetings with all employees. "There will be a clear message to all the managers to quickly organise local team meetings to explain what happened and what's being done, and to make sure that if there are problems they can be discussed," said company spokesman Sebastien Audra. Last year, after a series of suicides at carmaker Renault, the then-labour minister pledged to create a special government suicide monitoring agency. The current Labour Minister Xavier Darcos is to meet on Tuesday with France Telecom's chief executive to discuss the problem.*

(Email is causing killer stress: exec, 2009, pG1)

In the above extracts, the deaths are viewed as something that has resulted in the development of wider societal changes and/or key learning. The consequences of these suicides suggest suicide can result in positive changes. In extract 10, the suicide led to a series of public announcements and changes, such as calls to increase public awareness of

youth suicide signals, increased funding for youth mental health services, and the death was also used to justify the importance of the government's upcoming youth suicide prevention programme. In extract 11, the string of employee suicides prompted the company to attempt to decrease levels of employee stress, increase monitoring of vulnerable employees and have more frequent management meetings. In essence, the publication of public consequences of suicide appears to help construct an image that the deaths are not pointless and that the reported suicides served important societal purposes. This further demonstrates that the victims' deaths have a wider meaning beyond that of their families and friends by incorporating wider social changes. This framing also suggests suicide can be positive in providing an opportunity for those in authority to implement changes designed to decrease the likelihood that similar suicides will occur in the future.

The wider social changes portrayed by news articles following the occurrence of suicide appears to raise the profile of suicide. Suicide is not conveyed as an isolated act occurring in a vacuum; rather it is constructed as an event that is and will lead to wider societal changes. As an indirect result, audience members are more likely to perceive that suicide should have been prevented and that societal failings (whether national government problems or local workforce problems) are partly responsible for the suicide. Finding external fault diminishes the level of personal responsibility, where suicide victims are now subtly conveyed as a victim of circumstance rather than of an individual's deliberate decision.

It is likely the reporting of actions taken to prevent similar suicides will affect the audience in different ways. Firstly, this is likely to inform the public that suicides are a controllable phenomenon. It is further likely to assure the public that suicide prevention is a high priority, where all practical necessary steps will be undertaken to reduce the possibility of future suicides. Finally, it also informs audience members that suicide may be a way of gaining attention of community members and people who are not likely to have provided victims with what they were looking for while alive. It appears the unspoken idea behind this is that suicide is unacceptable and should be prevented. In the above extracts, the underlying theme is that these deaths could have been prevented if society was functioning effectively such as being responsive to youth needs and not creating intolerably high levels of work stress. In addition, this framing is not solely looking backwards but appears orientated towards the future to decrease the likelihood that similar suicides will occur again. The subsequent section builds further on these ideas and demonstrates how suicide articles would externally assign suicide responsibility and blame.



## Responsibility

The responsibility theme was not present in every suicide article; however, when it was present, news articles heavily focused on this feature. Similar to identifying social changes, allocating suicide responsibility appears to be used to diminish the role that an individual's motives, problems and mental illness played in their decision to end their own lives. This is consistent with the simplification construction as it encouraged suicide to be linked back to one event that "allowed" or "permitted" the suicide to occur. This further appears to diminish personal responsibility. As a result, suicide is likely to be seen as a response to external failings and less as a purposeful, deliberate act. The implication of this is that someone had to be at fault for someone else taking their own life. The most commonly criticised organisations included health services, government privacy legislations, and the prison system. Publication of deficiencies in these areas appears important as it appears to allow newspapers to serve one of their important roles of generating awareness of important health issues (Elliott, 1986), whereas failures in the private sector are less likely to impact public health. In 1997, suicide articles frequently involved lengthy explorations detailing the perceived failings in public services. The following extract demonstrates this.

12. *Her family asks why no-one was on watch. Her mother says the sheer volume of drugs should have alerted staff to the fact she was suicidal... Instead of being constantly watched she was checked every two hours. It was during one of these routine checks, at 1am, that her body was found... In her letter of complaint to the commissioner Mrs Tulloch wrote: "I cannot understand why the assessment was that Sarah was 'not suicidal' as it was only the previous day that Sarah had been admitted into the assessment ward for taking an overdose of pills." She wrote of her disbelief that the overdose was an accident, particularly since a suicide note was found among unsorted letters in her flat after her death. She has complained that health authorities withheld information, frustrating her with the Privacy Act, and that only on the day of Sarah's death was a form produced authorising the release of information. Faced with little option, said Mrs Tulloch, they had accepted that the drug counsellors and those at the hospital knew best. "If she could have got the right support I'm sure she would have got through it. That's why I'm angry with the hospital. She should have been watched."*

(Taylor, 1997, pC3)

The notion that suicide can be prevented is strongly represented in the media and, in the above extract, it has been portrayed that the victim's suicide has occurred following a series of failures, such as incorrect suicide risk classification, inappropriate levels of victim monitoring, and problems with the Privacy Act. This point was reinforced by the mother saying, "If she could have got the right support I'm sure she would have got through it." This

serves to place responsibility for the suicide onto failures with health services, and works to diminish victim responsibility. Allocating blame for a suicide appears to move responsibility to public health services to prevent suicide. Implicit in this idea is that a properly functioning health service will not provide any opportunities for a suicide to occur. This responsibility construction further highlights how suicide articles reinforced the concept that suicides are preventable. This appears to overlook literature demonstrating that suicide is a difficult phenomenon to identify, even among trained professionals (Powell, Geddes, Hawton, Deeks & Goldacre, 2000).

In addition, as illustrated in extract 12, these accounts are from one perspective and do not include alternative views, such as viewpoints from staff or representatives of the detoxification centre. However, due to confidentiality limits health service staff are unable to release this information and therefore may only be able to provide generalities. These articles also provided quotes from the victim's family, which appears to serve multiple purposes such as making the account more emotional and allowing the reader to 'step into the mother's shoes', which appear to make the death appear more tragic, and suggest the suicide appear avoidable. In addition, noting that there is a current investigation into the suicide serves to reinforce the family member's claims that their views are valid and justified. In the following extract, the construction that public health services' reported incompetence directly led to suicide is made more overt.

*13. A coroner is calling for a national legal help phone line for prisoners in police custody after a lawyer could not be found for a man who later hanged himself in his cell... Dr Bain is also recommending that police adopt a zero tolerance policy towards lapses in their procedures after a series of "frankly unbelievable" failings led to Mr McGuire's death in a Rotorua police cell. These included a lack of risk assessments after his first-time arrest over an alleged domestic incident and then placing him in the cell without relieving him of his shoelaces, drawstrings on his sweatshirt and track pants, a pounamu necklace, a bracelet, cigarettes and a lighter. Mr McGuire's name was put on the wrong cell, he was not fed, finger-printed or photographed and was not frequently monitored - despite a whiteboard instruction in the police watch house for that to happen. He was denied police bail as a matter of course, under a policy aimed at tackling domestic violence, but Dr Bain said that was not explained to him and custody officers who phoned four lawyers on his behalf were stymied by answer phone messages. The Coroner said the police acknowledged at the start of his inquest in January that procedural lapses created a circumstance in which Mr McGuire was able to take his own life.*

(Cell suicide brings call for legal help line, 2009, p1)

It appears the underlying theme of this extract is distrust, where the police may not be completely trusted to follow procedures that may have prevented a suicide. Extract 13 demonstrates the rhetoric of advocacy linking suicide to service failure. The overall tone of the article was sceptical of police care of the victim, where a series of police failures were identified as the sole determining factor that allowed the suicide to occur. As a result, the responsibility for the suicide appears to rest with the police. The wide scope of these failures is reported as severe and described as "frankly unbelievable". The scope of these criticisms were not limited to this individual case but are subsequently generalised to attack police services throughout the country. Furthermore, the acknowledgement that a previous suicide occurred in a similar circumstance diminishes police claims that they identified changes which will prevent future suicides from occurring. This extract appears to indicate that simple and obvious changes would have prevented the victim's death. However, the complexities and feasibility of these solutions was less clear in the media items.

The apparent scapegoating of suicide responsibility serves to diminish and ignore the role that other factors played in the victim's suicide. In addition to diminishing personal responsibility, this theme fails to acknowledge that an individual determined to kill themselves can be very difficult to stop. As a consequence, this frames the suicide victim as someone who did not necessarily want to die, and that any suicidal behaviour reflects a cry for help or attention seeking. Therefore assigning heavy responsibility for a suicide to external agencies is likely to distort reader's understanding of why the suicide occurred.

In 1997, attributing suicide responsibility to external failures was generally only one element of the story, and the article featured numerous other details, such as victim details and suicide method. However, in 2009, the attribution of suicide to public and private sector perceived failings occurred far less frequently. This may reflect articles in 2009 less frequently reporting suicide as a response to one or two simple events. As a result, in 2009 it is not as easy to blame health workers or government agencies for a suicide. When articles did report this, it was a detailed discussion and became the article's primary focus. This may suggest a number factors such as, the quality of public services has improved where there are less opportunities for them to be held responsible for suicides, or when suicides do occur within public service settings there is significant ambiguity regarding the role of the public sector in permitting the suicide to occur.

### **An Illness**

Portrayals of mental illness shared similarities with discussions of suicide motive and assigning responsibility, as these sections attempted to explain and justify why a suicide

occurred. However, unlike these latter topics that were often discussed in detail, descriptions of victim mental illness tended to be brief or simply omitted. In 1997 and 2009, descriptions of mental illness was only present in 9 to 10 per cent of all articles. This was somewhat unexpected as mental illness is strongly linked to suicide where 90 per cent of suicide victims have a diagnosable mental disorder (McKeown et al., 2006; Quin, 2005). Although, the low reporting of the victim's health status may reflect that an individual's health status was a sensitive and private matter which people were less willing to discuss with the media. This current section explores how mental illness was constructed in suicide stories and explores how it has changed between the two investigated timeframes.

The vast majority of suicide articles in 1997 paid little attention to mental illness, and any mention of mental illness was brief and "matter of fact". When mental illness was discussed it was generally talked about in generic terms, usually with no information available about whether victims were formally diagnosed and no descriptions outlining the degree of distress the victim was experiencing. Typically an individual's difficulties were externally located and suicide was seen as a response to external triggers, such as relationship break ups and work difficulties. As shown in the following quotes, when mental health issues were reported they were very brief: "... a depressed Lithuanian", "... a recovering alcoholic", "... state of depression", "... psychopath Christopher Lewis" and "He was a schizophrenic in acute need...". In these quotes, the presence of mental health features was briefly linked to an individual's decision to kill themselves and it is unlikely that these descriptions adequately explain the role of mental illness in suicide.

Further marginalising the role of mental illness was the tendency to not specify which specific disorder was affecting the victim. However, when reporting other causes for suicide, other factors such as "email work stress" were precisely identified. Instead of identifying specific mental health difficulties, generic terms such as "mentally ill" were used. In extract 14 readers are not told what, if any, mental illness the victims were experiencing. The audience is simply informed that, prior to their suicides, the two victims required admission to a psychiatric unit.

*14. The two suicides in Tauranga's psychiatric unit, Ward 17, over the past month, are an unspeakable tragedy for the families involved, and all their friends.*

(Unhelpful approach, 1997, p6)

Collectively, when specific mental illnesses were described, suicide articles identified a wide array of disorders. This serves to develop a variable presentation of suicide, where suicide is not simply linked to depression but other disorders such as drug and alcohol dependence and schizophrenia. This appears to inform readers that the presence of mental illness can

increase an individual's risk of suicide. This variable presentation of mental illness appears to further increase the difficulty in predicting and preventing those at risk of suicidal behaviours. The infrequent and brief reporting of mental illness serves to diminish the significant role mental health plays in suicide. However, when considering the availability of information combined with the task of the journalist to report the death (instead of engaging in a detailed analysis of possible explanations of suicide), it is not surprising that mental health speculations are brief and superficial.

In 2009, mental illness was less frequently reported than in 1997. However, when mental health issues of a suicide victim were discussed, they were generally discussed in greater detail and the victim's experience of mental illness became more prominent. During 2009, mental health problems were reported as the underlying factor in a victim's suicide attempt. Suicidal individuals were described as having singular or multiple problems. As a result, suicidal behaviour began to carry a meaning of greater pathology. The idea that suicide is associated with greater illness appears to increase the depiction of victim's distress, as this extract illustrates:

*15. A Christchurch prisoner with severe depression, psychosis, and a history of self-mutilation committed suicide after being transferred from a special care unit to a general cell ... had been diagnosed with "major depressive disorder, recurrent, severe with psychotic features and psychotic depression". He had spent the four years leading up to his death in the prison's designated care unit (DCU). His symptoms included "not eating, not drinking, total mutism and complete social withdrawal". One psychotic episode in September 2004 involved self-mutilation of his genitals.*

(Steward, 2009, p1)

In 1997, there was quite a change. Suicide articles appeared to underpathologise and decrease the important role that mental illness generally played in influencing an individual's decision to end their own life, while the trend in 2009 was for mental illness and individual distress to be a more significant aspect of the overall article. In extract 15 phrases like "severe depression, psychosis, and a history of self-mutilation", "diagnosed with 'major depressive disorder, recurrent, severe with psychotic features and psychotic depression'", "symptoms included "not eating, not drinking, total mutism and complete social withdrawal" and "self-mutilation of his genitals" create an image of a very distressed, disturbed and vulnerable individual. Readers are left with the impression that the suicide was likely to be a response to his difficulties and, given his distress, his suicide was almost to be expected. This extract also locates the pathology of suicide within the individual with a mental illness.

In this way, external stressors are not presented as the sole rationale for suicide, which is considered to be deeper than externally observable behaviours.

Extract 15 illustrates how suicide was associated with high levels of mental illness in 2009 articles. In addition, these articles frequently framed the individual as being distressed, vulnerable, and with little control and influence over their behaviour. The reporting of multiple mental diagnoses further serves to reinforce the construction that the increased number or severity of disorders is associated with a greater likelihood of killing yourself. This is likely to help the audience establish the connection between suicide and mental distress and illness. Consequently, this appears to create a more realistic image of suicide. The illness theme functions to create the idea that the client was “ill”. Viewing a suicide victim’s behaviour through this construction suggests that any behaviours exhibited are additionally a product of mental illness. This could also suggest that, due to mental illness, the victim was not personally responsible for their actions. The repeated referral to mental illness functions to maintain the belief that the majority of those who kill themselves are mentally unwell. The next extracts from 2009 demonstrate how suicide victims were seen as passive sufferers of illness.

*16. The first time it happened, she was 13. "I was in a lot of distress and everything just felt overwhelming . . . I didn't remember doing it but became aware I was bleeding. I guess I was still in shock, I thought, 'How the hell did that happen?' "For the next few years, self-harming became her main coping strategy for dealing with distress and depression. Even in summer, she would wear long sleeves, trousers and tights to hide the cuts. It's hard to understand how someone could feel "helped" by such self-destructive behaviour, but Jess felt she had no other way to communicate what was happening to her inside.... Despite the involvement of mental health services in her life from birth - because of her mother's serious mental illness - the pattern of hurting herself started very early. Her father remembers that as a pre-schooler, Jess would scratch herself in her sleep till she bled. Her mother took her own life when Jess was 9, and for many years, she felt fated to follow the same tragic path. Admitted to hospital at 14 after a suicide attempt, she came under the formal care of mental health services, for better - and occasionally - worse.*

(Hill, 2009, pC6)

This extract creates an image of an individual who is obviously distressed. Jess’ fragile mental state was developed by using the victim’s own statements for personalising distress and pleas from her father. Statements referring to the life-long involvement of mental health professionals, the engagement in behaviours she was unaware she was committing, and family history of suicide appear to help create the impression that her suicide should have

been forecasted and her suicide attempts should have been prevented. The increased prominence of mental health reporting takes away the act of suicide as a deliberate choice of an individual, rather an individual's suicide is associated with mental illness. This has created an elaboration of suicide motive, where suicide motive is not simply the response to one stressor, but also may also involve complex mental health needs. Articles in 2009 were more likely to report on these needs and link the presence of these difficulties to suicide. The presence of (severe) mental illness suggests suicide victims are impaired, not thinking rationally and subsequently suggests they are not completely responsible for their actions. This implies that suicide can be prevented if those experiencing mental illness receive help. In 2009, suicide articles demonstrated a wider variety of reasons explaining why someone decided to kill themselves to include the presence of varied mental health difficulties. When this information is combined with suicide motive and responsibility, it suggests that in each year investigated, suicide is either portrayed as an external force or an irresistible internal "illness" that the person is too unwell to fight. Each of these points of view appears to diminish the level of personal control of suicide, where articles do not reinforce individual choice, power and intention to die.

### **Sensationalism**

The previous sections explored how suicide reporting has changed between 1997 and 2009. Until now, most these changes were subtle such as in 2009 when there was an increasing use of ambiguous references to suicide, and articles were less definitive in identifying suicide motive. However, this section reveals that between the compared years there were many changes in sensational characteristics of suicide articles. By its very nature, any suicide news coverage tends to be sensational, as stories of unexpected and/or violent death result in heightened audience interest (de Leo & Heller, 2008). This section outlines my classifications of the elements of sensational reporting and their role. While the topic of suicide is often viewed as exciting and dramatic, suicide news stories frequently contained additional elements to make the reporting appear increasingly sensational and dramatic. Unlike previous sections, this section is particularly large as articles contained range of distinct elements which contributed to make suicide reporting sensationalised. Such sensational elements included the focusing on positive victim characteristics, grieving reactions, emotional reporting, glorification, romantic portrayals, and morbid details. The following section will expand on each of these features, to analyse these and explore how they have changed in the two years analysed.

## **Glorification of suicide**

In 1997, suicide articles would occasionally glorify the victim as a martyr and object of public adulation. Typically these characteristics were reserved for celebrity deaths, however, this trend was also present in teen suicides. These portrayals not only glorify and dramatise suicide, but also they appear to honour the suicide victim. In addition, this glorification has allowed the victim to be elevated and reach a level of societal honour and fame that was not possible while the victim was alive, where suicide even catapults celebrities into further infamy. These factors may contribute to suicide contagion by suggesting to susceptible persons that society is honouring the suicide behaviour of the deceased person. The following extract demonstrates this.

### **17. *Living fast, dying young* (title)**

*Until a week ago, the world was only vaguely aware of Michael Hutchence. His was a name of significance only to a particular sub-group of rock music fans (mostly female) and to devourers of tabloid show-business gossip. But in death the Australian singer and boyfriend of British TV presenter Paula Yates has become one more addition to the tragic roll of celebrities whose names acquire instant recognition by virtue of their untimely deaths... Hutchence's self-inflicted death in a plush Sydney hotel has brought his name to the notice of a wider world. By fulfilling the cynical injunction first laid down in Willard Motley's novel *Knock On Any Door* - "Live fast, die young and leave a good-looking corpse" - he has assured himself of near-mythic status. Rock music's pantheon, first occupied by Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens in 1958, must by now be getting crowded.*

(Living fast, dying young, 1997, p6)

The extract explicitly states that the victim's suicide catapulted the performer into instant global stardom, "he has assured himself of near-mythic status". This quote states that the musician's suicide has guaranteed that he will now be viewed as a legend. This image is reinforced by comparing his rise in stardom to celebrity deaths of highly celebrated and remembered musicians, Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens. Although the article suggests that this happens too often, it appears to reinforce the link that it was solely the musician's suicide that made the public take notice and acknowledge his talents. Therefore it appears it is the victim's suicide and not necessarily his talents that have made him internationally renowned. This may create the unrealistic image that suicide is a glorified act associated with publicity, power and immortality. In addition, the glamour of the victim appears to overcome other aspects such as the presence of mental health issues or prolonged personal stress. The victim's sudden unexpected death is likely to increase the victim's status as a martyr and the level of admiration and/or pre-occupation for the victim and suicide. Articles that glorified suicide still continued to occur in 2009, however, these articles were rare.



## Victim Characteristics

Descriptions of the victim and their background appeared to be an essential aspect of each suicide article. Suicide articles generally either provided brief victim details or extensive details relating to who the person was and their life situation. As demonstrated below, in 1997 and 2009, when brief background details were supplied, they were usually limited to minimal facts related to the person's name, age, sex, location, and employment.

18. *Takapuna Grammar School pupil Toran Henry, 17...*

(Chapman, & Watt, 2009, pA1)

19. *West Auckland carpenter Mark Whittome. The 27-year-old...*

(Lewis, 1997, p8)

In these stories, the articles focused on other details such as the method and potential suicide motives. These brief descriptions are likely to make it hard for readers to identify with the victim because they remain a 'faceless' stranger. Lengthy victim details were usually provided if the victim was of high public profile, a youth or teenager, or if the death was linked to external causes or failures. Throughout 1997, one consistent theme in these detailed accounts was that the deceased was consistently constructed as likeable and their positive characteristics were frequently identified and discussed. This may allow readers to share similarities and creates an opportunity to feel empathy and sympathy. The following extract illustrates this.

20. *"Sarah was the light of our family," said her older sister Louise. "She was the most enthusiastic of all of us. And she was my best friend." She was perhaps also the most sensitive. The bad and sad of society were not lost on her. But her introspection and melancholy had not been cause for alarm... Sarah had the looks to follow Louise into modelling but it seemed more likely she would have found a career where she could use her artistic talent. She had filled a notebook of pencil, ink and crayon sketches which showed real ability. She had talked of becoming a clothes designer and even had a name for her label... It did not matter that she was honourable, the most likely of the Tulloch siblings to join marches for causes such as the environment and animal welfare... She felt the wrongs in the world too acutely and took them too personally. "She would be so sad for a friend's hurt," Louise recalls. "At times it was like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders.*

(Taylor, 1997,C3)

The above extract is typical of the descriptions of the deceased. In 1997, suicide articles primarily focused on the victim's positive attributes and aspects of their life. Numerous positive qualities of the victim are outlined ranging from her childhood behaviour to her future dreams and aspirations. Among other things, the victim is presented as a fun, enthusiastic, sensitive, caring, attractive, artistic, honourable, and talented teenager. Quotes from the

victim's sister are used to reinforce this point. This construction appears to reinforce the tragedy of the death, as the deceased was identified as an immensely valuable individual who had a bright future and the potential to make a positive and valuable contribution to society. Cases which heighten the suicide as a tragedy are typically associated with the victim's age, where the victims are generally at an age where they were full of potential and could have done so much more with their lives.

The victim is painted as anyone's and everyone's son or daughter, which is likely to evoke empathy for this broken figure. The focus of these accounts on positive features may create an unbalanced image of the deceased, where negative victim features or angry reactions are not discussed. This construction may reflect society's attitudes to the recently deceased where people accentuate the positive features and avoid the negatives (O'Rourke, Spitzberg & Hannawa, 2011). However, the tendency to focus exclusively on positive features is likely to give readers the impression that suicide will lead others to focus on the victim's positive features and grieve, which in turn is likely to make suicide a more attractive option to vulnerable individuals, especially those who rarely receive any positive reinforcement for desired behaviours. Therefore, this construction helps create a positive image of suicide, where it becomes a method of obtaining positive recognition. By focusing on positive features, articles rarely mentioned troubles and problems the deceased was experiencing. Social Learning Theory has been used to explain how this construction of suicide is likely to increase the likelihood of suicide contagion (Stack, 2003). According to the Social Learning Theory, vulnerable individuals are more likely to imitate the actions of desirable people or positive models (Gould et al., 2003). Alternatively, positive victim descriptors could reflect an attempt to emphasise the sense of loss and tragedy of a suicide. Such descriptors may also provoke greater reader emotional reaction to the story, which is likely to further contribute to contagion (O'Carroll & Potter, 1994).

In 2009, the descriptions of suicide victims changed. Unlike 1997, in 2009 the writing styles were more diverse and complicated. The writing could be separated into one of three common categories: articles predominantly portraying positive victim characteristics, articles portraying negative characteristics and articles acknowledging both positive and negative qualities. Articles portraying positive victim characteristics were consistent with articles presented above and consequently do not need to be elaborated on. The next extract reveals a change in victim construction, demonstrating how a large proportion of suicide articles would primarily focus on the victim's negative features.

21. *On word of the death of Antonie Dixon last week, the immediate and predictable response was at least he had saved the country from further expenditure... He died,*

*at 40, a murderer whose life was dictated by a drug addiction... Dixon's tragic life, and the tragedy he wrought, was the result of the environment he grew up in and his own vulnerability to addiction. Like William Bell and Graeme Burton, the addict became a killer. Dixon was a monster... Like Nia Glassie, he was abused as a child. Ironically, there were stories about both being hung on clotheslines and abused by adults. Courts were told that as a child Dixon did not speak - he barked like a dog. Nia Glassie did not have the chance to grow, and it was to the cost of a lot of people that Dixon did. Antonie Dixon did not become a killer solely because of his addiction to P. It is unlikely he would ever have led a normal life under any circumstances...Yet in court this manipulative and vicious career criminal showed himself to be an intelligent person.*

(The tragedy of Antonie Dixon, 2009, p4)

Although this extract is of a high profile person, it is representative of similar articles involving convicted or suspected criminals. Although it could be argued that these victims warrant a negative description, despite reporting less on crime, suicide articles in 2009 predominantly outlined the negative features of the victim. In the above extract, numerous negatives of the victim's childhood to adulthood are detailed, ranging from childhood abuse and drug addictions to criminal convictions. The victim was described as a "monster", a "manipulative and vicious career criminal" and repetitively described as a "killer". It appears this construction serves two main purposes; it firstly distances the reader from the victim, as the victim is seen as very unlikeable and dangerous. This is likely to reduce audience empathy for the victim, where suicide is not conveyed as a tragedy. Secondly, due to the negative victim behaviours the suicide is conveyed as a neutral or even desirable outcome. In the above extract, the suicide was framed as socially and financially beneficial. The article reports that his suicide means that "he had saved the country from further (legal) expenditure" and that society is safer as the victim can no longer harm anyone. There is also an implied level of justice where the victim deserved to die due to his crimes. As a result, the theme of this account is that society is now better off. The article's predominant negative focus also suggests that due to the victim's long history of negative experiences, his suicide was a long time in the making. In this way the person's life was portrayed as destructive and their suicide as a likely consequence of their lifestyle and/or upbringing. Details outlining the level of childhood abuse, combined with descriptions of him barking like a dog suggests that the deceased had little opportunity to live a 'normal' life.

The next extract demonstrates the final construction of suicide victims in 2009, which conveyed both positive and negative features of the deceased.

22. *He wasn't a P freak. He wasn't a lone extremist. By all accounts, Jan Molenaar was simply a tense, angry man who broke... had stored away his fury at "racist" police, his fury at P-dealing gangs, his grief at his brother's suicide... For a man first described as a loner, Jan Molenaar, 51, had a lot of people who called themselves friends... Neighbour Paul McKee said: "He would look after our place when we were away. He was a good neighbour... were a normal family with normal issues... At the gym, he built up his impressive physique, allegedly with the aid of steroids. Those drugs may have pumped him with aggressive testosterone hormones... He "absolutely detested" gangs and drugs..." Rollinson said Molenaar had a temper on him, though. "If you know him you know how to talk to him."*

(Napier shooting: Inside the mind of a killer who 'snapped', 2009, p1)

It is likely that the above extract paints a more detailed and balanced image of the suicide victim as this portrayal includes both positive and negative features. Positive features included being a good neighbour, pro-social interests, physically health and strength, being tidy, anti-gang attitudes, and having pro-social supports. Identified negative features included anger difficulties, steroid use, and anti-police attitudes. It also appears that different people had conflicting ideas about the victim's problems with anger and attitude towards drug use. This article serves to debunk many myths about the victim being a "P freak" and "lone extremist" and attempts to construct the victim not as a horrible person who is simply defined by his offending and death, but as a person with both positive and negative traits. In addition this portrayal acknowledges the presence of several suicide risk factors, including drug use, family history of suicide, and traits of anger. While none of these factors are explicitly linked to the victim's suicide, it suggests that the suicide may be the result of more than the initially reported trigger (inability to escape police). This portrayal appears less likely to contribute to suicide contagion as the negative victim characteristics are still discussed and suicide appears to be the result of numerous factors (Blood & Pirkis, 2001).

In 1997, when victim details were expanded upon, suicide articles primarily portrayed their victims in a positive frame. This portrayal helped reinforce the view that each suicide was a tragedy. Furthermore, lengthy positive descriptions of the deceased are likely to increase the likelihood that the audience identified with the victim (through shared experiences) and may subsequently contribute to suicide contagion (Blood & Pirkis, 2001). In 2009, negative portrayals were associated with criminals and disliked public figures, and these presentations appeared to convey the victim as 'unlikeable' and as a consequence the suicide was not an undesirable outcome. On the other hand, suicide articles which provided positive and negative victim details appeared more likely to construct and develop a more balanced image of the deceased and the difficulties and distress associated with suicide.

## Sympathetic Reporting

Many suicide articles were short and provided few details, however, where sympathy was expressed, the article suggested that the victim was deserving of sympathy. In 1997 and 2009, victims were portrayed as being overwhelmed with stressors beyond the tolerance levels with which they were able to cope. In order to portray the victim in a sympathetic light, the suicide victim was frequently represented as innocent, weak and vulnerable. It appears the role of these sympathetic portrayals is to heighten the level of reader emotion and invest more heavily in the struggles of the deceased. Extracts 23 and 24 elicit reader sympathy for the victim.

**23. *Youth suicides linked to 'sexting' but trend rises* (title)**

*13-year-old Hope Witsell hanged herself after relentless taunting at her school near Tampa, Florida. She had sent a nude photo of herself to a boy she liked, and another girl used his phone to send the picture to other students who forwarded it along....and last year in Cincinnati, 18-year-old Jessica Logan hanged herself after weeks of ridicule at school. Logan had sent a nude cell phone picture*

(Youth suicides linked to 'sexting' but trend rises 2009, Technology, General p1)

**24. *Fear of attacker prompted prison suicide* (title)**

*A prisoner, who had been raped by another inmate, killed himself after learning his attacker was being brought back to the same prison, prison sources say.... However, Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse Trust manager Ken Clearwater said knowing that the convicted attacker, gang member Dean Noble, was coming back to the prison would have had a "massive effect" on Maxwell. "It would definitely traumatise him. Even (if they were kept separate) just that Noble was within the same space would have affected him." ... Maxwell was repeatedly raped in Christchurch Men's Prison in 2005, after being placed in the same cell as Noble, a violent gang member. A prison source said Maxwell, 24, committed suicide after other inmates taunted him that Noble was being brought back to the prison. ... He was transferred back to Christchurch Men's Prison, and "he finally snapped", she said. He feared for his safety for testifying against Noble, Litt said.*

(Fear of attacker prompted prison suicide, 2009, General p3)

Extracts 23 and 24 are examples of how the text pulls on the heartstrings of readers who are encouraged to sympathise and feel pity for the victims. The expressions of sympathy are found in the inclusion of quotes from community services and reporting the unfairness of the victim's plight. The perspective builds on the ideas that no one likes being a victim, wants to suffer in misery or wants to live with the prospect of on-going physical or emotional torment. More sympathy appeared to be expressed with uncontrolled life events, such as being raped than suicide associated with drug abuse. Sympathetic portrayals appear to increase a

reader's ability to understand the shame, humiliation and fear involved in the suicides. Through the language used, readers are encouraged to empathise with the victims as they were the victims of stressors such as "relentless taunting" and "weeks of ridicule". In addition, these extracts help the reader come to the conclusion that, due to the amount of victim distress and perceived lack of victim control, their suicide appears a justifiable and understandable response to their stressors. A simple cause and effect narrative is employed for this purpose. Framing suicide in this way is likely to make the victim's suicide more understandable. These sympathetic portrayals may also fuel the concept of diminished responsibility, where external factors, in this case bullying and the imminent arrival of the victim's sexual attacker, caused the suicides.

By portraying the suicide motives in a sympathetic manner, it is difficult for readers to justify any negative reaction to the victim's decision to kill themselves. In addition, by not discussing the negative consequences of suicide, the authors indirectly promote the concept that the suicides were justifiable, understandable and an increasingly attractive reaction for the victim. The presentation of ongoing difficulty is predicted to continue into the future. The victim's decision to kill themselves because their life was so miserable serves to make the victim's death even more tragic. The perceived unusual nature of the suicide motives may have resulted in the article eliciting increased emotion to the explanations for the suicides. Perhaps this more sympathetic attitude towards suicide may encourage others to attempt suicide when faced with similar crises because they view it with greater compassion. In addition, as empathic portrayals are likely to encourage audience members to help those in need, it may encourage them to support proposed initiatives designed to prevent these suicides from being repeated again in the future (Cialdini, Schaller, Houlihan, Aips, Fultz, & Beaman, 1987).

### **Shocking Headlines**

News headlines briefly summarise an article and direct reader attention towards it. Throughout 1997 and 2009, it was common for suicide articles to not only contain neutral headlines but to also contain provoking and attention-grabbing features. These suicide headlines not only serve to sensationalise suicide but can create false fears and misinform the public. Below are a selection of such headlines from 1997 and 2009.

25. *Email is causing killer stress: exec* (Email is causing killer stress: exec, 2009, pG1)

26. *Horrific suicide epidemic has cops alarmed* (Lewis, 1997, p8)

27. *Man hangs himself online* (Man hangs himself online, 2009, pW1)

28. *Cluster of suicides strikes the region* (Cluster of suicides strikes the region, 2009, p3)

- 29. *Billionaire ends it all under express train* (Billionaire ends it all under express train, 2009, pG1)
- 30. *Shame led to throat cutting* (Shame led to throat cutting, 2009, pA8)
- 31. *Why did she have to die?* (Taylor, 1997, pC3)
- 32. *Living fast and dying young* (Living fast, dying young, 1997, p6)
- 33. *A tragedy for family, friends and country* (*A tragedy for friends, family and country* 1997, p6)

The above extracts frame the events as a crisis and report on the more dramatic aspects of the suicide. Extracts 25 and 26 are particularly provocative and use misleading headlines to draw reader attention to the body of the article. The headline “Email is causing killer stress” appears sensational as the body of the article explained the suicides as primarily a response to large layoffs and work stress (rather than email). In addition, the phrase “suicide epidemic” appears an exaggeration as the article refers to two suicides with the same unusual method (involving nail guns) occurring within one month. “Shame led to throat cutting” and “Billionaire ends it all under express train” are both examples of headlines involving rare events that may be designed to heighten reader interest. Extracts 31, 32, and 33 are examples where the reporting has focused on the emotion of the deaths. Sensational and dramatic headlines are likely to encourage more audience members to read the article to satisfy the intrigue and alarm that these headlines create. The suicides represented in these headlines are not representative of ‘typical’ suicides and the sensational reporting of extreme cases may distort the public’s perceptions of suicide where usual or extreme suicide behaviours are seen as the norm or perhaps as less unusual or extreme. This may create false public fears, where people become unnecessarily concerned. In addition, the increased use of sensational and shocking headlines may desensitise the public to suicide.

### **Romantic Portrayals**

Unlike 2009, in 1997, a number of stories conveyed suicide as a romantic behaviour. Although not particularly common, when these portrayals were present they were prominent. Romantic constructions appeared to be utilised to frame suicide as a positive and meaningful event. Romantic portrayals of suicide were frequently used to convey several messages such as suicide as a means of punishing someone you love, forcing someone to express their love for you, being reunited with the deceased, expressing great love, and an escape from feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. As illustrated below, these accounts appeared to pay a high degree of attention to precise non-relevant glamorous details such as what the victim was wearing and how they looked. In addition to romance, these accounts tended to convey images of wealth, drama and intrigue.

#### **34. *Suicide Reveals Snowdon’s Secret Love* (title)**

*London- On New Year's Eve, Ann Hills dressed up to die in a black party dress and stiletto heeled shoes. She wrote several notes, including one asking for library books to be returned. She then took a cocktail of drugs, washed down some champagne, and lay down for the last time in her \$NZ900,000 London penthouse. Probably just after that, a message was left on her answerphone. The caller used a codename to identify himself. He apologized for not being able to see her for a few days and ended his message by saying chin-up... The caller was Lord Snowdon, Princess Margaret's former husband. He and Ann Hills had been, unknown to almost everyone, lovers for almost 20 years... A shockwave went through Snowdon's exotic friends. She was the one love that they knew almost nothing... She was a freelance journalist who met Lord Snowdon at a press conference. A few days later she turned up at his home, and said she wanted an interview and added: "But I also want to have an affair with you." And so it started... Lord Snowdon shortly afterwards to Mrs Hill's utter surprise, married Lucy Lindsay-Hogg. Neither woman had known about the other. Despite the marriage and Mrs Hill living with a number of other men, their relationship continued until the end. Whoever she was with, Lord Snowdon would always have visiting rights.*

(Suicide Reveals Snowdon's Secret Love, 1997, p1)

As illustrated in extract 34, the act of suicide was made more dramatic and glamorous by focusing on the secret 20 year love affair and highlighting specific suicide details. The article was very precise and outlined elegant behaviours, such as the victim getting dressed up to die and drinking champagne. The use of emotionally loaded provocative descriptions such as "black party dress and stiletto heeled shoes", "cocktail of drugs, washed down some champagne", and "lay down for the last time" suggests her suicide was not a desperate attempt of escape from someone in crisis, but rather a glamorous, deliberate and elegant act. Ann took time to write several notes, including one asking for her library books to be returned. It appears the major purpose of including non-relevant details like these is to construct the suicide as an elegant and romantic act. The deliberate manner in which this death was portrayed appears to create an image that the suicide was a calculated and rationale decision. This extract raises an interesting juxtaposition between the internal emotional turmoil and desperation of a person's decision to kill themselves with a description of suicide as elegant and graceful. Suicide reports like these construct suicide as a desirable and positive act, which may increase the article's imitative effects.

Although not openly stated, the absence of other information implies relationship difficulties contributed to the victim's death. Audience interest and speculation is further heightened by the mysterious codenamed caller, who the article suggests called moments too late to



prevent the victim's suicide. This appears to further create the perception the suicide was a poetic tragedy, involving peaceful sleep that will provide escape from feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. In addition, the failure of the article to acknowledge other factors such as mental health difficulties or bodily reactions from the overdose maintains the false image that the victim's death was quick and painless. Repeated exposure to these types of stories may inadvertently suggest that suicide is an appropriate and normalised expression of love. In 2009 portrayals like this were extremely rare, which may demonstrate a change in reporting practices where the media were no longer willing to portray suicide as a romantic expression of love.

### **Grieving Reactions**

Particularly in 1997 and less in 2009, newspaper articles contained frequent discussions of friends' and family members' outpouring of grief and expressions of regret. It appears this was used to reinforce audience sympathy and audience perceptions of loss, and to demonstrate the ongoing confusion and pain of individuals affected by suicide. In 1997, many articles discussed parent and friend confusion and mourning, adding to the tragedy. As a result, similar to the glorification and positive victim construction, readers are likely to infer that suicide is associated with a level of fame and a way to be remembered. The following example illustrates this.

**35. A tragedy for family, friends and country (title)**

*When a 14-year-old Hamilton schoolgirl took a handful of pills and ended her own life earlier this year, her school was in a state of shock for days. The teenager showed promise. She was a bubbly and talented young dancer; a member of the junior council. Her classmates wept in the playgrounds and many were sent home to grieve. "It was", said the headmaster at the time, "a most tragic time for all concerned."... Every nation has high hopes for its youth. It is they who hold the key to future prosperity and peace. If many of them despair of their future and take their own life, it is not only a dreadful tragedy for their families and friends, it is a damning indictment on the society in which they live.*

(A tragedy for family, friends and country, 1997, p 6).

In this example, the suicide victim is painted as a promising young individual, and described as "bubbly" and a member of multiple groups. The focus here is on the impact the behaviours have on those left behind who have difficulties accepting the suicide. Students are sent home to grieve and the suicide is described as "a most tragic time" and a "tragedy for family, friends and country". The effect of this is to construct suicide deaths as something that is tragic and widely felt. Therefore, occurrence of suicide means more than just the death of an individual, as the death is associated with a more public grieving, cementing how

much the victim will be missed. Descriptors like these appear to contribute to the development of the image that suicide often results in widespread grief. This point is further highlighted by stating the victim's decision to kill herself is a "damning indictment" on our society. Generally, descriptions outlining how a specific behaviour may cause pain in others could be viewed as an attempt to deter that behaviour. Consequently, with regard to suicide reporting, this style of reporting could be viewed positively. However, suicide appears unique in that descriptors of others' grief and pain may make suicide appear more attractive as it may encourage potential victims to see suicide as a way of obtaining desired attention or as a method to punish others (Stack, 2003). The following extracts further illustrate the difficulties facing grieving family members.

**36. Youth suicide scares deeply** (title)

*A veteran radio talk-back host and Manukau City councillor Ewing Stevens, said his son Jason's suicide in 1988 was a horrific shock for the family. "His death is with us daily. We respect his right to finish his life but we regret that we can't change it. If we hear a song that he loved come on it really breaks you." ... It doesn't feel as if we have come very far," Sue Bradford said, "Sometimes it seems we don't cope all that well. We have a special place here on the farm where we have buried his ashes and planted some native trees and we sometimes have a special time with him. But still I have trouble talking about it. In some ways it has brought the family closer. We treasure each other and are more conscious about the time we have together.*

(Youth suicide scares deeply, 1997, p1)

In this example, suicide is described as a significant event; something that has changed the lives of all family members. Individuals are still grieving and experiencing difficulty years after the suicide, where one parent still thinks daily about his son nine years after his death. The pain of suicide is captured as constant and that will never go away or get easier with time. The survivors of suicide are taken to personal lows. In addition to promoting strong grieving reactions, discussions of grief can also be viewed as affirming life. This is achieved by reflecting on the value and worth of the suicide victims and the importance of each life. However, the focus on death and loss in these stories often results in any positive life affirmations remaining hidden in the background. The phrase "we respect his right to finish his life" was particularly interesting as it is one of the few times an article would acknowledge and respect the victim's own rights to control their body and life. This is an important point as it recognises death is a private matter and promotes the victim's own responsibility and control in ending their life. This appears to contrast starkly the vast majority of suicide articles which appear to diminish individual control by portraying suicide as a result of external influences such as agency failure and specific negative life events.

Many articles further openly discussed family and friends' confusion and surprise at the suicide. Suicide is often portrayed as a mysterious phenomenon that occurs unexpectedly. To the audience, this serves to fuel a sense of alarm that a suicide is unavoidable and may happen at any time. This inaccurate perception of suicide could potentially fuel audience fear of suicide as an unpredictable event. In 1997, there were frequent statements like "why did she have to die? ... I never thought it would come to this" (Taylor, 1997, p3), "... had no idea why his son took his own life seven years ago" (Pushing a method to prevent suicide, 1997, p10), and "... neither she nor her husband had any idea their daughter was emotionally so low" (Mackay, 1997, p23). These reports are often based on shocked and grieving friends and relatives. The belief that the suicides were sudden and unexpected is likely to fuel family members' tendency to report dramatic and emotional responses to a suicide. In addition, this section demonstrates the tension and conflict between framing suicide as preventable and reporting that suicide is often a surprise. With regard to discussing grieving reactions, in 2009, suicide articles appeared to have changed their tack, providing fewer details of family and friends' grieving reactions. Descriptions of grief were usually brief as the following illustrate:

*37. France Telecom employees also held a moment of silence on Monday in honour of those who have committed suicide.*

(Email is causing killer stress: exec, 2009, p.G1)

*38. The officer in charge of the suicide probe, former Santa Barbara County Sheriff Jim Thomas, said; "Everyone in this whole saga was touched tragically".*

(Father of Jackson accuser commits suicide, 2009, p.G2)

It appears that in 2009, journalists did not frequently discuss grieving reactions of suicide victims' friends and family. As demonstrated in the above extracts, when grieving reactions were provided, they were typically brief 'matter of fact' comments. Suicide was no longer necessarily conveyed as something that will have lifelong negative consequences for all those who are connected with the victim. These accounts diminish the showcasing discussions of public memorials or permanent reminders of those who have died by suicide. Family grief is still acknowledged, which enables readers to understand a degree of the negative consequences for family and friends but descriptions such as in extracts 37 and 38 indicate that the grief over the deaths appear to be only briefly acknowledged. These brief descriptions of parents and friends mourning reduce the glamour and any resulting 'positive' consequences associated with suicide deaths. In addition, grieving responses were rarely provided from affected friends and family members, and alternative sources of grieving reactions such as police and business representatives are more moderated and less emotional. However, as demonstrated below, there were examples of emotion and detailed descriptions of suicide grieving descriptions in 2009 articles.

39. *"I tried to be there for him," Teresa Enke said, choking back tears "I can assure you - we owe Robert Enke that - German football will use all its capabilities to find an answer to the question of how a young athlete celebrated by so many as an idol could land in such a situation,"... Germany coach Joachim Loew said the team could not simply go back to business as usual. "We lost a friend, we deeply mourn Robert Enke," Loew said. "I feel completely empty. He was a great guy. He had incredible respect for others. We will miss him, as a top-class sportsman and an extraordinary man." Enke's death shocked his Germany teammates. "I'm stunned. I don't know what to say," captain Michael Ballack told the Bild daily. Hundreds of Hannover fans paid tribute to Enke at the stadium Wednesday. Hannover set up a condolence book outside the AWD Arena, and some supporters lit candles and left scarves and shirts in tribute to the goalkeeper. A service was scheduled in the evening, to be followed by a silent march to the stadium... Chancellor Angela Merkel sent a "very personal" note to Enke's widow to convey her "consternation and compassion,"... Thomas Bach, president of the German Olympic committee, called Enke's death "really tragic." German Football League president... said there would be minute's silence before the next round in the top two divisions on Nov. 21-22 and that all players would wear black armbands. Barcelona is in mourning over the death of Robert Enke."*

(Soccer: German goalkeeper left suicide note, 2009, Sport p1)

Extract 39 is an example of an emotional and grief-laden response to a suicide following the death of German national football player, Enke Merkel. In 2009, detailed extracts like these were typical of celebrity deaths, deaths of high profile business people and occasionally found in youth and teenage articles. These news stories included emotional accounts of immediately bereaved close friends and family members. The above extract contains emotional citations from the victim's wife, teammates, coach, and government officials. Strong grieving responses are captured by additional details such as describing the widow "choking back the tears", while others report being "stunned" and "feel(ing) completely empty". Similar to articles in 1997, this helps convey the image that the death was a tragedy and associated with powerful public outpourings of grief and adulation for the victim. These accounts are further reinforced by detailing public memorials and tributes (condolence books, candles, and public memorial marches), cancellations of games and even referencing personal contact by the German Chancellor. The unintended message of these extracts is that suicide may result in more fame, attention and notoriety than some other deaths such as murder or natural causes. This may also suggest that the victim's life has gained more in death than in life and that society is honouring the suicide of the deceased rather than solely mourning the victim's death. The tendency of articles like these to focus on the way they

died to highlight the life and accomplishments of the victim further reinforces the image that suicide can be viewed as desirable.

### **Precise Morbid Method Details**

As part of one of the newspaper industry's primary objectives of informing the public, news articles frequently outlined the method individuals used to kill themselves. In 1997, suicide method was reported upon in 57 per cent of all articles and in 2009 this decreased to 40 per cent. Discussions of suicide method varied according to the different constructions they drew on and were used to capture reader attention. Articles discussed suicide method differently, according to the year of publication (1997 or 2009), who the victim was (known or unknown), the method used (unusual or common), and where the suicide occurred (public or private).

The most immediately obvious distinction between suicide reporting in 1997 and 2009 was the changing style of presenting suicide method information. In 1997, the descriptions of suicide generally included extensive method details or a brief description of how and where the suicide occurred, as the following illustrates.

*40. ...he committed suicide in one of the committee rooms of Parliament House by shooting himself through the head with a revolver.*

(Sharp, 1997, pE3)

Extract 40 presents the reader with information detailing the suicide method. Readers are informed of the weapon used (a revolver), how he killed himself (shooting himself in the head) and the location (in an unnamed Parliament House committee room). The audience is provided with enough information to construct a visual representation of how the victim died. The inclusion of suicide method details appears to be as legitimate as the inclusion of any other aspect of the story such as detailing the victim's occupation or relationship status. However, the description of the victim shooting himself through the head is more shocking. Extracts such as this one may contribute to the perception that the victim's death was something that was quick, painless, and effective. However, this may not necessarily be the case where suicides are not necessarily quick, painless or effective, even those involving guns.

Many descriptions of the method in 1997 were highly specific, outlining precise details. These details include using emotionally charged words, including shocking, controversial and attention-grabbing details (such as the precise cause of death and how the dead body looked), and reporting about insignificant details that do not inform the audience but encourage speculation, morbid curiosity and approval of violence. The following extract demonstrates this.

41. *He was found lying on an upstairs bed, dressed only in grey boxer shorts. Plate of pecan shells downstairs and dirty clothes strewn about seemed to indicate he had made the houseboat his home for a while. His hair was cropped short and his face, partially blown away after he shot himself through the mouth, was covered by a beard.*

(No Escape for Cornered Cunanan, 1997, p26).

The above extract is made more emotionally charged by drawing out a number of details, such as what the victim was wearing, where he was living, the state of his house, and how his dead face looked. These descriptions help build intrigue and help satisfy the audience's desire to learn exactly what happened. This method of reporting is made further captivating and emotional by including precise morbid details such as describing the gunshot injury and how he precisely killed himself, "his face, partially blown away" and "shot himself though the mouth." Descriptions such as these are explicit, extremely visual and paint a very precise picture of what the deceased victim looked like, the room in which he was found, and how he died. These details appear to be used to shock the audience and seize their attention.

In an effort to capture exactly what had transpired, suicide articles tended to provide a step-by-step guide of what the victim had done. These descriptions go beyond labelling events to provide a detailed explanation of how they died. These accounts included the discussion of precise materials used, locations, how the body was discovered, and how they killed themselves. The following extract demonstrates how the journalist has attempted to invoke explicit and detailed images of how an individual ended or attempted to end their own life.

42. *On April 24 last year, while still under half-hour checks, he was found dead in his cell hanging by his neck from a sheet that had been tied to a hot water pipe behind his cell door.... Mr Young died from cerebral hypoxia when he committed suicide by hanging himself in his cell, Mr Savage concluded.*

(Prison and mental health staff criticised, 1997, p 20)

Here readers are informed of the date, location and suicide method. However, additional information explains how he victim hung himself. The audience further learns of the precise factor that killed him (cerebral hypoxia). This article is particularly representative of articles involving suicides in public buildings (a prison) or spaces. It appears the public nature of these suicides increases the availability of information enabling journalists to report precise method details. The detailed construction of suicide method was also common in cases of odd and unusual suicide methods as illustrated below.

43. *The man accused of murdering an elderly Invercargill woman was found by police wired for electrocution with his feet in a bucket of water, the Invercargill District Court heard yesterday. Garthwaite was found in a barricaded bedroom of his mother's flat*

*with electrical wires attached to his wrist and neck... A suicide note from Garthwaite was later found in the kitchen and a red petrol container and plastic milk bottle containing petrol along with several freezer bags, which smelt strongly of petrol, were also found in Garthwaite's room. Detective Sergeant Tim Haughey told of finding Garthwaite in the south-east corner of his bedroom, lying on the floor with his head against the wall beside a wall socket...Garthwaite was breathing deeply and was either unconscious or playing possum, Mr Haughey said. Wires were attached to Garthwaite's neck and wrist and his feet were in a bucket of water. The three-point plug attached to the wires was on the floor below the socket. There was a strong smell of smoke.*

(McLauchlan sorry that comment offended, 1997, p10)

The above extract includes descriptions including locations and precise method details which paint a detailed visual image of the attempted suicide. In articles such as these, it is the suicide method and death that becomes the focus of the article, where increasingly bizarre or violent suicides are associated with increased notoriety. The presence of these details is likely to be used to sensationalise the suicide, grab audience attention, evoke morbid curiosity and increase the article's shock value. The focus on the unusual may give the audience the impression that it is the unusual nature of the death and not the presence of other factors (such as any mental illness or any other suicide risk factors) that are the key contributors to suicide and attempted suicide. The focus on atypical and bizarre cases of suicide is likely to distort the image of suicide, where unusual and violent suicide methods are seen as increasingly common.

Throughout 1997, an active construction was commonly used to describe how an individual killed themselves. As demonstrated in extracts 42 and 43, the suicide was reported as "he committed suicide by hanging himself in his cell" (Prison and mental health staff criticised, 1997, p 20) and "shooting himself through the head" (Sharp, 1997, pE3). In 2009, accounts of suicide method changed and they were generally brief and less explicit. Articles which reported suicide method generally vaguely described the suicide with limited detail.

44. *He was found dead with a self-inflicted gunshot wound...*

(Police: Mia Farrow's brother killed himself, 2009, p1)

Extract 44 illustrates 2009 suicide method reporting, and minimal details are provided. The audience is informed in a matter-of-fact manner that the victim died of a gunshot wound. Unlike articles in 1997, which tended to provide details of the mechanism and procedures used to complete suicide, it is unknown where the suicide occurred, what weapon was used, where he shot himself and how he obtained access to the weapon. The reporting of suicide method appears is less explicit. The style of the method descriptions had also changed, in

that an increasing number of articles used passive sentence structure to describe the suicide. This suggests the suicide was possibly less deliberate and violent than if the journalist was to report 'he shot himself with a gun'. The following extract further demonstrates the passive sentence structure.

45. *...killed after being hit by a train at a level crossing.... confirmed it was a suicide.*

(Soccer: German goalie dead, 2009, p12)

In the above extract, the passive phrase that the victim died after being "hit by a train" is a less emotive and descriptive phrase than saying the victim purposefully stepped or jumped in front of an oncoming train. The use of the passive sentence also removes connotations of how deliberate the event was. In the above extract, the audience is likely to initially believe that the death was possibly accidental, and a statement is required later in the article to confirm the death was suicide.

Unlike in 1997, during instances of suicides in 2009 occurring in public locations, within government facilities, or celebrity victims, suicide method details were generally briefly provided. Extract 46 demonstrates this in action.

46. *...suicide of a depressed and psychotic prisoner who was allowed access to razor blades... Childs was allowed to keep razor blades overnight in his new cell and used them to kill himself on his first night out of the dependent-care unit.*

(Steward, 2009, p4)

Here the audience is left to infer that the victim used razor blades to kill himself. In addition, the audience is not informed of how he obtained the razor blades, and it is unknown where he cut himself or the time of death. This demonstrates how, in 2009, the reporting of suicide method was no longer a key feature of a suicide article. This style of reporting may reflect journalists' attempts to report the suicide method without breaching the Coroners Act, or may reflect changing industry attitudes towards including suicide method details, where including explicit method details are increasingly avoided.

In 2009, suicide method was not as frequently disclosed and was present in 40 per cent of articles. When suicide method details were not included, an explanation was often provided, such as:

47. *The police would not release the exact cause of death, but spokesman Eddy Azcarate said Kellermann's body was found in the basement.*

(Freddie Mac CFO dead in apparent suicide, 2009, p17)

Here the details of the death remain unclear, where it is even difficult to ascertain whether the death actually involved a suicide. Police statements are further used to justify why this information was unavailable, which also demonstrates the media is being responsible and



not speculating on possible methods or going against police procedure and publishing the method details anyway. As illustrated in the two extracts below, in 2009, numerous articles would also not report the suicide method.

*48. At some point in the night Michael left his house. His body was found nearby the next morning.*

(Teen deaths shock families, 2009, p2)

*49. ...and walked the short distance to his parents' home. He was later found dead there by a younger brother.*

(Coroner criticises DHB over man's suicide, 2009, p1)

These extracts raise the reader's curiosity and interest in the missing pieces of information. In both of these extracts, the reader is informed that the individual walked out of a house and was subsequently found dead. No information is provided to even speculate on the suicide method involved. By providing a brief overview of the events prior to the suicide, the audience is expecting to find out more information about the manner of death. The exclusion of this method information may consequently raise reader interest over the manner of death in a way that would be unlikely if it was reported that the individuals had simply been found dead the next day (excluding details of prior events).

In summary, there was a dramatic difference in the way in which suicide details were presented to readers in 1997 and 2009. In 1997, suicide articles frequently provided a very detailed description of the method of death. These descriptions included outlining precise suicide details such as materials used, how the victim died and their location. In contrast, the 2009 articles identified suicide method less frequently. When suicide method was discussed, it was typically briefly mentioned and discussed in less explicit terms.

The mysterious and uncommon nature of suicide contributes to make suicide a dramatic and interesting topic. However, despite the interest surrounding suicide, in 1997 and 2009, various additional editorial methods and tools appear to be used to heighten reader interest and sensationalise suicide. As a consequence, sensationalised reporting is likely to make suicide appear as an attractive option, which may increase the likelihood of suicide contagion (Pirkis & Blood, 2001). Suicide reporting in 1997 appeared particularly sensational, where articles glorified the suicide victim, presented sympathetic and positive portrayals of the victim, used shocking and attention-grabbing headlines, represented suicide as a romantic act or an expression of love, detailed outpourings of grief and regret towards the victim and finally, articles tended to provide precise and shocking method details. In 2009, suicide reports became less sensational, however, articles continued to contain sensational elements such as portraying the victim in a sympathetic and positive

light, and using inaccurate attention-grabbing headlines. However, as demonstrated in the following section, the presence of additional help and referral information suggests journalists are not simply interested in reporting 'interesting' suicide stories, but performing public health service became increasingly common.

### Preventing Suicide

Throughout 2009, it was rare for suicide articles to contain explicit messages designed to prevent or decrease the public's risk of suicide. Explicit suicide prevention messages were typically demonstrated by including referral information to appropriate health services, outlining suicide risk factors or specific strategies designed to counter motives linked to suicide (such as cyber-bullying or drug side-effects). The following extracts illustrate this point:

50. *We always encourage people, if they see things going on that are not quite right to do something about it." Where to go for help? If it is an emergency and you feel like you or someone else is at risk, call 111. Or call Youthline 0800 376 633, Lifeline 0800 543 354, Depression Helpline 0800 111 757, What's Up 0800 942 8787 (noon-midnight). \* Suicide Prevention Information New Zealand has more information about mental health services and contact information for counsellors, doctors and support groups. Visit: [www.spinz.org.nz](http://www.spinz.org.nz). \* The Ministry of Health also offers information at [www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz). \* Teens can visit [www.thelowdown.co.nz](http://www.thelowdown.co.nz)."*  
(Teenager dies in death pact, 2009, pG1)

51. *Roaccutane (also sold as Isotane and Oratane) is one of the licensed brand names for a drug containing isotretinoin. The dangerous side-effects of isotretinoin are well documented. The Ministry of Health agency MedSafe publishes on its website a British paper which is recommended reading for health professionals. It states: Isotretinoin can be highly effective in moderate to severe acne when other treatments have failed. It has many unwanted effects including disturbance of foetal growth and development, nosebleeds, effects on liver function, and scattered reports of mood change, depression and suicide. Clinicians should be alert to the high prevalence of depression among people with acne and discuss these issues before and during treatment. If serious psychiatric problems occur, the patient should be referred to a psychiatrist immediately.*  
(Woodd, 2009, p4)

The above extracts are reported in an authoritative tone and are very clear, to the point and factual. This tone is likely to support the credibility and legitimacy that the information is correct and educational. The list of help resources conveys the message that there are alternatives and that suicide is not the "normal" reaction. In extract 50, a range of referral

sources are supplied (phone numbers, websites and people to contact) for specific age groups (youth and adults), for crisis and non-crisis events. As a result, this information is likely to provide a useful resource. This information is generalised and is suitable for a wide variety of situations. However, as demonstrated in extract 51, help information was often tailored to reflect the specific content of the suicide article. This extract was written in response to a suicide linked to the use of the acne drug Roaccutane. The listed information appears to inform the audience of consequences and side effects of using this drug. Including drug scientific names, such as 'Roaccutane' and 'Isotretinoin' (as opposed to brand names) and the references to medical authorities such as 'MedSafe', contributes to the belief that the information is up-to-date and legitimate. Information included appears balanced, as not only does it include drug benefits but it also outlines drug side effects that are not solely focused upon increasing suicide risk. In 1997, it was even rarer for suicide articles to contain referral information. As demonstrated in the below extract, when this information was included, it was nonspecific.

*52. The Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention and the Samaritans both have web sites to offer help for the depressed.*

(Deaths linked to internet, 1997, p22)

In the above extract, referral information does not appear very accessible to the wider audience, as the referral information is only available for internet users (which in 1997 were likely to be a minority of New Zealand households). In addition, these help resources are not specifically listed and need to be searched for on the internet. This demonstrates that information provided in 2009 was of more use to the audience. The general absence of explicit suicide prevention information suggests that, in 1997, the media almost exclusively focused on the story and did not see themselves as a resource or mechanism for suicide prevention. The frequent exclusion or omission of explicit suicide help or referral information suggests that including this information in news articles is of low priority. However, in 2009 the increasing use of help and referral information may suggest that the media were increasingly aware of including help information.

In both 1997 and 2009, the majority of the media's suicide prevention messages appeared to come from indirect and more subtle messages. In general terms, the repetitive and ongoing reporting of suicide serves to remind the public that suicide remains an important social issue that is of high public concern. These suicide stories may also serve to educate the audience about many different suicide risk factors and warning signs (such as experiencing negative life events). However, it is likely that several positive aspects of suicide reporting are undermined by a number of features such as the simplification of suicide, portraying the

victim positively and normalising suicide as an understandable and justifiable response to stressors.

### **Summary**

There were several similarities and differences between how suicide was reported in 1997 and 2009. In 1997, references to suicide were made clearly and directly, where references to suicide were openly made and repeatedly stated. This trend continued into the reporting of suicide motive, where suicide motives were clearly and explicitly stated. In 1997, when suicide motives were referenced, they were generally simplified to one main casually-related factor. Throughout 1997, articles presented suicide as an event that resulted in key service and social changes. This helped frame suicide as preventable. In addition, during this period mental illness was not commonly discussed in news articles. When mental illness was identified, it was discussed briefly and was not explicitly linked to the victim's death. This served to create the false impression that suicide has no associations to mental illness.

When discussing suicide details in 1997, articles typically portrayed the victim in a very positive light. By doing this, articles led the audience to feel sympathy for the victim and their plight. Framing the victim as a positive and wonderful person further fuelled the perception that the victim's death was a tragedy. Not only were victims framed positively, but throughout 1997, suicide articles often created sympathetic portrayals of the victim. This framing created the image that the victim was innocent, vulnerable and simply overwhelmed by stressors, not responsible for their actions and that their suicide was an understandable response to their stressors. In addition to providing sympathetic portrayals, during this timeframe suicide articles occasionally appeared to glorify suicide. This allowed the victim's death to appear more dramatic in that the suicide was associated with increased status, admiration and publicity. Suicide articles in 1997 would occasionally portray suicide as a romantic event. Framing suicide in this manner conveys suicide as an elegant and graceful way to die. Similarly, articles of this period would focus on friend and family grief. This construction reinforced the victim's death as a tragedy and may also convey the message that the victim will always be missed. The repeated glorification, romanticisation, and focus on victim bereavement combines to suggest that suicide is a positive way to die.

During 1997, it was common for suicide headlines to be sensational and alarming. These headlines were often inaccurate and appeared to be primarily designed to shock the audience and grab their attention. Throughout this time period, suicide articles focused extensively on reporting the suicide method. Journalists appeared to consistently present visual images of the suicide, involving precise method details and locations. In 1997, explicit

suicide referral and help information was rarely provided. When help information was provided, it was mostly in the form of generalised referral material.

Similarly in 2009, suicide was frequently openly reported, however, articles would also frequently use more ambiguous phrases and coded words to refer to suicide. This demonstrated a change where journalists tended not to concretely identify a death as suicide. As a result, this left the audience with a degree of ambiguity in determining the precise cause of death. Unlike 1997, suicide motives in 2009 were frequently indirectly applied. In 2009, articles tended to be much less definitive in their identification of single causes and where alternative factors were often identified, and provided a more detailed image of the distress the victim was likely to have experienced, although the role of these other factors was diminished by journalists' tendency to explicitly focus on one suicide motive.

Consistent with 1997, 2009 articles presented suicide as an event that resulted in key service and social change. This not only presented these deaths as avoidable but served to diminish personal responsibility for suicide. As a result, blame could consequently be assigned to external factors beyond the victim's control. Again in 2009, mental illness was not frequently discussed in suicide articles. However, unlike 1997, which discussed mental illness briefly, when mental illness was discussed, articles linked suicide to greater pathology and mental distress. In 2009, there was also a greater variation of victim portrayals where articles presented the victim in a positive or negative light, or in a manner reflecting both positive and negative attributes. Presenting the victim negatively was generally reserved for "disliked" individuals such as criminals. This framing allowed the suicide to be viewed as not necessarily a negative event, where their death could also be viewed as desirable. Positive and negative representations of the victim created a more balanced and realistic image of the person, where the victim's negative characteristics are not ignored.

In both the time periods, suicide articles often portrayed the victim in a sympathetic light. It was also common for suicide headlines to be sensational and alarming. In contrast to 1997 articles, suicide articles in 2009 did not appear to glorify suicide and romantic portrayals occurred less frequently, but when they were used they demonstrated great love. In addition, journalists appeared less willing to focus on suicide bereavement, and when descriptions of grief were included they were brief. Furthermore in 2009 the media less frequently discussed suicide method, as when it was reported these features tended to be briefer and less explicit. In 2009, while still rare it was increasingly common for suicide articles to contain referral information. Unlike 1997, this information was relevant to a wide audience and contained

multiple different resources. There were numerous interesting similarities and distinctions between how suicide was reported in 1997 and 2009. Despite mixed results, overall there appeared to be an improving trend in the way suicide articles were presented to the public, where articles possessed fewer features that are known to contribute to contagion.

# CHAPTER FOUR

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## STUDY TWO: METHOD

*If journalism is good, it is controversial, by its nature*

*Julian Assange*

Study One explored how newspapers portrayed suicide content to their audience. However, this only represents part of the picture, and what remains unknown is the processes involved with constructing a suicide article and the views, opinions and experiences of media personnel responsible for writing suicide stories. Study Two investigated the processes of the publication of suicide articles. The aim of the present study is to investigate journalists' views and experiences of writing about suicide. In order to explore how newspaper journalists and editors understand and construct their role as a suicide reporter, a methodology which was capable of investigating the complexities of naturally occurring talk was required. In this chapter, the methodological approaches chosen to perform the data analysis are introduced, and their main assumptions and techniques explored.

### **Rhetorical Analysis**

The term rhetoric has a long rich history in academic research and critical analysis, and was frequently involved in educating individuals in Ancient Greece and Rome (Heath, Toth & Wayner, 2009). In his work *Rhetorica*, Aristotle defined rhetoric as the study of the available means of persuasion (Gross & Walzer, 2000). In fact, the ancient study of rhetoric can be viewed as a predecessor to psychology, as in order to become an expert in persuasion you needed to know the hearts, minds and psychology of your audience (Billig, 1991; Hart, 1997). Rhetoric Analysis (RA) builds on this to explore the various dynamics of an individual's argument. Unfortunately, in conversational English rhetoric has negative connotation and is seen as lacking sincerity (Weber, 2002). However, for researchers examining text or oral discourses, rhetoric defines a method of identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Unlike many fields of qualitative analysis which explore what is being communicated, rhetorical analysis is more interested in how people communicate. In other words, RA explores not only what has been said, but also explores a range of additional features such as why it was communicated in the first place,

who is the intended audience, what is the goal or motivation of the discourse, what the source content means, the purpose or goal of the communication and how the discourse was organised (Bitzer, 1995). In order to achieve this, it is important to also consider context issues, such as who the communicator is and their background (Foss, 2004).

### **Rhetorical Theory**

Billig (1996) reported that the process of thinking was modelled on the process of arguments. He suggested that internal arguments could not be possible without external public arguments between two people, which is based on the belief that an individual's attitudes and thoughts are communicative acts that are the result of the possession of argumentative ideas (Billig, 1991). By expressing your individual attitudes, people are doing more than simply expressing personal beliefs, but the person is also placing themselves in a situation of public controversy with wider beliefs (Winton, 2013). Thereby, expressing an attitude is likely to divide public opinion. As a result, the expression of an attitude has dual functions as it possesses individual and social meanings (Billig, 1999). People both persuade and resist persuasion to attitudes expressed by others by constructing argumentative positions.

RA can be loosely described as the study of how individuals or an entity use words or information to influence, persuade or dominate others (Gaines & Gronbeck, 2008). RA is based on the underlying desire for humans to influence others and endeavours to investigate how individuals attempt to enhance their views as being accurate and in a mutual interest (Heath et al., 2009). Rhetoric is the result of attempts to reconcile differences in people's views, opinions and preference for different actions (Cutlip, 1994). Rhetorical theory arises out of differences in opinion and motivates individuals to make one choice over preference for another (Burke, 1967). RA explores the role that information and facts play in shaping our knowledge and opinions (Heath et al., 2009). A central guiding premise of RA is how individuals craft their argument (Billig, 1996). This is seen as a central aspect of peoples' daily lives. People engage in arguments in different ways such as taking stances, expressing opinions, providing evidence and justifications, and anticipating and opposing arguments (Billig, 1991).

### **RA as an Analytical Method for Interview Data**

RA was considered well suited for the current investigation for several important reasons. Firstly, RA is designed to allow the analysis of differences of opinion and participant's thoughts, concerns and perspectives to be captured. This approach appeared particularly well suited for the current data as participants appeared to naturally form arguments. RA



allowed the exploration of many important points such as how participants balanced the conflict between the principle of freedom of the press (a fundamental journalist belief) and forms of censorship (reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act). This approach then allowed the function of these differing arguments to be deconstructed and evaluated. RA also provided an effective tool for exploring the tension that this debate created and how it was managed. The uniformity of participants' responses also reinforced the selection of RA as an appropriate choice.

### **Methodology: Journalist Interviews**

A review of current suicide articles was used to identify a range of potential journalist participants who were frequently involved in suicide reporting. Due to an editor's role in assigning stories, deciding which stories should be featured and editing and reviewing articles, editors from each newspaper were also asked to participate. In addition, following their regulatory role and role in advocating for the media industry, members of the New Zealand Press Council (NZPC) were also invited to participate. In order to recruit participants, an email and follow up phone calls were made to editors and reception staff of all major mainstream newspapers in New Zealand and the NZPC. Following these discussions newspaper staff agreed to invite staff to participate by forwarding a study background information sheet to all relevant staff members (*Appendix A*). In addition, participants appeared to recruit each other, where some participants reported they volunteered following the recommendation of colleagues who had completed the interview. Nine participants accepted the invitation and were interviewed in 2012 (see Table 5 for details). Participants had between 6 and 30 years of experiencing working in the industry, with a mean of 17.25 years' experience. All participants were familiar with either reporting suicide or overseeing the process. Prior to the commencement of the interview, journalists completed a consent form and agreed to the audio-recording of the interview (*Appendix B*).

**Table 5:** Descriptions of Participants

Participant Profiles	N
Reporter	1
Chief Reporter	1
Editor	3
Chief Editor	1
Reporter with previous Editor experience	2
NZPC employee	1

## **Interview Format**

Semi-structured interview questions (see *Appendix C*) were used to obtain personal narratives of suicide reporting. This approach has many benefits; it firstly allows the researcher to be flexible and dynamic to changing situations and subject personalities. Secondly, it enables researchers to respond appropriately and more naturally to participant responses (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2008). Semi-structured interviews allow topics to be discussed in the order participants bring them up and avoids asking questions which may have previously answered. Then finally, it encourages the investigation of new topics/ideas that may benefit from further exploration/clarification (Blood et al., 2007).

The interview questions were open-ended allowing the participant to express their thoughts and point of view. The interview style was informal, allowing the interviewer to interject to clarify points, facilitate conversation, validate their concerns, or make the participant feel at ease. In keeping with Potter and Wetherell's (1987) recommended interventionist interview style, probes and follow-up questions "which pose alternative or problematic views or facts for the interviewee" (p.164) were frequently used. According to Potter and Wetherell (1987), this technique encourages more active engagement, where participants are more likely to explore their interpretative resources. Variation and diversity to research questions were encouraged because this was integral to the epistemology of qualitative analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Interview questions all stemmed directly from the following research goals. There were several important goals of the interviews, and they were to:

- Explore what factors influence what suicide information was included or excluded in newspaper articles
- Investigate ethics and barriers surrounding suicide reporting
- Obtain information outlining how suicide reporting guidelines have influenced reporting
- Explore editors/journalist opinions of the suicide reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act
- Explore editor/journalist knowledge of their role in suicide prevention

The interview was comprised of three distinct stages. During the first stage, the purposes of the study and participant rights were discussed. It was also important that during this initial stage the process of rapport building began. High levels of rapport will encourage participants to feel more relaxed and contribute to a more open and honest discussion

(Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2008). Participants were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers, and they were free to turn off the audio-recorder at any stage. In the second stage, the topic of suicide and the media was introduced and the audio recorded interview began. During the final stage, approximately 10 minutes was used to debrief participants. This debriefing provided participants an opportunity to discuss their reactions to the study and ask the researcher any questions. In addition, prior to the interview process participants were aware that the researcher had analysed published suicide articles from two timeframes. However, in order to not distort or influence participant responses, these results were not shared with the participants.

### **Information Gathering Procedure**

Due to the potential sensitivity of the subject and the requirements of their full time jobs, participants were interviewed at a time and location agreed by both the participant and the researcher. Interview locations varied from workplace offices to cafés. Participants were interviewed individually. Interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 69 minutes, with an average of 51 minutes. A total of 461 minutes of semi-structured interview time was recorded. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher. The transcription notation used was a simplified version of the system recommended by Potter and Wetherell (1992) (see *Appendix D*). A simplified version was used as the aim of this analysis was to explore persuasive and argumentative function. This notation system included detailing features of pauses, changes in prosody, emotion and tone, identifying inaudible material, highlighting responses where the accuracy was unclear, and noting parts where details were deliberately omitted. This system was chosen because readability was important and the focus of the research was more towards how they said something rather than what they said.

Prior to transcription, in order to aid familiarisation with the verbal discourse and its associated features, the audio-recording was repetitively listened to. All nine audio-recordings were transcribed by the researcher, for Atkinson (1984) highlighted this is one of the best methods to immerse the researcher within the data, and identify reoccurring elements, and ask what they are doing. A total of 128 pages of single-spaced transcription was produced. All transcription pages were numbered and labelled with a reference code. One master sheet was used to identify each participant to their corresponding interview transcription.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The current study was planned with consideration of the principles outlined in the *Code of Ethical Conduct* (Massey University, 2015). Study Two raised some interesting ethical

considerations. These ethical issues reflect the unknown nature of how journalists could have responded when answering questions about suicide articles they had previously written, and the personal impact that these articles have had on them. While it remained unlikely that these topics would reignite anxieties or trauma, it is important that if this did occur the interviewer had the resources available to deal with the anxiety. It was therefore essential that, prior to commencing the interview, the participants were informed that they could abstain from answering any questions or may simply stop the interview at any time, without further need for explanation. Following the interview, participants were presented with help referral resources to resolve difficulties or issues that the interview has raised. Furthermore, as New Zealand has a small journalist community (according to the 2006 Census, there were only 2034 print journalists), it was important that steps were taken to preserve journalist anonymity. While complete anonymity cannot be promised, transcripts were altered to remove any personally identifying features, and data was viewed only by the researcher and thesis supervisors. In addition, only a master code sheet was able to link participants to their actual interview transcripts, which were stored apart from the original tapes and transcripts. In addition, finished transcripts were emailed to the participants, to ensure they were happy with their comments. At this stage, participants were able to edit their responses, if desired. Once transcripts had been reviewed and/or edited, data analysis began. At the conclusion of the research, participants had the option of having their audio-recordings and transcripts returned, destroyed, or stored in a research archive. In accordance with these ethical considerations, this study applied for and was granted low risk ethical approval.

# CHAPTER FIVE

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## STUDY TWO: RESULTS

*Whoever controls the media, controls the mind.*

*Jim Morrison*

This study examined the arguments newspaper journalists and editors made regarding reporting suicide in New Zealand. In order to aid the analysis interview transcripts were organised into four main codes, namely the concept of science and research, media relevance, ethics and morals and then laws and power. In an effort to create a sense of the data, the way participants discussed suicide reporting is outlined, using the different arguments they drew upon. The analysis then moves from identifying different arguments to interpreting and analysing them by identifying links and placing them into their wider social context.

### Science and Research

Empirical research demonstrating the media's ability to influence suicide contagion has been used by government to inform initiatives such as the Coroners Act (2006) and suicide reporting guidelines. The purpose of these initiatives was to minimise the opportunity for suicide contagion by limiting the manner in which suicide is reported. Participants were aware of the impact of contagion research on their industry. Arguments using research and scientific data demonstrated that, not only are participants aware of the current research, but they can also critically evaluate it. Consequently, if participants wanted to advocate for the unrestricted reporting of suicide and maintain an image that this is not inappropriate or unethical, they needed to find a way to contest current research understandings that certain portrayals of suicide can increase reader suicide rates. The current section explains how participants used a range of arguments to systematically undermine research conclusions supporting suicide contagion. Such arguments included denying the general existence of contagion, highlighting research as inconclusive, questioning the application of international research to New Zealand, and presenting an argument that contagion research is misleading and biased. However, views of contagion research also appeared to change according to the research conclusions as participants also used research evidence to demonstrate that suicide contagion is controversial. The following extract outlines how suicide contagion was framed as controversial.

1. *I think the contagion, hmm, ARGUMENT JUST DOESN'T HOLD ANY WATER in light of the fact that we haven't really reported on suicides in any meaningful way FOR YEARS and our rates still keep going up. So it's now time to talk about suicide in exactly the same way as we talk about depression. (Adam)*

Adam begins by stating that suicide contagion is not conclusive and achieves this by using a metaphor of not holding water to illustrate the concept of contagion is flawed, weak and full of holes. This image contrasts starkly with something “watertight” which can withstand any level of scrutiny. He emphasises his point that contagion is flawed by raising his voice. In order to better illustrate this, counter-evidence is introduced to argue that the absence of meaningful reporting combined with climbing suicide rates demonstrates suicide contagion does not exist. He also appears to diminish contagion evidence by labelling it an ‘ARGUMENT’. By doing so he subtly implies that contagion is something which is contestable, which reinforces the credibility of his claims that climbing suicide rates combined with absence of suicide reporting contradicts the existence of suicide contagion. The power of Adam’s argument is undermined by the vague nature of what “meaningful reporting” means. Adam then slightly changes focus and concludes by advocating his desire to write about suicide in the same manner that he would for other comparatively sensitive topics such as depression.

In addition to challenging the general existence of contagion, participants would systematically criticise research. Multiple arguments were used to highlight problems with existing research, such as:

2. *I guess I am yet to see any evidence of it (suicide contagion) that I found compelling. By which I mean, I know in Korea or was in in Japan there was the charcoal deaths and the media reported on them at length and more people committed suicide by charcoal. Who was to say that they were not going to commit suicide anyway, and the publicity around the method just made them change the method? I guess in all of the research I have seen none of it was from New Zealand. We are in a small country where the situation is very particular to us. I haven't seen any research EVER, saying the day after the story ran in the newspaper there was a major spike in suicides. (Rachel)*

Rachel opens with her main point labelling suicide contagion as contestable. The phrase “I am yet to see any evidence” suggests there is no current or historic credible research evidence supporting the existence of contagion. Rachel then introduces an example of the widely cited Korean charcoal burning suicides study (Chung & Leung, 2001) to demonstrate that their findings could be reinterpreted in a manner which does not relate to contagion. Interestingly, Rachel does not refute the findings that media reports were associated with

increases in the reported method; rather she challenges the conclusion that this demonstrates suicide contagion. This argument has a degree of inconsistency, as while it accepts media reports are associated with a degree of reader imitation (switching suicide methods) it also appeared dismissive towards the possibility of further imitation in the form of suicide contagion (increases in reader suicide rates). As a result, it is argued that only a mild form of suicide imitation exists, while forms of contagion associated with increasing suicide rates in readers is denied. Therefore, this argument appears to overlook the serious consequences of method imitation, where this is conveyed to be of little concern and used to challenge our interpretation of contagion research. However, method imitation is a source of concern, as it may encourage readers to use increasingly lethal or painful suicide methods. This inconsistency appears to further reinforce the point that if any media imitation occurs, its effects are perceived as minimal as increases in suicide rates are denied. Therefore, suicide contagion is positioned as not something of prominent public or media concern.

Rachel then changes track, she moves away from contesting research conclusions to identifying and challenging perceived research flaws and wanting a higher standard of proof. She begins this by highlighting that she has not seen any New Zealand based suicide contagion evidence. This could suggest that either she is not aware of all the research evidence or the lack of any New Zealand specific research raises concerns about the validity of applying international research here. In her next sentence, Rachel talks about this as a significant limitation. In order to better illustrate how this could be problematic, she identifies two generic examples to demonstrate the uniqueness of New Zealand. In doing so, Rachel is strongly implying that it is unknown how suicide contagion operates within New Zealand, where the country's identified unique features may mean it functions differently. Rachel's concluding statement that she is not aware of any research linking suicide media to major suicide spikes further stresses that evidence of contagion is contentious, a point she emphasises by stressing the word "EVER". Furthermore, Rachel sets high a threshold of proof; this is likely to reflect the intangible and nuanced effects of contagion which are not always clearly linked to news media. It appears in order to meet participant research standards they desired evidence that demonstrated a "major spike" the day after suicide media. This opinion was widespread among participants. It appears the purpose of this argument is to demonstrate that contagion evidence is insufficient. This may also have some relationship with how participants defined suicide contagion, where it needs to occur immediately following an article's publication.

In order to make her point more poignant, it appears that she generalises her scepticisms from New Zealand research to research in general. Rachel's argument suggests that unless

the existence of contagion has been robustly and empirically documented, it will be criticised. Consequently, participants will not view contagion as a serious concern and reporting practices will not change. This argument appears to shift the responsibility for the manner in which suicide is reported onto the researcher, whereby it is up to researchers to develop 'conclusive' research which would then be uncontested and justify reporting changes. This argument appears to conflict with other later arguments in which participants believed their reporting was highly ethical. However, like ethical reporting the purpose of this argument was to distance suicide reporting from harm and to demonstrate that external reporting initiatives are unnecessary. In a continued attempt to discount suicide contagion, participants would expand to indicate that contagion research has a subtle negative bias.

3. *You never get to ask the victims did they read a suicide article? Did it place a seed in their head? You also never get to ask them whether they felt if they could talk about it with anyone? Even if it gets to a point where we get to a point where we can discover the negative impact of reporting a suicide. WE will never get to a point where we know the impact of not reporting on suicide. You know that could be far worse. That could be 60 per cent of the problem. The largest part of the problem could be the stigma of the environment where they feel they are unable to get help. Or where do you hear where you can get help, because we can't write about suicide or can't write many of them, and when we do we get to put those little boxes in with all the help and stuff. But if we can't write stories about suicide we can't put those little boxes in and how do people get this information? I know with the internet you can find things out these days, you can Google help, and the lowdown and that. That type of stuff would come up, but that is the other flip side is what is the good the media could do if they were given the chance.*  
(Rachel)

Rachel begins by arguing that the existence of contagion is uncertain. She does this by highlighting a perceived weakness, whereby contagion research fails to investigate victim perspectives. Such an argument is difficult to refute, as no one is able to understand the precise perspectives and views of the deceased. In addition, the highlighting of researchers' inability to establish a more direct contagion relationship is used to undermine the relevance of the majority of contagion research. She then adds credibility to her claim that research evidence is inconclusive by listing a series of perceived research flaws. Rachel then changes focus and argues that the consequences of suicide reporting are misunderstood. This is done by arguing that suicide reporting can actually promote public health, which effectively argues the opposite result than would be expected from suicide contagion. This argument demonstrates two sides of the same argument, where positive influences of reporting suicide are advocated while simultaneously the presence of negative



consequences are refuted. To reinforce this point she notes that even in the unlikely case suicide contagion is conclusively demonstrated, the positives of suicide reporting may still outweigh any negatives. The use of the word “never” and “far worse” implies the scope of suicide reporting benefits are so wide reaching they cannot be fully identified. Rachel then uses hypothetical statistics to highlight that the media’s inability to report suicide could reflect a majority of the problem (60 per cent). However, these statistics reflect Rachel’s interpretation, and overlook the possibility that suicide reporting could be responsible for the remaining 40 per cent of suicides. Rachel then identifies some hypothetical ways in which suicide reports may help readers. Interestingly, Rachel appears to undermine her own argument by acknowledging that people could obtain this same help information from the internet. As a result, the perceived benefits of including help referral information appear less relevant with increasing levels of public access to the internet. This contradiction provides the first indication that the media are becoming less relevant in today’s society, a point which will be examined in more detail in the subsequent section. The argument then concludes with her main point that instead of restriction suicide reporting, it should be promoted.

It appears that despite the absence of research evidence and Rachel’s own admission that the benefits of suicide reporting are difficult to establish, she firmly argues that reporting of suicide may have positive consequences. The argument that suicide reporting can have positive consequences appears to be a contradiction. It appears the function of this argument is to distance the media from the possibility that they may harm their readers and promote the belief that suicide reporting restrictions are not only unneeded but open reporting should be encouraged. This argument is presented in a black and white way, where participants appear to be placed in a “no-win” situation, where they cannot write about suicide but journalists and editors need to be helpful by providing help referral information.

Not only did participants have problems with research data and conclusions, but they also expressed concerns regarding the motives of those completing the research. Specifically, participants referred to government policymakers and researchers as having a unique agenda which would encourage researchers to overlook results and draw false conclusions. For example:

4. *I just wish that some of the Suicidologists. Isn't that an awful word? ((laughter)) could stop seeing the media as the enemy and start seeing the usefulness really. And stop misleading, making misleading statements about the research. Be a little more honest and a little more open... I think in some ways the media has been a sitting duck ... I do think some of this concentrating on the media is to avoid the spotlight on other factors. (Tracey)*

This is another example of how participants argued that suicide contagion evidence is controversial. Tracey argues that researchers are biased against the mainstream media who are unfairly targeted by researchers with a fixed agenda. This argument claims that there is misleading contagion research which may misinform our understanding of contagion. Tracey uses the word “enemy” which conveys an image that research into suicide contagion is perceived as being openly hostile. Restating of the word “misleading” and Tracey’s claims for honesty reinforces the sense that contagion evidence may be used in a selective and misleading way to promote a fixed point of view. To reinforce this point, Suicidologists were attacked and criticised.

Tracey then uses the metaphor of a “sitting duck” to emphasise the idea media is an easy target for criticism. In addition, Tracey goes on to state the focus on media reporting reflects a deliberate attempt to distract people from other more important factors. This represents a strategic misalignment approach where it is argued that researchers “have the wrong target”. This argument is designed to shift the focus away from the media, where the media are framed as a victim, having little or no responsibility for suicide contagion. As a result, researchers would be better off moving on and analysing other more important suicide risk factors. This argument is particularly interesting as attention is moved away from readers being the victim (through suicide contagion) to framing the media as the victim (as they deal with misleading research statements). Throughout this extract, arguments for researcher bias and researcher avoidance of discussing other suicide risk factors are not specified. Such vagueness usually passes unremarked in conversations but is very obvious when examining a written transcript. Subsequently, this extract demonstrates that participants perceive much of contagion evidence to be comprised of some misleading statements made by those with political and personal agendas. As a result, participants do not perceive contagion evidence to be reflective of robust and neutral scientific data.

Until now participants have appeared to systematically challenge and discredit any research demonstrating the existence of contagion. However, participants were also very selective in their criticism of research data. When research contained favourable conclusions, participants used research data to support their arguments.

5. *The evidence was mixed wasn't it? It didn't say that every time there was a report people automatically committed suicide, but it didn't say people didn't either. That the evidence was mixed on the matter and that is about as far as I can take that. So we really need some conclusive data.* (Sarah)

Sarah does not deny the existence of suicide contagion; rather she argues that contagion evidence is mixed. The absence of conclusive data appears to have left participants with

room to draw their own conclusions. This argument is particularly interesting as research evidence is selectively used to demonstrate that suicide contagion is contentious and based on ambiguous research. The use of research data appears inconsistent with many participant claims that research data is seriously flawed. Labelling contagion as inconclusive appears to reduce the seriousness of contagion, as it is something that if it exists, it only sporadically occurs, “the evidence was mixed wasn’t it?” This may reflect the nature of contagion research not being an undeniable causal relationship, and for those trained in journalism (as opposed to scientific method) such a relationship leaves room for doubt and uncertainty. To support this argument, an example was used to demonstrate that contagion may not exist as not every occasion of suicide reporting was linked to a documented case of suicide contagion. However, in doing so, the argument appears to ignore or overlook the instances where suicide reporting may contribute to suicide contagion. Therefore, this same point could be used equally well to support the existence of contagion. It appears before accepting the occurrence of contagion, Sarah requires direct causality, where suicide reports need to be consistently linked to real suicides. Her repeated use of the vague term ‘mixed’ is then used to demonstrate that this criterion has not been established. Sarah then concludes by restating her desire for obtaining conclusive data. The following extract further demonstrates how participants would selectively use contagion evidence to demonstrate contagion evidence is controversial.

6. *Do you know the guy Hassan who has done research in Australia? I mean he came out and said, that in fact he couldn't see that there was any causality, causation, cause, or whatever. He couldn't make that link and he actually said, and my research is the latest that has been done on this and I can't make, I can't actually make that link. But, it gets reported categorically, that he has said cause and effect. So, you know, I will give you an example that, that supports the use of the role of media, and this is when Kurt Cobain died... so that is a situation where, One, it was known that he had committed suicide. Two, he was a celebrity. Three, he was (2) adored by lots of young people who are probably in the vulnerable age group. But because of the way it was, the media way, how it was manag-. Because of the way the media reported on this suicide. In fact there were a lot more phone calls to call centres. The suicide rate went down and they reckon the whole effect in Seattle was quite the opposite to what you would have thought, IF THERE was suicide contagion. So, so but, but, that never gets mentioned. (Tracey)*

Tracey uses research statements to support her viewpoint that the occurrence of contagion is controversial. This argument appears inconsistent with previous arguments which systematically labelled research as flawed and biased. Here, Tracey uses research evidence

to demonstrate that research conclusions are being misappropriated and selectively used to demonstrate causality. The selective use of research data raises questions surrounding whether it is the unfavourable research conclusions and not the research itself that is the issue. Tracey begins by asking the writer's knowledge of the recent research by Hassan. Noting Hassan's research is Australian may reflect an attempt to avoid or minimise her own criticisms, which are also established by Rachel (extract 2) that overseas research does not apply to New Zealand. However, it may also reflect that Tracey is more accepting of international research and its applicability to New Zealand, where Australian research in particular is likely to be more applicable to New Zealand (due to cultural and geographic closeness). Tracey then argues that the inability of contagion researchers to establish a causal link greatly diminishes the legitimacy of suicide contagion. Tracey strengthens her argument by demonstrating that her viewpoint is shared by the researcher "I can't actually make that link". This serves to strengthen the argument as it is now seen to come from an impartial researcher who is an expert in the field. Identifying this research as the latest further reinforces the point that no researchers have been able to establish causality. This argument appears to overlook the conclusions that Hassan could make and does not comment on whether this viewpoint is shared by other researchers. Tracey then concludes by again re-emphasising research criticisms that research data may incorrectly over-report their findings.

Tracey then changes track, in order to support her view that the media related contagion is dubious she uses the example of the death of Kurt Cobain. Tracey begins by numerically listing three points to demonstrate and reinforce the point that if contagion exists it should have occurred after his suicide. Tracey then further emphasises this point by stating that following his death, suicide rates decreased. She then stated this change reflected responsible media management and positive audience consequences to media reporting. These statements are particularly interesting as they reveal a number of important contradictions. By highlighting the reporting following Kurt Cobain's death as appropriate raises the questions regarding why reporting of suicide needs to be altered from typical reports, particularly if contagion does not exist. In addition, a decrease in suicide frequencies could not necessarily reflect contagion does not exist, but that in this instance appropriate media reporting minimised the opportunity for contagion. Then finally, it appears counterintuitive that the media can positively influence readers ("more phone calls to call centres") and yet any negative reader impact in the form of contagion is firmly dismissed. Furthermore, this point alludes to the power of the media, where the media is believed to be able to positively influence the media. However, this point appears selectively used where negative consequences (suicide contagion) are dismissed while positive consequences

(help-seeking) are promoted. Interestingly, as the following extract demonstrates, despite criticising contagion research, participants reported that they would be willing to take research data seriously.

7. *The argument we had with the Minister, we keep saying that where is the research that shows contagion came from the way the mainstream media reported suicide. We said we have one of the most tightly written suicide codes in the world, in terms of Section 29 of the Coroner's Act, and we have one of the highest suicide rates, explain that to us we said. And we will actually take note of your concerns about the way mainstream media reports these things, when we see some New Zealand research. And we will actually take note of your concerns about the way mainstream media reports these things, when we see some New Zealand research. And in fact there was some New Zealand research done, and that showed on the whole New Zealand mainstream media was very responsible in the way it reported suicide. And there was the suggestion, and that it is no real surprise that we need more research. But I have never met a researcher who never said that, particularly if they can get government money to do it. But as a result of that we felt that in fact it showed we were reporting suicide, when it occurred (2) and when it had a public interest dimension, (2) responsibly. And I still would think it will still be in that way. (Sarah)*

Sarah begins by stating that the media have argued with government Ministers regarding the perceived lack of contagion evidence. This not only demonstrates that Sarah was aware of contagion research but also reinforces the perception that contagion evidence is contentious and inconclusive. She increases the persuasiveness of her argument by repeatedly using the word “we”, which demonstrates her position is shared by others. In order to better illustrate her views on contagion, she reports that NZ has “one of the most tightly written suicide codes in the world”. This suggests that NZ is progressive with innovative practices, or is very backward, hinting at old regimes that fought to prevent people from speaking out. Sarah immediately quashes the latter possibility, and argues NZ’s high suicide rate conflicts with the existence of contagion.

Interestingly, participants argued that research evidence is necessary to promote changes in reporting practices. This frames the industry as reasonable, ethical, and open to the possibility of suicide contagion. However, the reported industry’s willingness to accept contagion research appears to conflict with statements that existing research is inconclusive. In addition, considering the wealth of published contagion research available it raises questions as to what degree of evidence the industry requires. Furthermore, if an evidence threshold is met, Sarah’s vagueness “take note” serves to reduce any industry obligation to

change reporting practices. It appears the aim of this argument is to demonstrate that without conclusive evidence it is unwise to take “speculative actions” that will have a significant impact upon the media.

Sarah then appears to contradict herself by noting local research has actually been completed. This research is used to demonstrate that New Zealand reporting is “very responsible”. This argument is used to imply that even if contagion evidence was undeniable, mainstream media are doing everything correctly and do not need to change. This again demonstrates that participants are resistant to external initiatives designed to alter the manner in which suicide is reported. This argument also demonstrates that participants were selective in their criticisms of research data and they appeared less willing to challenge research with favourable conclusions. Sarah would then lampoon research motives for desiring more research. She does this by indicating these claims are typical and a joke is used, “I have never met a researcher who never said that (need more research), particularly if they can get government money to do it”. The discouragement of future research may reflect an attempt to maintain the existing perception that the media continue to report suicide ethically. Alternatively this may reflect a desire to avoid the development of a compelling list of NZ based research, which may substantially undermine participant opposition towards contagion evidence.

Throughout this section participants attempted to position themselves as academically aware of suicide contagion literature and research. This may reflect participants’ awareness that they were talking to an academic professional and consequently were more likely to focus on being scientific in their responses. However, participants’ ongoing referencing of scientific evidence meant that they were required to find a way to discredit science that did not suit their purpose. This was a key theme throughout this section, where participants discounted the conclusiveness of contagion evidence while elevating science as being “truthful” when it opposed suicide contagion. As a result, participants were willing to prioritise science under specific circumstances when it suited them.

In summary, participants were aware of contagion research, and were able to critically evaluate this research to develop their own conclusions. Participants all argued that at best suicide contagion evidence is contestable with some participants going further to suggest suicide contagion may not exist. In particular, participants identified researchers’ inability to establish causality as a significant flaw. The challenge of contagion research evidence appears to reflect an attempt to establish that suicide contagion research is misunderstood. In order to demonstrate this, participants would argue contagion research is significantly

flawed and unreliable. In doing so, they appeared to diminish the link between suicide reporting and reader harm. As a result, suicide can continue to be viewed as a valid topic of publication where no additional levels of censorship are necessary. When making this argument, participants appeared to contradict themselves by selectively using contagion research to demonstrate that suicide contagion is contentious. This demonstrates that participants were dismissive towards evidence linking suicide reporting to reader harm, but were motivated to accept and generalise 'favourable' contagion evidence that does not establish this connection. As a result, it appears participants prioritised the absence of evidence over the presence of knowledge shown from previous studies, in that participant perceptions of research flaws, particularly the lack of causality, was seen as a large barrier to applying research results. It appears the purpose of this argument is to highlight the controversial aspects of contagion to consequently demonstrate that suicide articles are unlikely to harm readers and reporting initiatives are not needed.

In addition, participants argued that even if contagion has been hypothetically "proven", anecdotal accounts indicating the presence of suicide reporting benefits is likely to outweigh any negative reporting consequences. This highlights how participants were resistant to changing their reporting practices and consequently wanted to dispute the suicide contagion evidence on which the suicide reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act are based. Referencing the contestable nature of contagion research reveals that, by challenging contagion and having high standards of proof, participants do not believe they are being unethical or radical, rather their views are justified. Collectively, these extracts demonstrate that media principles of freedom/democracy and ethics were placed as being more important than contestable research findings. Unfavourable research results were continuously challenged, labelled as bias and despite a level of reader risk, participants argued that other factors were more important, such as obtaining a high level of proof before restricting media reporting practices.

### **Media Relevance and Impact**

When discussing suicide reporting, participants would regularly refer to the relevance and impact of the news media. Arguments related to media significance and impact was particularly interesting, as these assertions did not directly dispute the existence of contagion, rather participants disputed and minimised the media's ability to elicit contagion. Accordingly, this argument states that even if suicide contagion evidence meets participants' high standards of proof, contagion will still not be viewed as an important suicide reporting concern. However, similar to previous arguments around research data, participants were selective and contradictory with their use of arguments. They argued newspapers had little

to no negative reader impact, they simultaneously argued that the media reporting of suicide creates important positive reader benefits. It appears the function of these arguments is the same, to accentuate the positives of suicide reporting while minimising any perceived negatives. Similar to participant views of research, such arguments are likely to diminish participant concerns of suicide contagion and legitimises the continued reporting of suicide. The following extract demonstrates an attempt to diminish the newspaper industry's contagion influence by arguing that other domains have a larger audience impact.

8. *We have never really believed, (2) what I rather disparagingly refer to as the 'suicide industry' has said about the contagion effect of newspapers. And I actually think that as time has gone on, what newspapers and mainstream media does has become more and more irrelevant to what actually happens... Nine times out of ten it is because of what their mates have done or maybe what somebody that they respect, (2) maybe a celebrity figure (2) has done. And I think that affects young people much more than what we can do. >They don't even read BLOODY newspapers anymore<. (Sarah)*

Sarah begins by highlighting the familiar argument that contagion does not exist. To give strength to this argument, the word 'we' was used, which implies there is more than one subscriber to the view. The use of the disparaging phrase "suicide industry" is further used to convey that suicide contagion evidence is developed from people with vested interests. This reiterates previous criticisms of research evidence and frames contagion evidence as disputable, since it casts doubt on the motives of those involved. However, Sarah introduces a new element as she proposes that any contagion effect from newspapers and the mainstream media is minimal, as the media's ability to elicit contagion has become increasingly "irrelevant". This argument appears to move responsibility for suicide contagion onto other domains that are outside the influence of the media. In order to better illustrate this point, a number of these factors are specified. However, this argument appears to overlook the potential role the media may play in these identified contagion factors. As a result, these same examples could be applied to argue the opposing view, that the media coverage of celebrity suicides or deaths of respected people may similarly contribute to suicide contagion.

Sarah's linking of the phrases newspapers with the generic term "mainstream media" serves to generalise this argument across domains dominated by journalists. Sarah appears to avert the potential counterargument surrounding the growing influence of the mainstream media by arguing that the media's ability to influence their audience is diminishing with each day. An arbitrary statistic, "nine times out of ten" is then used to reinforce the view that the mainstream media have minimal influence of contagion. Again, this argument appears to



overlook self-acknowledged instances where media reports do contribute to contagion. Consequently, these same statistics could be reversed to support the view that the media do contribute to contagion. The persuasiveness of this argument is undermined by the frequent use of uncertain language such as “maybe” and “I think”. Sarah then concludes by noting that the youth, the population most susceptible to contagion, “don’t even read BLOODY newspapers anymore”. This argument is used to suggest that as the most vulnerable population are not exposed to newspapers then newspapers must not contribute to contagion. In addition, it appears to highlight the changing nature of “reporting” and journalism, a possible reference to increases in social media. This argument appears to overlook the potential impact that suicide articles may have on those actually exposed. In addition, emphasising the word “BLOODY” is used to frame the belief that newspaper incited contagion is ridiculous. Throughout this argument, Sarah frequently interchanges from discussing mainstream media in general terms to specifically discussing newspapers. The example of youth not reading newspapers could be applied to state that contagion may occur in other mainstream media domains to which the youth are regularly exposed to. However, this appears problematic as it opposes the earlier statement that the mainstream media (in general) do not contribute to suicide contagion. The following extract highlights and builds on these ideas of media relevance and impact.

9. *Again I would stand to be corrected on > that (3) this, people who take the step of attempting suicide or succeed, they are by in large if not completely people who are seriously ill and not someone who has been exposed to a nasty piece of media. And if you consider how the issue is covered in sitcoms. Hmm, sitcoms ((laughter)) and SOAPS, and television drama or music video and film. <That probably would have a bigger impact than news coverage by your local newspaper that is fairly restrained. (Tom)*

Tom begins by disputing the existence of contagion, as he argues that suicide is more likely the result of non-media related factors such as serious illness, a point he reinforces by stating that other factors are almost completely responsible for suicide. This argument appears to move attention and responsibility away from newspaper reporting of suicide onto other non-media related domains. To reinforce this point, an example of mental illness is used to demonstrate that the influence of media contagion is minimal and unlikely. The derogatory phrase “nasty piece of media” is further used to belittle the existence of media suicide contagion. This argument downplays the importance of the media, where Tom is essentially arguing the media have little to no contagious impact. This argument appears to not only legitimise suicide reporting but demonstrates media censorship of suicide is not needed. When making this argument, Tom appears to blur the lines between suicide risk factors and suicide contagion. As a result, he argues that as a majority of suicides can be

explained by non-contagion risk factors that suicide contagion cannot exist. This argument appears to simplify suicide contagion to reflect something that is unlikely to be the consequence of multiple complex risk factors which is particularly the case for suicide contagion.

Tom then shifts focus and appears to contradict his initial point, as he argues that even if contagion exists it is more likely to occur in other media outlets and not newspapers, a point he asserts by listing other entertainment media outlets and describing newspaper coverage as restrained. However, other domains such as sitcoms do not typically deal with matters of suicide. Newspaper reporting is then positively framed not only as something which is restrained but is described a “local newspaper”. This creates an image of a small scale, honest and trustworthy business. The positive framing of newspapers as an ethical industry further distancing newspapers from reader harm, provides an additional layer explaining why contagion is not an industry concern and helps set up the subsequent argument that industry censorship is unnecessary. Tom then concludes by affirming that other domains and not newspapers are likely responsible for contagion.

Participants would also adapt the argument of relevance and add a new element by directly applying this argument to suicide reporting initiatives and restrictions. The following extract demonstrates this.

10. *TV and radio stations and news stations, and newspapers have all been really responsible in the reporting of suicide. I believe they largely do a good job. So I don't really have any issues with the mainstream media, so I think it is mainly a problem with how suicide is written about on other controlled forums (like) the internet. On the internet people can almost write what they want with no restrictions. People discuss suicide, the method and locations. Which raises questions whether any of these restrictions placed on the media are useful or needed at all. Especially when anyone can google items and find people who have comments on unrestricted or uncontrolled internet blogs. I think all these media restrictions are outdated and unnecessary. The media have a social conscience and are always, well I hope always, but they have added incentive to report things responsibly and ethically. While on the internet there are no such controls or restrictions. (Graham)*

Graham begins by stating his viewpoint that all mainstream news media organisations report suicide in a responsible manner, a point he emphasises by repeating two more times. This frames mainstream media reporting practices as the benchmark of suicide reporting and implies that the media do not contribute to suicide contagion. Consequently, this positions

current reporting practices as not needing to change. This point then sets up his next argument; that problems around suicide reporting largely stem from other media domains. This argument shifts responsibility for suicide contagion onto other areas outside their control, like the Internet. He justifies this view by highlighting that no restrictions apply to the Internet where people can write about anything they want. To reinforce this point Graham states, on the Internet people frequently discuss suicide method and location details; factors widely known to be associated with suicide contagion. This statement strongly implies that unlike the uncontrolled domains, the mainstream media is more responsible as they do not report these details. This extract argues that the professional and ethical restraint of newspaper reports contrasts with the free-for-all that social media offer.

Graham then argues that the internet has dramatically increased people's ability to view unrestricted and uncontrolled material and therefore placing restrictions on mainstream media is outdated and unnecessary. It appears the function of this argument is to highlight the double standard between printed and digital domains and to state that as other media domains cannot be 'policed' the mainstream media should not be either. Using the example of uncontrolled Internet reporting of suicide to advocate that the mainstream media should be similarly 'unrestricted' appears inconsistent with the previous argument linking the uncontrolled nature of Internet reporting to suicide contagion. As a result, the counterargument could be made stating that the restrictions are particularly valuable as they ensure reporting is to a high standard. Consequently, such an argument could be used to advocate that media restrictions should be expanded to include unregulated domains. However, the unregulated nature of these areas means that restrictions cannot be applied. Graham appears aware of this potential contradiction and attempts to downplay its significance by stating it is the mainstream media's "social conscience", as opposed to restrictions are responsible for the mainstream media's responsible reporting of suicide. It is also important to note that throughout this extract the word "restrictions" was repetitively used to reinforce the view that media guidelines and the Coroners Act are obstructive. Some participants went a step further and argued that current restrictions are irrelevant because they are outdated and irrelevant as they did not reflect public opinion.

*11. It needs to be updated for the 21st century for a start. There needs to be evidence of how people communicate now and how the media has changed markedly. You can tell they are trying to hold back the tide. You know, if you are going to apply 20th century media restrictions to the 21st century digital media. So it all is set to be updated... You know, what the law says and what the prevailing behaviour is has gotten out of step. And either you need to pull the media back into line with this draconian rule defining law or we are saying we*

*need to change the law to reflect what the actuality of reporting suicide is. AND what the public mood is. Laws should reflect what the public wants, so there should be a discussion around that. You know, if the public view is that there should be reporting of suicide or that the restrictions are appropriate at the moment, then that is fine. Let's make them clearer and we will move on. That is democracy. (Paul)*

Paul argues that the existing Act is out of date with today's society, as the public are regularly exposed to other unmonitored sources of information. He then restates a previous call for more evidence to investigate changes in people's consumption of media. This further implies that people's use of the media has substantially changed and current suicide reporting restrictions and guidelines are now outdated. The restating of words like "20<sup>th</sup> century" and "21<sup>st</sup> century" is further used to stress the perception that current restrictions and suicide initiatives are outdated and need to be changed. A metaphor of "holding back the tide" is further used to capture the image that attempting to restrict the media in today's society is futile, as the media (the tide) will keep publishing suicide articles no matter what the government do. Paul then introduces two solutions, ensuring the media adhere to the law or changing the law to reflect how suicide is currently been reported. The use of the strong word "draconian" suggests current restrictions are heavy handed and negative, suggesting the only reasonable solution is to change the law. Paul appears very directive with his approach and states he wants the law to be changed to reflect current media practices. According to this argument, Paul desires legislation to have little to no impact on media reporting practices, which raises questions as to whether legislation is needed at all.

To further support his view that current laws need changing a new argument of public opinion is introduced, whereby laws should reflect public appetite. The invoking of democracy is a powerful and difficult argument to refute, as it is one of the foundation principles of freedom. Despite initial criticisms of existing laws, Paul appears open to the consequences of public consultation and reported he would accept public opinion. This argument shifts attention away from article content and reader safety to introduce a new legal argument relating to the effectiveness and relevance of restricting media reporting. The extract also demonstrates that legal concerns over suicide reporting should take precedence over other concerns. As a result it appears the desire for media freedom is prioritised over other values such as media ethics and reader safety.

Participants appeared selective in their arguments regarding media relevance. Until now participants have argued the newspaper media are becoming less relevant in today's society and consequently the media have little audience impact and suicide contagion is unlikely to

occur. It appears the function of this argument was to demonstrate that suicide contagion is not a concern for mainstream media and consequently they should be able to report on suicide like any other topic. However, as the following extract demonstrates, there were many instances where participants would argue suicide reporting resulted in a large reader impact. This was a widely held argument which all participants raised, journalists and editors. This represents a large rhetorical change where the argument becomes less defensive and hostile toward the notion of contagion, and more positive about the potential benefits accomplished by publishing suicide articles. The following extract provides some insight into how and why this was done.

12. *And they [suicide guidelines] don't look at how the media can positively impact what it can do for families, what it can do for people who are struggling. It may help them. You know (2), how the media can be used in a positive way. I mean it is always best to (2) come from a positive point of view than a negative, if you are just told what is going to be bad you won't get as good of a response. So yeah, the media can have a huge positive influence.* (Ashley)

Ashley argues that suicide reporting can positively influence readers. To support this argument, examples are used to demonstrate that suicide reporting can help families and those at risk of completing suicide. Consequently, suicide reporting is framed not only as a pure news story but something that will lead to reader benefits. Highlighting the positive consequences of suicide reporting appears to further distance suicide reporting from reader harm and serves to inform others that their perceptions surrounding suicide reporting are inaccurate. As a result, it appears to suggest that suicide reporting is not a contentious issue to something that the media may have an ethical obligation report upon. Accordingly, this argument implies that guidelines or restrictions are unnecessary as there are no dangers to protect readers from. Ashley appears careful to not overstate these claims, where the words “can” and “may” acknowledge that identified positives may not occur. This argument is particularly interesting, illustrating that the media can have a large reader influence, in the form of “positive contagion”. However, this argument appeared to contradict previous arguments which advocated that the mainstream media has little audience impact. While conflicting, these arguments appear to both serve the same function, distancing media reporting from reader harm and promote the removal of suicide reporting guidelines or restrictions. The following extract builds on these ideas and specifically discusses ways reporting of suicide can positively influence their readers.

13. *What good, how many lives or suicides have been prevented if there is greater openness? Because you can't qualify that. So it is very well, you know, do-gooding social agencies to say. There was this article in the paper and then two other people in the city killed themselves, and we can show there was a link. But*

*well, obviously that is BAD, and no one is going to be joyous about that. But what they can't qualify is, well look there is this great story in the Manawatu Standard about teenage suicide and the impact it had on the family and the warning signs they missed and they spoke to, you know, a mental health expert. Hmm, and you know, seven kids saw that or seven parents saw that and picked up on something that saved those kids lives. YOU ARE never going to have that data.*

(Paul)

Paul opens with his main point that greater openness surrounding suicide reporting is likely to prevent suicides. As a consequence, this suggests reporting restrictions are counterproductive and problematic, where they are positioned as something which inadvertently prevents media personnel from writing stories, which may reduce suicide rates. Again, the purpose of this argument appears to diminish the perceived dangers of suicide reporting and frame it as beneficial. This framework further legitimises the media's continued reporting of suicide. In addition, if suicide reporting could be viewed as having large reader benefits, then there would be no need to limit or control media reporting of suicide. This serves to widen the number of factors that should be considered when discussing the consequences of suicide reporting. Paul appears to pre-emptively counter potential criticism regarding the lack of research evidence by repeatedly stating reader benefits of suicide reporting are impossible to quantify. To emphasise the point, Paul appears to diminish and trivialise the negatives associated with suicide reporting by labelling the people who developed the information as "do-gooding social agencies". This quote further illustrates how participants have a negative association with those who want to limit suicide reporting. Again, this demonstrates how participants would prioritise evidence that suits their agenda while similarly dismissing unfavourable evidence.

An anecdotal example is then used to illustrate that although writing about suicide may result in two suicides, it will also prevent seven. The larger positive consequence of suicide contagion is then used to conclusively construct suicide reporting as a positive behaviour, as even if participants support the existence of contagion, suicide reporting will save more lives than harm. However, the repeated acknowledgment that the benefits of suicide reporting are difficult to determine not only makes this point less viable and persuasive, in addition as these benefits are purely hypothetical similar arguments could be used to suggest that perhaps reporting negatives outweigh the benefits. Interestingly, this argument demonstrates that participants appeared to prioritise the unestablished and unknown benefits of suicide reporting, above the empirically established negative effects of suicide reporting. The following extract picks up on these ideas, but argues in order for an article to have a positive audience impact, suicide needs to be discussed in detail.

14. *But I think we should do that (write about suicide in detail), I really do. Because the whole school is talking about it, everyone knows exactly what happened but no one is really saying it. Think about this. When I was in Taranaki there was, there was a student who committed suicide at school. And... my understanding is that he hung himself in the toilets at Boy's High, and you know, °a lot of school parents would have known that.° I mean half the town probably knew that, and we write three or four paragraphs about it saying no suspicious circumstances. In my mind if we can't talk about it in detail, in a very, very sensible and inclusive sort of way then I don't see how we are going to fix it. (Adam)*

Adam argues that the industry's inability to write detailed articles about suicide is irrational. He uses a personal example to demonstrate that it is relatively pointless to limit detailed discussions of suicide, particularly when the whole local community are likely to know precise suicide details. Adam stresses the ridiculousness of this situation, by stating that he could not even directly label the death a suicide, where he was required be more subtle and label the death as "no suspicious circumstances". It appears this argument was designed to promote more open and detailed reporting of suicide, particularly as restrictions do not necessarily prevent an article's publication. Adam appears to be aware of some potential problems surrounding the detailed reporting of suicide and attempts to reduce these concerns by noting that such reporting needs to be done in a sensible and inclusive way. He stresses this point by restating the word very, "very, very sensible". Adam further appears to decrease the potential serious consequences of journalists getting this balance wrong by avoiding the word suicide. Interestingly, Adam uses broad terms to argue for the detailed discussion of suicide, the lack of precise details of what such details could include appears to avoid potential criticisms surrounding whether these details could potentially contribute to contagion, such as the detailed method descriptors. Adam concludes by noting that silencing aspects of particular cases does no one any good and the detailed reporting of suicide may help "fix" social problems, where suicide reporting is seen as a "cure". This is an argument for complete openness and transparency. The following extract expands on these ideas and suggests that due to the enormous reader benefits of suicide reporting, it is a topic that needs to be talked about.

15. *It is a method whereby the public can be informed of frequent causes of suicide and signs of suicidal behaviour. (2) So then people may be better able to identify the common signs of suicidal behaviour in others. That then provides an opportunity for help seeking behaviour. I also believe we help make suicide an increasing part of public awareness. Much like John Kirwan has been used to educate and promote the problems around mental illness... and I think we can inform the public that suicide is still an ongoing concern in New Zealand and not*

*something that should be forgotten about. We can also highlight the role of mental illness in suicide, such as the correlations between depression and suicide. Therefore suicide is not seen as rather a simple decision. (Graham)*

This extract serves to increase awareness of the important positive consequences suicide reporting can have. Here it is argued that one aspect of the decision to publish a story is linked to the story's ability to provide public benefits. This construction again appears to implicitly challenge the notion that suicide reporting can be harmful and serves to distance media reporting from any negative outcomes (such as contributing to contagion or promoting unhealthy messages). This argument constructs suicide reporting as possibly reducing suicide rates and illustrates that suicide articles can educate readers (such as warning signs, risk factors and motives), increase public awareness, provide help-seeking information and reduce social taboos. In an effort to illustrate the concrete gains that can be achieved by media reporting, the example of Sir John Kirwan (prominent NZ rugby coach and former player of NZ's national rugby side) is used to demonstrate that the media can have positive effects by encouraging others to seek help for mental illness. However, this comparison does not appear entirely comparable as media around John Kirwan represented a prolonged government funded depression awareness campaign. Consequently, it could be argued that it is government advertising initiative and not media news articles are responsible for public benefits. Furthermore, it deals with awareness of mental illness (depression) and not something as fatally final as suicide.

Graham then concludes by stating the media can help readers by educating them that suicide is a complex issue involving many different factors. Focusing on the social benefits of reporting suicide serves to provide the media with a legitimate explanation of why they should continue to publish suicide stories. It further reinforces the underlying message that media are ethical and would not place the readers at risk. In addition, it highlights that reporting suicide is a method of promoting community good. This argument demonstrates that the media believe there can be a link between what the media report and how the audience behave. It appears inconsistent that participants assert the positive consequences of suicide reporting while downplaying negative effects, where if participants believe suicide reporting could positively affect their audience it also appears likely that suicide reporting could lead to negative consequences.

While participants were generally dismissive towards any potential negative impact of suicide reporting on readers, as the following extract demonstrates participants were aware of the potential negative effect suicide reporting has on themselves.



16. *I get they would affect you [media personnel] more than most stories because they are just so awful and tragic for everybody and it is just <a really nasty thing that has happened and the families are so devastated, and the whole thing is just (2) horrible.> BUT, I can't think of any particular ones that I have cr(h)ied about or anyt(h)hing ((laughter)). BUT yeah when I was doing the series (of suicide stories), DEFINITELY, everyday people ringing me telling about how they wanted to commit suicide and how their brother did and how it affected them. And obviously you can't fob these people off and ° I didn't want to, but by the end I had had enough ° and was pretty sick of reporting about th(h)is ((laughter)). Yes, it definitely does affect you, it isn't a very nice thing to talk about. But I wouldn't say any particular stories affected me. I think for most people. If I did a series about almost of any topic by the end of it I would probably be like right I have had enou(h)gh ((laugh)), of that for a while. But suicide is particularly affecting because people you don't and people that you know vaguely start telling you about their own experiences with their family and people get very personal. So yeah, it °definitely affects me.° (Ashley)*

Ashley acknowledges that suicide reporting is a particularly sensitive topic and identifies reasons to explain why suicide is especially hard to report upon. The use of the words “so awful”, “tragic”, “really nasty”, “horrible” and “devastated” highlight that suicides are terrible events that has an enormous impact on media professionals which “definitely does affect you”, a point she emphasises by repeating. This argument demonstrates a degree of inconsistency with previous participant claims as participants were aware of their own negative personal impact occurring from suicide reporting, while simultaneously denying any potential negative reader impact. Consequently, this assertion appears to imply journalist's experiences of suicide reporting are prioritised above readers. However, this may reflect journalists being aware of their own personal reporting experiences while being uncertain of audience experiences. As a result, this point conflicts with subsequent ethical arguments raised by participants advocating that media professionals are responsive and considerate towards the possibility of negative reader impact.

Interestingly, when initially discussing personal impact, Ashley reported that individual stories did not affect her; rather it was the cumulative effectives stemming from repeated suicide stories. However, she later appears to contradict this point by noting individual experiences from specific suicide stories “definitely affects me”. This contradiction is likely to reflect the spontaneous nature of speech, whereby when thinking more about a topic people may start thinking of new details which may change their mind. It is also important to note that Ashley highlighted the personal nature of suicide stories which made them difficult to

report. However, as will be discussed in more detail later, when writing suicide stories participants asserted that personalising suicide stories was an essential story element associated with increased reader interest and creating positive community change. As a result, participants demonstrated a degree of inconsistency for not applying their own acknowledged difficulties to their readers.

Participants who argued that mainstream media have little audience impact were typically editors or journalists with previous editorial experience. These participants are more likely to be aware of the business and economic elements of suicide reporting. Consequently, they are more likely to be aware of competing forms of entertainment, readership numbers, industry trends and increased awareness of how much time readers are engaging in other media domains. Journalists with no editor experience are not likely to be aware of all these details and may hold the view that their work is meaningful to their readers. Conversely, all participants appeared aware of potential reader benefits of suicide reporting and this may reflect the common journalist belief that their work is more than entertainment and has important real world benefits.

As demonstrated throughout this section, when discussing suicide contagion, participants appeared to be dismissive of newspapers' ability to negatively impact their readers. As a result, participants argued that other domains negatively influence audience behaviour more than newspaper articles. This allowed participants to distance themselves from the likelihood that they could be responsible for harming their readers. Therefore what media personnel or newspapers did or how they reported on suicide is not a priority, as they argued that people committed suicide for reasons other than contagion. In addition, not only did this argument demonstrate that suicide was a legitimate topic to publish but as they have little reader impact there would be little to no value in adhering to suicide reporting initiatives.

Participants also used this same argument to directly challenge existing guidelines and restrictions which were similarly seen as either irrelevant (due to the rise of the Internet) or pointless (holding back the tide). However, as demonstrated throughout this section participants appeared to contradict themselves and would use the argument of positive reader impact to argue that suicide reporting can actually alter reader behaviour. These comments link suicide reporting to a responsible and mature response to suicide. This helps create a sense of necessity regarding suicide reporting, which appears to provide media organisations with legitimate permission to write about suicide. Although participants' use of arguments around media relevance and impact appear contradicting, the goals of these arguments is the same, to present suicide reporting as something positive, distance suicide

reporting from harm and advocate that any external suicide reporting initiatives are unnecessary and unwarranted.

### **Ethics and Morals**

Highlighting the important ethical and moral decisions associated with suicide reporting was a dominant feature of participant discussions. This argument appeared to be used in combination with participant arguments of contagion research to demonstrate that media reporting practices are not harmful to readers. However, unlike arguments around research, participant arguments involving reporter ethics and morals did not contest contagion. Rather, participants asserted that high internal industry ethics and standards ensure that suicide reporting does not incite suicide contagion. Participants used a number of different arguments to demonstrate that suicide is an ethical topic to report, including asserting that media professionals are aware of important suicide sensitivities, detailing how participants are responsive to these sensitivities, participants already censoring their suicide reporting and participants being considerate to article content. Participant assertions that suicide reporting is of a high ethical and moral standard was particularly interesting as participants were required to balance the desire to report ethically with the potentially conflicting demand of needing to meet financial realities by increasing readership through publishing interesting stories. When participants first introduced the argument of ethics, it was typically used to justify and explain why the media report suicide. This allowed participants to frame suicide as something that consequently will be unlikely to contribute to suicide contagion where suicide remains a legitimate topic of publication. This argument is outlined below.

*17. I think as a broad topic, broadly as a (2) health issue. It's a source of huge disruption to people's lives and huge source of pain and grief and a big death toll. And it is a serious public mental health issue with a concern for the community, in a similar way as heart disease and cancer, and car accidents. I think it is up there with those. I think we are around 600 deaths a year, I'm not sure. SO it is a big public health issue... As a broad subject it certainly is (newsworthy) as it affects people's lives, and as a journalist we cover things that affect people's lives even if they are sensitive with a lot of sensitivity around them. (Tom)*

Tom argues that suicide is an important and appropriate news topic as it informs the public of important social issues. As a result, suicide is framed as a topic which journalists have a degree of ethical obligation to report. Consequently, suicide is not simply an interesting story but is further framed as something that highlights important community health concerns. To support this argument, Tom discusses suicide reporting exclusively in positive terms. The social impact of suicide reporting is reinforced by restating the words such as “huge” and “big”. Therefore suicide was not simply seen as a disruption at the individual level, but an act

that has wider community concerns. To further emphasise the credibility of his points, suicide is then compared to other leading causes of death, to which journalists routinely discuss without criticism (heart disease, cancer and car accidents). This argument frames suicide reporting as somewhat altruistic and removed from financial motives. Furthermore, defining suicide as a social issue helps provide the media with a legitimate licence to report upon suicide. It is also important to note that participant claims that reporting of suicide can have a “huge” reader impact appears to contrast with previous claims minimising the media’s ability to affect their audience. The following extract expands the idea of social interest in a manner which explains why suicide is an appropriate topic for journalists to discuss and publish.

*18. I think with suicide there is an extra element to it... it actually highlights an important social issue, >usually associated with mental health<. That people have reached a desperation point for whatever reason. Maybe they have been bullied at school, which is an important social issue that we need to talk about. That they are not getting the important mental health support they need from health agencies, which is an important social issue in the public interest to report. SO I THINK you have that basic element of that a life has been lost but, almost inevitably another one, two or three elements that make that story more in the public interest than someone just being killed in the car crash perhaps. (Henry)*

Henry begins by framing suicide as something particularly unique as it possesses an “extra element”; this elevates the reporting of suicide above other events or topics. This could suggest that suicide reporting possesses distinctive features that make it either inappropriate or important to report. In the next sentence Henry reveals he perceives suicide reporting to be uniquely important as it is intimately linked to a number of key social issues that the public should be aware of, such as identifying social problems in mental health, lack of social support and bullying. The essential desire to publish suicide stories is stressed by repeatedly describing it as a “need”. Like the previous extract this frames suicide reporting as a legitimate topic of conversation and means the important social issues linked to suicide create an ethical obligation. This argument demonstrates a degree of confirmatory bias as these arguments are exclusively positive and appear to ignore any negative factors or risks associated with suicide reporting. Linking suicide reporting to a public service implies that the main function of suicide news articles is to inform the readers of social issues. This suggests that all published suicide stories reflect an attempt to educate the public of important social issues; consequently this argument implies that this should be the main focus of all suicide articles.

Participants not only argued that the media have an ethical obligation to report suicide, but it was further argued that participants carefully consider the sensitive issues around suicide. As the following extract demonstrates, suicide reporting practices were argued to be ethical and of a high standard.

19. *“The biggest thing is (2) how high stakes it is. You know that if (2), if, you are reporting on a car crash and you get a detail wrong, or you kind of, maybe get the treatment wrong. You know, you do something that’s (2) intentionally or unintentionally something that sort of (2) inflammatory or, I guess what we know in the business as a ‘beat up’. You know, if you, if you, get the tone of (2) almost any other story WRONG, (2) there is kind of no harm done. You know? It is sort of just, hmm, well that is or you might get taken to The Press Council and I don’t mean to dismiss that as though it is unimportant. But, (2) no one will die, you know what I mean? And I guess, the reporting of suicide, the thing that really hit home for me was that, hmm, (2) people who are battling thoughts of suicide, (2) may quite simply see the word suicide in a newspaper article poster or on the front page of the paper and think that that is a sign.”* (Rachel)

Rachel begins by arguing that suicide reporting is viewed as a very sensitive topic that is treated with high degree of care and scrutiny. This point is stressed by listing features of suicide reporting which makes the topic particularly unique and challenging. The serious potential ramifications of suicide reporting is highlighted by noting that getting suicide reporting details wrong may have serious consequences; a possible reference to suicide contagion. Highlighting participant awareness of the serious nature of suicide reporting appears to indicate that the industry carefully scrutinises reporting details. To better illustrate the “high stakes” involved, suicide reporting is directly compared to car crashes, where similar small reporting errors are not believed to negatively impact readers. In order to preemptively dismiss potential counter arguments, Rachel notes it is the high risks associated with suicide reporting that prevent the media from reporting suicide in an inflammatory fashion known as a “beat-up”, which is a popular industry criticism. This point is further emphasised by restating that unlike almost any other topic, getting a suicide story’s themes or tone wrong can be harmful. Highlighting the extra care suicide stories receive is used to demonstrate that current suicide reporting practices are ethical. Consequently, suicide reporting is positioned as being unlikely to provoke contagion, especially as each small story detail is carefully deliberated and provocative details are avoided. As a result, this argument subtly implies that industry reporting is unlikely to benefit from adhering to suicide reporting initiatives designed to improve suicide reporting quality, such as reporting guidelines. However, highlighting the fine line of suicide reporting, where small errors can result in serious negative public consequences, could be used to support the opposing argument that

suicide reporting is too delicate an issue to leave to journalist judgement and reporting initiatives are needed to ensure it is reported ethically. Rachel then concludes by reinforcing the serious consequences of suicide reporting, as she highlights the inclusion of relatively minor details such as the word “suicide” may result in suicide contagion. Arguing that suicide reporting is ethical, as participants are aware of potential negative reader consequences, appears to contradict previous arguments that contagion is contestable. However, Rachel’s avoidance of using the phrase “suicide contagion” suggests directly endorsing contagion is something that is still avoided. The following extract builds on this argument that media reporting of suicide is ethical and uses the specific example of media sensitivity and empathy for issues surrounding suicide.

*20. I guess for me, (2) it is like, hmm, I am acutely aware it is a mental health problem. And that people who have taken their own lives have only done that because they feel they have no other option. You know (2) And I, (3) I guess I (2), understand (1.5), empathise with the emotional position that they must have been in. So to me it is not something that’s. Hmm it is very hard for me to put into words. Sorry ((laughter)). I just, I just really feel for the families and the people involved. I feel really sorry for them that they could not see any other way out. I guess I am kind of a softy in that regard (Katie)*

It is argued above that participants are aware of the sensitive issues surrounding suicide, particularly identifying mental health difficulties, victim distress and the feelings of the bereaved. The highlighting of participant awareness of reporting sensitivities implies that Katie is responsive to these concerns and subsequently her reporting is of a high ethical standard. Katie personalises this argument by frequently repeating the word “I” and “me”, which helps convey the participant’s intimate knowledge of the difficulties to do with suicide reporting. The repeated use of emotional words is further used to demonstrate the intense emotions that accompany suicide reporting. This point is reinforced by noting that she feels for the families of the bereaved and for people who choose to commit suicide. However, this may also reflect potential embarrassment or difficulties discussing this topic. Throughout this extract, Katie appeared to adopt an empathic approach by attempting to imagine how grieving families and the victim might respond. This is a key point, as empathy is framed as something which ensures suicide is treated with appropriate media respect and consequently reported ethically. The phrase “I am a kind of softy in that regard” and repeated use of the word “sorry” is used to further drive home this point. However, the personalised use of this argument could be used to demonstrate that this practice may not reflect common industry practice and is specific only to Katie. In addition, highlighting the difficult nature of suicide reporting may provide the media with a potential explanation for why they may occasionally get things wrong. Again, it is likely that participant arguments

highlighting the sensitivities surrounding suicide could be adapted and applied to argue that these same delicate issues justify the implementation of reporting initiatives designed to ensure it is reported upon ethically with a decreased risk of contagion.

As the following extract demonstrates, participants would also argue that their reporting was appropriate and ethical as journalists would frequently censor their reporting to protect their readers and avoid offence.

*21. The great unseen thing about journalism is about what we don't publish. Every day there is information about all sorts of things, and we decide for matters of taste or decency, risk of offending people, privacy, where we make a good judgment so it does meet the threshold for us to publicise that, so every story involving suicide would involve those discussions. ((laughter)) I can remember one case where, you know you have family calling with a different version of whose fault it was and all of that. You just don't go there and why would you? It's not something. It is not our job to do that, so why would we? So a lot of filtering goes on. It is a real taboo subject, and like all taboo subjects probably you pay more attention to filtering those topics than others. So I can. It will be hard to think of a case of suicide where the journalist and the editor haven't wrestled quite hard about what to leave out. (Tom)*

The extract begins by highlighting that public are not aware of reporting processes, particularly details and stories journalists decide to omit. This is then framed as a positive, as a series of factors are listed to demonstrate that article details are selectively censored according to the delicate and sensitive issues associated with suicide. The listing of these features is further used to demonstrate that suicide reporting is highly ethical as it is strongly implied that journalists will not report anything “distasteful” or that will cause offence or breach privacy. Tom further argues that there are a wide range of situations in which the media will censor themselves. This point is then further stressed by specifically stating every suicide article will have these discussions and that “good judgment” is used. Consequently, this argument implies that suicide articles are particularly responsible and ethical as newspapers do not include any of these identified details. In order to better illustrate how journalists and editors censor themselves and to provide further evidence that self-censorship occurs, a previous personal experience is shared to demonstrate an instance where the presence of sensitive issues resulted in a story not being published. This example further stressed the ethical nature of suicide reporting by stating that ethical concerns prevent the publication of potentially interesting story elements. A series of rhetorical questions such as “why would you?” are then used to further stress the point that journalists have nothing to gain by publishing sensitive and controversial details. However, this same

example could be reinterpreted to suggest it is the lack of consistent evidence and not participant concerns for decency and responsible reporting which prevented the publication of these details. In addition, the restating of the word “filtering” implies that this is routinely done. This argument further demonstrates that suicide reporting will not lead to contagion and that suicide reporting initiatives are unnecessary. Tom concludes by restating his point that every suicide article requires an extra degree of attention and self-censorship.

Framing the media as selfless, responsible and ethical serves to position the media as a trustworthy industry who are well capable of dealing with the complex and potentially dangerous demands of suicide reporting. Tom uses general principles and practices to discuss these issues, yet in the real world setting it is likely these factors are much more complex. It is particularly interesting to note that participants would advocate for industry self-censorship and argue that it is an important step in order to maintain ethical reporting. However, when participants later discussed externally applied reporting initiatives designed to promote a high standard of suicide reporting, these initiatives were strongly opposed. This represents a potential contradiction; where participants would advocate that one form of censorship is necessary, while simultaneously opposing similar forms of external media censorship. As a result, it appears it is the external nature of the restrictions that participants opposed and not necessarily the censorship. Sarah expands on this issue of industry self-censorship to outline specific details participants would avoid publishing.

*22. Yeah, you would certainly try to stay away from the method, unless as I have said to you before, unless there is a public interest in expressing, of getting the information out there. But nine times out of ten there isn't. Nine times out of ten you want to tell the people this woman did this, and she did this because. And it might be helpful for other mothers, or it might be helpful for other parents. (2) I'm not pretending that it is all altruistic, well we are all in the business of making money. But that is the privately owned media and not the state media. (Sarah)*

The above extract demonstrates why the media would avoid reporting suicide method. Interestingly, this was not primarily due to any legal restrictions, such as the Coroners Act, but because there was little or no public interest in learning this information. This is the first acknowledgment that when determining article content participants are concerned about reader interest. This reveals that, among other factors, participants are motivated to produce interesting articles to sell papers. Importantly, this is framed as a positive as it ensures appropriate reporting of suicide as it is argued that readers do not want to read about suicide method. The power of readers in determining article content is stressed by noting that often the journalists want to report details, but audience reaction prevents them. Accordingly this argument supports previous claims that suicide reporting is ethical and does not need to



change or be censored. Sarah uses concrete details to note that “nine times out of ten” there is no public interest in learning this information and it is omitted. This point acknowledges that on certain occasions there is reader interest and suicide method is then reported. Then Sarah argues that when suicide method is reported it is again framed positively as it is linked to reader benefits, such as being “helpful for other parents”. Again this argument represents a degree of confirmation bias as only positives are discussed at the cost of exploring potential negatives, such as suicide contagion.

Sarah reinforces the important influence reader reaction has on determining article content by noting that “nine times out of ten” participants want to report suicide method but reader appetite prevents this. This point was later stressed by noting that the omission of method details did not reflect ethical or “altruistic” beliefs, rather it reflects a business’s financial need to be profitable. As a result, reader reaction appears more important to participants than other concerns such as ethics and suicide contagion evidence. While it is difficult to argue with the financial realities of maintaining a business, relying on audience members to censor suicide reporting appears to diminish claims that suicide reporting is highly ethical. This argument raises the question of how suitable readers are as the source of determining appropriate reporting, particularly as reader appetite and tolerance for information is likely to change. In addition, despite initially framing the non-reporting of suicide method as a positive, Sarah appears to undermine the ethical nature of this decision by noting the reporting of method details can be a good thing. The credibility of this claim is maintained by noting the appropriate reporting of suicide did not simply reflect altruistic beliefs, but reflected attempts to satisfy their readers and stay in business. The following extract discusses other forms of media censorship to identify forms of internal industry censorship and external censorship.

*23. We have our own guidelines which talk about the fact that we don't want to sensationalise or glamorise suicide that we want to talk about it without it seeming like it is a reasonable option for people. So we don't want to normalise it, and (3) I guess we've got considerations in terms of the family. If the family don't want us to do it, then I would have thought that we wouldn't and that we would stay away from it unless there is some sort of ↑extremely good reason to go ahead. <so we think about that>. We think about all the people that knew the person. Yeah all of the people involved. You have to think about how they are going to feel about it and take that into consideration. (Ashley)*

Ashley begins by stating that her newspaper has their own guidelines and argues that these guidelines ensure that suicide is ethically and appropriately reported. As a result, this argument suggests current methods of reporting suicide are very robust and do not need to

change. Ashley stresses this point by specifically listing positive reporting elements that these guidelines promote. Consequently, this argument appears to set high suicide reporting standards and implies that none of these negative reporting features are present in current media reports of suicide. The repeated use of the word “we” is used to strengthen her argument as it implies that this view is held by a number of media professionals. The ethical manner of current suicide reporting practices is then further stressed by noting media professionals have no desire to report suicide in an unethical manner.

Ashley reiterates the highly sensitive nature of suicide reporting by frequently restating the consideration they make towards the bereaved. This point raises an important ethical dilemma which is only touched on, what happens when the bereaved do not want the information published? The potential problems arising from this situation appear to be minimised by stating an “extremely good reason” is needed before a story would be published. This suggests that without approval of the bereaved a story will not be published. However, a lack of specificity surrounding what is considered an exceptional reason may mean that in reality suicide stories may often be reported without approval from the bereaved, as some of these may contain important reasons. It appears the function of this argument is to demonstrate that internal industry guidelines have ensured suicide reporting practices are highly ethical whereby opportunities for offence and contagion are minimal. This argument appears inconsistent with subsequent arguments raised by participants, where they argued Ministry of Health suicide reporting guidelines are ineffective, unnecessary and unused. It is likely this contradiction reflects an industry desire to be fully independent and being responsible to adhering to external guidelines. As a result, participants like Ashley discussed the benefits of internal industry guidelines, while similarly discounting the need for external reporting guidelines. The following extract explores in more detail participant attitudes towards Ministry of Health suicide reporting guidelines.

*24. Editors are aware of them (reporting guidelines), but it is, is a different thing being aware that they exist (2) and on the day when something terrible happens remembering they exist and making sure that we don't do anything to run afoul of them... I don't personally refer to them and I'm not aware of anyone that does.*

(Sarah)

Sarah begins by noting that she is aware of suicide guidelines, but does not use them. This forthright comment is backed up by the rationale that the guidelines are too impractical to refer to when writing an article following a suicide. This removes Sarah from any criticisms for being unethical for applying the guidelines, where the failure to use reporting guidelines now reflects problems with the guidelines themselves. As a result, reporting guidelines are seen as unworkable in the real world setting. The decision to not apply the guidelines is then

framed as a logical response to dealing with a tragedy, where non-specific concerns are seen as more important than adhering to guidelines. The phrase “run afoul of them” appears to diminish the potential serious or ethical consequences of concerns about not following reporting guidelines. In order to further stress that guidelines are impractical, Sarah focuses solely on journalist needs and does not consider ethical responsibilities or reader impact. As a result, this argument appears to prioritise journalist practical implications when writing about suicide. Sarah then normalises the refusal to use suicide guidelines by stating she was not aware of anyone who uses them. This statement reinforces the belief that ignoring the guidelines does not mean she is behaving recklessly or unethical and that these guidelines are irrelevant to the daily practices of journalism.

Arguing that reporting guidelines are unnecessary appears to not only contradict the previous argument that internal industry guidelines are useful, but it also could be used to challenge participant arguments which advocate that suicide reporting is ethical and of a high standard, particularly as the above extract implies that when dealing with tragedy it is impractical to adhere to guidelines. A potential extension of this argument could be that during times of tragedy, suicide gets treated like any other news article and special ethical considerations are not made. However, other participants would build on this argument and argue that despite not adhering to reporting guidelines, suicide reporting is highly ethical and to a high standard. The following extract expands on these ideas.

*25. No the guidelines haven't (influenced my reporting of suicide) but my knowledge of the issue has. So the longer I have spent reporting suicide, the more suicide prevention, or conferences, hmm, and spoke to guidance counsellors. And that has been very valuable. As a journalist you are in a very powerful position and you get to put things out there, write stories that will never go away. I think it is really good and really valuable for a journalist to be second guessed. I think that that is a really valuable thing to have people put you on the spot and say is that the right way to do things? Do you stand by that? Is that the way you would do things now? So that changed my reporting, not the guidelines. (Rachel)*

During this extract Rachel carefully balances her position that suicide is a uniquely sensitive topic that requires special consideration with the view that external suicide reporting initiatives (namely suicide reporting guidelines) are unnecessary. Rachel opens with a controversial statement that suicide reporting guidelines are irrelevant. However, the controversial and contagion implications of not doing so are immediately challenged by noting her knowledge and experience surrounding suicide reporting ensures that her reporting of suicide is of a high standard. This argument has several similarities with previous arguments that participant awareness of important suicide reporting sensitivities

helps to ensure suicide reporting is appropriate and ethical. Despite not adhering to suicide guidelines, Rachel lists a series of features to demonstrate that her reporting of suicide is ethical and of a high standard. Rachel increases the persuasiveness of her argument by focusing almost exclusively on the benefits of using personal experience when writing about suicide and not discussing the risks associated with this reporting style. Again, it appears the function of this argument is to demonstrate that suicide guidelines are unnecessary, where being knowledgeable about important issues regarding suicide reporting is all that is needed to ensure suicide reporting is appropriate. As a result, this argument appears to prioritise personal experience of reporting suicide over industry regulations and laws.

Rachel then states it is this knowledge of suicide reporting issues which ensures she reports suicide appropriately. To do this she discusses the large influence of the media, a point which appears to contradict previous arguments advocating that newspapers have little to no reader impact. As a result, guidelines to ensure reporting is appropriate are viewed as unnecessary. However, this same argument demonstrating the importance of suicide reporting knowledge could also be used to advocate the use of suicide reporting guidelines, which are essentially a technique to increase the media's knowledge of contagion. To further reinforce the ethical nature of suicide reporting, Rachel argues that suicide reporting practices should be robust enough so that suicide reporting can be scrutinised by and defended to others. This argument demonstrates an interesting contradiction where on one hand the media are willing to have their behaviour regulated by others, but are also resistant to having their writing constrained by guidelines.

Participants would also expand on Sarah's comments in extract 22, to argue that article content reflects deliberate journalist judgements about reader interest and demand. This frames market forces as being responsible for determining article content and consequently diminishes the media's responsibility for inappropriate reporting. This argument initially appears incompatible with high standards of ethical reporting, as reader interest is typically associated with sensational reporting styles and contagion. However, as demonstrated throughout the following extracts, this point was repetitively used to argue that having content driven by readers leads to safer and more ethical reporting. The following extract expands on these ideas.

*26. So I think it is driven by what the reader wants. So I don't think the media really. We are sensitive to what our readers want to see, we have to make ethical judgements in those boundaries. Where we might say our readers may want to know this but it wouldn't be responsible or appropriate to tell them. Hmm, but we do this for a living. I have edited thousands of newspapers, and I get the*

*feedback and I talk to the community, and I talk to our readers. I know what they value and what is important to them and I know what stories are most clicked on, on our website. So, hmm, we are not just making that stuff up for shits and giggles. We have a pretty good handle on the public mood and the public desire for information. I am not saying we always get it right. (Paul)*

Paul argues that newspaper content is driven by reader demand and market forces, where suicide article content reflects reader interest. Arguing that the audience are the dominant force in article construction frames the media as being highly reactive to audience demands. This can be viewed positively, increasing readership and sales volumes, or could be seen as a negative as adhering solely to reader interest is likely to promote the development of more interesting, graphic and sensational stories; all features known to contribute to contagion. However, such negative claims appear to be pre-emptively dismissed as Paul interweaves discussions around ethical judgements, boundaries and being in touch with the community to argue that suicide reporting does not solely reflect reader interest. Therefore, considering these issues ensures that suicide reporting remains responsible. This point is reinforced by noting that he is aware of what readers want to know and can balance this demand with what is “responsible or appropriate to tell them”.

Paul reiterates his ability to know what readers want by listing a series of methods he uses to stay in tune with them. In doing so, Paul appears to avoid discussing the financial importance of sustaining sales volumes and obtaining profits. It is also important to note that the degree to which journalists censor their writing for their readers may undermine the initial argument that it is the reader and not the media who choose what to report. Paul then concludes by reinforcing the serious considerations the industry provides to suicide reporting. He does this by using the derogatory colloquial language “shits and giggles” to demonstrate the counter-argument that the media simply publish what they want is ridiculous. This argument does not appear to flow well, and this suggests that Paul is in an unfamiliar territory, possibly because he is trying to explain familiar professional production procedures and decisions to an outsider who he may well believe holds strong views about the practices. The following extract demonstrates that other participants were very direct in discussing the importance of satisfying reader interest.

*27. If we get stories wrong or if we sensationalise a story or if we (2) get fixated by it, or give it too much weight or too little weight. Our readers will tell us and judge us on that. SO the best. As I said the best influence on us is what our readers want and need. What these sensitivities are. It sounds like we are going to the lowest common denominator, but we are not, our readers are very intelligent and demanding on us. WE are a restrained professional news media in New Zealand.*

*Our job is to challenge our audience, but there becomes a point where we become offensive. Or our readers perceive we are acting as callously or negatively, they will quickly let us know. (Tom)*

Tom argues that readers are the best influence on the media, and they encourage the media to report ethically and appropriately. It is argued the readers will quickly let the media know when they have gotten things wrong. The argument does not specify how readers will judge the media or let them know. However, it appears likely such judgements would be based on sales and/or letters to the editor. Accordingly, an opposing argument could be made stating readers are an inappropriate source of censorship as they desire more dramatic and interesting stories; elements associated with contagion. As a result, this argument appears primarily based on marketing concerns. Paul's comments in extract 26 about knowing what stories are most clicked on appear to support this. Tom appears aware of these potential criticisms and pre-emptively acknowledges claims about maximising profits, "it sounds like we are going to the lowest common denominator". He then attempts to diminish this concern by noting that the audience are "very intelligent and demanding" on the industry and will quickly let the media know whenever they have become offensive. This argument also implies that readers are too intelligent to be purely motivated by sensational stories. Consequently, readers are framed as an appropriate source to determine the standards of suicide reporting. Highlighting the importance of readers in article construction appears to move some responsibility of suicide article content onto readers; as a consequence, criticisms of how newspapers write about suicide could potentially be shifted towards readers.

The argument that readers ensure suicide reporting is ethical and appropriate appears reactive, as readers need to be exposed to offensive and potentially contagious material before reporting practices can be changed. As a result, this same example could be used to argue the opposing view that readers are not effective at ensuring appropriate suicide reporting. Tom then further attempts to downplay this concern and reduce the likelihood that inappropriate suicide reporting may occur by also describing the media as "professional" and restrained. Framing both readers and media professionals as those who desire appropriate suicide reporting further suggests suicide reporting is of a high standard. However, the statement that the media industry frequently pushes boundaries and challenges audiences could undermine this argument, particularly as participant attempts to challenge readers and push boundaries may result in occasions where they overstep the boundaries of appropriateness.

During the next extract, Adam highlights journalist interest in selecting suicide stories and avoids discussing reader interest. This may reflect a simple omission or may also reflect an attempt to convey the reporting of unusual suicides is only a positive.

*28. Typical everyday suicides are not newsworthy. BLUNTLY, people who have mental illnesses and things who take their lives aren't particularly newsworthy or interesting because that just happens every day. (2) Similarly someone who has taken their own life, a male in this case because of a family issue or a marriage break up or relationship breakup again isn't particularly interesting to us. Really just part of life sadly, and the way people deal with that sort of thing... We are interested in something more unusual and something that shines a light, on really a part of our lives or a part of us that is normally in the dark. Or something that tells us more, a little bit more about who we are. A social issue... It also depends on the victim; the victim has to be somebody our readers will identify with. Particularly if it is a middle class typesetting (Adam)*

Adam raises the argument that suicide is something that is not inherently newsworthy. According to this argument, the presence of “typical” suicide features diminishes a story’s interest. Examples are then used to illustrate that “common” motives for suicide are of little reader interest. Such descriptions appear to reduce the seriousness of suicide to something increasingly normalised which “just happens every day”. This argument is particularly interesting as it explicitly explains why one suicide will be published while others may not. The statement “we are interested in something more unusual” appears connected to previous participant statements outlining participants’ desire to write important and interesting stories, where unusual stories are likely to have larger reader impact. The publication of unusual suicide stories is then framed as mainly a positive as it is believed to reveal important hidden social issues to the community. Consequently, this argument positions suicide reporting, particularly of usual suicides, as a moral and ethical practice. To reinforce this point, a metaphor of light and dark is then used to demonstrate that the media are an enlightening force that brings important hidden dark social issues to widespread attention. This metaphor positively frames the media’s reporting of suicide as something that reveals important social issues. However, this argument appears inconsistent as it implies that these same benefits will not occur through the publication of suicides containing “typical” features.

In addition, this argument appears to sidestep serious potential negative consequences of publishing self-acknowledged “unusual” and sensational stories that are comprised of victim details encouraging “our readers will identify with”. This is particularly important as these same identified features are known to contribute to suicide contagion. As a result, this point

could be used to argue the opposing view that the publication of these details could be viewed as an ethical issue as they are associated with contagion and therefore require an extra degree of scrutiny. It is also important to note that throughout this argument, statements like “just happens every day”, “just a part of life” and “the way people deal with that type of thing” reveal a degree of participant normalisation of suicide, which is another feature associated with contagion. Therefore there is a degree of risk that as Adam talks about suicide in such a way that he may also normalise suicide in his writing.

Until now, the precise content of suicide article details has been discussed in general terms, with little clarification explaining which details participants would like to report, considerations made for article content and their ethical implications. The following extract expands on this.

*29. °To have some of the personal story behind it° ... Things like whether they are married, do they have kids, their age, do they go to school, what type of school did they go to. Just those kind of details that take it just beyond. (2) It is kind of a word portrait of the person and we are building an idea of who they are. So those types of details. (Katie)*

Katie argues for a detailed description of the victim, as it is seen as a necessary element for creating an effective story. As a result, the focus of suicide articles becomes a personalised story of getting to know the victim. This implies that it is not necessarily the suicide that journalists are interested in, rather it is the story and the particulars of the victim that “make” the story. Highlighting the importance of the suicide victim provides further clarification of previous arguments as to why some suicides are published while others not. According to Katie’s argument, reporting detailed descriptions of the victim becomes increasingly important to make “compelling” stories. The metaphor of creating a “word portrait” was used to further reinforce this point and illustrate the highly vivid and detailed image an article should create. This argument appears to rationalise and justify why journalists may publicise potentially controversial private victim details. As a result, this argument has a strong story focus, exploring what elements these details add to the story. However, this argument appears to overlook potential negative effects of focusing on the victim, such as ethical considerations in the form of victim rights for privacy and protecting readers from contagion (which is associated with reader identification promoted by additional victim details). As a result, this argument appears to prioritise and emphasise the media’s desire to publish victim details over other concerns.

Accordingly, this argument implies that creating an interesting story trumps these other concerns. Overlooking these features appears to strengthen the argument that publishing specific victim details are necessary as it distances reporting these features from any



negative consequences or ethical considerations. The following extract builds on this argument to better explain why it is important for suicide articles to include detailed descriptions of the victim.

*30. WE would try to include as much of the background that we know that could paint the person as a victim. Where or not they went to school. Hmm, to me and I know this is where (3) the Coroner's may disagree with me is. To me the power is in the person or the individual who commits suicide. Their individual story. To capture the attention of the public you need to get them to identify with the victim.... statistics for, for all of their value just do not have that connection. So by saying 50 people shot themselves last year, it is not as powerful as an individual story outlining where someone had shot themselves. That type of story would hopefully get people to examine how easy it is to access any guns at home, outline potential causes and signs of suicide. (Graham)*

Graham reaffirms the argument that it is important to create a detailed picture of the deceased. The use of the word “we” strengthens this point by suggesting others within the industry share this opinion. The statement “the power is in the person” demonstrates that it is the personal story and not the suicide which makes the article interesting. Graham further reinforces that reader identification is an essential element by stating that to “capture the attention of the public you need to get them to identify with the victim”. Creating a detailed image of the deceased is likely to increase reader empathy and audience identification, where they are likely to imagine themselves in similar situations. This is framed as positive as Graham argues these features are justified as it may lead to suicide prevention through reduced gun access. However, this same information could be used to argue the opposing viewpoint that these details should be cautiously used as these variables are associated with suicide contagion. Graham notes that Coroners may disagree with his viewpoint and this provides the first indication that this matter, including detailed victim details, is potentially contentious and may rely upon interpretation. Nonetheless, despite acknowledging the possibility of other viewpoints, the failure to specify or discuss these in any meaningful way greatly diminishes the credibility of alternative explanations. Hence, this argument appears to emphasise the business realities of needing to sell papers by creating interesting stories, and other considerations such as ethical concerns particularly around contributing to contagion appear secondary. Therefore, this argument appears to conflict with previous participants’ claims that suicide reporting is highly ethical and appropriate reporting of suicide was a key objective.

To better illustrate that reader identification is an important element of interesting stories, a comparison is then made between reporting suicide statistics and reporting cases of

individual suicides. Graham then proactively counters claims that prioritising the publication of suicide conflicts with ethical reporting by stating it can be advantageous as it may prevent suicide. This is achieved by stating that stories with a strong victim focus will be more “powerful” and consequently may lead people to re-examine their lives and learn about suicide causes and signs. However, this same argument could also be applied to contagion, where powerful stories which promote reader identification is associated with suicide contagion. Participants not only argued that reporting victim details are an important element, but as the following extract reveals, they similarly argued that including details surrounding family impact was also a key feature of creating interesting and ethical stories.

*31. SO I think the impact of the family is one of the most important things. They are the ones we have to (find) and also that kinds of steers clear of all the legal problems that you might have when you go into the details of the suicide itself. We talk about the family and what they say is the impact on them. (3) ↓ that's more interesting story anyway for the public to read about. So yeah I think they are an important part. (Ashley)*

Ashley argues that including family impact is a key feature of a suicide article. The importance of including this information is stressed by describing it as “one of the most important” elements. Consequently, this argument appears to suggest that including family impact is more important than other concerns such as contagion and profit. In addition, this statement appears to conflict with other arguments outlining other features as an article’s main consideration such as reader interest. Ashley emphasises the importance of including family reaction by listing features justifying its inclusion, namely avoiding potential legal difficulties and creating a more interesting news story. The point that including family impact makes an article more interesting supports the previous arguments that it is the individual and not the suicide which creates an interesting story. In addition, justifying the inclusion of victim details to avoid legal ramifications and promote interesting stories appears to support business interests of decreasing potential legal costs while simultaneously increasing readership. In the following extract, Sarah builds on this argument and introduces new issues.

*32. But the editor has decided that, you know what, this is actually too important of an issue in New Zealand to not acknowledge it when it happens and then, not make light of the tragic means...But nobody wants to (3) do more to make sure the community understands more of its own little dark secret, really. We have had parents, particularly in Christchurch who have contacted the local paper to say that we want to talk about our son or daughter. We want to be able to tell their friends there are other ways out, and when they are feeling absolutely down and at the bottom, we would like to put our friend's parents on notice, so that they*

*know what to look for when things get difficult. (3) But we haven't been able to do that. (Sarah)*

Sarah begins by highlighting that the industry is justified in their decision to report upon suicide as suicide reporting is too important to ignore. The potential counterargument that the media industry may report suicide for other reasons appears to be anticipated and challenged as Sarah pre-emptively states the industry reports suicide for community benefits. This is a restatement of previous community benefits of reporting, but instead of distancing suicide reporting from reader harm, this argument is now used to position suicide reporting as an ethical practice. The phrase “nobody wants to ... do more” is then used to again stress the industry’s decisions to report suicide are strongly motivated by obtaining wider community benefits. A metaphor of suicide reporting as shining a light onto a community’s “little dark secret” was then used to create a positive visual image that the media can provide a helpful role in suicide prevention. Adam, in extract 27, made a similar reference demonstrating that reporting is needed to shine a light on dark social issues.

Sarah then qualifies her authority to comment on the bereaved by discussing her personal experiences. This example is used to strengthen her argument, as not only does it provide a concrete illustration of how suicide reporting may help readers, but it further suggests that the view that the media reporting can help other people is shared by non-media personnel. This frames the publication of suicides as something those bereaved by suicide want and a topic journalists are sensitive to. As a result, reporting experiences of the bereaved is considered an ethical practice. This argument reveals a degree of confirmatory bias as this argument assumes that all family members want to have the death and their grieving reactions reported. However, this appears overtly simplistic as it fails to answer the more complex question concerning what would happen in situations where some bereaved oppose media publicity. Consequently, this argument could be adopted to suggest media censorship is needed to protect those bereaved. Sarah then attempts to solidify the positives and ethical nature of reporting the reactions of the bereaved by stating it further contains positive educational consequences that may prevent future suicides. Sarah then concludes by attacking current suicide reporting initiatives and stating these initiatives have prevented the publication of suicide stories or key details which would have resulted in suicide prevention. Sarah’s comments parallel earlier comments regarding publishing what readers want to also publish details the bereaved want as well.

When discussing the publication of suicide, participants, particularly those with editorial experience would raise pragmatic concerns and argue that suicide publication reflected business realities of publishing interesting stories to sell papers and make profits.

Consequently, such arguments prioritising the publication of reader interest appear to conflict with previous statements demonstrating that suicide is reported due to ethical purposes. The following extract demonstrates how a suicide article is likely to appeal to reader interest.

33. *Sometimes there are elements of a suicide that make it inherently more newsworthy or in the public interest. (4) For example someone who kills themselves in the garage after a marriage breakup, (2) wouldn't be as newsworthy as, an example in Auckland where a teenage boy who was being bullied at school and was dared to jump off the bridge. And jumped off a bridge in a very public place and I think a traffic incident happened, resulting in him dying. I mean that highlights more social issues about how teenagers relate to each other; texting, cyber-bullying, and also it happened in a very public place where there was an impact on traffic and stuff like that. That is inherently more newsworthy. BUT LET'S BE HONEST, I mean it is also more sensational, it is a more interesting story. And so a Sunday newspaper in particular is more likely to (2) speak to the mother and get the heart reaching story behind it. I mean we are humans and we understand and are drawn to human behaviours of emotional pain, loss, and vulnerability. THOSE ARE THINGS that we all inherently understand as people. It doesn't understand if you are well educated, it is not a story about financial markets where you need some interest or understanding of how they work. When you are talking about raw human emotions it is something that we all have in common. (Paul)*

Throughout this extract, Paul discusses the components of a suicide and argues that specific elements make a suicide more interesting. The statement “elements of a suicide” demonstrates that these differences are inherent to the suicide act and occur independently of readers and writers. Positioning some suicide stories as newsworthy appears to frame suicide as a legitimate topic of discussion. Paul then discusses newsworthiness and public interest as being equal and functionally similar. Two examples are then introduced, one public and one private. The private case suggests a suicide following a failed relationship that occurs on private property and behind closed doors is of little public interest. A more public suicide is then introduced to contrast the previous example, where the victim's death is linked to social causes; bullying where the person was goaded to jump off a bridge in a public place (the extract suggests the bridge went over a road). This example demonstrates it is not the dramatic nature of the death which fuelled its newsworthiness. Rather, the story's newsworthiness is connected to the public location of the suicide (public bridge which affected traffic) and the suicide's connection to social causes (bullying). This public example appears more pertinent as there is also a suggestion as this suicide may reflect an actual

case in Auckland. Paul underscores this point by explicitly stating deaths that highlight social issues, occur in public and have a public impact (on traffic) are more newsworthy. These aspects are undoubtedly important issues, however, this argument suggests relationship breakdowns are not an important social issue, or at the least a less important social issue. Paul then restates his initial point that newsworthiness is an aspect inherent to the story. This suggests newsworthiness is an article feature that is incontestable and irrefutable. However, Paul's own example could be used to demonstrate that relationship breakups are actually newsworthy as they may highlight that important social issues (communication issues, infidelity, and changing family structures) affect many people and have widespread effects. As a result, the newsworthiness of suicide shows a degree of subjectivity.

Paul then makes a declaration of "HONESTY", which has the effect of inviting the listener into a very frank and intimate confidential conversation, where he will 'tell it like it is', that all helps make his statement more appealing. Paul then states that stories which are linked to his understandings of newsworthiness are "more sensational" and "more interesting"; features also associated with suicide contagion. Paul then links sensationalism to Sunday newspapers which are more willing to exploit the emotional aspects of a suicide. Paul argues that readers are drawn to stories of pain and loss and these features are again framed as "inherent" which positions it as incontestable. This point is reinforced with the bluntness of talking about "raw human emotion" as being of universal interest and not something requiring specialised knowledge or education. As a result, a suicide story's perceived ability to elicit reader emotion may be a further element that adds to the level of public interest. This extract highlights how suicides are associated with different levels of newsworthiness and public interest. The analysis points to explain the way in which the public interest is a rhetorical feature that can be drawn on to add impact to the argument that the media have a role to play in suicide reporting. In addition, linking newsworthiness with public interest could suggest that the presence of some economical business realities such as increasing readership numbers are a further consideration for a suicide's publication and how it is constructed. This could be viewed negatively as it may be associated with a rise in sensational reporting. However, as the following extract demonstrates, participants did not believe that a focus on profits and publishing interesting stories would undermine suicide reporting quality.

*34. I think quite a strong public perception that we (the newspaper industry) are just trying to sell papers. I don't know any editors who are driven by that. Not because they are really decent good people. But if you are only trying to sell papers you are going to alienate your readers. I know in my readership, I could put the story (2). Say the mayor was caught with a prostitute and we had a story and pictures*

*and we put it in the front page of the paper one day. We might sell, maybe an extra 500 to 1000 copies in that day. Which is NOTHING! In the grand scheme of our business that is an absolute pittance, that might equate to maybe \$300 extra profit. It just doesn't drive us. At the same time if we did that story we would alienate all of our subscribers, people who have read the paper for years and years because that is not the type of thing, hmm, appropriate front page material or is actually is in the public interest or is constructive. (Paul)*

Paul begins by acknowledging a common criticism of newspapers that they are “just trying to sell newspapers”. By acknowledging this point, Paul is then able to systematically challenge this viewpoint to demonstrate that this is not the case. Paul begins by personalising the argument, that “I don't know of any editors who are driven by that [selling papers]”, implying that since Paul is not aware of it happening then it must not occur. Paul then acknowledges that it is not a strong moral compass that prevents the media from writing sensational and inappropriate stories, but rather a firm knowledge of their readership and an understanding of long-term financial implications. This point is particularly persuasive as it reveals motivators to report appropriately do not reflect intangible ethical standards, but reflect observable financial analysis. Paul then goes on to state “I know my readership”. This statement conveys a degree of expertise as Paul understands exactly what his readers want. As a result, this statement suggests his argument is grounded in fact, whereby criticisms made by others are likely to be invalid as they are not aware of exact reader behaviour. This argument demonstrates that readers are an effective means of controlling how potentially sensational material should be handled, whereby reader appetite is explicitly prioritised over ethical standards of reporting “not because they (the media) are really decent good people”.

A hypothetical financial example is then used to demonstrate that sensational reporting, while increasing short-term readership, in the longer-term will result in subscription cancellation and reduced readership. This business argument is used to directly challenge perceived industry criticisms that newspapers are only interested in selling newspapers. Paul further reinforces the pointless nature of trying to increase readership by noting selling an extra 500 to 1000 copies of a newspaper is “NOTHING” and an “absolute pittance”. At the same time this argument stresses the potential negative consequences by noting the media would “alienate all of our subscribers”. This argument assumes that new readers will not continue to read the newspaper and those long-term subscribers will cancel subscriptions, however, this may not be the case. In addition, this argument implies that attempting to increase newspaper readership is futile as small increases in readers equate to minimal profit. It is also important to note that the use of a non-suicide example suggests that this is

not limited to suicide reporting but represents a general media principle. Accordingly, this argument suggests that newspapers would rarely publish any overtly sensational or graphic material. This argument, highlighting the need for interesting stories, moves attention away from previous arguments of ethics and implies that economic realities and reader reaction ensure that suicide is reported ethically and responsibly. As a result, it is not in the industry's best economic interest to publish inappropriate stories.

Throughout this section, different arguments were made by different participants, and participant responses could almost be separated into journalist responses versus participants with editorial experience. Typically, when discussing suicide reporting journalists would particularly stress the ethical and moral nature of their reporting, where it was argued that suicide was reported for ethically legitimate reasons such as informing the public of important health concerns. In addition, journalists were more likely to argue that they were aware and considerate of the sensitivities surrounding suicide reporting and that they would censor their reporting of any inappropriate material. Furthermore, journalists frequently argued that the content of their articles consider reader response and that included content is likely to reduce audience risk of suicide. Collectively these arguments demonstrate industry ideals; this may reflect a particular desire to believe that their own writing of suicide is of a high standard and is not going to harm readers. In addition, it may also reflect the fact that journalists typically are less experienced than editors and resultantly are likely to be less cynical and less aware of larger concerns beyond investigating and writing a story.

Participants with editorial experience appeared more grounded in their arguments and more willing to make controversial statements, such as advocating that article content reflected reader interest and financial considerations are made when selecting new stories. While controversial, editors would advocate that these viewpoints actually demonstrate a degree of responsiveness to ethical concerns. In comparison to journalists, it is likely editors have more industry experience and awareness of a wider range of issues. Consequently, editors may be more likely to deliver contentious arguments. In addition, an editor's role is different from a journalist's where editors are more aware of wider business implications of stories. Such arguments appeared quite pragmatic about the daily reality of putting out newspapers quickly, selling newspapers, increasing advertising revenue and making profit. Therefore, participants with editorial experience were more likely to discuss the importance of simultaneously being profitable and responding to the reality and the concerns of the world in which we operate. Collectively participants used arguments relating to ethics and morals to demonstrate that current suicide reporting is of a high quality. This has a number of important implications, namely not only is suicide reporting unlikely to harm readers, but the

reverse is true where ethical reports of suicide are likely to reduce suicide. In addition, this argument also implies that suicide reporting is already at a high standard and unlikely to benefit from adhering to additional suicide initiatives such as external suicide reporting guidelines. Participants further noted that article content reflected reader interest and the desire to write stories the bereaved want published. These features were framed as a positive as it was argued these qualities ensure ethical suicide reporting.

### **Power and Fairness**

In addition to ethical considerations, participants further argued that suicide reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act heighten difficulties of suicide reporting. The external nature of these initiatives appears to have created some tension between participants' desire to be autonomous and adhering to reporting initiatives, which were perceived to be a risk to editorial independence. As a result, participants consistently argued against reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act and advocated for greater industry control over what is reported and how it is reported. When doing so, participants typically brought up arguments relating to fairness, where media personnel were not considered in the development of these initiatives. Participants further argued that the Coroners Act was not very equitable or fair across the country and that these initiatives are not very clear, consistent and were flawed. Throughout these arguments participants raised the theme of power and abuse of power. Namely, that Coroners have too much power, decision making should sit with the media, constraints on the media are unwarranted with no benefits and the restrictions oppose Democratic Rights. This section demonstrates how participants would discuss these issues.

As the following extracts demonstrate, many participants found it difficult to talk about suicide reporting guidelines as their awareness and knowledge of suicide reporting guidelines was low.

*35. Hmmm, to be honest I haven't looked at them for a really long time and can't comment too much. (Graham)*

*36. I need to refresh myself on it. I know (3) they have changed slightly. (Adam)*

*37. I would have to go a refresh my memory on it... They are not a live and powerful living document within our newsrooms. (Tom)*

The extracts above demonstrated that participants were aware of suicide reporting guidelines, but their lack of knowledge of the guidelines demonstrates that when writing suicide articles the reporting guidelines were not referred to and are not a "powerful living document". As a result, these extracts assert that reporting guidelines are unnecessary and unimportant where suicide can be reported appropriately without referring to them. This point



appears even more poignant when considering that prior to the interviews, participants were aware they were going to be asked to specifically talk about suicide reporting guidelines. A lack of participant knowledge of reporting guidelines appears to undermine previous assertions that media reporting of suicide is ethical and considerate of audience impact. The following extract expands on participant knowledge of reporting guidelines and provides an insight into why they are not applied.

*38. I have heard about them, I think I may have read them. Hmm, but, °I wouldn't say that I have taken a lot of notice of them. ° and (3) my opinion of most of those guidelines is that they are probably not worth the paper they are written on to be honest. It is all very well having these guidelines but when your editor is yelling at you and they want that stor(h)y or stuff, you just go with what your boss says ((laughter)) most of the time because they pa(h)y your wag(h)es and keep you in the job ((laughter)). And the guidelines, I find that they are always wishy washy and not (3) and not written by someone who is a front line journalist who knows the realities of the job. (Katie)*

Katie appears to hold some potentially contentious opinions about the suicide reporting guidelines and does not appear shy about discussing them. Katie begins by restating that she is aware of the guidelines “I have heard about them” and “may have read them”. A point she emphasises by belittling the guidelines by asserting they are “not worth the paper they are written on”. It appears the function of this point is to emphasise how pointless and ineffective reporting guidelines are. However, the fact that Katie may not have actually read the guidelines could be used to undermine her arguments as she may lack the necessary knowledge of the guidelines to appropriately comment on them. In addition, statements demonstrating that reporting guidelines are not used could be used to challenge previous arguments demonstrating that suicide reporting is highly ethical. In a potential effort to downplay any potential criticisms of not using suicide guidelines, Katie argues they are not practical in real world settings. As a result, this point appears to prioritise industry story constraints such as prompt publication over other concerns such as suicide contagion. Katie then uses the vague term “wishy washy” to further explain why the guidelines have not been applied. The jovial nature of this discussion further implies that following reporting guidelines is of little importance. These explanations appear to remove personal accountability for guideline non-adherence, and it is framed as a logical response to their inability to be applied in the real world and their lack of specificity. One potential function of these arguments is to prevent external agencies from imposing restrictions thereby allowing the media to act autonomously. This point is then explicitly reinforced by noting all of these issues would be resolved if they were rewritten by a “front line journalist”. This statement also conveys a

message that the media industry knows best and reveals a degree of participant feelings of entitlement to write about suicide in a manner in which they see fit.

Rachel further expands on difficulties relating to suicide reporting guidelines to argue that the negative history regarding the development of suicide guidelines has resulted in rejection and ambivalence towards them.

39. *They have had an unfortunate history in that in the beginning they were mocked up by a government department and then issued to the industry...The last time I was up-to-date with how they were going, two of the major players were refusing to sign up to them. So anything voluntary is kind of toothless and, but I don't blame those media organisations it was a failure on the part of the, those doubtfully well meaning, those early (2) policy writers or you know mental health workers that wrote up the list and said you must follow these. That was really the wrong way to go about it, there was no media input and they were not workable. Hmm, the current guidelines seem good to me. I am assuming they haven't changed since I last saw them in 2010. They seemed to be exactly that, guidelines. I think they were quite effective. (Rachel)*

Rachel outlines a range of problems with the suicide guidelines which stem from their development and application to the media. It is argued that implementation of guidelines without industry consultation has resulted in industry rejection. This argument makes the media's refusal to adopt the guidelines a reasonable response to having something imposed onto the industry with no consideration. The statement "you must follow these" further frames the guidelines as something that are compulsory and restrictive, which is far removed from something voluntary and to be used as a guide. Consequently, the industry's perceived refusal to adopt the guidelines is then positioned as a failure of those who developed and implemented the guidelines rather than a reflection of unethical journalist behaviour, which is highlighted by the statement "I don't blame those media organisations". Rachel's argument demonstrates that as media experience and expertise is missing from reporting guidelines they are not valid. Throughout this extract Rachel distances herself from the central debate around guideline adoption, where as key newspaper organisations decided to not adopt guidelines it is taken as a fait accompli that she will not refer to them. As a result, this appears to diminish any personal ethical implications of her not using the reporting guidelines. This point is made further apparent when Rachel reports no personal problems with the guidelines, and then positively reports "they seem good to me" and "they were quite effective". Consequently, Rachel appears to prioritise industry views of reporting guidelines over her own personal views that the guidelines can be effective. This point appears particularly poignant considering the goal of the guidelines is to reduce suicide contagion

and save lives. As a result, this assertion appears to undermine previous claims that suicide reporting is ethical and considerations are made for audience impact.

When discussing suicide reporting guidelines, Rachel makes the remark that “anything voluntary is kind of toothless” which states that anything the media needs to voluntarily adhere to will not be followed. The metaphor of “toothless” creates an image that any successful reporting protocols should have a “bite” or meaningful consequences. As a result, this suggests that in order for the guidelines to be applied, there needs to be some consequences otherwise the guidelines will remain unused. Therefore, this statement could be used to assert that legal motivators are necessary to increase industry adherence to guidelines. However, such an argument appears to conflict with participant views on editorial independence. Throughout the extract Rachel openly acknowledges the limits to her knowledge “the last time I was up-to-date” and “I am assuming they [the guidelines] haven’t changed”. This provides an opportunity for her comments to be challenged, particularly as suicide reporting guidelines have been updated and have subsequently received industry-wide endorsement. As a result, Rachel’s lack of awareness of these issues provides indirect evidence that suicide reporting guidelines are seen as a low priority and remain unused. Accordingly, this observation appears to undermine one of Rachel’s arguments that a lack of industry endorsement of the guidelines has prevented her from applying them.

While participants demonstrated limited knowledge of suicide reporting guidelines, each participant talked extensively about the Coroners Act. This is likely to reflect the voluntary and “toothless” nature of the guidelines, whereby if participants do not agree with them they can be simply ignored. However, this is unlikely to be the case with legislation which has consequences and are more difficult to ignore. The following extract picks up on the impact of the Coroners Act on suicide reporting.

40. *“It [suicide] is the only one really, apart from the courts that have any kind of legal restrictions on us. So (2) we don’t get to make our own decisions about (2) >↑what’s in the public’s best interest and what is not and what is ↑ethical and what is not.< ↓Decisions are made for us s:o it’s completely different from everything. We are pretty much a lot more aware of legal issues. And yeah and the pote:ntial to (2) to get yourself in trouble with what you write, more than other stor(h)ies.”* (Ashley)

Ashley begins by asserting that suicide topic is one of the only topics which have legal restrictions upon what can be reported, a point she emphasises by repeating “it’s completely different”. Accordingly, suicide reporting in New Zealand could be viewed as either progressive and leading the world with innovation, or draconian whereby the government is

enforcing overtly harsh and outdated restrictions. Ashley immediately reveals it is the latter, where it is asserted that these restrictions prevent participants from making important decisions surrounding “what’s in the public’s best interest” and what is ethical. This appears a key point and conveys that legal restrictions are extremely prohibitive and effective in restricting suicide article content. The use of non-specific general examples further asserts that suicide legislation prevents more than just the publication of specific details but undermines the whole reporting process. Consequently, this positions current suicide reporting legislation as a direct and powerful challenge to media freedom. As a result, current legislation is framed as a significant determinant of the current quality and level of suicide reporting. Ashley then asserts that suicide reporting is more tightly policed, where it is impractical and unrealistic for media professionals to attempt to breach existing legislation. This representation serves to position journalists and editors as passive observers with little influence over which suicides they write about and the manner in which the article is written. Therefore, according to this argument, current legislation is responsible for the quality of suicide reports.

As a result of being one of the only topics with legal restrictions over what can be reported, many participants argued that the Coroners Act opposed the foundational journalism principle, the freedom of the press.

*41. I don't think we need media reporting restrictions or guidelines. We are guaranteed the freedom of expression under the Bill of Rights and New Zealand is the only country in the world which has such a (2) sort of a (2) constrained view of how the media should report suicide. And nothing I've seen would suggest that it has had any good effect. In saying that the causes of suicide are multiple and complex and it is not just about the media coverage. I ACTUALLY THINK we would all be better moving on from the media question. (Tom)*

Tom begins with his conclusion that “we don’t need reporting restrictions or guidelines”. The blurring of “restrictions” with “guidelines” suggests Tom sees the latter as functionally the same as legal restraints imposed by the Coroners Act that, as he states, infringe the freedom of expression guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. He then changes track and highlights New Zealand as “the only country in the world ... [that has] a constrained view of how media should report suicide.” If Tom’s assertion is true we could be either very backward, hinting at old regimes that fought to prevent people speaking out, or very progressive and leading the world. Tom immediately quashes the latter possibility, as he has seen nothing that suggests such constraints have “any good effect”. At this point he is relying on personal experience that, he asserts, warrants this negative assessment of “constraints”. However, if anticipating a challenge, he does not specify details of the actual

experience he is drawing on. Such vagueness usually passes unremarked in conversations but is very obvious when examining a written transcript. Finally, Tom builds a further argument around “the causes of suicide are multiple.” That assertion is supported by volumes of suicide research and Tom argues it means that “media coverage” is not the only cause “[so] we would be better moving on from the media question.” Consequently this argument implies that as suicide is the result of a range of factors, the impact of suicide contagion is minimal and suicide reporting styles do not need to change.

Participants also argued that the Coroners Act was problematic as it gave too much power to individual Coroners. As a result, the effects of the Coroners Act were inconsistent, where some Coroners openly released suicide details while others were very restrictive. Ashley discusses this below.

*42. I think it gives too much power to the Coroners, (2) and they then use it individually. It is not actually being applied uniformly across the country. Because it is not. Each Coroner makes his own decisions, and that is not fair. It means that if you have an open Coroner like, the Wellington Coroner, then it is going to be reported there, and then if you have someone in Southland who thinks that there is no public interest in it then it is never reported on. I mean that can't be what they were intending. So (2) I think that in a way they are too restrictive, but also in a way they need to be more definitive like, just say, (2) again talk with the industry and come up with something that is workable for everybody. AND not leave it up to these >individual< guys around the country making decisions, you know, off the cuff really. I don't think that works for anybody really, nobody knows what is going on. There is no continuity. There is no uniformity. It is just a bit of a mess really. (Ashley)*

Ashley begins with her main assertion that the Coroners Act is problematic as it provides individual Coroners with too much power and there is no national consistency. As a result, existing legislation is framed as too prescriptive and unfair. In addition, this assertion implies that this power should reside with the media. To better illustrate the level of unfairness, Ashley provides an example comparing and contrasting the application of the Coroners Act from different Coroners, which has resulted in opposing outcomes. This example is used as evidence that individual Coroners behave differently. However, as this example is hypothetical, we are relying on Ashley's opinion to be objective and accurate. Ashley's argument builds on the idea of fairness and constructs current reporting restrictions as being particularly unfair. Particularly as the inclusion of suicide reporting details depends on the subjective attitudes of external forces, where the media industry has little control over deciding what can and cannot be reported. Throughout this extract Ashley appears to

overlook potential explanations for different coronial decisions, suggesting media impact of the law should be considered the main priority. As a result, this extract reinforces the view that participants felt entitled to report upon suicide, regardless of Coroner opinions. Ashley reinforces the ridiculousness of relying on Coroners' opinions by attacking their ability to make good decisions and describing their decision making process as something "off the cuff" and "a bit of a mess". These points appear to build towards the main purpose of her arguments that current suicide reporting legislation is unworkable for journalists. Therefore, legislation is framed as something needing to be rewritten with media input. This again emphasises the rights of the journalists and the belief that Coroners should not dictate to the media what details can or cannot be reported. Throughout the extract, Ashley reinforces this point by progressively becoming more hostile towards perceived injustices.

There were different ways in which the Coroners Act was viewed as prescriptive. Paul argued that the current legislation frequently prevented the media from discussing suicide.

*43. I think the lack of information, that you are able to get, and the restrictions on the amount of information that you are allowed to report means that editors and journalists are. WE JUST CAN'T GET THE STORY. You know, like I said to you earlier, it is important that people understand the person, know the name and the face. Ah, you know, and because there are barriers to getting that information and reporting it. A lot of people say well suicide is too hard and not worth it. Hmm, I think there have been lots of really important stories on suicide, in individuals basis that would have had a hugely positive understanding on our collective understanding of suicide that haven't been told because it is just too hard to access. Those stories are just too hard to get to. So they are not told.*  
(Paul)

Paul builds the argument that current legislation prevents local media from reporting key details necessary to present an effective story. He appears to magnify the premise of this argument suggesting that the Coroners Act prevents the media from doing their job. He emphasises this point by stating it with a noticeable rise in his tone and pitch "WE JUST CAN'T GET THE STORY". Paul then specifically notes that current reporting laws prevent the media from getting enough information to put a face to the victim, thereby preventing the audience to identify with the victim. Paul emphasises this point by reiterating it several times throughout the extract. This frames suicide legislation as something not only unreasonable but also highly restrictive. Throughout this argument, Paul appears primarily focused on journalist suicide reporting barriers and how the impact is on the publication of "important" stories and little consideration is made for potential audience impact. This is particularly poignant in suicide reporting as audience identification with the victim is a key factor in

contagion. As a result, it appears participants prioritised their desires to publish suicide stories above other concerns such as potential negative audience impact. The repeated use of terms such as “we” and “a lot of people” strengthens Paul’s assertions by implying that his views are widely held within the media industry. This extract further reinforces the point that reporting restrictions are unwarranted.

Paul then raises a secondary argument that participant’s inability to write about suicide is not just a problem for the media but also negatively affects the public. In particular it is argued that existing legislation prevents the publication of stories that could have a “hugely positive” impact. As a consequence, the Coroners Act is positioned as something that may inadvertently harm the public. According to this viewpoint, breaching reporting laws to obtain large community benefits is positioned as an ethical thing to do. Throughout the extract Paul appears to blur the consequences of existing legislation, where it is described as something that prevents the publication of suicide stories or “makes it too hard” to publish. Paul uses phrases like these interchangeably. However, these have different meanings, as the former positions legislation as an insurmountable barrier to suicide reporting, while the later suggests reporting laws make suicide reporting more difficult. If the latter is the case, then this secondary argument could be used to position media professionals as being unethical for identifying suicide stories that could have positive community benefits, but deciding not to perform the extra work required to publish them. Although this counterargument largely depends on the degree of “unspecified” difficulty that suicide articles require.

In addition to arguing that Coroners have too much power over suicide reporting, participants further challenged the existing legislation by noting it is unclear and inconsistent. The following extract builds on these ideas.

44. *“I think at the moment it is a little bit muddled. I think if some logical thinking was applied to it, it would be quite good. Things like. It needs to be quite clear cut. I think at the moment there is a lot of ambiguity. It needs to be quite thought through and clear on what is permitted and what is not. And not any kind of inconsistencies in the way that it is applied.”* (Katie)

Katie argues suicide reporting is made difficult by her inability to understand and apply the legal restrictions. Phrases “a little bit muddled”, “needs to be clear cut”, “there is a lot of ambiguity”, “clear on what is permitted and what is not” are repetitively used to stress this is a key difficulty. The lack of specificity regarding aspects that are confusing reduces the impact of the argument; as a result we are reliant on Katie’s opinion. However, Katie’s reluctance to discuss specifics may reflect concerns that people may not understand the precise language and details required to understand the existing legislation, or may

alternatively reflect a personal lack of familiarity with precise specifics of the Act (which could support the complexities of the Act). It is then argued that the laws affecting suicide reporting appear to be applied illogically and are inconsistent. This argument serves to fuel the conception that when the media do breach legal restrictions, it is due to ambiguities and the complicated nature of the law on suicide reporting, and not careless or inappropriate reporting. This extract adds another level of evidence against current reporting laws. Although, unlike previous arguments that have asserted that legislation needs to be abandoned, Katie appears content with principles behind the current legislation as she notes with some additional clarification, “it would be quite good”.

However, as demonstrated below, the majority of participants continued to challenge the Act by arguing it was flawed, ambiguous and a poorly written piece of legislation making it problematic and unnecessarily challenging to work with.

*45. The legislation itself is quite ambiguous... it is poorly written legislation. I mean I am not a lawyer but that seems the common view of people without a common understanding of the law and legislation. You know the fact that the Act is so ambiguous... It is not just explicit enough and good law is explicit. And the Act has lots of grey areas and ambiguity about it, which doesn't help anyone. I think it is certainly it needs to be improved. Well simply, obviously the mode of suicide, what that actually means is one point that is really unclear and poorly written. And what I touched on earlier about you know the suppressing of evidence. What does that actually mean? What is considered evidence in that context? Is the name of the dead person evidence? A liberal interpretation of the law would say yes it is. But the Chief Coroner has said quite clearly that it is not. (Paul)*

Paul opens by building on the previous argument that the Coroners Act is poorly written and relies on a large degree of interpretive ambiguity. This appears consistent with some previous criticism of suicide reporting guidelines. Paul reinforces this point by noting this view is commonly held by others and that a background in law is needed to understand the Act. He states that this ambiguity prevents media personnel from doing their job by providing a barrier to suicide reporting. To illustrate these difficulties, Paul specifically notes that the term “evidence” can be used to prohibit the publication of almost any suicide-related detail. A series of rhetorical questions are then used to undermine the Act. Paul then attempts to stress the ridiculous ambiguous nature of existing legislation by noting this could possibly prevent the publication of victims’ names. This argument serves to diminish and remove journalist responsibility for failing to appropriately understand legislation that directly affects their work. Instead, the responsibility for this lack of understanding is firmly placed onto



legislators for constructing an unclear law, a point emphasised by noting “good law is explicit”.

Not only did participants have problems with the way the Coroners Act was written, they also argued against the way the Act was applied. Participants generally argued that the Act was problematic and unnecessary as there were several idiosyncrasies that allowed the uncontrolled reporting of suicide in some circumstances and not others. The following demonstrates this.

*46. The silly thing is, you know, if, (2) a celebrity overseas commits suicide and decides to hang himself in Central Park, we can report that. (2) if a member of Split Enz decides to do it in New Zealand, however, we cannot. And we may never be able to say, and our argument is that that is just plan daft. IF for example, this is a big if, but it has happened. (2) Well maybe it hasn't happened, but it could happen. One of the examples we have given, let's say if a well-known public figure, like the Mayor of Auckland or the Minister of Justice has been hiding a secret where in fact they are a depressive, which has happened with a particular politician in Australia. And who has now stood down from his position. BUT if the worse came to the worst and someone threw themselves out of the Beehive, because it all got just too difficult. We should be able to say that is what happened. AND WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO SAY THAT IN FACT BEFORE IT REACHES THE CORONERS COURT. But at the moment we are not allowed to do that and we can't say anything until after the inquest which can be two or three years down the track. So often that is the case. Yet the staff, the entire parliamentary pressing would know what happened. The entire Wellingtonian City Counsel building would know what happened. And in the end the Editors are just going to say butt out. >WE are going to say what happened because it is a matter of public interest<. (Sarah)*

Sarah begins with her main argument that suicide legislation is inconsistent. To better illustrate this point, a hypothetical comparison was used to demonstrate that random overseas suicides could be reported freely, while a local celebrity suicide could not be reported. Sarah reinforces the absurdity of this situation by using derogatory language to label the Act “silly” and “daft”. As a result, this frames reporting legislation as unwarranted with no benefit. In order to reinforce her argument, Sarah amplifies the power of the Coroners Act by repeatedly stating that New Zealand based suicides cannot be reported. Sarah then stresses and repeats her main assertion that “we [the media] should be able to say” what happened, a message she emphasises by loudly repeating. This statement is particularly important as it reveals that participants viewed that they were entitled to report

upon suicide and that the media has a moral imperative or right to do so. Consequently, this right to report suicide appears to trump all other issues such as the function of the legislation.

Sarah then changes focus and raises another perceived inconsistency, where the media cannot write about the suicide until the Coroner rules the death was likely to be self-inflicted. This is framed as futile and pointless as large groups of people will inevitably find out what has happened. However, this same example could be applied to demonstrate the opposite point of view, that although the majority of people in the City Council building will know what happened, the vast majority of the Wellington will not know until the suicide is reported. Sarah then again criticises the power of reporting legislation by noting if the media industry was to adhere to reporting laws, it could be two or three years until a suicide could be fully reported upon, a timeframe that is positioned as being ridiculous. This argument suggests Sarah is more concerned with publishing suspected suicide stories in a timely manner, than waiting for investigations to confirm whether a suicide had occurred or adhering to reporting legislation.

Sarah then concludes by stating, as she believes suicide reflects a public interest, suicide legislation will be ignored and the suicide will be reported anyway. This assertion further highlights the participant's perceived sense of entitlement to report on suicide. Sarah appears to downplay the controversial nature of this statement by framing it as something done to protect the vague term "public interest". As a result this statement reasserts previous ethical arguments to frame participant decisions to breach the Coroners Act as something that has utilitarian interests. Participants argued that the legislation needs to be changed to enable suicide stories to contain detailed descriptions of what happened. This was particularly interesting as increased suicide story detail is typically associated with increased risk of contagion.

However participants argued the opposite, that publishing victim details increases a story's potential to assist the public. Adam expands on this.

*47. But I think we should do that [write about suicide in detail], I really do. Because the whole school is talking about it, everyone knows exactly what happened but no one is really saying it. Think about this. When I was in Taranaki there was, there was a student who committed suicide at school. And... my understanding is that he hung himself in the toilets at Boy's High, and you know, °a lot of school parents would have known that.° I mean half the town probably knew that, and we write three or four paragraphs about it saying no suspicious circumstances. In*

*my mind if we can't talk about it in detail, in a very, very sensible and inclusive sort of way then I don't see how we are going to fix it. (Adam)*

Adam argues that the industry's inability to write detailed articles about suicide is irrational. He uses a personal example to demonstrate that it is relatively pointless to limit detailed discussions of suicide, particularly when the whole local community are likely to know "exactly what happened". Adam appears to use exaggerated claims "half the town probably knew" to reinforce his point that many details of a suicide are common knowledge. As a result, this argument frames the Coroners Act as being inconsistent as the Act does not stop the spread of information, it just prevents the media from playing a role. This assertion again appears to prioritise participants' belief that they are entitled to report on suicide. Adam then stresses the ridiculousness of current reporting restrictions, by stating that currently the media cannot even directly report the death was a suicide, where he was required to be more subtle and label the death as "no suspicious circumstances". It appears this argument is designed to promote more open and detailed reporting of suicide.

Adam appears to be aware of some potential problems of detailed reporting of suicide such as its association with suicide contagion and pre-emptively attempts to reduce these concerns by noting that such reporting needs to be done in a sensible and inclusive way. He stresses the ethical nature of suicide reporting point by restating the word very, "very, very sensible". Adam further appears to decrease the potential serious consequences of journalists getting this balance wrong by avoiding the word suicide. Interestingly, Adam uses broad terms to argue for the detailed discussion of suicide, the lack of precise details of what such details could include appears to avoid potential criticisms surrounding whether these details could potentially contribute to contagion, such as the detailed method descriptors. Adam concludes by noting that silencing aspects of particular cases does no one any good, and detailed reporting of suicide may help "fix" social problems. This again restates previous arguments that suicide reporting can have positive reader impact and also advocates for increased media openness and transparency.

So far, the vast majority of participants viewed the Coroners Act negatively as it was highly prescriptive. However, as demonstrated in the following extract, not all participants shared this view where a few participants argued the opposite, that the Coroners Act had little actual impact on their reporting of suicide.

*48. Well the legislation gives the Coroner a lot of ability to restrict information. WE know about that. So the only way they can authorise the making of any information in the particulars of death, is if public safety is at risk. And that is a real broad power.(2) It doesn't really impact on us doing our job. BECAUSE we*

*don't want to do that stuff that it is designed for us to stop doing. So (2) I have tried to move our editors away from worrying too much about this and just apply some basic rules around our protocol and just do a good job and not get carried away. Use good judgement. (Tom)*

Tom begins by neutrally clarifying the Coroners Act and the role of the Coroner. This subsequently positions his statements as being more objective and credible. Tom then introduces his main argument that the Coroners Act has little impact on the reporting of suicide, as the media have no interest in reporting details that the Coroners Act prohibits. This argument directly contradicts previous assertions that the Coroners Act was too prescriptive. While conflicting, these opposing views could be used to support previous arguments advocating that suicide reporting laws are ambiguous, particularly as different media personnel appear to interpret the legislation very differently. Positioning the Coroners Act as something that does not interfere with suicide reporting supports the notion that suicide reporting is highly ethical, as in addition to adhering to the law this argument states there was no desire to publish potentially dangerous details that the Act prohibits. As a result, it is expected that participants holding this view point would not publish details such as suicide method or location details. Tom then reinforces this point by noting that editors are encouraged to not worry too much about the Act whereby editors are encouraged to apply good judgement. This last statement appears to frame the Coroners Act as something unnecessary or unimportant. Accordingly, media professionals do not need to concern themselves with reporting legislation and they can simply rely on their good judgement. Such a statement appears to undermine the established ethical nature of suicide reporting as it could suggest legislation is not applied and by simply relying on editors' good judgement participants are actually taking the law into their own hands.

While some participants noted the Coroners Act was unnecessary as it did not affect their job, others made the argument that the Coroners Act was unnecessary because there were strategies the media could use that would allow the media to circumvent the legislation. The following extract demonstrates this.

*49. <OH YEAH YEAH, we do that all the time.> So we (3), we will say words like there are no leads and police are not looking for anyone else in connection with the death or whatever. Or if it is a murder suicide, they are not looking for anyone else in connection with the murder. (3) And you know what has happened. (2) We do, <I personally don't get that involved> but the press and other newspapers definitely push and pushing the boundaries of that. The press has started to say it is a suspected suicide. Cos they still think it is silly to say anything else because everyone knows what that means. It just sounds silly and also it is a suspected*

*suicide. (1.5) BUT I don't know how pleased the coroner is about that, and there is some debate as to whether he can stop us doing it. I don't know, I don't really get involved at that level, that is kind of the higher level decision. (Ashley)*

Ashley begins by stating the Coroners Act is almost redundant as the media constantly use methods to circumnavigate the Act. The phrase "OH YEAH YEAH" further stresses that this point is extremely obvious and commonly done. Examples are then provided to illustrate how the media currently write about suicide without the Coroner's approval. The potential serious moral and legal implications for deliberately breaking the law are minimised by labelling this behaviour as "pushing boundaries". In addition, Ashley's frank and open discussion of this controversial behaviour could further suggest that participants did not view this behaviour as unethical, illegal or even problematic. Consequently, this further reinforces the idea that media personnel feel they are entitled to write about suicide. Furthermore, the ongoing deliberate nature of this behaviour does raise ethical concerns that Ashley does little to dispel. Ashley attempts to reduce personal accountability for this potentially controversial behaviour by using the word "we" to stress this is a common industry practice. Although no explanation is provided for breaching the Coroners Act, Ashley defends the decision to directly label deaths as "suspected suicides" by saying everyone knows what they are talking about and by insulting other alternatives and calling them "silly". It is then noted this behaviour is likely to be contentious as there is some ambiguity as to whether this goes against the Coroners Act. As a result, this argument can be used to support the ambiguity regarding existing law.

So far a majority of participants have argued suicide reporting initiatives such as the Coroners Act are overly restrictive, problematic and unnecessary, while other participants argued it had little impact on their job. Although these arguments are very different they collectively imply that suicide reporting initiatives are unnecessary. However, not all participants shared this view and as the following extract demonstrates, a small minority of participants argued that the reporting legislation is needed to ensure that suicide is responsibly reported.

*50. BUT I still feel there needs to be some safeguard there because no matter as I would like to believe that all journalists are responsible in the way they approach the issue of suicide and all editors are responsible. I know in reality there are some who don't really give a shit too much they just want a story and don't think about the consequences of what they are writing. So I think for those very few kind of rogue people ((laugh)), there probably needs to be some kind of framework where they will be restricted in what they can say. (Katie)*

Katie begins by stating external suicide reporting initiatives are necessary as they provide a safeguard to ensure responsible suicide reporting. This is achieved by contrasting journalism ideals of ethical and responsible journalism with the reality that not all journalists and editors apply these principles to suicide reporting. As a result, it is argued that some within the media are solely interested in the story and don't care about any consequences. Katie stresses this point by using the derogatory phrase that these individuals "don't really give a shit". The statement "I know in reality" reinforces the validity of this argument and demonstrates a degree of certainty. The assertion that there are journalists and editors solely interested in publishing a story appears consistent with previous arguments emphasising the financial business responsibilities. As a result, in order to stay in business journalists and editors must write interesting stories that will attract readers and maximise profits. However, unlike previous arguments this argument states this behaviour can be unethical and consequently external restrictions are needed to protect readers from inappropriate suicide reporting. This argument implies that despite being a potentially unpopular view there still needs to be some form of legal framework designed to restrict suicide reporting and ensure that "rogue" journalists report suicide appropriately. Such argument helps to stress the point that the vast majority of reporting is of a high standard and any legal restrictions are only needed as a safety net to alter the reporting of the "very few". As a result, such restrictions are unlikely to alter mainstream suicide reporting practices.

This section demonstrates how participants negatively viewed suicide reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act. As these initiatives were designed to promote public safety, participants arguing against these initiatives needed to balance a fine line between promoting increased editorial independence while not appearing as if these desires were unethical or dismissive of any negative reader impact. Participants attempted to do this by highlighting perceived serious problems with these initiatives. As a result, responsibility for not adopting these initiatives was shifted away from participant behaviour and onto the initiatives themselves. When challenging these initiatives participants would raise issues surrounding fairness, where the industry was not considered in initial development, the initiatives were inconsistent, unclear and flawed, the Coroners Act not being equitable across the country, not being applicable to media practice and the constraints having no good effect. Participants would also complement these arguments about fairness by raising issues surrounding power and abuse of power. Namely, participants would report Coroners have too much power, decision making and power should reside with the media, constraints on the media are unwarranted with little benefit, and that reporting restrictions directly oppose media freedom and independence. Collectively, these arguments demonstrate the

view that current suicide reporting initiatives are untenable and need to be removed or at least reconstructed with industry consultation.

### **Summary**

This chapter heightened the participant views on suicide reporting and provided valuable insight into their main reporting concerns and obstacles. When discussing suicide reporting participants were very selective of their use of science and research. In particular, participants would contest or undermine “unfavourable” research data or conclusions supporting suicide contagion while simultaneously using less certain “favourable” scientific data. It appears the function of these arguments was to advocate their point-of-view that suicide contagion is contestable. Similarly, when discussing media relevance and impact, participants were dismissive towards and minimised the media’s ability to elicit suicide contagion. However, at the same time participants would advocate for the existence of positive article consequences. The results also demonstrated the complexities surrounding suicide reporting, where participants stated they faced potentially conflicting demands when writing about suicide. Specifically, participants reported strong desires to balance their need to report suicide to a high ethical standard with reporting interesting stories to sell papers; stories containing features known to contribute to contagion such as bereaved reactions and personal identification with the victim. Participants appeared to balance this potential conflict by noting that the industry publishes stories to a high standard and that interesting stories are needed to increase the positive reader benefits associated with suicide reporting. Furthermore, participants framed suicide reporting as a highly ethical and relevant topic as suicide reporting helps to reveal serious public health and social issues. Collectively these arguments appear to further distance suicide reporting from harm. Participants also argued that legislations and restrictions placed on suicide reporting oppose the fundamental media principle; freedom of the press. As a result, participants were very critical of any perceived reporting restriction and they were strongly opposed. Participants opposed suicide reporting initiatives in a number of ways such as arguing they are not relevant, were unfair, ambiguous, difficult to adhere to and unnecessary. As a result, these initiatives have been ignored and participants want to report in a manner to which they feel is appropriate.

# CHAPTER SIX

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## DISCUSSION

*People care about what newspapers tell them to care about*

*Delia Parr*

This Chapter examines and integrates the results from the two completed studies. In doing so the wider implications of the results are discussed, including reflexivity discussions, exploring how the results relate to previous literature, strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, as well as considerations for future research.

### **Reflexivity: Post Analysis Considerations**

Before examining research conclusions, it is important to consider the personal impact examining suicide articles and interviewing journalists had on me. As both a mental health clinician and a researcher, analysing the research data and conducting research interviews had a deep personal impact. During my analysis of Study One, I spent hours reading and rereading tragic stories about people who had taken their lives and the impact this had on others. Over time, this began to take a cumulative personal toll on me and began to affect my mood. In addition, I found myself having some reaction to specific article content. In particular, I was shocked and surprised by the graphic nature of article content, and in both years, investigated articles contained gruesome descriptions of the suicide method and how the bodies were found. Such graphic descriptions have created a lasting impression on me, where I can still easily and accurately recall a detailed mental picture involving precise details reported. Consequently, my own personal experience of suicide has heightened my clinical concerns regarding the potential impact suicide stories may have on vulnerable readers.

My experiences with Study One also created challenges when interviewing participants for Study Two. In order to provide participants with an opportunity to tell their stories, I needed to remain neutral and put aside details and opinions from my initial data analysis. This was made particularly difficult when participants made assertions that were clearly contradictory



to information obtained from Study One, such as stating that suicide method is never reported.

Throughout the interview process, I was very fortunate to have participants who appeared relaxed, comfortable and responded in a very considered way, providing a wealth of information. However, as an interviewer, this presented a further difficulty, as participants appeared very comfortable and would make a variety of controversial statements. Accordingly, throughout the interview process, it was hard to not respond to these statements or provide research rationale that could counter their assertions. These difficulties were then further magnified when I was sitting down for long periods of time, transcribing and rereading interview transcripts. As a result, initial drafts of my analysis were plagued by criticisms and counter arguments of participant statements. In addition, throughout the interview process, I began to develop a degree of sympathy for participants and their situation. I personally agreed with participants that the suicide reporting guidelines and The Coroners Act should not have been presented or imposed on the media without any industry consultation. Although the guidelines were eventually rewritten with industry input, participant opposition and avoidance of these initiatives is not completely unexpected.

Not only was I affected by my participants, but who I am and my research topic is likely to have influenced participant behaviour and what they said. Being a suicide contagion researcher, participants may have placed more emphasis on discussing topics such as the validity of contagion research evidence and the ethics of media reporting. In contrast, if the same participants were being interviewed by government policy makers, they may have talked more about power and fairness of reporting suicide. Furthermore, as the participants were aware this research is likely to enter the public domain they may have been more likely to emphasise the positive features of industry suicide reporting and avoided discussing potential negative features. However, participants' willingness to raise and discuss controversial points suggests that this latter point is unlikely to be a large concern. By its very nature, suicide evokes strong emotive responses across society. Therefore, it was not unexpected that both participants and I had strong responses.

In addition, when designing these studies, it was initially envisioned that this research would primarily explore the suicide reporting guidelines. However, my interviews quickly revealed that participants had little knowledge of the guidelines. Not only was this unexpected but it required me to adjust my interview plan and to spend more time exploring other factors related to suicide reporting. This allowed me to expand my interviews to discuss the broader topic of suicide reporting and participant challenges and views of how suicide is reported.

### **Study One: Newspaper Analysis**

The newspaper industry appears to be in a difficult position as they are required to balance many different industry demands. Such demands include readership desires for news and entertainment, business demands to increase readership and advertising revenues, work demands for timely, relevant stories, and ethical demands for freedom of information and to not incite hate or harm. These competing demands may expose journalists and editors to accusations of being unethical or biased. Suicide reporting appears particularly challenging as the industry is required to balance all of these demands, which can be often conflicting.

Study One used descriptive statistics and content analysis to investigate how suicide was reported in New Zealand and compared suicide reporting styles in 1997 and 2009. The analysis investigated the extent and nature of suicide reporting and explored elements known to contribute to suicide contagion. It is also important to consider that observed differences in reporting practices may also reflect the media's ability to access material, changes in the way suicide information can be obtained or is disseminated, or changes in journalist and editor training and education. For example, changes in police practices in deciding what suicide information can be released to the media is likely to alter what can be reported. However, one key factor that occurred in this 12 year period was the development and implementation of suicide reporting guidelines.

The article analysis demonstrated that, in 1997 and 2009, the quality of newspaper reports of suicide remained mixed in that reporting practices had either improved, remained stable, or become increasingly likely to incite contagion. Across the two years investigated, several aspects of suicide reporting appeared to improve and consequently these changes are likely to reduce an article's ability to incite contagion. Improvements included the decreasing frequency of the word "suicide" in the title, not reporting the age of the victims, the decreased use of images and a decrease in suicide method reporting. In addition, in 2009 descriptions of method became increasingly brief, suicide motives were less explicit, were reluctant to assign external blame for suicide, discussed mental illness in greater detail, and the glorification or romanticisation of suicide became rare. Further, articles contained a more variable description of the victim, focused less on the grief and bereavement of family and friends, and suicide help referral information became more specific and helpful.

Despite demonstrating some improvements, the comparison between 1997 and 2009 results revealed there were still a number of areas of suicide reporting that were more likely to incite contagion. Key concerns of suicide reporting practices that may increase risk of suicide contagion include suicide reporting that did not match reality, the increased reporting of

celebrity suicides, the low reporting rates of mental illness, the increasing tendency to include suicide motives and that these motives were oversimplified. In addition, the reporting of more violent suicide methods became more frequent, as did the socially ambiguous language used to describe suicide (“committed” suicide, “successful” suicide), oversimplifying the causes for suicide and the ongoing use of sensationalised and inaccurate headlines.

The statistical analysis revealed differences in the frequency of newspaper suicide reporting. In particular, The New Zealand Herald published almost half of all suicide articles (absolute numbers). This is important as The New Zealand Herald has the largest circulation figures for NZ newspapers. Therefore, a small improvement in this one newspaper is likely to reduce reader exposure to contagious material, and future suicide media interventions such as reporting guidelines would benefit from the involvement and possibly the endorsement from The New Zealand Herald. These results are not unusual and appear consistent with Michel et al. (2000) and Michel (1995), who similarly found large variations in different newspapers’ reporting of suicide. Such differences may reflect population differences, editor preferences, regional suicide rates with most suicides occurring in Auckland (Ministry of Health, 2010a), or regional public appetite for suicide information.

### **Frequency of Reporting**

Throughout 1997 and 2009, suicide appeared to be reported at similar rates. This appears to reflect the similar number of suicide deaths occurring within each investigated timeframe (Ministry of Health, 2014a). Therefore, it is assumed as suicide deaths have remained stable, the consistent level of suicide reporting suggests suicide reporting during 1997 and 2009 continued to remain equally newsworthy throughout. In addition to reporting suicide in similar frequencies, there was no significant difference in article word length. This may indicate that, despite changes within the social environment, suicide appeared to be reported with the same focus. This was unexpected as previous international “time comparisons” following guideline implementation have revealed media reports on suicide becoming less common and more brief over time (Michel et al., 1995). This could reflect the NZ media industry’s decision to not endorse the guidelines.

### **Referencing of Suicide**

The avoidance of the word “suicide” in an article’s title is a positive change as this is believed to reduce suicide contagion (Kuess & Hatzinger, 1986; 1989). It is believed that decreasing the use of the word suicide in a headline diminishes a story’s profile and reader attention to suicide. Furthermore, avoiding the word suicide in a headline may help separate the victim

from their death, where the victim is not as clearly defined by their death. Interestingly, although the recommendation to avoid using the word suicide in an article's title is common in many overseas guidelines, such as Austria (Kuess & Hatzinger, 1989), Australia (Pirkis et al., 2009) and Hong Kong (Cheng, Fu, Caine & Yip, 2014), it is not specifically identified in New Zealand's Ministry of Health reporting guidelines. Therefore, the decreasing use of suicide in the title is likely to reflect non-guideline reasons such as a growing international media opinion that the word suicide is an inappropriate word to include in a headline. Alternatively, it may also reflect an attempt to report on suicide without clearly breaching the Coroners Act. At first glance, the decreasing incidence of the word suicide in a headline result appears consistent with previous Australian (Pirkis et al., 2009), Austrian (Hatzinger, 1989) and Swiss (Michel et al., 2000) studies. However, unlike these studies which demonstrated the word has almost been eliminated from article headlines, the current research revealed suicide appeared in almost one quarter of all suicide articles. Not only does this suggest there is still room for improvement, but it may also indicate reporting guidelines are only intermittently applied if at all. Subsequent participant interviews reinforced this point by suggesting participants have little knowledge of the guidelines and openly stated that reporting guidelines are not applied.

The qualitative analysis revealed not just what was said, but helped demonstrate the way in which suicide was discussed. In 1997, the word "suicide" was directly and repeatedly stated. This style of reporting lends itself to be attention grabbing and sensational and may increase suicide contagion (Stack, 2003). This may suggest that the media had few taboos about directly identifying and labelling a death as suicide. In 2009, reporting practices changed, where the word suicide was increasingly substituted with indirect and ambiguous statements. This reporting style not only decreases the articles' focus on suicide, but is likely to make articles appear less sensational, and the victim's death is less likely to be the focus of the story. Together these factors are likely to diminish an article's potential to elicit contagion. This study appears to be the first to identify this pattern of results. Study Two demonstrated that the rise in the indirect referencing of suicide reflected participant attempts to circumvent the Coroners Act.

In addition, in 2009, the terms "committed suicide", "successful", "unsuccessful", and "failed" became increasingly common. The repeated use of this phrase is concerning as these phrases have important connotations, such as framing the suicide as immoral behaviour, completed suicides as a positive and attempted suicides as a failure. The increased use of these words may therefore unnecessarily increase the suicide risk to vulnerable individuals. Gould (2003) supported this view noting that this language should be avoided because it

fuels negative stigma and contributes to contagion. As a result, Gould recommended these phrases be substituted with the more neutral terms “suicide deaths” or “non-fatal attempts”. Although the Ministry of Health suicide reporting guidelines make no reference to how suicide should be referred to, the recently developed Pasifika media guidelines include such descriptions (Le Va, 2016).

### **Reader Identification**

In 2009 suicide articles appeared less likely to encourage reader identification with the victim. Specifically, articles less frequently contained descriptions of victim ages and pictures. This may reflect increased media sensitivity to victim anonymity, increased difficulty of obtaining this information or adherence to suicide reporting guidelines. This finding was consistent with Michel et al. (2000). A decrease in reader identification has important ramifications for suicide contagion, as it has been demonstrated that an article’s ability to elicit contagion increases with higher reader identification with the victim (Blood & Pirkis, 2001). Therefore, omitting these details is likely to reduce reader identification and subsequently decrease an article’s opportunity to incite contagion. Furthermore, the decreasing use of pictures of the bereaved can be viewed as positive as pictures are likely to increase reader attention and are prone to glorify suicide (Stack, 2003). Consequently, pictures may inadvertently reinforce suicide as a desired outcome and is not recommended by suicide guidelines (Stack, 2003). The decreased reporting of this information is likely to reflect increased adherence to suicide guidelines, or changing perceptions regarding the importance of publishing images. However, article pictures are still present in almost one fifth of all suicide articles and again the degree of guideline impact is not as high as overseas studies such as Michel et al (2000) and Hatzinger, (1989), and there is still room for improvement.

Furthermore, the qualitative results revealed changes in article descriptions of suicide victims. In both years, articles either provided brief victim details or contained lengthy victim descriptions. Articles that focused on victim details included suicides involving celebrities or youth. It is concerning that celebrity and youth victims were discussed in extensive detail, as these stories are likely to have a larger influence on youth. Subsequently, the detailed reporting of victim information is likely to increase the opportunity of reader identification with the victim (Blood & Pirkis, 2001; Stack, 1987a) and increase the possibility of suicide contagion (Beautrais, 2000).

Throughout 1997, victim positive characteristics were routinely detailed. Not only did this allow the audience an opportunity to share similarities with the deceased but it highlighted

the tragedy of the victim's death and created an opportunity to elicit audience empathy and sympathy. Such descriptions create an unbalanced image of the deceased, where negative victim features or distress were not discussed. Consequently, such descriptions may increase the risk of suicide contagion by making suicide appear an attractive option (Gould, 1990; O'Carroll & Potter, 1994). It is for this reason that reporting guidelines advocate against focusing solely on positive victim characteristics. Focusing on positive victim characteristics may reflect an attempt to comfort and not upset the bereaved, or reflect societal expectations to speak positively of the deceased.

In 2009, the descriptions of suicide victims became more varied, where articles would additionally focus on negative victim features. Consequently, such descriptions are likely to be more realistic. The variable picture of suicide victims is indirectly endorsed by reporting guidelines as this representation reduces the likelihood that the victim appears an object of admiration and reduces victim empathy. As a result, this is a positive change in reporting practices. In addition, such reporting may provide valuable insight into the development of suicidal behaviour, where suicide is connected to negative life events, addiction and inadequate supports. Such descriptions not only present suicide as an undesirable act, but it may also highlight suicide risk factors. This appears to be the first study to identify that article content would frequently contain negative victim characteristics. This may reflect New Zealand's relatively high prison suicide rates (Simpson, Brinded, Laidlaw, Fairly, & Malcom, 1999). In addition as this feature was not present in 1997, it may suggest changing social taboos where journalists appear more willing to publish a range of victim descriptions. Furthermore, this distinction may reflect culture changes where readers see themselves as less powerful or less likely to complain.

Participant interviews revealed that participants would actively seek to include victim details, stating that such information is necessary to create interesting and compelling stories. As a result, participants would actively attempt to increase reader identification with the victim; a feature that not only encourages contagion but interestingly is also a feature that participants acknowledged made suicide reporting personally difficult for them. Despite participants being very aware of their own negative personal impact of writing and investigating suicide stories, they were dismissive towards the possibility of any negative reader reaction. Although an apparent contradiction, it is likely participants may view their perspectives on suicide reporting as very different from readers. Journalists and editors are likely to spend a prolonged period of time interviewing a range of people and developing a story which can be viewed as quite different from the readers who may simply read the published article. In

addition, it is likely the perceived mysterious and unknown nature of suicide contagion means participants were reluctant to accept these perceived uncertain consequences.

Participant dismissals of negative reporting consequences is concerning, as there is a wealth of suicide contagion research that has demonstrated that exposure to suicide material can elicit suicide contagion (Gould, et al., 2014; Pirkis, 2010; Stack 2003). This point was particularly interesting in noting identification with the victim does not only increase audience suicide rates, but also makes a story more difficult for media personnel to report. However, participants' reluctance to reflect on their own difficulties with reporting suicide has resulted in participants focusing on publishing the same details (namely victim identification) that they themselves found particularly difficult. As a result, while participants were dismissive of suicide contagion, they may be more receptive to an approach which encourages media personnel to apply their own difficulties of suicide reporting to their readers.

Particularly in 1997, newspaper articles contained frequent references to outpourings of grief, confusion and regret. Such constructions framed suicide as a method of death that is not only tragic, but is associated with widespread public grieving and pain. Similar to the glorification construction, readers are likely to infer that suicide is associated with a level of fame and a way to be remembered. As a result, such descriptions are likely to incite contagion and are not endorsed by reporting guidelines (Bandura, 1977). In addition, in 1997, many articles openly discussed family and friends' confusion and surprise at the suicide and this is likely to convey misinformation and unnecessary fear. In reality, while anyone can potentially commit suicide, it rarely occurs without notice and is typically linked to multiple warning signs and risk factors (Granello, 2010). However, while signs may be present, they may often go unrecognised until after a suicide has occurred (Ruskin et al., 2004).

Describing grieving reactions is likely to have journalistic appeal as it adds emotional power, encourages reader identification with those grieving, and reinforces the death's tragic consequences. These features are likely to combine to develop a more interesting story. In addition, including grieving descriptions may serve to comfort the bereaved by enabling them a forum to express their feelings. In 2009, reporting styles changed where descriptions of grief were typically brief and less emotional. As a result, these descriptions are less likely to convey suicide as something desirable, reducing suicide glamour and decreasing an articles' imitative effect. The reduced focus on family grief suggests that providing interesting stories is not the only reporting concern, whereby, changes in 2009 may reflect growing ethical

considerations about reporting grieving reactions or may reflect increased reluctance of grieving families to speak to the media.

Interestingly, participant interviews revealed that focusing on the victim and the bereaved allowed readers to better identify with the victim and created a more compelling and exciting narrative. Therefore, this point demonstrates that the suicide victim, and promoting reader interest, is a key feature of suicide reporting, where journalists are more likely to report a suicide if a more personalised narrative can be constructed. This argument is consistent with the business model, where interesting stories are required to increase newspaper readership. However, these features associated with reader interest are also associated with suicide contagion and conflict with reporting guidelines (Stack, 2003).

Participants framed the reporting of details of the bereaved as an ethical practice as they stated these people wanted their stories told. However, this argument appears to prioritise the rights of those who want their experiences made public and overlooks the wishes of those who do not want their experiences shared. Participant desire to publish interesting stories is well supported by the article analysis, which revealed articles regularly contained elements that would directly appeal to reader interest, such as sensational details, focusing on personalised stories, reporting unusual suicides of high lethality, including descriptions of the bereaved and creating victim sympathy.

## **Method**

One important area of change was the decline of suicide method reporting, where in 2009 descriptions of suicide method were less likely to be reported. This was an important improvement as the reporting of suicide method is repeatedly associated with suicide contagion and method imitation (Liu et al., 2007; Pirkis & Blood, 2001). Consequently, this improvement appears consistent with the Coroners Act and suicide reporting guidelines, which discourage the inclusion of method details. These results were consistent with a range of time lapse studies such as Bohanna and Wang (2012), Michel et al (1995, 2000), and Pirkis et al (2009). Although, suicide method reporting was hypothesised to decrease, the high level of reporting of suicide method (included in 40 per cent of articles) was unexpected, particularly as previous New Zealand research (McKenna et al., 2010) found that the reporting of method was relatively rare. It is likely different media domains and media sampling methods contributed to the observed difference in results. The relatively high rate of reporting of suicide method was particularly unexpected as the Coroners Act (2006) specifically prohibits the publication of any suicide method data, suggesting that reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act are not being adhered to.



Participant interviews revealed that the participants viewed reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act as significant reporting obstacles. As a result, participants noted that these initiatives are routinely opposed and participants frequently employed a range of strategies to circumvent legislation. Participants stated that they do not report suicide method details, something the article analysis revealed was routinely reported. Consequently, these results suggest reporting interesting details for readers and increasing readership was prioritised over concerns for negative reader impact.

The article analysis further demonstrated important changes in how suicide method was reported across analysed timeframes. In 2009, the reporting of suicide methods greatly diverged from official statistics, where methods with higher degrees of lethality were over-reported (such as jumping and firearms). This is consistent with the findings of Michel (1994). The increased reporting of increasingly “out of the ordinary” and lethal suicides may reflect an attempt to capture reader interest and maximise readership. This suggests the covering of suicide and attempted suicide was increasingly becoming a news sensation. However, not only will including descriptions of suicide method increase the probability of contagion, but exposed individuals may consequently be more likely to use methods that are more violent and lethal, decreasing the likelihood of a failed attempt (Blood et al., 2007; Gunnell, 1994).

The qualitative results demonstrated that this was only part of the picture and there were a number of differences in how suicide method was reported. In 1997, descriptions of suicide generally included extensive suicide method details which outlined the precise and explicit mechanisms and behaviours involved. These details included reporting on materials and locations with emotionally charged words. Such descriptions of suicide method are likely to shock the audience, build interest and satisfy their desire to learn exactly what happened. However, the frequent detailed reporting of method details may encourage morbid curiosity and approval for violence. Furthermore, these are also qualities associated with suicide contagion and are discouraged by reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act.

Conversely in 2009, the reporting of suicide method was less explicit. Articles which reported method did so vaguely, without descriptions of the procedures. This suggests that in 2009, the reporting of suicide method was not such a key article feature. Participant interviews demonstrated that this style of reporting reflects journalists’ belief that while interesting method details should not be reported. The continued reporting of suicide method suggests it remains an important element of interesting stories. Consequently, this may again suggest

that increasing newspaper readership is prioritised over concerns for any potential negative impact among vulnerable readers. In addition, indirect references to suicide may also reflect an attempt to circumvent the Coroners Act, where subtle method descriptors make breaches to the Act less obvious and therefore less likely to result in warnings, fines or prosecutions. Again, Study Two supported this as participants noted they are increasingly willing to test and challenge the Coroners Act, with some participants going as far as noting the Coroners Act does not prevent them from reporting what they want to report.

The improvements in method reporting following guideline implementation is consistent with international research (Michel et al., 2000, Pirkis & Blood, 2001, & Pirkis et al., 2009). These studies concluded that improvements in suicide reporting were solely linked to the development and implementation of suicide reporting guidelines. The problem with this conclusion is that it assumes that guidelines alone were responsible for changes. The current thesis demonstrates that as guidelines were not endorsed by the industry, different aspects of suicide reporting may have improved without guideline implementation. Therefore reporting improvements may reflect changing industry attitudes towards what is appropriate to report. Participant interviews suggest that identified positive changes in suicide reporting are likely to reflect participants' desire to be ethical, changes in audience appetite for information and increased participant understanding of what reporting features may be harmful.

### **Suicide Motive**

In 1997, suicide articles explicitly outlined motive, whereas in 2009, the reporting of motive was more subtle, with triggering events being indirectly implied. This change in reporting is considered an improvement, as it is less definitive and leaves room to suggest that other factors may have contributed to the suicide. This may reflect changing attitudes where journalists were less willing to report potential suicide motives as concrete facts. Conversely it may also reflect increased industry knowledge that suicide is a private matter and the precise causes are difficult to determine. In addition, in both 1997 and 2009, the causes of suicide were simplified to one single causally related factor. The increasing frequency of mono-causal reporting was unexpected as previous time-lapse studies by Kuess and Hatzinger (1986, 1989) and Michel et al (2000) demonstrate that guideline implementation was associated with a reduction in the reporting of cause and effect motives. In addition, these results differ slightly from New Zealand research of McKenna et al (2010) who reported that the oversimplification of suicide motives was rare. Again, this difference in results may reflect differences in data collection, where McKenna et al (2010) investigated a range of different media domains and used a different analytical procedure.

The continued simplification of suicide motives demonstrates that providing readers with simple and clear explanations is a key article element. One potential benefit of reporting causal suicide motives is that it may help educate the public of suicide risk factors. However, this is also associated with negative costs of promoting a simplistic understanding of suicide that fails to fully educate the readers about the complex interaction of suicide risk factors and warning signs. Over time, it is likely that the repeated reporting of suicide as a monocausal factor is likely to normalise the audience's perception that suicide is a common or appropriate strategy to deal with stressful situations. As a result, this style of reporting can increase suicide contagion (Beautrais, 2000, 2003; Romer et al., 2006; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1989). It is for these reasons that reporting guidelines advocate against simplistic interpretations of suicide. Not only does this provide further evidence that suicide reporting guidelines are not adhered to, but it suggests that creating clear, concise, interesting stories is of greater importance than concerns for suicide contagion.

It is believed the continued simplification of suicide motives is perpetuated as it allows the media to quickly write clear, concise and uncomplicated articles without extensive investigations. Furthermore, linking suicide to one event is further likely to increase reader attention and interest in a story ("email is causing killer stress"), and also appears to suggest that these suicides could have been predicted or avoided. It is also important to consider that simplified stories have enormous appeal to newspaper audiences, with 56 per cent of adult New Zealanders having poor literacy skills and score below the minimum requirements needed to meet the demands of everyday life and work (Ministry of Health, 2010b). Consequently, readers are more likely to read and understand simplistic stories. Participant interviews appeared to support these results, as when participants were discussing suicide they would simplify the causes of suicide. As participants appeared to hold a simplistic cause and effect understanding of suicide, it would be expected that they report suicide is a similar method.

### **Responsibility and Social Changes**

In 1997, suicide articles frequently involved lengthy explorations assigning external blame and responsibility. Allocating responsibility for a suicide reaffirms life and the notion that each suicide is not only identifiable, but preventable. Articles extensively criticising service failures cultivate a theme of distrust, where external services cannot be trusted to prevent suicide. In 2009, the decreasing use of assigning suicide responsibility can therefore be viewed as an improvement. This may reflect the media's reluctance to assign blame or that improved practices mean there are fewer opportunities to assign blame. Despite being an

improvement, this reporting feature is not mentioned in suicide reporting guidelines. Therefore, this change is likely to reflect other issues, such as a general reluctance to assign blame to suicides, increased risk aversion to making claims that could result in legal repercussions or the reduced occurrence of suicides that involved the perceived failures of external organisations.

Throughout 1997 and 2009, suicide articles also constructed suicide as an event that will result in wider social changes. This future-orientated framing suggests suicide will result in social changes designed to prevent similar suicides. As a result, suicide is again framed as preventable and societal failings allow suicide to occur. Assigning external responsibility for suicide is problematic as it diminishes personal accountability, which may reduce readers' ability to engage in help-seeking behaviour. Therefore, assigning responsibility for a suicide to external agencies may negatively distort the audience's understanding of why the suicide occurred. Conversely, this style of reporting may also reinforce the notion that suicide is preventable, and that extensive measures should be taken to prevent future suicides.

### **An illness**

The results demonstrated a complicated and variable picture of the reporting of mental illness, where statistical and qualitative results combined to reveal important changes in how suicide was reported. In 2009, articles infrequently contained descriptions of mental illness. This suggests that mental illness was generally not seen as an important article element. Conversely, it could also suggest that it has become increasingly difficult for journalists to obtain sensitive and private mental health information, or reflect an already established desire to publish simplified uncomplicated suicide stories.

Including mental health information is advocated by health professionals and suicide guidelines as it is believed that including mental illness details would help educate readers of an important suicide risk factor that affects 90 per cent of suicide victims and prevents the simplification of suicide (Bohanna, & Wang, 2012; Quin, 2005). However, it is important to consider that it is not the responsibility of a journalist to engage in speculation on stressors and their implication of mental wellbeing, particularly given industry constant time pressures. The low reporting of mental health illnesses is consistent with Niederkrotenthaler et al (2009) and Thom et al (2011) who found the role of mental illness was under-reported. When mental illness was discussed, consistently across investigated years depression, followed by alcohol and drugs were most commonly identified. These factors appeared to reflect real world statistics as these are the two key risk factors for suicide (Seay, 2014).

Although statistical results demonstrated that mental illness was rarely reported upon, the qualitative analyses provided valuable information outlining how this was discussed. In 1997, when mental health was mentioned, descriptions were brief and non-specific, suggesting mental illness was not viewed as an important element. The low and brief reporting of mental illness appeared to minimise its role. As a result, the low descriptions of mental illness would likely give the audience a false impression that mental illness plays a minor role in suicide.

In 2009, while mental illness was less frequently reported, when it was discussed, this involved greater detail and the victim's distress became an important article element. The reporting of complex mental disorders appears to further reinforce the accurate picture that illness severity and complexity is a powerful predictor of suicide and is associated with an increased suicide risk (Quin, 2005). It is likely this style of reporting helps educate the public that mental illness is an important suicide risk factor and is advocated by suicide guidelines. However, the low reporting rates of mental illness is likely to undermine these benefits. These findings were consistent in New Zealand research of Thom et al (2011) who found mental wellbeing was marginalised. These results appeared to conflict with participant interviews which highlighted a desire to educate readers of important suicide warning signs such as mental illness.

### **Glorification**

The unexpected, mysterious and violent nature of suicide makes it an interesting topic. However, suicide news stories frequently contained additional elements to make the reporting more sensational and dramatic. In 1997, suicide articles would intermittently glorify suicide by conveying the victim as an object of reverence or presenting suicide as an act that will bestow fame, honour, and immortality. In addition, these articles increased the pre-occupation with the victim's death and subsequent rise in status. Such representations are dangerous and are not advocated by reporting guidelines as they may elicit contagion by constructing suicide as a desirable action that will provide vulnerable individuals with a level of fame, attention, and respect that is missing from their lives (Bandura, 1977; Joiner, 1999). Accordingly, the glorification of suicide is a feature that suicide reporting guidelines seek to avoid.

In 2009, the glorification of suicide became rare and was a reporting improvement. However, an analysis of reporting headlines revealed that throughout 1997 and 2009 it was common for suicide articles to contain attention-grabbing headlines. These headlines not only serve to sensationalise suicide but can create false fears and misinform the public. The use of sensational and dramatic headlines is likely to increase readership by heightening public

intrigue and alarm. The ongoing use of sensational headlines is problematic as not only is it associated with suicide contagion (Middle et al., 2007), but these articles may distort reader perceptions of suicide where unusual or extreme suicide behaviours are seen as the norm. Furthermore, the increased use of sensational and shocking headlines may desensitise the public to suicide. The use of attention-grabbing headlines was further unexpected as these headings appear to conflict with media ethics and directly oppose reporting guidelines which advocate that headlines should be moderate and carefully considered (Christians, 2009). Study Two demonstrated that although participants identified a desire to publish interesting stories, they stated that high industry ethical standards prevented inappropriate and sensational suicide reporting. However, the continued presence of sensational headlines suggests industry competitive pressures to increase readership appears to trump ethical considerations.

The article analysis demonstrated that in 1997 and 2009, articles also occasionally presented the deceased in a sympathetic light, which is likely to increase their audience appeal. Such victims were portrayed as innocent, vulnerable, and overwhelmed by exceptional stressors. It is likely these sympathetic portrayals may sensationalise suicide by heightening the level of reader emotion, interest and investment in the deceased. Furthermore, these articles framed the victim's suicide as an understandable response to stress. In addition, such portrayals are likely to diminish victim responsibility and increase reader emotion; all features linked to contagion and opposed by reporting guidelines (Stack, 2003). However, a positive, empathic portrayal is also likely to encourage audience members to help those in need, and may encourage people to support suicide prevention initiatives (Cialdini et al., 1987).

In 1997, suicide was occasionally portrayed as a romantic act of love. This romantic construction was used to frame suicide as a positive meaningful event, and a way of expressing great love. Typical romantic descriptions of suicide raised an interesting juxtaposition between the internal emotional turmoil with the description that the victim's suicide was elegant and graceful. Such portrayals are problematic as they sensationalise suicide and are associated with suicide contagion (Bandura, 1977; Joiner, 1999; O'Carroll & Potter, 1994). In 2009, romantic portrayals of suicide were uncommon and an important reporting improvement.

The decreased glorification of suicide was consistent with many studies such as Pirkis et al (2001; 2009) and Michel et al (2000), which linked reporting improvement to the implementation of suicide reporting guidelines. However, as this research demonstrates,

reporting improvements are not due to adherence to the guidelines or the Coroners Act, rather the reduced glorification of suicide reflects increased industry awareness that glorifying suicide is inappropriate and reduced audience appetite for this style of suicide reporting. The reduced presence of sensational news features suggests that creating interesting stories is not the sole focus of suicide reporting and this was supported by interview data demonstrating that participants consider a wide array of factors before publishing suicide stories. However, the ongoing presence of sensational reporting features such as dramatic and inaccurate headlines, suggests that creating interesting stories is still a notable consideration.

### **Reported Suicides Not Matching Reality**

A further reporting concern was that in 2009 suicide reporting was less likely to reflect the suicide real world behaviour, where mental illness, victim celebrity status and lethality of suicide did not match the information provided by official statistics. This is likely to misinform the public creating an incorrect understanding of suicide. Throughout both timeframes celebrity suicides were over-represented (particularly in 2009). In terms of contagion, the over reporting of celebrity suicides is particularly problematic as celebrity suicide stories are associated with powerful contagion effects (Joiner, 2003; Stack, 2003). Due to these concerns suicide reporting guidelines advocate that serious considerations should be made before publishing celebrity suicides. These findings are consistent with international studies of Gould et al (2007) and McKenna et al (2010). This is likely to reflect modern society's preoccupation with all things celebrity (van Krieken, 2012). Participants themselves reinforced this finding by noting that "typical" suicides have little reader interest. Therefore, participants stated they desire more unusual and dramatic stories that will appeal to readers. Participants did not appear aware of the wider ramifications of publishing such stories, such as how this may alter public perceptions of suicide or diminish an article's educational value.

Throughout both years investigated, suicide articles primarily focused on death by suicide. Not only does this suggest that the media are more interested in stories of increased lethality, it also demonstrates that media descriptions of suicide do not reflect real world behaviour, where suicide attempts are six times more likely than suicide deaths (Ministry of Health, 2014). These results were consistent with Pirkis et al (2001), McKenna et al (2010), and Michel et al (2000), who similarly reported that newspapers focused on completed suicides.

The focus on lethality may increase article interest but may also normalise lethal suicide behaviour and consequently increase suicide contagion (Romer et al., 2006). Furthermore,

articles focusing on completed suicides may provide the audience with the perception that suicide ideation is rare and uncommon; this may reduce help-seeking behaviour. Despite some contagion consequences, suicide reporting guidelines do not make direct reference to reporting of suicide ideation or suicide attempts or linking these behaviours to completed suicide. It appears likely that the industry's emphasis on reporting completed suicide reflects the ease to which journalists can access information. Furthermore, the media are more likely to be alerted to completed suicides and less likely to receive notification of attempted suicides and are very rarely notified of suicidal ideation. Additionally, as participants stated, focusing on completed suicides is likely to reflect reader interest.

As demonstrated above, suicide reporting practices did not appear to reflect reality. This appears to be a common practice and is consistent with many international studies such as Fishman and Weimann (1997), Pirkis et al (2007), Niederkrotenthaler et al (2009), Michel (1995) and New Zealand research of McKenna et al (2010). It is suspected that the media's inherent reliance on the business model that requires the media to increase their readership and maximise their advertisements strongly encourages the maximisation of interest through the reporting of unusual suicides. Therefore, as Study Two identified, the newsworthiness and publication of a suicide was linked to its unusual features. While the media have no moral imperative or obligation to offer reports that mirror the real world, the selective reporting of suicide, particularly in favour of extreme stories, may distort views of suicide and may reduce the potential educational value of suicide reporting.

### **Referral Information**

Suicide reporting guidelines advocate for the inclusion of help referral information. In 1997, it was rare for suicide articles to contain help referral information. When information was included, the quality of this help information was considered low. This could suggest that in 1997, the media did not see that they played a significant role in suicide prevention and consequently, including suicide help referral information was unnecessary. In 2009, although still rare, when included, this information was of greater quality and was often tailored to the article's content. This suggests the media are gaining a greater understanding of their responsibilities and may also reflect a growing perception that suicide reporting can provide educational value to their audience. This was consistent with interview data which found that participants believed suicide reporting is associated with increased ethical concerns and with positive reader benefits and increased help-seeking behaviour. However, the very low frequency with which suicide referral information was included places important caveats on identified improvements in the increased quality of referral information.



The limited referral information demonstrates that when suicide was discussed it was treated as a straight news piece, designed to primarily inform and entertain readers. Therefore, despite research participants saying otherwise, it appears that including suicide referral information was trumped by other considerations. While it could be argued that including suicide referral information could represent an ethical obligation, it is also important to consider that this expectation to include referral information appears limited to suicide reporting. Interestingly, other news stories involving death such as motor vehicle accidents and cancer do not include referral information. Therefore, it is not completely unexpected to discover that suicide referral information is routinely omitted. However, this rationale does not adequately consider the volume of research demonstrating that readers are influenced by suicide reports (Phillips, 1974; Pirkis & Blood, 2001; Stack, 2003,) and that including suicide referral information can promote help-seeking behaviour and affirm life (Niederkröthaler et al., 2014). In the future, advances in research may similarly promote the inclusion of help-seeking behaviour in a range of story domains such as domestic violence or rape. The lack of help resource information is particularly disappointing as this is one area the media can quickly and easily promote help-seeking behaviour. In addition, generic templates could be easily constructed and applied to any suicide article. These findings are consistent with local evidence of McKenna et al (2010), and the Australian study of Pirkis et al (2002).

### **Reporting of Suicides Occurring Within New Zealand**

In order to specifically explore changes in newspaper adherence to the Coroners Act across both time frames, a subgroup of suicides which occurred within New Zealand (and were subject to the Coroners Act) were specifically analysed. The results demonstrated that there were few significant changes, suggesting the Coroners Act has been similarly applied. As a result, the routine reporting of suicide details explicitly prohibited by the Coroners Act suggests that the Act is not robustly applied and has had little impact; a finding supported by participant interviews. In addition, these results suggest that previously identified changes in suicide reporting does not reflect increased industry adherence to the Coroners Act. In the future it may be valuable to directly compare local New Zealand suicides (which are subject to the Coroners Act) to foreign suicides (which are solely subject to reporting guidelines). However, such comparisons are likely to be limited by differences in local and foreign suicide stories. In order for overseas suicides to be reported in New Zealand, these stories are likely to contain additional unusual or dramatic elements that result in foreign media attention. In addition, such overseas stories may also be produced by overseas wire services, who are unlikely to be aware of the specifics of New Zealand's media guidelines.

At the time of this study, the media industry had not officially endorsed reporting guidelines. If reporting guidelines had been applied, it would be expected that reporting improvements would be universally displayed across a majority of individual categories. In addition Study Two participants reported that suicide reporting initiatives are routinely ignored. Therefore, identified improvements are not the result of the application of industry guidelines. Instead, these changes might reflect increased journalistic knowledge, experience and awareness of what is appropriate to include, changes in reader appetite, or changes in journalistic practices and ethics. This is a key point, as many changes identified in previous international time lapse studies may have occurred without guideline implementation. Furthermore, the continued presence of several features known to contribute to suicide contagion is likely to reflect a perception that such reporting is not problematic. Therefore, it is likely that the industry can benefit from education and resources such as reporting guidelines which are specifically designed likely to minimise the opportunity for suicide contagion. However, some of the weaknesses identified are not explicitly covered by reporting guidelines. Therefore, even if guidelines had been stringently applied, some identified reporting weaknesses would still occur. This suggests reporting guidelines could further include additional features; particularly how to reference suicide and reporting of suicides that reflect reality. Importantly, this study has been able to identify reporting weaknesses, and demonstrates that New Zealand suicide reporting can improve and is likely to benefit from robustly applying suicide reporting guidelines.

### **Study Two: Journalist Reporting on Suicide**

Study Two complemented Study One by providing new insights into suicide reporting. In particular it allowed the media to discuss their perspectives on and concerns about suicide reporting. Participants' arguments were separated into four main themes, research and science, media relevance and impact, morals and ethics and finally, power and fairness. These themes are discussed next.

#### **Research and Science**

A major theme regarded how participants would reference science and research data. This theme had a number of important implications as it not only affected their views on suicide contagion, but also appeared to influence how suicide is reported. Participants held conflicting views on research results, where it was either seen as flawed and inconclusive or was conversely used as solid evidence to support their own viewpoint. Selective use of research evidence reflected their beliefs that suicide contagion may not exist or that its evidence is controversial. Participants achieved this by systematically highlighting perceived research flaws and biases. However, participants' views on contagion research were

inconsistent and demonstrated a degree of confirmatory bias, as participants used “favourable” research conclusions to advocate that contagion may not exist or that its effects are minimal.

The strong and pervasive criticisms towards contagion research suggest that participants seek a high threshold of contagion proof. This is likely to reflect the consequences that contagion evidence has had on industry, where suicide contagion has been used to justify the application of external media initiatives (reporting guidelines) and suicide reporting restrictions (the Coroners Act). As a result, suicide contagion research was viewed as a threat to media freedom; a foundational media principle (Bollinger, 2010). Despite being well meaning, it appears that these unfavourable consequences have fuelled negative participant perceptions of contagion evidence. As a result, participants desired obvious and direct evidence proof to justify why media freedom is being impinged. However, the complexities surrounding contagion accompanied with research reliance on correlational and large scale ecological experimental designs means that this level of evidence is difficult to establish.

It appears the function of arguments relating to research standards and bias is multiple. Firstly, it allows participants to distance suicide reporting from public harm, where contagion is not something to be worried about. This legitimatises suicide reporting and allows suicide to be treated like other less controversial newsworthy events and means media professionals are not required to change their reporting practices. Therefore, suicide reporting initiatives such as reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act are positioned as unnecessary.

Participants’ negative perception of contagion evidence shares similarities with Tully and Elsaka (2004), who reported that the New Zealand media was resistant to the concept of suicide contagion. The current study revealed that despite advances in research and time participants maintained this view. In addition, identified scepticism towards contagion evidence appears similar to Jamieson et al.’s (2003) findings that USA print journalists were only loosely aware of the concept and had a poor understanding of suicide contagion. Consequently this is likely to increase the times that participants may misinterpret or hold incorrect assumptions about suicide contagion.

The frequent referencing of research results could suggest that participants were well informed about the topic. However, their unconventional research views, which opposed the conclusions and rationale of many independently published international studies, may further suggest that participant understanding of suicide contagion is limited. As a result, similar to

Jamieson et al. (2003), this appears to have affected participants' research understandings. Participant difficulties in understanding suicide contagion are likely to stem from barriers understanding the intricacies of scientific data, where participants are media professionals and not social scientists.

Participant criticisms of contagion research may also reflect their desire to believe that their daily reporting does not harm readers. As a result, it is likely that participants are automatically primed to negatively interpret and oppose any research conclusions supporting suicide contagion. This interpretation is supported by subsequent arguments which noted that, even if contagion existed, suicide reporting benefits greatly outweigh any negatives. Negative views of contagion evidence is problematic as participants with this view are unlikely to adopt strategies designed prevent contagion such as suicide reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act, particularly if these initiatives are seen as a threat to media independence; which participants argued was also the case. Indeed this was the heart to which participants based their work on, and appears to overshadow contagion research, which they viewed as inconclusive. This suggests that participants' industry moral responsibilities to remain independent are a key suicide reporting consideration.

Participant negative views of contagion evidence were evident in the manner to which suicide was reported. The article analysis demonstrated that throughout both timeframes, suicide articles routinely contained numerous elements that contribute to suicide contagion, such as suicide method and sensational headlines. However, if participants firmly believed suicide contagion evidence was robust and inappropriate reporting was linked to contagion, then it would be expected that concerns for reader wellbeing would mean these same article elements would be absent or rare and that reporting quality would be to a high standard.

Arguments that contagion evidence is inconclusive are likely to continue to be a barrier for participants accepting or neutrally evaluating contagion evidence. These findings demonstrate that it is important for those involved in suicide reporting to receive education surrounding suicide contagion from qualified professionals. Increased participant knowledge of contagion may reduce misconceptions surrounding contagion and subsequently reduce participant opposition. Such education should not only describe elements that are expected to elicit contagion, but must also examine the suicide contagion research evidence.

### **Media Relevance**

Participant arguments relating to media relevance minimised newspapers' relevance in today's society and consequently dismissed the industry's ability to influence their readers.

Therefore, even if suicide contagion was to meet participant evidence thresholds, it was argued that newspapers are not relevant to contagion and subsequently not a concern. To achieve this, participants argued that vulnerable groups such as teenagers are not exposed to newspapers. It appears the function of this argument is to further distance newspaper reporting from suicide contagion. It is also likely to undercut the hypothesised causal link between what participants write and the effects this may have on the vulnerable. Participants are then unlikely to view suicide contagion as a concern and will be reluctant to change their reporting practices.

Participants also questioned the relevance of media restrictions in modern society. As a result, not only is the newspaper industry's ability to produce contagion seen as obsolete, but strategies designed to decrease contagion were framed as outdated. This may allow media personnel to treat suicide like any other topic and removes media responsibility to alter current reporting practices and may also decrease the level of concern regarding suicide prevention initiatives. This means participants would be less likely to view suicide reporting guidelines or the Coroners Act as useful. Consequently, media personnel are unlikely to adopt these initiatives.

Again, the analysis of articles supported participant comments that elements known to contribute to suicide contagion were routinely included in suicide articles. However, if participants firmly believed that newspapers do contribute to contagion and reporting initiatives designed to prevent contagion are still relevant, then it would be expected that elements known to contribute to contagion would be rare and that reporting initiatives would be viewed more favourably.

While participants argued that newspapers have little audience negative impact, they simultaneously argued that suicide reporting was highly relevant as it was associated with powerful positive consequences. This appears to be a contradiction. Participants used this argument to strongly advocate that suicide reporting can save lives by educating the public about suicide warning signs, reduce the stigma surrounding suicide and promote help-seeking behaviours. The denial of the empirically well-established negative influences while promoting uncertain benefits demonstrates a degree of confirmation bias. It appears this is likely to reflect participants' reluctance to accept reporting risks and preference to view their reporting as beneficial. In addition, the minimisation of newspapers' ability to elicit contagion further appears to shift responsibility for contagion onto other domains outside the media industry's control.

Participant claims that suicide reporting has positive reader benefits appears to conflict with some Study One results. Specifically, participants argued that suicide reporting can encourage help-seeking behaviour. However, this was not a focus of published suicide articles. The article analysis revealed it was rare for suicide articles to contain explicit messages (such as referral agencies) that are designed to prevent or decrease the public's risk of suicide. As a result, promoting help seeking behaviour does not appear to be a significant focus of suicide reporting. Similarly, articles continued to simplify the causes of suicide and report atypical suicides. Collectively, these articles may undermine an articles' educational value as they create a false image that the causes of suicide are simplistic. As a result, such articles are unlikely to educate the public of other important risk factors. Furthermore, participants noted that suicide reporting would increase reader awareness of the important role mental illness plays in suicide. However, this again appeared to conflict with the article analysis, where mental illness was reported in only one-fifth of articles, suggesting educating the public of the role mental illness plays in suicide is not a primary concern.

### **Ethics and Morals**

Participants spoke at length about the ethics and morals involved in suicide reporting and framed suicide reporting as a topic given care and is consequently reported appropriately. Participants would use discussions of ethics and morals to legitimise suicide as a topic of publication. This was achieved by arguing that suicide reporting is a key method of informing the public of important social issues. In addition, participants argued they were aware of the sensitivities and high stakes surrounding suicide reporting and concerns for these factors ensured participants were highly motivated to report suicide appropriately. This argument was important as it appears to contradict previous arguments dismissing the negative reporting consequences. Although a contradiction, it appears the function of both of these arguments is similar; to demonstrate that suicide reporting is unlikely to harm readers. However, it could also reflect participant attempts to position themselves as being professionally responsible.

Participants advocated that they viewed suicide as a sensitive subject that the media wanted to report ethically. Although participants had little concern of suicide contagion, participants noted suicide still possessed features that required important consideration and self-censorship. Such trepidations included concerns for audience appetite of suicide material, concerns for grieving families, and reflections as to whether particular information was important or necessary. For example, participants noted that there was a desire to sensibly report suicide method and that internal industry pressures (instead of external pressures)

often prevented participants from publishing these details. This demonstrates that, although participants did not adopt suicide reporting guidelines, they do alter and censor their suicide reporting. As participants reported that guidelines were not applied to suicide reporting, identified reporting improvements in 1997 and 2009 may therefore reflect a growing desire of journalists and editors to censor suicide reporting through professional self-monitoring.

Interestingly, participants' discussions of self-censorship appeared consistent with features of reporting guidelines, such as avoiding graphic details and descriptions of method. However, the article analysis demonstrated that the reporting of these article elements can still greatly improve. Furthermore, participants appeared to prioritise the desires of bereaved who want their story told, while overlooking the wishes of those who do not want their experiences made public. These findings are important as they demonstrate that participants want to view their reporting of suicide as ethical and shows that the media personnel can change their reporting practices. In addition, the desire to report ethically could be used in an attempt to increase industry receptivity and adherence to suicide guidelines.

Participants also argued that their knowledge of what is appropriate and inappropriate to report means suicide reporting initiatives are redundant. As a result, knowledge of suicide and important issues surrounding suicide is all that is needed to ensure appropriate reporting. However, this argument assumes that all media personnel have an extensive knowledgeable base as to how suicide should be reported. In reality this is unlikely to be the case. In addition, participants indicated that they desired to include article elements known to contribute to contagion. Such elements include descriptions of the bereaved, dramatic stories and promoting reader identification. The article analysis confirmed that these elements are routinely reported, which suggests that participants do not have adequate knowledge to report on suicide in a manner which will minimise contagious elements. Given this argument that journalists rely on their reporting knowledge, it appears inconsistent that participants strongly opposed reporting guidelines; an instrument effectively designed to increase industry knowledge of important suicide reporting considerations.

This negative attitude may reflect the initial guideline development process, where guidelines were imposed on the industry without any consultation. Many studies have demonstrated that externally imposed initiatives are problematic as they are typically associated in less industry buy-in and ownership than something that is internally developed (Forsyth, 2006; Johnson & Needham, 2014). Although the current incarnation of reporting guidelines were redeveloped with industry input, the negative guideline developmental history combined with the fact the guidelines have essentially remained unchanged is likely to reduce any industry

buy-in. In order to further improve guideline adherence the industry is likely to benefit from reminders of the purpose of the guidelines; to protect readers (Hirsh, Delehant, & Sparks, 1994). This may then allow the guidelines to be viewed as a positive tool to promote appropriate suicide reporting and not necessarily a barrier to media freedom. In addition, to increase the relevance and meaning of the guidelines, they may benefit by being tailored to each media domain, such as a specific guideline for print media, television and radio. This is likely to be beneficial as research has shown that fitting regulations to specific groups increases their adherence (Johnson, & Frank, 2002). Furthermore, research evidence demonstrates that guideline adherence is likely to be increased through ongoing monitoring of reporting practices (Johnson & Needham, 2014). Without this monitoring it is likely to result in an environment where it is appropriate to dismiss the guidelines and they become viewed as unimportant or “toothless”. Therefore, in order to increase industry ownership of the guidelines as well as to build on participants’ desires to be ethical, it is recommended that each newspaper periodically evaluates their adherence to the guidelines. This could be achieved by reviewing a random sample of suicide articles once or twice a year.

The article analysis also revealed a significant mismatch between what participants said they reported to what was actually published by the wider industry. As discussed, participants reported that reporting ethical and moral stories was a key priority. However, the article analysis demonstrated that the newspaper industry would regularly report details that participants stated they themselves would not publish. In particular, participants reported they would not report details such as suicide method, location or glorify suicide. This suggests that either participants were trying to convey themselves in a more positive light or that they themselves were not fully aware of how the wider industry reports upon suicide. Therefore, the participants may benefit from learning about their suicide reporting strengths and weaknesses. However, this cannot be the primary target of any reporting initiatives as participants identified that the tendency to distance the industry from contagion is likely to reduce any motivation to change their reporting practices.

Participant discussions of ethics and morals was important as it revealed how participants would balance their desire to be ethical with the often opposing need to write interesting stories and maximise profits. This demonstrates that participants were required to walk a fine line between being responsible and yet still demonstrating the freedom of the press. Participants argued that in order to create interesting stories they would focus on unusual suicides, create a personalised story and focus on reactions of the bereaved. These descriptions were supported by the article analysis which demonstrated that creating interesting articles was a dominant article feature.



Participants appeared relatively open about their desire to report interesting stories that will appeal to readers. However, participants argued the strong desire to report interesting stories did not conflict with ethical reporting. Participants' stated that readers have little appetite for inappropriate reporting styles and therefore encourage the media organisations to report ethically. This argument shifts a lot of responsibility for article content onto readers. However, it appears unlikely that readers are the most appropriate source to control and regulate reporting practices, particularly as this strategy is reactive, relying on readers being exposed to contagious or inappropriate material before future reporting can change. In addition, despite participant counterarguments, readers are more likely to read sensational stories. Therefore relying on reader reaction appears more likely to contribute to more sensational reporting and echoes of mob mentality (Gustafsson & Weibull, 1997), and consequently increased contagious elements. However, the article analysis suggests that this argument may have some merits as the presence of sensational article elements in 2009 had decreased. Although, as sensational article elements are still routinely reported, relying on reader reaction does not appear an effective strategy to ensure appropriate reporting of suicide.

Participants' arguments surrounding ethics revealed they believed that their reporting was to a high standard. As a result, this meant that participants would have little motivation to adhere to additional reporting initiatives designed to improve reporting quality. In addition, participants did not perceive the need to write interesting stories as something that conflicts with ethical reporting; indeed, participants argued it ensured ethical reporting. However, a comparison with the article analysis results reveals that the standard of suicide reporting can still significantly improve and that focusing on creating dramatic and interesting stories does not appear to be associated with improved reporting quality.

### **Power and Fairness**

Participant discussions of suicide reporting revealed they were acutely aware of the external influences on suicide reporting and believed the media industry is being unfairly treated. Therefore, participants argued against external suicide reporting initiatives. Given participants' negative view of contagion evidence and their belief that they are currently reporting suicide ethically, it is not surprising that participants had little knowledge and awareness of current reporting guidelines. This reveals that despite being endorsed by the industry, these guidelines were seen as pointless and were not referred to. Participant avoidance of suicide reporting guidelines appears supported by the article analysis, as although there was a decrease in suicide reporting features (pre-guideline development

versus post guideline development), these improvements were not consistent with the level of improvements found in overseas research (Bohanna & Wang., 2012; Michel et al., 2000; Pirkis et al., 2009).

In addition, participants systematically argue that existing guidelines are not only unnecessary, but were a threat to media freedom and autonomy. This is a key argument, as the recent French Charlie Hebdo shootings related to the publication of images of Muhammad have shown that media freedom is a fundamental principle for which people are willing to die (Cormack & Sier, 2015). As media freedom is linked to many fundamental elements of western society, it is likely that media personnel would be resistant to any externally applied initiatives designed to curb or censor media reporting practices. It is to be expected that even well evidenced guidelines may be viewed negatively as they may set precedence for future censorship. As a result, it appears if any initiatives designed to alter media reporting are to be applied, participants want irrefutable local research justifying why the media's freedom has been impinged. However, as noted the complex nature of contagion means that it is unlikely that such evidence can be demonstrated. Participant perceptions that guidelines represent a barrier to press independence and freedom is likely to remain an obstacle. Therefore, in order to decrease this threat, it is important that educational initiatives stress the voluntary nature of the guidelines, which each journalist decides to apply on a case-by-case basis. Increasing industry knowledge that guideline adherence is voluntary may ease participant concerns that it is a threat to media freedom.

Current results demonstrating concerns that guidelines impinge media freedom appears unique to New Zealand, as a range of international studies have demonstrated that media guidelines have resulted in little industry opposition (Michel et al., 2000; Cheng et al., 2014). The current findings provide validity to concerns raised by Pirkis, Blood, et al (2006) and Pirkis, Burgess, et al (2006), who noted that as soon as the guidelines are seen as a threat to media independence, they may be contested and ignored. The current level of opposition was not entirely unexpected, as within New Zealand Tully and Elsaka (2004) similarly found that the media viewed suicide guidelines as a serious threat to the freedom of the press and right to self-regulation (NZPC, 2001, 2005). This is also consistent with Collings and Kemp (2010) who found New Zealand media personnel framed the guidelines as an attack on public and media autonomy. However, both of these previous findings reflect a period when the media industry declined to endorse media guidelines. Conversely the current results are important as they demonstrate that despite endorsement of guidelines, media attitudes and acceptance have not changed. In addition, participants' strong arguments against reporting guidelines not only suggest that media do not view the guidelines as useful, but that the

media do not believe that adhering to the guidelines will result in real life saving benefits. This is consistent with participants' reported attitudes towards contagion, where the media are sceptical as to whether contagion is a real established phenomenon. As a result, instead of viewing the guidelines as a helpful resource designed to prevent suicide, guidelines are seen as an unnecessary and ineffective barrier to publishing suicide stories.

Despite openly and sometimes proudly ignoring suicide reporting guidelines, participants reported that they still maintained high ethical standards and did not place their readers at undue risk. This was demonstrated by participants outlining that the media was already averse to reporting distasteful accounts of suicide, adhered to their own internal guidelines, were sensitive to the victims and the bereaved, believed they were considerate to their readers and local research demonstrated that they reported suicide appropriately. This demonstrates that although participants do not adhere to the guidelines they still see their reporting as ethical.

Pirkis' (2010) reply to Collings and Kemp's (2010) study discussed the importance of getting suicide prevention experts to work closely with media professionals to develop guidelines. Pirkis claimed that the lack of any industry input is likely to diminish industry ownership resulting in guidelines being ignored and viewed as problematic. The current study demonstrates this is not necessarily the case. Although participants acknowledged the initial guideline development without industry consultation has shaped current negative attitudes, the subsequent guideline redevelopment with industry input and continued participant reluctance to apply the guidelines suggests other factors are also playing a role. This provides further credence to the likelihood that negative participant attitudes of contagion evidence underlie the lack of guideline adherence. Therefore, in order to increase industry adherence to guidelines it is important to resolve participant scepticism towards suicide contagion. This reiterates the importance that participant concerns regarding contagion evidence need to be addressed.

It is important to note that participants' strong resistance to suicide guidelines appears relatively unique. Repeated international studies have demonstrated that suicide guidelines have been successfully adapted and applied in countries such as Austria (Kuess & Hatzinger, 1989), Australia (Pirkis et al., 2009), and Hong Kong (Cheng et al., 2014). The strength to which participants argued against something they acknowledged they knew little about suggests that in addition to their concerns regarding contagion other factors may also play a role. It is likely that the industry's 13 year opposition to suicide guidelines created a lasting culture where media personnel are opposed to any non-industry initiatives. This is an

extension of a number of studies that recommended that media consultation and interaction is needed to build guideline ownership and investment (Hawton & William, 2001; Martin, 2004; Michel et al., 2000; Pirkis, 2010; Tully & Elsaka, 2004).

An alternative explanation of the lack of guideline adherence may reflect the presence of the Coroners Act. In many international studies where suicide guidelines have been successfully adapted, guideline adherence may reflect concerns that if the industry does not accept voluntary guidelines legal restrictions may be imposed. As a result, overseas journalists may have additional motivation to adhere to guidelines. However, in New Zealand suicide legislation actually predates guideline implementation and this may consequently reduce any industry motivation to adhere to further initiatives designed to alter suicide reporting.

It is also important to note that media personnel in the present study generally knew little about the suicide reporting guidelines. This was particularly unexpected as prior to the interviews participants were aware that guidelines were a topic of discussion and the interviews occurred three to seven months following the industry endorsement of the new guidelines. Following the implementation of training and dissemination of resources associated with new initiatives, it would be expected that journalists and editors would have knowledge of these initiatives. Collectively these findings demonstrate that the media endorsement of guidelines has done little to change media reporting practices and reporting guidelines remain ignored and unknown.

Media education surrounding the importance of the guidelines may help improve the use of suicide guidelines. Such education should allow media personnel to make more informed decisions as to whether to use or not use reporting guidelines. In addition, as participants' believed their reporting was already ethical and of a high standard, such education should elaborate on this point by highlighting the real world implications of adhering to the guidelines. In addition, it is important to consider there could be a problem within the guidelines, where despite media input, the suicide guidelines have effectively remained the same. As a result, this may have greatly reduced the industry's sense of buy-in to the guidelines. However, rewriting the guidelines for the fourth time may reinforce the image that contagion is a controversial issue and repeated reissuing of the guidelines may further discourage staff from applying them.

Consistent with their views of suicide reporting guidelines, participants similarly opposed the Coroners Act. Participants' labelling of the Coroners Act as a threat to media freedom was an extension of the previous argument made against suicide reporting guidelines. However,

unlike guidelines which are voluntary, the Coroners Act represents legislation designed to prohibit the publication of specific suicide details. As a result, participants reported the Act was too limiting and the decision making should remain with media personnel. This positions the media as the people who know what is best. Participants additionally undermined the Coroners Act by noting flaws with how the Act was applied, its relevance, and reporting that audience reaction is more important than the Coroners Act. It is expected the strong media resistance to the Coroners Act reflects the culture that holds freedom of the press as utmost importance. It is likely this media culture automatically primed and predisposed participants to resist this Act (Bollinger, 2010). Again, a view that contagion evidence is contestable is expected to further encourage participants to view the Act as unnecessary.

Participants generally argued that despite being unpopular, participants adhered to the Coroners Act. Unlike suicide guidelines, participants had a good working knowledge of the Coroners Act. This supports participant statements that the Act directly influenced how suicide was reported and underlies the importance of being legally compliant. However, the article analysis demonstrated that similar to the guidelines, the Coroners Act was routinely ignored. As a result, it appears that despite participant comments to the contrary, media personnel are willing to regularly breach the Coroners Act. This suggests that participant views that the Coroners Act is problematic and restrictive has resulted in the Coroners Act being frequently ignored or manipulated and taken to the extent that they can breach the Act and not get penalised. Therefore, it does not appear that media personnel are concerned about the consequences of breaching the Coroners Act. This may reflect that the Coroners Act has never been tested in law and consequently may lack real world consequences (Hollings, 2010). As a result, it is expected that the recent changes of the Coroners Act (prohibiting publication of suicide location details and legalising publication of suspected suicides) will have little influence on media reporting of suicide (Jones, 2016).

In addition, many participants acknowledged an increased tendency to test the power of the Coroners Act by using various methods to circumvent the Act, such as using codes to refer to suicide such as “no suspicious circumstances” and referring to suicides as suspected suicides; a point which the article analysis validated. This suggests that breaches may become increasingly common. However, some participants appeared to have accepted the Coroners Act where they note that it has little reporting impact as it does not interfere with their writing. This could imply the Coroners Act is frequently ignored or that participants had no desire to write details the Act prohibits. A review of the article analysis suggests it is the latter, as if the Coroners Act was consistently adhered to there should be no method details and suicide or suspected suicide would not be reported until after the Coroner has released

their findings, which typically takes nine months (Coronial Services of New Zealand, 2014). As a result, it appears recent changes to the Coroners Act enabling the media to write about suspected suicides will have little impact as this is something that the media are already routinely reporting upon (Jones, 2016).

It is likely the industry competitive forces are further barriers to suicide reporting initiatives. These forces encourage media personnel to deliver interesting and dramatic stories within a short time frame. Therefore, it is likely these internal industry pressures will result in a general unwillingness to adopt suicide initiatives that may limit reporting. In addition participants appear to have a strong belief in editorial independence, so much that they are willing to potentially jeopardise public health to support these views. Particularly as participants perceived suicide contagion evidence as contestable.

It was interesting to note that, despite opposition, some participants acknowledged the Coroners Act may be required to protect readers from rogue suicide reporting by ensuring suicide was reported ethically. Such arguments positioned participants as reporting ethically and not needing reporting guidelines but suggests “others” may require monitoring. This was an important point as it was the first time participants acknowledged the possibility that there could be some inappropriate reporting of suicide. Participants holding this view acknowledged that not all journalists may hold the same high ethical standards as them. As a result, despite their opposition towards the Act, some participants believed the potential positives outweighed the known negatives. This demonstrates that some media personnel are willing to tolerate industry constraints, as long as the constraints ensure the delicate topic of suicide is ethically reported and that readers are protected. It appears that linking suicide reporting initiatives to readers’ safety is important, as this appeared to encourage some participants to yield to “unpopular” media censorship. Health professionals need to build on this logic to positively frame reporting controls to encourage media personnel to adopt suicide initiatives.

Study Two demonstrates an insight into journalist and media experience of suicide reporting. The findings revealed that suicide reporting is unlike any other reporting and the media face a range of unique challenges. Despite recent media endorsement of reporting guidelines, the media continue to avoid using these guidelines. It appears the media’s current negative perception of suicide contagion evidence has had several important consequences. These have negatively influenced how the media regard suicide prevention initiatives designed to reduce contagion, such as the suicide reporting guidelines and the Coroners Act. In addition, the long developmental history of reporting guidelines characterised by industry opposition is

likely to have increased their reluctance to adopt and apply reporting guidelines. Although the media did not adopt reporting practices designed to protect the public, the media firmly asserted their reporting of suicide was responsible and was not inappropriate and therefore did not place their audience at risk.

These results demonstrate that getting participants to adhere to suicide guidelines is not as simple as obtaining industry endorsement. It appears the media not only need to understand the importance of initiatives, but also need to know that these initiatives are based on sound evidence. They also need to have a collaborative relationship between themselves and government policy makers. It appears without these factors there is an increased risk that the media will believe their current practices are sufficient and that they will be less likely to willingly apply external suicide prevention recommendations such as the guidelines, particularly if they could be perceived as a threat to media freedom. In addition, participants argue that their reporting is highly ethical and references to “others” that require monitoring positions journalists above the law.

### **General Discussion**

This thesis provided valuable insight into the reporting of suicide within New Zealand. At first glance, Study One results suggest newspapers are primarily concerned with constructing interesting articles, thereby increasing readership and maximising business profits. This was evident by suicide articles regularly containing sensational elements, focusing on the victim, providing descriptions of suicide method, and focusing on more dramatic and lethal suicides. However, participant interviews revealed that suicide reporting is not that simplistic, where participants are required to balance many different, often conflicting pressures and tensions, factors which are unlikely to be directly observable through solely analysing published articles. In particular, participants highlighted demands of being ethical, reporting interesting stories, maintaining industry autonomy, adhering to external restrictions, being responsive to contagion research, being aware of reader impact, daily reporting pressures, and the desire to be treated fairly. Collectively, these results demonstrate that while media personnel consider different demands, the desire to write interesting articles appears most evident in completed articles. Unfortunately, the close connection between many contagion elements with interesting stories has meant that many suicide contagion elements are still routinely reported.

This thesis further demonstrated that there was a discrepancy between what participants said they reported and what the wider industry actually reported. Participants in Study Two reported several details such as focusing on the suicide victim and possessing no desire to

report suicide method. However, the article analysis revealed that method details were present in 40 per cent of articles, and that the circumstance of the suicide was the article's main focus. This demonstrates that the media are not reliable narrators of their own reporting practices. This may reflect an attempt to convey their reporting practices in a more positive light, or it may reflect that the print media hold incorrect assumptions about how suicide is reported in New Zealand. It appears unlikely that the media are deliberately presenting themselves in a positive light as prior to the interviews they were aware previous articles had been analysed. If the latter point is true these misconceptions could be a barrier to improving suicide reporting quality.

As a result, it appears likely that the media would benefit from initiatives designed to demonstrate how suicide is actually reported. To increase industry buy-in, such initiatives should be led by appropriately trained media personnel (Johnson & Needham, 2014). This training should be delivered to all individuals who may be involved in suicide reporting such as editors and relevant journalists. Such training should address identified reporting strengths and weakness (from both research evidence and from internal quality reviews), should address the complexities of suicide contagion and contagion evidence, and explore how different forms of suicide reporting may have protective or harmful reader consequences. Furthermore, in order to keep the topic and reporting concerns fresh and relevant, participants are likely to benefit from attending ongoing refresher courses (Hirsh et al., 1994).

It is also important to note that experienced journalists had slightly different perspectives than more junior participants. In particular, experienced participants were more aware of business needs to write interesting stories and sell papers. Conversely, less experienced participants believed that the industry's reporting of suicide was ethical. As a result, initiatives designed to improve suicide reporting may need to target and address these differences such as informing experienced participants on how to write interesting suicide stories while simultaneously minimising opportunities for suicide contagion.

Study One results not only reflect how New Zealand newspapers portray suicide, but the findings may also be generalised and applied to mainstream New Zealand news internet sites, as all the articles analysed in 2009 are also available through each newspaper's respective online news website. However, the generalisation to online news sites is limited as online news contains additional news items from other news domains, such as television and exclusively online news websites. Although the narrow scope of this study allowed a greater level of analysis of all suicide newspaper items, it also meant that the analysis was



restricted to newspapers. As a result, one notable limitation of the article analysis was that other important news domains such as internet, television and radio were not included in the analysis. While newspapers are the news domain which most heavily contribute to suicide contagion (Niederkrötenhaler & Sonneck, 2009; Stack 2000, 2003), the rising pervasiveness of the internet, combined with online regulatory obstacles, reinforces that it is particularly important that future studies include an analysis of online suicide material. As a result, future studies could investigate online news sites and online domains such as internet blogs or forums where vulnerable individuals are likely to be exposed to suicide material. This is particularly important as the influence of suicide contagion in these domains remains relatively unexplored.

An important strength of the article analysis is the extensive analysis of all identified suicide articles, compared with previous studies where the qualitative analysis was limited to a subset of articles. This helped provide an accurate image of suicide reporting across both the years investigated. A further strength was the time comparisons between suicide reporting in 1997 and 2009. This comparison provided a valuable insight into how suicide reporting has changed and identified key reporting weaknesses that are likely to contribute to contagion. Furthermore, the combination of descriptive statistics with qualitative data was complementary, drawing together the strengths of both approaches and minimising their weaknesses (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In addition, the mixed method design helps to enhance the internal and external validity via triangulation (providing corroborating evidence for conclusions) (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2004). Compared to either method alone, a mixed method design provides a better understanding of research information and additional depth to the analysed studies (Gehart et al., 2001).

The article analysis provided valuable insight into newspaper reporting of suicide within New Zealand. Throughout the analysed periods the continued presence of article features known to contribute to suicide contagion suggests that protecting readers through reducing an article's ability to elicit contagion is not a primary concern. Instead, the results demonstrate that creating interesting stories is of primary importance. As a result, suicide articles contain various elements appealing to reader interest, such as sensational headlines, and reporting of method. However, participant interviews reveal that although reader interest is a highly salient aspect of suicide articles, interviewed journalists consider a variety of other factors.

One potential limit of the article analysis was that following the analysed period, suicide reporting guidelines had been revised and endorsed by the media industry. This raised questions as to whether identified reporting practices had changed. However, participant

interviews demonstrated that the endorsement of guidelines is unlikely to have altered reporting as participants stated they were not applied. Instead, participants reported that their reporting practices were of high quality and guidelines were unnecessary. Interestingly, participants were very sceptical of contagion evidence, and this appears to have undermined participant motivation and need to apply the guidelines. These findings demonstrate that there is a need for suicide reporting guidelines, where industry adherence to guidelines would improve reporting practices and opportunities for contagion. However, these findings further reveal that in order to obtain journalist application of the guidelines, gaining industry endorsement and revising the guidelines with industry input is not always enough. Instead, this thesis identified that journalist motivational barriers to applying the guidelines must also be resolved. Therefore, reducing media suspicions towards contagion should reduce resistance by demonstrating that reporting guidelines do serve an important role in suicide prevention. Increased industry knowledge of contagion will reduce participant misconceptions and may reduce barriers by demonstrating why complexities surrounding contagion means that irrefutable proof is difficult to establish. Furthermore, initiatives should build upon and appeal to participant desire to be ethical; consequently, the industry could benefit from guideline application and guideline adherence being framed as best ethical practice. Then to reduce participants' perceptions that guidelines are a threat to media freedom, the voluntary nature of the guidelines needs to be reinforced; as guidelines are not concrete rules with consequences it is ultimately journalists and editors who decide what is reported and how it is reported.

A key strength of Study Two was that participants came from a diverse range of roles from chief editor to field reporter. This meant that opinions expressed in this study reflect a variety of newspaper positions and roles. Furthermore, participants' willingness to make controversial statements suggests that they were relaxed and comfortable and provided an honest indication of their perspectives on suicide reporting and were not merely trying to present the industry in the best possible light. A further important strength of this study was that participant interviews were terminated once participants' responses were discovered to be very similar and homogenised; this suggests that results could be generalised to the print media, as views expressed by participants may reflect wider industry attitudes and knowledge.

Throughout Study Two participants were not aware of Study One results. This was done to ensure participant responses were not distorted. However, given that participants systemically argued against unfavourable research and desired additional New Zealand research, it would have been interesting to see how participants would have responded to

Study One data. Specifically, would participants be receptive or critical to this current study or would it have resulted in any changes in opinion? This is an area that future studies could look at investigating.

Study One explored suicide reporting and identified messages sent to the public. Study Two went “behind the scenes” to explore media perspectives and practices of suicide reporting. It appears logical that future research should investigate how the audience negotiate and make sense of suicide articles. It would be of particular interest to explore perceptions of vulnerable readers and individuals who had attempted suicide. Exploring the audiences’ capacity to interpret or misinterpret media messages would provide a valuable insight into the mechanisms of contagion and how exposure to reported suicides has influenced them. Such an analysis may identify unknown contagious elements and provide a personalised account of the contagious process. Furthermore, an exploration of vulnerable audience members may answer questions surrounding whether these individuals actively seek out suicide stimuli, and allow the exploration of methods that could protect or “vaccinate” the individuals from contagion.

It would also be important to establish the presence of media suicide contagion in New Zealand, where suicide media has been linked to rises in actual suicide rates. Not only would this help remove one barrier to guideline application, but such research could help identify important characteristics of individuals who are vulnerable to contagion, such as identifying ethnicity and social economic risk factors. Investigations like these could potentially enable researchers to identify and prevent suicides among individuals most at risk of contagion. Future research should also not be limited to “pure” suicide stories, where given the rising frequencies of high school mass shootings within the United States (Mcdowell, 2013), it would be particularly important to investigate how media contagion may influence this behaviour. Research into this topic would provide valuable insight and understanding into this relatively new phenomenon and may help decrease their frequency. There is likely to be a large degree of overlap in the similarities of the contagious processes, where media portrayals of these events are likely to be paralleled. However, not only do these events occur at different frequencies but coverage of mass shootings is likely to be associated with different levels of publicity, different portrayals of the deceased and different levels of community reaction. This suggests that there may be slight variations in the way contagion operates.

Future research should also investigate the suicide reporting experiences of media personnel from a wider range of media domains. Such investigations should include other

domains of internet, television and radio. Inclusion of this information will supplement the current study by identifying important information and experiences that may only relate to specific domains. For example the permanent, detailed and physical nature of newspaper reporting may result in difficulties or reporting concerns that are not present in other domains, particularly radio broadcasts which tend to be brief and temporary.

Climbing rates of international suicide reinforces the importance of increasing our understanding of suicide. Obtaining greater insight into causative factors is important as this will help improve suicide prevention strategies. This thesis has explored suicide reporting in New Zealand newspapers and analysed the content of suicide articles and media experiences and practices of suicide reporting. As a result, this thesis not only identified important areas where suicide reporting practices can be improved, but further identified key reporting barriers that need to be overcome. This thesis has begun to further clarify suicide contagion and has demonstrated that small changes in journalistic practices can play an important role in suicide prevention. This thesis has shown that simply endorsing media guidelines has not been enough to improve reporting practices to the recommended standard and that an analysis of published suicide articles suggests the industry is driven by creating interesting stories. However, interviews with the media revealed that suicide is not so simplistic where media personnel consider a wide range of issues before publishing a suicide article. In particular, participants believed their reporting was ethical and they would invalidate contagion research evidence that does not support their position.

This thesis has been highly valuable as not only has it been able to identify areas of reporting that are likely to contribute to suicide contagion, but it has been able to go the next step in identifying barriers to changing current suicide reporting practices. As a result, this thesis can provide an important framework to reduce suicide rates by reducing incidents of suicide contagion and promoting positive contagion effects such as increasing help-seeking behaviours.

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# APPENDICES

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MASSEY UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES  
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
TE KURA PŪKENGĀ TANGATA

# Suicide Contagion and Role of the Media

## INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

### Who is doing this research?

My name is Craig Colhoun and I am a Massey University student in the School of Psychology (Manawatu Campus) conducting this research as part of my Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. My primary supervisor for this project is Dr Keith Tuffin, an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology at Massey University.

### What is this study about?

The study explores how newspapers portray suicide, and how the implementation of suicide media guidelines has affected suicide writing. The project builds on previous research by exploring journalist culture, values and practice surrounding the reporting of suicide.

### What does this study involve?

Participants will either be New Zealand newspaper editors or journalists that have had some experience reporting either local or international suicide. You will be invited to attend an interview with the researcher which will explore the reporting of suicide, including standards applied when writing about suicide, barriers to writing about suicide, and the personal impact of reporting on suicide. Any questions asked will be to prompt you telling your story, rather than to gather specific information. The interview will be audio-recorded and will take approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be at a time and a place that suits you. It is important that participants are comfortable discussing the topic of suicide.

If any emotional distress arises from the interview please contact Lifeline on 0800 543 354.

### What can I expect from the researcher?

At any time, you have the right to decline to participate in this study. If you agree to participate in this study, you have the right to:

- Refuse to talk about any issue(s) during the interview, without any explanation.
- Withdraw from the interview at anytime.
- Ask for the audio recorder to be turned off at any stage during the interview.
- Have any personal identifying information removed from interview transcripts.
- Review your interview transcript before any data is coded.
- Your participation will remain confidential, and your information will only be shown to the participant and the researcher's supervisor.

**Thank you** for taking the time to read this Information Sheet and find out more about the study. If you have additional questions about participation, please contact me at [craig\\_colhoun@hotmail.com](mailto:craig_colhoun@hotmail.com) for more information, or the supervisor Dr Keith Tuffin at [K.Tuffin@massey.ac.nz](mailto:K.Tuffin@massey.ac.nz).



## Appendix B



MASSEY UNIVERSITY  
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AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
TE KURA PŪKĒNGA TANGATA

### Suicide Contagion and Role of the Media

#### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

I understand that my privacy will be protected throughout this study. I have the right to decline to answer any particular question, to withdraw from the study during the interview and during any part of the interview process.

I agree to provide my information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission and any personal information will be deleted or disguised.

I agree to parts of the interview being used in the researcher's thesis or articles based on the thesis, provided I cannot be identified by these.

I agree to the interview being audio-recorded and that the researcher will use this information for his study. I understand I have the right to ask the audio-recorder be turned off at any time during the interview.

I understand that I will receive a copy of the transcript for me to check and edit, and that I will receive a summary of the research findings at completion.

I understand that upon completion of the research I can choose what happens to my audio-recording and transcript. I choose the following (*please circle one*)

- To have my recordings returned to me.
- To have the researcher destroy the recordings
- To have data placed in an official archive.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name - printed \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview Schedule

### STAGE ONE

#### Introductions

Purpose of study and interview

Reiterate participant rights

- To withdraw at any time
- To have audio-recorder turned off at any time
- To decline to answer any question
- To read and edit their final transcript of the interview
- To have anonymity and privacy

Highlight there are no right or wrong answers

### STAGE TWO

Editors and Journalists will be asked:

#### Background Details

1. General details: name of newspaper, job details, experience any previous media experience as a journalist/editor, age, sex.
2. Experience: approximate number of suicide stories over what time period?

#### The Reporting of Suicide

3. How is the reporting of suicide different from other stories?
4. What features make suicide newsworthy?
5. What details do you look to include?
  - What suicide method information is important to include? Any instances where you have reported more or less information?
  - Any information you try to avoid or omit?
  - Do you try to include suicide help/referral information?

### Ethics and Barriers to Suicide Reporting

6. What are your professional responsibilities and ethics surrounding the reporting of suicide?
7. Are there any barriers when writing about suicide?

### Exploration of Suicide Reporting Guidelines

8. What is your opinion of New Zealand's reporting guidelines?
  - Any concerns regarding the reporting guidelines?
9. Have the guidelines altered your reporting practices? How?
10. What could be done to improve the effectiveness and use of the guidelines?

### Media's Role in Suicide Prevention

11. How do you see your role in suicide prevention?
12. What knowledge do you have of any connection between portrayals of suicide and subsequent suicides?

### Personal Costs of Reporting Suicide

13. Have you experienced any personal consequences of investigating and reporting suicide? How do you cope with these experiences?
14. Do you have access to help or support for stories you find particularly distressing?

## **STAGE THREE**

### Debrief Process

- Are there any questions/thoughts that you have regarding this research?
- Monitor participant interview experience and feelings
- Monitor support needs

## APPENDIX D

### Transcription Notation

(.)	Just noticeable pause
(.3), (2.6)	Examples of timed pauses
↑word, ↓word	Onset of noticeable pitch rise or fall
wo(h)rd	(h) is a try at showing that the word has "laughter" bubbling within it
wor-	A dash shows a sharp cut-off
wo:rd	Colons show that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound.
(words)	A guess at what might have been said if unclear
( )	Word(s) located inside closed brackets represent unclear talk
<u>word</u> , WORD	Word(s) underlined sounds are louder, capitals louder still
°word°	Material between "degree signs" is quiet
>word word<	Demonstrates faster speech
<word word>	Demonstrates slow speech
→	Analyst's signal of a significant line
((sniff))	Transcribers' effort at representing something hard, or impossible, to write phonetically