

The Bridgend Suicides: How the Story Unfolded

Ann Luce, Bournemouth University

Rhwng Ionawr 2008 a Mehefin 2008, bu'r hunanladdiadau a fu ym Mhen-y-bont ar Ogwr yn tra-arglwyddiaethu ar dudalennau newyddion y wasg genedlaethol ym Mhrydain a'r wasg yng Nghymru. Wrth chwilio am rywun neu rywbeth i'w beio, bu'r cyfryngau'n sydyn i amlygu'r Rhyngrwyd, gan gysylltu Bebo a Facebook fel catalyddion i sefydlu'r 'clybiau hunanladdiad' a 'chytundebau hunanladdiad'. Ymatebodd rhieni, yr heddlu a gwleidyddion yn sydyn i'r honiadau hyn gan honni mai ymdriniaeth y cyfryngau o'r digwyddiad a oedd wedi creu yr 'epidemiog hunanladdiad'. Mae'r astudiaeth hon yn trafod papurau newydd Prydeinig a Chymreig dros gyfnod o chwe mis, gan ddefnyddio dulliau meintiol (dadansoddi cynnwys) ac ansoddol (dadansoddi disgwrs, cyfweiliadau gyda newyddiadurwyr) er mwyn astudio'r ymdriniaeth a fu. Mae'r erthygl hon yn ystyried sut y datblygodd y stori a'r disgysiau a gododd o gwmpas yr hunanladdiadau a'r ffaith eu bod wedi digwydd yng Nghymru.

In January 2008, the south Wales borough of Bridgend became the focus of local, national and international media attention due to a spate of suicides in the region. Suicide, once believed to be a social issue that should be kept under wraps due to the stigma associated with it, became much more openly discussed as the former mining and market town made national headlines over the first six months of 2008 for having had twenty suicides amongst people aged fifteen to twenty-nine. Although government health officials in Wales had long been aware of the high suicide rates in the region, it was not until Welsh newspapers began regular, sustained coverage of the story that those suicide rates came under the spotlight and health officials were taken to task. The story soon made national and international headlines after the Wales News Service, a press agency, sold a sensationalistic piece of copy to both tabloids and broadsheets. The story, accompanied by photographs, focused predominantly on sensationalising the suicides, thus constructing the borough of Bridgend as 'Britain's suicide capital', and 'death town', describing the deaths that occurred there as part of a 'suicide craze', and attributing them to a 'suicide cult'. The story still made the front pages of British national newspapers on 23 January 2008, despite Wales News Service's lack of headline accompanying its copy.

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Suicide is a sensitive and complicated issue. In 1961, British law deemed suicide no longer a crime in England and Wales. Prior to this, those who attempted suicide and failed could be prosecuted and imprisoned, while the families of those who succeeded could also potentially be prosecuted.¹ In part, this was due to religious and moral beliefs around intentionally taking one's own life, which some regarded as an act of self-murder. However, even with the legality of suicide, suicide statistics in Wales are still much higher than those in England. In 2012, the Office of National Statistics reported that, in England, approximately 4,200 people die by suicide annually.² Approximately 19,000 suicide attempts are made by adolescents every year in Britain and, each month, more than seventy young people aged between fifteen and twenty-four die by suicide.³ In Wales, the rates of suicide are statistically higher than those of England and Northern Ireland. Between 1996 and 2006, around 300 people died each year by suicide in Wales, a rate that has remained relatively constant.⁴ Figures show that Bridgend has higher overall rates of suicides among males (25.2 per 100,000) than females. Female deaths in the borough are 4.6 per 100,000. The highest number of female suicides in Wales, however, can be found in Conwy, with 11.9 per 100,000.⁵ Every year in England and Wales, more than three times as many men as women kill themselves. In recent history, the most common methods used in suicides are: poisoning (including car exhaust fumes), hanging and suffocation, drowning, firearms, jumping, cutting and piercing, and overdoses.⁶ This holds true for most countries, except the United States where firearms are the leading method of suicide death, followed by hanging and suffocation.

Methodology

The findings explained here about Welsh newspaper coverage of the Bridgend suicides are part of a larger study looking at how the British press reported the suicidal deaths. In that study, twelve newspapers – *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Mirror*, *South Wales Echo*, *The Western Mail*, *The Times on Sunday*, *The Observer*, *The Mail on Sunday*, *The Sunday Mirror* and *Wales on Sunday* – were analyzed using content analysis, discourse analysis and interviews with journalists. The content analysis was conducted during the first six months of 2008 using 322 newspaper articles from the sample looking at a variety of codes from production processes to discursive phrasing and elements. It was chosen because of the broad representations of suicide its findings could provide. While the content analysis yielded some important results, it did not provide descriptive answers to the research question of how suicide is reported in the British press. Neuendorf argues that a 'content analysis can be as easy or as difficult as a researcher determines it to be' but it 'needs substantial planning'.⁷ The content

¹ Suicide Act 1961, Chapter 60: http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1961/cukpga_19610060_en_1. (last accessed June 2007).

² Office of National Statistics, *Suicide Statistics* available at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/subnational-health4/suicides-in-the-united-kingdom/2010/stb-statistical-bulletin.html> (last accessed: February 2012).

³ Attempted suicide statistics from Kate Hill's, *The Long Sleep: Young People and Suicide* (London, 1995); Monthly suicide statistics from Ronald W. Marris, Alan Lee Berman and Morton M. Silverman, *Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology* (New York, 2000) and David Duffy and Tony Ryan, *New Approaches to Preventing Suicide: A Manual for Practitioners* (London, 2004).

⁴ National Public Health Service, *Suicide in Wales: Briefing Document to Bridgend Local Health Board* (Cardiff, 2008), p. 4.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lisa Bird and Alison Faulkner, *Suicide and Self-harm* (London, 2000), pp. 1–40.

⁷ Kimberly A. Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis Guidebook* (London, 2002), pp. 2, 8.

analysis undertaken here looked at frequencies of phrases and words to determine how often the issue of suicide was represented in a positive or negative light, and cross tabulations were also conducted for a more in depth assessment of the articles in the study. Hansen et al discuss the overarching purpose of using the content analysis method, stating:

The purpose of the method is to identify and count the occurrence of specified characteristics or dimensions of texts, and through this, to be able to say something about the messages, images, representations of such texts and their wider social significance.⁸

To complement the findings of the content analysis, discourse analysis was conducted from a social psychology perspective and was carried out on four of the deaths over the six months to try and better understand how the suicides were discursively presented to the British public. The discourse analysis was conducted predominantly with Potter and Wetherell's model of social psychology in mind, which helped focus data collection on how the issue of suicide is constructed.⁹ Their model was chosen because it allowed for a study of how discourses around suicide are formulated in society based on how newspapers both categorise and socially represent suicidal stigma to the masses. As this study wanted to learn how suicide is represented to the British public, Potter and Wetherell's model allowed suicide to be analysed in terms of social discourses and to understand how journalists categorize the issue of suicide. This article, therefore, will not focus linguistically on the texts constructed by newspapers, but will study instead the organization of newspaper articles to determine the ways in which discourses are socially constructed. By using this model, framing analysis became the focal point of the research, thus highlighting how journalists framed the Bridgend suicides and instructed audiences how to interpret the deaths.

The three ideas used, based on Potter and Wetherell's model, were: categories, social representation and interpretative repertoires. Categories were important, as Potter and Wetherell found, to understand how journalists organize their discourse around suicide. This organization then helps construct a societal narrative around how British society interprets the acceptable discourses around the issue of suicide and suicidal stigma. Categories are, therefore, 'the building blocks of our many versions of the social world'.¹⁰ In terms of using the idea of social representation, it seemed pertinent for this study as one of the foundational concepts for those trying to explain suicide is to find the cause or blame for it. Potter and Wetherell more generally use the idea of social representation to explain 'the causal explanations people give for events'¹¹ while their idea of interpretative

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⁸ Anders Hansen, Simon Cottle, Ralph Negrine and Chris Newbold, *Mass Communication Research Methods* (Basingstoke, 1998).

⁹ See Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, *Discourse and Social Psychology* (London, 1987).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

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repertoires is used to characterize and evaluate how both categories and social representation are created and recurrently used to create societal discourses. These three ideas – categories, social representations and interpretative repertoires – were important for this study because they allowed for an in-depth analysis of how the issue of suicide is constructed in the British press. These ideas will be explored more in this article when discussing how the Bridgend suicides were discursively described in Wales.

While content analysis and discourse analysis were able to provide detailed information about how the Bridgend suicides were displayed on news pages throughout the UK in 2008, it was important to understand how those in the newspaper field, itself, felt about reporting this important issue. Therefore, as a subsidiary method, interviews were conducted with reporters, newspaper ombudsmen, as well as those working in the upper echelons of the journalism field, to try and gauge their understanding of media reporting of suicide in the UK. The aim of this article, however, is to assess how the story of these twenty suicides in Bridgend developed in the British national press and to provide a snapshot of how the suicides were reported in the Welsh press.

A Developing Story

The first story to cover the Bridgend suicides ran in the *South Wales Echo* on 17 January 2008.¹² Nearly a full week after the original newspaper report, the Bridgend story became national news in the UK on 23 January 2008. One might assume that the national newspapers were slow to detect a potential suicide ‘cluster’; in fact, it appears that a news release from the Wales News Service on 22 January initiated the coverage and deemed the suicides as part of something more sinister. The lead of that release read: ‘A teenage suicide cult is sweeping through a town with seven young people killing themselves in copycat deaths’. Paul Horton, the News Editor and Director of Wales News Services Ltd., said that he was tipped off to the story by a senior member of the emergency services brigade in the Bridgend area, who was concerned at what he thought was an increase in the number of suicide-related calls he was receiving. In a telephone interview with Horton, he was asked if, in retrospect, he would have changed the words that he used to describe events in Bridgend, and which seemed to provide the impetus for the ensuing rise in media coverage, to which he responded:

I read our copy again today, and looked at the words ‘cult’ and ‘craze’. Now we got those words, a senior member of the emergency services said it was a cult, or something sinister was going on down there, and a parent said the word craze, it was like a craze, suicide had become a craze of some sort. There was a time a few months ago when

¹² ‘Thomas Davies and three of his friends killed themselves. Now a task force has been set up to find out why so many of our young people are taking their own lives’, *South Wales Echo*, 17 January 2008.

I said that we wished we didn't use those words, but today I remembered the emotion. No, I wouldn't change it. It made people sit up and take notice.¹³

Horton illustrates here the role that journalists played in reporting the Bridgend suicides. The decision to report the story came, as he reveals, because there was 'something' going on that needed to be brought to the attention of the general public. He defends his agency's usage of sensational words such as 'cult' or 'craze', despite ultimately 'othering'¹⁴ the act of suicide and those who took their own lives in the area. Consequently, between 23 January and 28 January 2007, the twelve newspapers in the sample considered for this study ran fifty-seven stories between them. Another key event, the publication of a press release by the suicide prevention organization PAPYRUS which demanded that journalists halt their reporting of the suicides, only fuelled the fire. As a direct result, coverage that had been decreasing rose with twenty-five news articles published between 6 February 2008 and 16 February 2008. It is important to note that PAPYRUS disseminated this release during the height of the coverage in an attempt to diminish the press's coverage, but instead of achieving its goal, as the sample in this study showed, the coverage increased.

Additionally, during February 2008, two cousins, Nathaniel Pritchard, 15, and Kelly Stephenson, 20, died, which created a climax to the story. The story reached its peak on the 20 and 21 of February, when forty-six stories ran. The press was already encouraged to focus on suicide in Bridgend by the time of the two cousins' deaths, as well as an additional suicide on the 19 February. On the 20 February, however, the South Wales Police, as well as the parents of Nathaniel Pritchard, publicly accused the media of causing the suicides, specifically pointing to the *South Wales Echo* in a live, televised, national press conference, as the primary culprit. This created outrage amongst journalists because, as some highlighted, there was no concrete evidence to support such a claim. For instance, Mike Hill, editor of the *South Wales Echo*, who declined to be interviewed for this study, nevertheless did respond to my questions via e-mail:

Following a shameful South Wales Police press conference last year I wrote an editorial because I thought we owed it to our readers to explain why we were covering the story and the manner in which we were doing so. That editorial was also a response to what I saw as various people using the tragedies for their own ends – and that includes those in the police, politicians and the media – rather than looking for why so many young people were taking their own lives. I don't intend to say any more than I did in that editorial, save for that I stand by the way we have covered and continue to cover the story in Bridgend. I've never believed there was or is a simple answer to what has happened there and it has been one of the most difficult stories I've ever had to cover. Nevertheless

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¹³ This excerpt comes from a larger and more-in depth qualitative interview discussing Horton's role and that of his agency in the reporting of the Bridgend suicides.

¹⁴ 'Othering' is defined based on Stuart Hall's social constructionist approach: '... people who are in any way significantly different from the majority 'them' rather than 'us' – are frequently exposed to this binary form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed polarized binary extremes.' Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London, 1997), p. 229.

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I have remained conscious of the responsibility that we have as journalists to cover it fairly, accurately and, above all, with sensitivity.¹⁵

Hill's statement here shows the frustration newspapers held with those who disseminated information about the suicides, but, more importantly, he highlights the confusion around why the suicides were occurring. Hill acknowledges that journalists had a responsibility to report the suicides. They do this, as he states, by reporting, 'fairly, accurately and, above all, with sensitivity', yet based on this study, findings show that few of the newspapers studied followed through on that line of reasoning.

After the mid-February climax, Bridgend continued to be prominent in the press. It was 20 March before another increase in coverage occurred, with twenty-one articles being published in this newspaper sample. The coroner for Bridgend had ruled on five of the suicides and deemed only two as actual suicides.¹⁶ The remaining three were left as narrative verdicts which means the circumstances of the death are recorded, but no cause is attributed to an individual. After this announcement, the stories dwindled until the death of Sean Rees, 19, a grocery store worker who killed himself on 20 April 2008. His death led to a total of ten stories appearing in the newspapers on the 21 and 22 of April. Between 24 April 2008 and 30 June 2008, only a further forty-five stories ran – discussing previous deaths and coroner's verdicts – thus bringing the coverage to a natural endpoint.

A Snapshot of Welsh Reporting

First and foremost what must be kept in mind is that the Bridgend suicides were a Welsh story, despite the illusion of daily coverage in the British press. The analysis showed that in this sample of 322 articles from twelve separate British newspapers in 2008, 50.9 per cent (164 articles) of the coverage appeared in the *South Wales Echo*, *The Western Mail* and *Wales on Sunday*. While the suicides were prevalent on news pages throughout the six-month period, only 29 appeared on the front page. Of those 29 stories, however, 21 (72.4 per cent) appeared in the Welsh press. This meant that while Bridgend was a highly-sought, well-publicised story throughout the United Kingdom, it did not feature heavily throughout the six months on the front pages of national newspapers in this sample. This makes sense in terms of the news agenda and that the stories were local to Wales. Journalists on national newspapers focused mostly on the 'unusualness' and 'frequency' of the suicides, happening in Wales. The 'unusualness' focused mostly on the fact that for the first time, women were seen to be using more violent methods of suicide – hanging – rather than using the more traditional, gendered

¹⁵ This excerpt comes from an e-mail Mike Hill sent in response to a request for an interview for this study. He declined to be interviewed and also declined to answer follow-up questions based on his e-mail. E-mail sent by Mike Hill, editor of the *South Wales Echo*, to Ann Luce, October 2008.

¹⁶ For a death to be ruled as suicide in the UK, the coroner must have concrete evidence that the person intended to kill themselves.

method of self-poisoning. With the near-consistent regularity of the deaths in Bridgend, it made for an interesting and potentially sensationalistic piece of journalism for London-based journalists.

Media Effects and Suicide

Within journalism studies, there has been little research to date on press reporting of suicide. Existing studies have variously examined the media effects of reporting suicide on audiences, or have conducted interviews with journalists in order to establish how and why they report suicide in certain ways. However, few until now have engaged with these issues from a media or journalism studies perspective. Published studies frequently utilize strongly challenged, if not discredited, theories of direct or causal media effects. As such, these studies have tended to point to the media as the 'cause' of suicide, as evidenced earlier with the *South Wales Echo* being highlighted as the reason for the deaths in the borough of Bridgend; this body of research, however, fails to take into consideration more recent, and critical, approaches to the reporting of suicide. Thus, it could be argued that important discussions that need to occur around the media and its 'effect' on suicide and suicidal tendencies are at a dead end, and probably have been since the mid-1980s. No recent methodologies or theories have been introduced to the field of suicidology to study whether reporting suicide has an influence on suicide. Academics in the fields of sociology, psychology, psychiatry and medicine also cite the media as the predominant cause for 'copycat', or imitative suicides.¹⁷ While exception can be taken with this research on several points, debunking this research is not the purpose of this article. The research explained here illustrates the current thinking regarding how the media report suicide. Current research into suicide often uses what has been referred to as the 'Werther Effect', which is based on Goethe's, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, published in 1774. Several suicides occurred following the publication of this book,¹⁸ with the deceased dressing in a similar fashion to Young Werther and adopting his method of killing himself; some who died, were found with the book. The Werther Effect theory did not come to light, however, until the 1970s, when David Phillips researched imitative suicidal behaviours occurring in response to the portrayal of suicide in the news or entertainment media.¹⁹ Phillips' study was among the first to look at the effect that newspaper reporting of celebrity suicides had on national suicide rates in the months following Marilyn Monroe's recorded probable suicide in 1962. He found a twelve per cent increase in the United States' national suicide rate at that time. Following this discovery and his knowledge of the suicides in response to Goethe's book, he coined the term, 'Werther Effect', to describe the potential impact of a celebrity suicide on inspiring others to end their lives.²⁰

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- ¹⁷ See J. Coyle and D. MacWhannell, 'The importance of "morality" in the social construction of suicide in Scottish Newspapers', *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 24, 6 (2002), 689–713; M. Gould, P. Jamieson and D. Romer, 'Media Contagion and Suicide Among the Young', *The American Behavioural Scientist*, 46, 9 (2003), 1269–84; K. Hawton, S. Simkin, J. J. Deeks, S. O'Connor, A. Keen, D. G. Altman, G. Philo and C. Bulstrode, 'Effects of a drug overdose in a television drama on presentations to hospital for self poisoning: time series and questionnaire study', *British Medical Journal*, 318 (1999), 972–7; P. Jamieson, K. H. Jamieson and D. Romer, 'The Responsible Reporting of Suicide in Print Journalism', *American Behavioural Scientist*, 46, 12 (2003), 1643–60; G. Martin, 'Media Influence to Suicide: The Search for Solutions', *Archives of Suicide Research*, 4 (1998), 51–66; G. Martin and L. Koo, 'Celebrity Suicide: Did the death of Kurt Cobain influence young suicides in Australia?', *Archives of Suicide Research*, 3 (1997), 187–98; D. P. Phillips, 'The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect', *American Sociological Review*, 39, 3 (1974), 340–54.
- ¹⁸ The book, a tale of unrequited love where the protagonist shoots himself, is thought to be one of the earliest known sources of copycat suicides.
- ¹⁹ Phillips, 'The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide', 340–54.
- ²⁰ Ibid.

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The Werther Effect is, for all intents and purposes, a good example of what critics of certain effects-research have referred to as a 'hypodermic needle approach' to media research – namely, that all media audiences passively accept media messages. Media effects-research works on the basis that audiences do not critically engage with media messages.²¹ As such, it would be argued that media audiences are encouraged to see suicide as an option to solve their problems due to media reporting of suicide. Mick Temple in his analysis of power and the British press summed up effects-research:

The relationship between cause and effect does not flow one way . . . readers can influence their newspapers. There are many other influences (home, work, education) impacting on our political beliefs and the huge number of media outlets makes it difficult to ascribe impact to, for example, newspapers, or even any one newspaper. It is also the case that different people use the same media in different ways and for different purposes, making it likely that a newspaper will have different effects on different people. People have a well-developed capacity to suppress, forget, distort or misinterpret messages to fit their view of the world.²²

The media play a role in this social issue, as it does in any social issue. The media must report responsibly, have some consideration for families of the deceased, but, probably most importantly, the media has a role to play in educating citizens about suicide, the effect it has on those left behind, and also educating about the warnings and signs of a potential suicide.

In the case of the Bridgend suicides in 2008, it should be noted that while suicides that occurred in 2006 and 2007 were included in the reporting of the 2008 deaths, none of the deaths had been reported in either the Welsh or British press during 2007, thus raising significant issues about the validity of the copycat theory during the media reporting of the Bridgend suicides. The first Bridgend suicide story originated in September 2006 when Dale Crole, an eighteen-year-old from Porthcawl, went missing. His decomposing body was found hanged in early January 2007. His was the first death to be reported in 2008 as part of the Bridgend suicides coverage.

Production Processes

While much of the blame for the Bridgend suicides was placed on the newspaper reporting of the deaths, findings also show that the suicides were deemed a 'Welsh only' problem, and that Welsh politicians allegedly had the situation under control. When looking at primary sources of news, it emerged that the Welsh press in this sample relied most heavily on family members, police and politicians for discussion of the suicides. The suicides in the borough were portrayed as a consequence of

²¹ See, for example, Nick Lacey, *Media Institutions and Audiences* (Hampshire, 2002).

²² Mick Temple, *The British Press* (Maidenhead, 2008).

wider and more serious economic issues in the country, such as deprivation, high unemployment and an absence of cultural cohesiveness that was once present in Wales. Based on the findings, it appears that Welsh journalists were trying to reinforce the belief that powerful elites had the situation under control and that the suicides were more of an anomaly than something that should be worrying the citizenry as a whole. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Politicians had no control over who killed themselves, and had no control over how the media portrayed the deaths. They equally had no power to limit or prevent the deaths. Nevertheless, Welsh journalists tried to convey in their reporting the message that politicians were in control by sourcing politicians (*The Western Mail*, 48.6 per cent of articles in total sample; *South Wales Echo*, 27 per cent, *Wales on Sunday*, 10.8 per cent), and also by visually representing them on news pages. Journalists are encouraged in the World Health Organization media reporting guidelines on suicide not to embellish with pictorial content, but, that said, most editors and journalists strive to have at least one picture alongside each story.²³ Harrower describes in a tongue-and-cheek way why a news page designer would want to include photos with a story:

Yes, you can design stories without art. But your pages will look lifeless and gray. After all, most stories are about people: people winning, losing, getting arrested, getting elected. (Often they get elected first, *then* arrested). Readers want to know what these people look like. So show them. Remember, mug shots attract readers. And attracting readers is your job.²⁴

In the case of the Bridgend story, over the course of the six-month sampling of stories, 199 (61.8 per cent of the sample) articles in newspapers included a picture, while 123 (38.2 per cent) did not. Of the 199 total stories with images, the *South Wales Echo* ran fifty-six articles with pictures (28.1 per cent); the *Western Mail* ran thirty-seven (18.6 per cent), *The Sun* ran twenty-eight (14.1 per cent), and *The Times* ran twenty-one (10.6 per cent). *The Mail on Sunday* was the only newspaper to not include any photos over the six-month period. These results show that these suicides were not as visual in the British newspapers as they were in the Welsh newspapers, with *The Sun* providing the highest percentage of picture coverage compared to the other British newspapers at 14.1 per cent. The Welsh newspapers made the story local, by using pictures to illustrate the angst and confusion surrounding the suicides in the Bridgend area. In terms of the types of images included, newspapers in the sample mostly chose to include pictures of the deceased alone (67 per cent of total pictures). Newspapers also chose to depict the deceased with friends in twenty-two articles (3.9 per cent) and family

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²³ World Health Organization and International Association of Suicide Prevention, *Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals* (Geneva, 2008).

²⁴ Tim Harrower, *The Newspaper Designer's Handbook* (New York, 2002).

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was also present in twenty-two articles (3.9 per cent).²⁵ As mentioned, politicians were also visible pictorially, but only in Welsh newspapers, with seventeen images included, totalling 3 per cent of total pictures.²⁶ This is further evidence that suicide was a political story in Wales; not only were political voices being heard, but they were portrayed visually as well. In local and regional newspapers, sources tend to be those who hold power and make decisions:

... the principal contributors are elite white men, with the 'ordinary' citizen, women, and members of ethnic minorities being far less frequently identified, since journalists are much more likely to seek out elite sources whom they believe will give their reports the requisite degree of gravitas and authority.²⁷

Throughout the coverage, politicians voiced their concern that the borough of Bridgend itself was being blamed for the deaths, but the research carried out for this study uncovered only eleven cases where this was actually discussed or commented on by journalists. When a discussion of the causation of suicide was offered by individual newspapers of differing ideological leanings, the causes for death were varied. For instance, *The Times*, on the right ideologically, blamed social networking sites in nine of its articles. The *Western Mail* blamed social networking sites in thirteen articles and attributed knowledge of the deaths of other individuals on individual suicides in thirteen articles. *The Daily Mail*, on the right politically, blamed knowledge of other or others' death in eight of its articles whilst *The Mirror*, a left-leaning paper argued the same in eight of its articles. *The Guardian*, on the left, blamed media reporting in six of its articles, while *The Sun* blamed drugs and alcohol in ten articles. Interestingly, it was only the *South Wales Echo* that put forth the argument of no particular cause or trigger in seventeen articles; this did not mean that the suicides had no cause,²⁸ but rather that the newspaper could not adequately pinpoint who or what was to blame for the deaths.

As mentioned earlier in this article, the area of Bridgend gained a bad reputation as being a possible 'cause' for the suicides. However, contrary to popular belief that the depressed area of Bridgend was to blame for the deaths, unemployment was only linked to three stories that discussed the suicide count.²⁹ Despite such low specific references to unemployment in news coverage, a closer textual analysis showed that the borough continued to be referenced as 'the teenage suicide capital of Britain – death cult town', or 'a small town hit by a spate of suicides'. It was described as 'the South Wales community of Bridgend', a 'town hit by a wave of young suicides', or 'the Welsh town of Bridgend'. The area was discursively described in an 'othering' manner.³⁰ It was frequently referenced as a small town, a small community, and more specifically as being Welsh. Illustrating the area in

²⁵ The *South Wales Echo* published family pictures in seven articles (31.8 per cent) and *The Sun* and the *Western Mail* each published images in four articles (18.3 per cent).

²⁶ The *South Wales Echo* ran nine (52.9 per cent) pictures of politicians, followed by the *Western Mail* at five (29.4 per cent) and the *Wales on Sunday* with three (17.6 per cent).

²⁷ K. Ross, 'Open Source? Hearing voices in the local press' in Bob Franklin (ed.), *Local Journalism and Local Media: Making the Local News* (London, 2006), pp. 232–44.

²⁸ Kerkhof and Arensman list reasons for why a suicide could occur as follows: living conditions, personal relationships, ambitions, fulfilments, physical, sexual and mental maltreatment by parents in childhood, substance abuse, depression, hopelessness, powerlessness, personality disorders, criminal records, previous psychiatric treatments and a history of stressful traumatic life events including broken homes and family violence, A. J. F. M. Kerkhof, and E. Arensman, 'Pathways to suicide: the epidemiology of the suicidal process', in Kees Van Heeringen (ed.), *Understanding Suicidal Behaviour* (Chichester, 2001), pp. 15–39.

²⁹ These references appeared in *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and *The Mirror*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

terms of it being Welsh meant that a natural 'us against them' situation could take place. For example, it is not very often that one would see in a newspaper the phrase, 'the English community of Stratford-Upon-Avon'. By stressing the Welsh aspect, the national newspapers in England were able to create a barrier between the United Kingdom and Wales, and define suicide as a Welsh issue.³¹ Again, when newspapers highlighted that Bridgend was the 'teenage suicide capital of Britain', the discourse that was reinforced was that Wales had an issue with suicide; England did not. By creating and reinforcing these discourses both in text and through the use of discursive features such as photographs (newspapers ran the same bleak picture to illustrate Bridgend over and over again), newspapers relegated the issue to a Welsh-only problem, thus limiting a serious and open debate about suicide that should occur in the United Kingdom.

Suicide and the Internet

Yet another way in which journalists isolated the issue of suicide was by framing causation of death around the Internet. Newspapers blamed social networking sites as a cause for death based on the fact that several of those who died were friends on sites such as Bebo, Facebook and MySpace. Newspaper headlines ranged from *The Daily Mail's* 'The Internet Suicide Cult: Chilling Links Between Seven Youngsters Found Hanged in the Same Town. They Lived and Died Online',³² to *The Guardian's* 'Police Suspect Internet Link to Suicides: Seven Young People Found Dead in Last 12 Months. Mother urges parents to monitor computer use'³³ and *The Sun's* 'Bebo mates in suicide chain'.³⁴

Both the police and the press alike attempted to draw links between the social networking sites and the suicides, but both were unsuccessful; no substantial evidence could be found to support this theory. Unfortunately, that did not seem to matter, as the discourse around the Internet and the suicides continued in the form of a moral panic about the Internet and its reach and influence. The concept of moral panics stems from Stanley Cohen's work in the early 1970s around delinquency, youth cultures and subcultures, as well as football hooliganism.³⁵ Cohen's argument was:

. . . that the attribution of the moral panic label means that the 'thing's' extent and significance has been exaggerated (a) in itself (compared with other more reliable, valid and objective sources) and/or (b) compared with other, more serious problems. This labelling derives from a wilful refusal by liberals, radicals and leftists to take public anxieties seriously. Instead, they are furthering a politically correct agenda: to downgrade traditional values and moral concerns.³⁶

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³¹ This only applied to national newspapers. Welsh newspapers simply referred to the area as Bridgend or the Bridgend Borough.

³² 'The Internet Suicide Cult: Chilling Links Between Seven Youngsters Found Hanged in the Same Town. They Lived and Died Online', *The Daily Mail*, 23 January 2008.

³³ 'Police Suspect Internet Link to Suicides: Seven Young People Found Dead in Last 12 Months. Mother Urges Parents to Monitor Computer use', *The Guardian*, 23 January 2008.

³⁴ 'Bebo Mates in Suicide Chain', *The Sun*, 23 January 2008.

³⁵ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London, 2002), pp. vii–xxxvii.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

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For a moral panic to occur, Cohen describes three steps in his discursive formula. The first is that the issue is either new or old, 'lying dormant perhaps, but hard to recognize; deceptively ordinary and routine, but invisibly creeping up the moral horizon' or that the issues are 'camouflaged versions of traditional and well-known evils'.³⁷ The second step is that the issue is either damaging or a warning sign of the real danger, while lastly, the issue needs to be transparent but also opaque, meaning that either anyone can see what is happening regarding the issue, or 'accredited experts must explain the perils hidden behind the superficially harmless'.³⁸ While an issue can be labelled a moral panic, Nachman Ben-Yehuda explains how one comes to fruition: 'Moral panics have to create, focus on and sustain powerfully persuasive images of folk devils that can serve at the heart of moral fears.'³⁹ Ben-Yehuda goes on:

... moral panics are about representations, images and coercion: about which sector of a society has the power to represent and impose its images, world views and interests onto others as being both legitimate and valid.⁴⁰

It is important to have an understanding of moral panics and folk devils, because the reporting of the Bridgend suicides was arguably a moral panic. The story of Bridgend has many facets; primarily, the fear of the Internet, the fear of social networking sites and the fear of suicide, coupled with the fact that the demonization of those who took their own lives led to over-exposure of a sensitive issue that was dragged out unnecessarily on news pages across the United Kingdom for more than six months, causing irreparable harm to those bereaved by suicide, those who worked in suicide prevention and those who suffer from mental health issues, according to Darren Matthews, Bridgend Branch Director for Samaritans, in a telephone interview conducted for this study.

What seemed to be fuelling the discourse around the Internet as having played a role in the deaths of those who died by suicide was a lack of understanding on the part of the press as to how exactly social networking sites work. Paul Horton, News Editor and Director for Wales News Services Ltd., encapsulated the argument as follows:

... because there was seven young people who had died, and there's this big question mark or not about Internet usage, um, parents don't understand Bebo, what's this latest craze all about? The same way when people started using the modern-fangled telephone, they were worried about use of, you know; it's a natural thing when new machinery, new gadgets, you know, come along. When the television started, I'm sure the older generation complained and said where's this new-fangled television gonna take us? I mean, I think part of that [concern] was the Internet, social networking, e-mailing;

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ N. Ben-Yehuda, 'Moral Panics – 36 Years On', *British Journal of Criminology*, 49 (2009), 1–3.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

it's a closed world that teenagers have to themselves, which middle-aged parents, elders aren't tuned in with and don't understand it, and they're frightened about it. I bet you anything they don't understand that it's not the sort of thing to be frightened about, and I think that's certainly part of it. We do stories like this all the time, and, for some reason, some catch people's imaginations and this is one of them, and I mean, it did run, and of course, within the short time, the numbers were growing and people couldn't explain it. I can't explain it, I mean, I've had everyone, people ask me all the time, 'What do you think happened down in Bridgend?' I mean we've all got our own little pet theories, but I can't, I can't really explain it. Contagion, I think, is probably the best explanation.⁴¹

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Horton explains the fear that exists around the Internet, as well as the anxiety around not being able to explain away the suicidal deaths. He also highlights the fear adults have about a world in which children, or in the case of Bridgend, young adults, have to themselves. Additionally, Horton's reference to 'contagion', which is used quite frequently in the suicide field to stand in for 'copycat' is an interesting turn of phrase; contagion can also mean epidemic, virus, disease. While suicide can be seen as the consequence of an untreated disease – depression – in this context it is clear that falling back on the Werther Effect theory is the only viable explanation journalists had.

During the Bridgend suicide reporting, journalists jumped to the conclusion that being friends on a social networking site meant close friendship and that an individual who was a friend on a social networking site of the person who had died, could potentially take his or her own life in a copycat suicide. Newspapers illustrated this point quite clearly by taking quotes from social networking sites and using them in their newspaper reporting. The quotes were used to highlight the concern that social networking was to blame for the continuation of deaths in the Bridgend area. Additionally, as mentioned by Horton, by saying that social networking sites caused the deaths, journalists, politicians, and academics, were all able to argue the contagion theory of the Werther Effect. Horton explains further the misunderstanding between generations, as well as between older journalists and younger journalists, about how the Internet and social networking sites play a role in suicide:

I think the media, and when you say media, I honestly think that social networking, Bebo, that is the media to that age group. Not *The Daily Express*, not BBC Radio Wales, not, you know, . . . middle-aged people read *The Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*. You don't see seventeen-year-old kids wandering down the road clutching their *Daily Mail*. You don't see twenty-one-year-old boys tuning in to BBC Radio Wales. No. No, no they're not doing it. They're buying *Heat Magazine*. Yeah? They're social networking on MSN, they're on Bebo. You know, I've got kids. You know, newspapers to them are old men's things; that's what I do, I'm an old man. They don't read newspapers, they don't watch the regional

⁴¹ Paul Horton, telephone interview with the author, October, 2009.

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news, they don't listen to the local radio, but they are obsessed with MSN, Bebo, texting, so, I, it's just my personal theory, [think] that there is massive media involvement, but it's self-generated media content; it's those kids, those young people, you know, building up a whirlwind of emotion about someone they knew: cousin's died across the other side of town, and a mystique grows up about Natasha, 'who's in a better place', 'good luck babe', you know, 'I'll see you in heaven', 'the world's too good a place [for someone like you]' and it's like it's hero worship built up around the young person that's gone. I can't prove that, but it's just my pet theory.

Horton calls attention to two things – the first, that media use amongst young people centres around the Internet and social networking sites; the second, that older generations and older journalists do not understand the emotional language and the conventions by which young people explore their grief in an open, online community. Posting online allows young people to both cope and share their grief openly. While there are risks related to online posting after suicide, journalists reporting the suicides tended to focus more on the fact that a person was 'friends' with the victim on a social networking site, rather than focusing on the suicide literature that shows a person is more likely to take their own life if they previously had direct contact with someone who had already died by suicide.⁴²

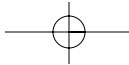
Conclusion

Questioning why a death happens is to be expected, but in the case of suicidal death, it seems mandatory. According to Koch and Smith, society often judges how well it is functioning based on the number of people killing themselves.⁴³ Questioning why people die is only natural based on that thesis. When it comes to suicide, however, the only person who knows why the death occurred is dead.⁴⁴ The press, then, stigmatises suicide as a way to make the act unacceptable in society. This study showed that in addition to blaming media reporting for the continuation of suicides in the borough of Bridgend, journalists also blamed the Internet. The common belief in the literature around suicide is that vulnerable young people who seek out online entertainment and friendship will end up being influenced and will consequently kill themselves. This has been reported in the press so as to create awareness of the threat and ensure that both the public and politicians can respond to correct this unstable situation. The Welsh government was aware of the high suicide rates in the region and indeed all of Wales, prior to the media coverage of the deaths in Bridgend during the first half of 2008. While Welsh journalists pointed to Welsh politicians as the people who could answer why the deaths were happening and how they could be prevented, this study showed, as mentioned earlier, that politicians had no control or influence in halting the

⁴² A. K. Alao, M. Soderberg, E. L. Pohl, and A.L. Alao, 'Cyberspace: Review of the Role of Internet on Suicide', *Cyberpsychology and Behaviour*, 9 (2006), pp. 489–93; C. Eichenberg, 'Internet Message Boards for Suicidal People: A Typology of Users', *Cyberpsychology and Behaviour*, 11 (2008), pp. 107–13; J. Tam, W. S. Tang, and D. J. S. Fernando, 'The Internet and Suicide: A Double-Edged Tool', *European Journal of Internal Medicine*, 18 (2007), pp. 453–5; S. Thompson, 'The Internet and its Potential Influence on Suicide', *Psychiatric Bulletin*, 23 (1999), pp. 449–51.

⁴³ Richard Koch and Chris Smith, *Suicide of the West* (London, 2006).

⁴⁴ While suicide notes do provide information in some cases as to why a person chose to take his or her own life, in most cases, as Shneidman found, suicide notes are not left behind by those who have died, Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind* (Oxford, 1996), p. 14.



suicides in the Bridgend area, and thus could not answer to the Welsh public why the deaths were occurring. Paul Horton argued:

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It's difficult, the problem is, you can't sit any of those young people down and say, why did you do it? And, that why is the big question, and you know this much better than me, why, why, why, why, why, why is the big question and nobody can ever bloody answer it. Each of those kids has their own back-story, and there are certain similarities and connections between them, but they don't even know why they did things in the end.

Horton illustrates the big challenge in reporting a suicide – there is no way to answer the question ‘why?’. That said, however, at the heart of reporting a news story, the fundamentals of journalism, the core news values, demand that the ‘why’ question be addressed. It is a key aspect of reporting a story – who, what, when, where and why? Asking the question and providing an answer, regardless of it being the right one or not, helps to maintain the ever-fragile equilibrium of a society. In the case of the Bridgend suicides, however, the wrong answer was presented, yet the moral panic around these suicides was much more acceptable to the masses than the alternative of a British society seemingly condoning the act of suicide.

