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Abstract

This article examines the manner in which journalists write news stories based on the ‘death knock’ interview where they gather reaction from the recently bereaved about their loss. The death knock news story with its emphasis on the first-hand testimony of the bereaved in certain respects can be perceived as a personal narrative of grief. This research studies the types of narratives used to tell these personal stories and applies Labov and Waletzky’s personal narrative model in order to determine what the bereaved tell us about grief and how the journalist interprets it. Statements from the bereaved contained in such stories are examined to identify emergent grief themes across the genre. The research found that, despite the adoption of a more positive mood in the later stages of reporting a family’s grief, the coherent narrative was one of unyielding anguish, emptiness and continuing loss.

Keywords

Bereaved, bereavement, death, death knock, emotions, grief, Labov and Waletzky, personal narrative, personal tragedy

Introduction

Newspaper stories about death in the UK invariably focus on the grief of those who are left behind, particularly where the death is sudden and involves an ordinary person. Unexpected deaths, especially of private citizens, whether through accident or murder, are presented as highly disruptive events in society, and because they meet several news criteria they regularly make the news (Hanusch, 2010: 2; Walter et al., 1995: 580). Their reporting must fit the story-telling format, or narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1985) and that

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requires an element of conflict or drama. According to Walter et al., the deaths of private citizens only become publicly visible, and therefore publicly authenticated, when that death is extraordinary or the circumstances in which the death occurred are unusual (1995: 584). Typically, they occur in public places or involve some external contact, such as the discovery of a body in a private place. Paradoxically, many of these stories report non-spectacular unexpected deaths, such as single road accidents, as extraordinary in that they are understood to be tragic. Their narrative ubiquity reflects journalism's changing functions within communities, and indeed within public ideas of death. This type of death is the one that most journalists are likely to cover in their professional careers. Very few will report wars, mass killings or major disasters but they will generally be required to report on a family's personal tragedy, when the death of a loved one in unusual circumstances places them in the public eye.

In this situation reporters are normally dispatched to interview the bereaved relatives. Known as the death knock, journalists will ask about the deceased's life, their character, the events leading up to the death and the family's loss. The journalist's job is specifically to record the bereaved's reaction to the death and the memories they have of their loved one. This is clearly a testing process for the relatives and the journalist, and the behavioural, ethical and practice issues relating to this form of interview have been the focus of past academic writing (Duncan and Newton, 2010; Frost, 2006; Herbert, 2000; Simpson and Coté, 2006; Tulloch, 2006). However, research on the transformation of the death knock interview into a news story is sparse.

Journalists are professional storytellers who through facts engage our attention and emotions by presenting real-life events in a narrative form (Bell, 1991: 147; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; Schudson, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). Thus, the news story seems to be a suitable format in which to narrate the personal experience of a death through the inclusion of facts and expressions of emotions. This article explores the manner in which these stories are narrated and the representations of grief they convey in relation to unexpected personal bereavement. The stylistic and structural elements of this story type are discussed along with an exploration of the complexities of reporting grief. Thereafter, a total of 433 stories from UK national and regional newspapers fitting the death knock definition were evaluated and classified into five categories to identify core themes and examine the manner in which the bereaved express their grief across the different story types. This classification was then applied to Labov and Waletzky's personal narrative model, which identifies six structural functions within a story. By applying this model to a story example from each category the intention is to assess the expressions of grief by narrative function as well as by story type.

The death knock news story

When a journalist writes a death knock news story they create a distillation of an intensive interview where a close family member has expressed raw and intimate thoughts on the loss of their loved one. Both the journalist and the bereaved can feel bruised by the interview, but the writing process can equally present opportunities to cause harm. The professional principles of accuracy, veracity, precision and attention to detail are of heightened importance when the journalist is writing about the unexpected and usually tragic death

of someone's child, father, sister. The burden of responsibility on the journalist to get it right should be immense. The bereaved need to feel that the emotional cost of this intrusion is worthwhile and productive. It is their story – the reporter is merely the narrator – and as Simpson and Coté state, the bereaved's suffering may have some purpose if their story is told at the right time and in the right way (2006). The manner in which the story is told – the narrative structure – and the way in which the bereaved's grief is portrayed, therefore, take on a special significance.

The death knock news genre is 'a news of feeling as well as fact' (Lantz, in Kitch, 2000: 172), an active reporting of the personal that provides meaning and context to tragic events (Walter et al., 1995: 585), where the bereaved can connect with the outside world and share their grief (Germer, 1995: 36). After a tragic event, displays of emotion and the sharing of personal stories are now customary (Wardle, 2006: 527) and the news media are increasingly serving a ritualistic function of 'offering a public forum in which to express and experience what were once private feelings' (Kitch, 2000: 173). The narrative is one that records the last social frame, death itself (Williams, 2003: 694), and the effect of this on the deceased's loved ones. Emotive quotes from the bereaved are a prerequisite in the death knock story. Accordingly, the presentational style may appear sentimentalized but this form of reporting reflects the pain and suffering of the bereaved and the language of the quotes is the language they have chosen to use to express their feelings. Perhaps then, their words can be invested with a particular kind of emotional authenticity stemming from the depth of their personal experience.

The death knock story can perform a therapeutic function for the bereaved and, in some cases, for the community at large (Germer, 1995: 36; Kitch and Hume, 2007) but the successful discharge of this function is dependent on a recognizable narrative form that effectively conveys the depth of grieving without being mawkish or overly intrusive. Some critics believe this therapeutic approach to news is detrimental to the traditional, factual hard news reporting formula. Mayes describes this as 'therapy news', claiming that the problematic issue is the priority people's emotions are given in news stories and the compromising effect it has on objectivity (2000: 31). However, this discussion becomes more complex when considering the death knock news genre. Statements relating to the circumstances of the death and the deceased's personal details both provide a factual context to underpin the single, emotive perspective of the bereaved's expressions of grief. Indeed, taking an objective approach within this genre could be interpreted as uncaring, or at the very least indifferent towards the interviewees' personal stories. Carey argues that the function of journalism is 'not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs' (1997: 69). As such, the journalist is responding to the audience's need to connect with the bereaved and vice versa, and is enabling people to be drawn together in 'fellowship and commonality' (1997:69) in order to understand the process of grieving and to be aware of how they can avoid or deal with the same situation (Kitch, 2000: 178). An inhibition of emotional expression would limit the opportunity for this mutual reaction to occur. Thus the level of 'emotional indulgence' or 'emotionality' (Higgins and Smith, 2011; Mayes, 2000: 30) to be included in a story is a question of adjustment between the need to engage the audience in the bereaved's experience and to inform them of the facts. News values assist in determining the weighting of these two factors. Death knock stories are considered newsworthy because of their dramatic content (i.e. the nature of the death),

their high threshold as events, their bad news content, their potential for emotive treatment, their cultural proximity, the publication's news agenda, and their 'extreme negativity as interruptions to the smooth flow of the daily round' (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Hanusch, 2008: 343; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001; Walter et al., 1995: 583). The death knock news story provides the audience with an emotional engagement, not just an informative one. Additionally, it is an engagement that the audience clearly expects otherwise newspapers as commercial enterprises would not provide it.

Good journalism, like good fiction, connects with its audience. There should be a strong 'like us' factor where readers can identify with the interviewees' experiences and reinforce the emotional authenticity expressed within the story. Frank notes that the weak news story is general and abstract whereas the strong is specific and concrete and it gets these qualities from the stories it tells about people (2003: 160). People make news and audiences identify with people like themselves. Death knock news stories have the ability to produce a robust connectivity and enable us to imagine ourselves to be 'part of a group who celebrates or mourns or expresses outrage' (Kitch, 2008: 313). Without this identification, news stories would imply that death does not happen to people like us but with it 'they worryingly reveal our own mortality even at the tea-table' (Walter et al., 1995: 586). The narratives people share do not just have the potential to create communities of interest but through a sense of connectedness they can also shape those communities (Fuller, 1996; Walter et al., 1995: 163).

Reporting grief

Potentially intrusive reporting comes under the purview of the UK Press Complaints Commission (PCC). Clause 5 of their Code of Practice (PCC, 2011) states that in cases involving personal grief or shock journalists must make enquiries or approaches with sympathy and discretion, and that publication should be handled with sensitivity. The code does not elaborate on what it means by 'grief' or 'shock' but this is widely interpreted as situations relating to trauma or bereavement, like the death knock. The journalist undertaking such a story, either at the newsgathering or writing stages, may realize that 'the loss of a close family member is one of the most stressful forms of bereavement' (Ringdal et al., 2001: 92) but may be less aware that no two individuals will react to death in the same way so advice on handling the production of the story with 'sensitivity' is of limited use.

The terms 'bereavement', 'grief' and 'mourning' are often used interchangeably; however, they do have distinct meanings. Bereavement refers to someone having lost a significant person by death, and is the cause of both grief and mourning. Grief is the normal response to overwhelming loss such as the death of a loved one. It is an internal part of loss and is defined as an emotional syndrome. Mourning is the observable expression of grief, the external part of loss. A psychological understanding of mourning as a painful internal process of coming to terms with the loss also exists. (Averill, 1979; Freud, 1957[1917]; Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005: 115; Malkinson, 2001; Parkes and Weiss, 1983; Ringdal et al., 2001: 92). Despite the individual nature of grieving, various models have been suggested by researchers which essentially include at least three partially overlapping but distinct stages: initially, a period of shock, anger, disbelief and denial; an intermediate period of acute mourning including emotional discomfort, and preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased; and a culminating period of resolution and acceptance of the loss (Bowlby, 1961;

Kübler Ross, 2009[1969]; Parkes, 1993; Ringdal et al., 2001: 92; Shuchter, 1993). However, these models are not designed to help ‘tuck messy emotions into neat packages’ (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005: 7). Whilst an awareness of these stages could greatly assist the journalist in understanding the potential emotional state of the people involved in their stories and could have some bearing on the type of death knock narrative that the bereaved will participate in at certain stages of the grieving process, Ringdal et al. warn that there is considerable individual variability ‘not only with regard to [the bereaved’s] ability to cope, but also in the mode of expression and duration of different grief reactions’ (2001: 93). Also, there is potential for the journalist to misinterpret the terminology of the grieving process with the consequence that they assume the bereaved have returned to ‘normal’ and are better able to cope with sensitive questions. For example, Kübler Ross warns that the acceptance stage should not be seen as a happy phase and is often confused with the ‘notion of the bereaved being all right with what has happened, which is not the case’ (2009[1969]: 92; Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005: 24).

Indeed, there is a wider unease beyond the journalism community in knowing how to handle grief. There is a ‘cultural uncertainty’ about how to grieve and how to respond to grieving people (Walter et al., 1995: 590). For the reporter, anniversaries and other occasions, like court cases, where the bereaved person is likely to be strongly reminded of their loved one, will be highly sensitized times to approach the relatives. Their suffering often takes on a renewed intensity at these times, resulting in the bereaved person fluctuating between different grief reactions – between pining and despair – before reaching the final phase of adjustment (Parkes, 1993, 1998; Ringdal et al., 2001: 93).

Being aware of this cultural unease around death is highly important to understanding the manner in which journalists tell personal stories of grief. Amidst this complex and confusing situation the journalist attempts to produce a narrative that enables the bereaved and the audience to make sense of the world. Here, the death knock story, particularly those that are framed as ‘tributes’ to the deceased, can provide a personalized way for the bereaved to display their suffering in an age when traditional modes of mourning appear to be diminishing. By sharing grief the loss will mean something (Germer, 1995: 37). As Walter et al. observe: ‘One would expect intense interest in learning from others how to present grief, especially when the role-models are ordinary people who have only been catapulted into the glare of media attention as a result of extraordinary death’ (1995: 593).

Narrative themes within death knock news stories

When a journalist transforms a death knock interview into a news story they do not merely reflect the reality of their newsgathering, they also construct a ‘reality’ through narrative. They tell the story of familial mourning and thus, as Kitch notes, are seen to assist in the rite of passage from life to death (2000: 173). Analysing news narratives facilitates the identification of common thematic and structural choices which journalists make in the news process, a means of determining the way they frame the personal narratives of the bereaved as an expression of their grief. Just as there are various stages of bereavement there are several formats of death knock news story, which tend to follow a temporal sequence relating to the grieving process but can, like the stages of grief, overlap on occasion. These different types of death knock stories contain core plots, which although the details are

new remind the audience of previous, similar stories. A total of 433 stories that fit the death knock definition taken from UK regional and national newspapers over a 36-day period were examined according to their core plots and classified into the following categories: event-driven; tribute-driven; post-judicial; anniversary; and action-as-memorial. They were scrutinized further by examining the statements from the bereaved contained in the stories in order to identify emergent grief themes across the genre and also in relation to the sequential nature of the reporting.

The *event-driven* story is the first media acknowledgement that a newsworthy death has occurred. The story leads with the death, its unusualness and some form of public involvement (such as the discovery of the body). A summarized version of this also appears in the headline. Most of the story focuses on who has died and the circumstances of that death. Emphasis is also placed on any elements of tragedy; for example, a teenager about to start her career, a father of triplets, a young woman on her honeymoon. Quotes from close family members, gleaned either from interviews with the journalist or from a statement issued by the relatives, tend to be placed around the middle to the end of the story and provide reaction to the death, tribute statements and biographical details. The emergent grief narrative is one of a futile loss of life, usually in violent circumstances (although this is not normally explicitly stated by the journalist), portraying a sense of shock and denial.

The *tribute-driven* story tends to appear a few days after the death. It may be a follow up to the event-driven story or it may be in place of the event-driven story, if for some reason the death event was not initially reported by the publication. Either way, the focus shifts to the bereaved family's expression of their devastation at the loss of their loved one. The story leads with a tribute from them where they extol the deceased's positive characteristics, emphasizing the loss of potential, their status within the family or community and that the death has created a gap that cannot be filled. The details of how the person died become of secondary importance. The grief theme here is of unexplained or perplexing loss, a life cut short, portraying a sense of sadness.

The *post-judicial* story occurs after the conclusion of a court case or inquest when the bereaved give the media their reaction to the verdict. This can be the point at which the bereaved receives some form of closure because they have an explanation as to the manner in which their loved one died but also public recognition and punishment of those responsible, if appropriate. The explanation for the death may not always be satisfactory to them and instead of reparation it can exacerbate their grief. The story would tend to focus on the case itself and the family's reaction to the verdict. The circumstances of the death and the family's expression of their loss would generally appear further down the story, signalling that these were less important. The grief narrative here is of a heightened emotional reaction to the explanation of the death, displaying either as anger or acceptance.

The *anniversary* story normally appears 12 months after the date of the death, although it can mark later anniversaries. Mostly, the narrative concerns the bereaved's attempts to resolve unfinished business; for example, a suspicious death where the killer has not been found. Close family members use the anniversary to retell the story of the circumstances of the death in an attempt to discover how their loved one died. Through their quotes the narrative emphasizes that their pain has continued because they are unable to accept the death until they discover what happened, but the public has lost interest in the initial story. This is a complex narrative that can be highly emotive and distressing because the family's

grief is still raw due to unresolved issues but the story lacks the dramatic impact of the event-driven story. The grief theme that emerges is one of continued suffering, guilt and depression.

The *action-as-memorial* story adopts a more positive tone than the other categories. The narrative focuses on the bereaved's efforts to mark the life of the deceased, rather than to focus on the death. By doing so they strive to overcome the futility of the death by seeking a resolution. The story relates how the family have memorialized their loved one by campaigning, raising funds for charity, or setting up a trust in their honour. It emphasizes the deceased's character and behaviour through the recollections of the bereaved. The intention is to do something good in memory of their loved one, to help others through their actions, thus providing a positive outcome to the death. The circumstances of the death are secondary and provide context rather than focus. The grief narrative is one of acceptance and seeking resolution.

Death knock news stories as personal narratives of grief

The preceding classification has illustrated the extent to which the death knock news story is highly dependent on interviews with the bereaved. As a result these stories contain a high proportion of personal experience or reaction, similar to personal narratives. The reporter collects the ordinary person's oral narrative but takes control of it by imposing a journalistic structure on it. However, the personal narrative in a news story is 'not the reporter's own' but 'the first-person experiences of others, retold in a mixture of third-person paraphrase and first-person quotes' which are embedded in news stories (Frank, 2003: 165). Thus, the personal narratives in death knock stories are told through the words of the bereaved.

Bell's comparative work on news stories and personal narrative (1991) is a useful model to explore the death knock story as a personal narrative of grief. He applied Labov and Waletzky's (1967) six functions of the personal narrative structure – the abstract, the orientation, the complicating action, the evaluation, the resolution, and the coda – to the news story whilst acknowledging that the personal narrative framework needs some modification to accommodate the news structure (Bell, 1991: 148). As well as utilizing Bell's work, this analysis draws on the methodology adopted by Frank in his 2003 article. The intention here is to explore through Labov and Waletzky's model what the bereaved tell us about their grief and how the journalist interprets that, not just within specific categories or over time but across the genre. By applying their six functions to the structures of five typical news stories, selected on the basis of the classifications above, the portrayal of grief over the range of story types was examined. Two were from UK regional evening newspapers, one from a regional daily newspaper, one from the Scottish edition of a national tabloid newspaper, and one from a local weekly newspaper, all during September and October 2010.¹ Each paragraph in the stories was numbered, starting at one, in order to indicate where Labov and Waletzky's narrative functions occur in the stories.

Abstract

Both the abstract in the personal narrative (PN) and the news intro perform the same function; that is, they summarize the central action and main point of the narrative by pre-empting

questions relating to what the story is about and why it is being told. An optional element in the personal narrative (PN), its use in the news story is mandatory as it forms the base from which the rest of the story develops. Its purpose is to hook the reader in, just like the abstract, and it enables the audience to decide from the opening sentence whether they wish to continue. The headlines and intros of the five sample stories fulfilled these criteria.

Orientation

Orientation sets the scene in the personal narrative 'in respect of person, place, time, and behavioural situation' (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 32) by describing the characters, the location, the time and the initial circumstances of the event. The person within this research refers to the bereaved or their representative and their first appearance varies across the range of stories, depending on whether they focus on an action (PN1/event-driven, PN3/post-judicial), where they enter around the middle of the story, or a reaction (PN2/tribute, PN4/anniversary, PN5/action-as-memorial), where they tend to appear in the first half of the story (see Table 1). In the event-driven story the use of a close friend as a source of reaction to the death gives the impression of distance from the primary bereaved. As well as indicating that the journalist failed to access immediate family members, probably because the relatives are overwhelmed by their loss, it also suggests the intensity of shock and denial at what has happened.

In the other categories the bereaved seem more willing to allow their grief to be the focus of the story, perhaps as a desire to keep at least the memory of their loved one alive. Although the places and behavioural situations differ, the common element is that the deceased were all participating in routine behaviour at the time of their death. None were taking part in high-risk activities that could have led to their death. The deceased, therefore, are portrayed as being blameless for their death, even in PN2, the tribute-driven story, where the deceased was walking at night on a road that was unsuitable for pedestrians. As a result this engenders a latent sympathy for the bereaved. We are orientated within their grief, in that their expressions seem more poignant because they are just like us and we are reminded that such tragic events could happen to us too. The time is different in each of the sample death knock news stories but the span covers the first 12 months of bereavement, a critical time for those who are grieving as each significant date passes for the first time without the deceased. From the journalist's perspective this period is the most newsworthy as it is dramatic and emotional, meeting requisite news values.

Complicating action

Labov and Waletzky describe complicating action in relation to the temporal sequence of the narrative's sentences; that is, the action is told in the order in which it happened as a 'series of events' (Bell, 1991: 152; Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 32). However, news stories reveal events in order of importance by presenting the outcome before the action that caused it. The death knock stories in the sample broadly follow this approach within their individual narratives in relation to the facts of the event they describe. Interestingly, if we look at the action in relation to the bereaved's response to the death (that is, the sequence of their grief and what happened to cause it), a narrative of anguish, confusion, sadness and loss appears in four out of the five stories.

Table 1. Orientation

Narrative/ story	Narrative element – orientation	Paragraph placement in story
PN1/event Total story = 11 paragraphs	Bereaved: close friend, Miss A; wife and three young children Place and behavioural situation: after the death of Mr B, 41, in a car crash in hazardous weather conditions two days previously.	P4; P5 P1; P2
PN2/tribute Total story = 17 paragraphs	Bereaved: best friend, Mr C; long-term partner, Ms D, and five children Place and behavioural situation: after the mysterious death of Mr E, 41, who was killed when a car hit him on a busy road near his home four days previously.	P2; P3 P1; P2; P3; P4; P10
PN3/post- judicial Total story = 15 paragraphs	Bereaved: father, Mr F; family; boyfriend, Mr G Place and behavioural situation: after the conclusion of the court case in which a 17-year-old boy was imprisoned for killing their 23-year-old daughter, Ms F on New Year's Day, nine months previously, by driving his car on to the pavement where she was walking with her boyfriend.	P1; P4; P9 P1; P2; P3; P4
PN4/ anniversary Total story = 23 paragraphs	Bereaved: brother, Mr H Place and behavioural situation: exactly 12 months after the murder of his brother in the town centre and he is being helped by volunteers to accept the death.	P1 P1; P2
PN5/action-as- memorial Total story = 22 paragraphs	Bereaved: Ms J's father, Mr J; family and friends Place and behavioural situation: at a charity memorial evening at a local public house, organized by her friends who had raised £2000 in her memory, 10 months after she was killed by a banned motorist.	P1; P8 P1; P7

The only one that contains a sense of hope is the action-as-memorial story where the bereaved have benefited from the support of their family and friends. The series of events in these stories is predominantly negative and hopeless with the exception of the action-as-memorial story where the bereaved have regained a constructive purpose (see Table 2). It is as if, through the temporal sequence of events described in these stories, their expressions of grief are moving from initial reticence to greater public engagement, from the specifically personal expression to engaging with the wider community.

Evaluation

This establishes the significance of a personal narrative and pre-empts any questions about why the story is being told. It differentiates a directionless sequence of sentences from a story with point and meaning or it reveals the attitude of the narrator towards the story (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 37). News stories also require to be evaluated for their significance and focus on events. According to Bell, the news intro is a nucleus of evaluation because it focuses the story in a particular direction. The headline also does this, especially when it appears to pick up on a minor point. Focusing a story is the prime occupation of

Table 2. Complicating action

Narrative/ story	Narrative element – complicating action	Paragraph placement in story
PN1/event Total story = 11 paragraphs	The deceased was driving his car in heavy rain when he lost control and hit a tree. He was cut free from the wreckage but died in hospital. His wife and children were being consoled at the family home.	P2; P3; P4
PN2/tribute Total story = 17 paragraphs	The deceased's loved ones did not have an explanation of why he was walking on the dual carriageway road when he was hit by a car. The police described it as a tragic accident.	P3; P8; P10
PN3/post- judicial Total story = 15 paragraphs	The family's anguish was exacerbated by the lack of remorse shown by their daughter's killer, who was drunk and speeding when he crashed into her, and his failure to stay at the scene of the incident to help her.	P3; P5; P7
PN4/ anniversary Total story = 23 paragraphs	The bereaved brother has been unable to grieve because of the unexpected nature of the death. He has become ill as a result and has received help from numerous organizations.	P4; P8; P12; P13; P14
PN5/action- as-memorial Total story = 22 paragraphs	The deceased's friends decided to start fund-raising in her memory. The family have taken comfort from the support her friends have given them.	P2; P4; P12

the journalist and failure to do so can result in an ineffective piece of writing (1991: 152). As this sample is concerned with expressions of grief as a personal narrative the evaluation relates to the narrator's attitude to the story, namely the bereaved, and therefore to the significance of their loss. The deceased is mentioned in the intro of each story along with a phrase which either reflects their respectable character or the futility of their death: father-of-three; dad, tragic road accident; trainee teacher, teenage drink-driver, New Year's Day crash; tragic death; a great girl with a great personality, hit-and-run driver. The significance of the loss is further evaluated by eulogistic quotes from close family and friends (see Table 3), which may be a means of them personally assessing the effect of the death. In relation to the temporal sequence of the grief narrative across the genre, the expression of emptiness seems as profound within each classification from the immediate reaction to the death (PN1/event and PN2/tribute) through to the post-judicial (PN3) and anniversary (PN4) stages to any acts of memorial (PN5), although in this final classification the depth of loss is mitigated somewhat by the support of a community of family and friends.

The evaluation is the most significant element in a death knock story. It enables the journalist to frame the deceased as idealized and the bereaved as tragic. However, the expressions of grief from the bereaved are genuinely told and heart felt. Their loved ones are 'sadly missed' and across the categories there appears to be a sense that their grief is ongoing. The common evaluation across the categories seems to be that it is acceptable for there to be a lack of resolution. There does not need to be a neat ending to grief and by recognizing the experiences of others we will be able to prepare ourselves to deal with such feelings.

Table 3. Evaluation

Narrative/story	Narrative element – evaluation	Paragraph placement in story
PN1/event Total story = 11 paragraphs	A close friend acted as family spokesperson. She described him as a 'wonderful, devoted family man' who 'will be sadly missed'. Dad/father-of-three, the deceased, mentioned in the headline and intro Positive biographical details of the deceased.	P4; P5; P6; P7; P10 P1 P3; P8; P9
PN2/tribute Total story = 17 paragraphs	Friends and family paid tribute to the deceased who would 'all miss him deeply'. His best friend said the death had left a 'massive hole in our lives', adding the deceased had been best man at his wedding and 'uncle of my four children'.	P1; P2; P3; P5; P6; P9; P13
PN3/post-judicial Total story = 15 paragraphs	The family were angry at the offender's attitude to the death of their daughter. They described him as 'callous and remorseless' as his priority at the time of the incident was to retrieve a bottle of vodka from the car rather than help their injured daughter. The court case was concluded, their daughter's killer was sent to jail but they felt no sentence could compensate for their loss. Her father, Mr F, said: '[Our daughter] was robbed of her hopes and dreams, and of her life.' Positive biographical details of the deceased.	P1; P9; P10; P11 P1; P12
PN4/ anniversary Total story = 23 paragraphs	The brother's grief has changed the way he leads his life. He is distraught and seldom socializes, as he used to with his brother. 'I'm isolated. If I go out I feel I shouldn't go out because it's too soon.' His distress is highlighted by the quote: 'I cannot even face coming to visit his grave.' He considered it an 'honour' to actively participate in his brother's funeral.	P1; P5; P6; P7; P9; P10; P11
PN5/action-as- memorial Total story = 22 paragraphs	Through the friends' fund-raising action to celebrate their loved one's life rather than mourn her death the family were comforted and their grief was eased. Her father, Mr J, said the memorial fund-raiser had shown him 'how popular' his daughter was and that so many of her friends were 'happy to get involved'.	P1; P9; P11; P12; P14; P15; P16; P17; P18; P19

Resolution

Frank describes the resolution as the 'upshot of the story, how events played out' (2003: 171), something that is not as clear cut in news stories, which finish in mid-air and consist of instalments of information of perceived decreasing importance rather than being temporally structured (Bell, 1991: 154). However, applying Frank's description to the bereaved's quotes it is possible to perceive a resolution of sorts in these stories, which essentially is how they have adjusted to their loss at that point in the story (see Table 4). Equally and more likely, this could be perceived as an ongoing and as yet unresolved situation – the latest phase they have reached in the grieving process at the time of the story. In two of the sample stories the resolution is

Table 4. Resolution

Narrative/ story	Narrative element – resolution	Paragraph placement in story
PN1/event Total story = 11 paragraphs	Family, friends and work colleagues were shocked and saddened to hear of his death	P4; P7
PN2/tribute Total story = 17 paragraphs	All those who knew him were still in shock and they believed they are unlikely to discover how he died.	P1; P2; P10
PN3/post- judicial Total story = 15 paragraphs	The family's anguish continued which the deceased's father expressed as there not being a 'moment in the day that [Our daughter] is not in our thoughts', adding that they 'all miss her'.	P11
PN4/ anniversary Total story = 23 paragraphs	The surviving brother suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the death and feels lethargic, isolated and guilty.	P7; P8
PN5/action- as-memorial Total story = 22 paragraphs	Family and friends appear to be working through the grieving process. The deceased's father said they were 'coping' although his other daughter had been particularly affected by the death because she and her sister were 'like best friends' but that she was 'bearing up'. He praised his daughter's friends for deciding to raise money in her memory and described it as 'a fantastic gesture and a comfort'.	P9; P12

shock (PN1/event; PN2/tribute), in two others despair (PN3/post-judicial; PN4/anniversary) and in the final one, nascent recovery (PN5/action-as-memorial).

Coda

Labov and Waletzky identified a sixth element, the coda, which is 'a functional device for returning the verbal perspective to the present moment', an optional conclusion (1967: 39; Bell, 1991: 154). This function is not required in a news story and does not appear in the sample stories.

So what is the coherent narrative within these expressions of grief? Essentially it is one of unyielding anguish, emptiness and continuing loss. The bereaved acknowledge that they cannot keep their loved one alive in reality but they do have some control over their commemoration. They are able to frame the perception of the deceased by the expressions of grief they make at different stages in the news reporting process. By speaking to a journalist, they give permission for their familial mourning to enter the public domain, where it becomes a matter of record that the public can access and respond to. The representations, crafted both by the journalist and the bereaved themselves, are of the deceased as good people who suffered sudden, blameless, futile deaths. Those left behind are bereft.

However, it appears that as time passes the bereaved are more prepared to participate in the journalistic process. Their remembrance moves increasingly from the private expression to the public. Ironically, the media's interest is at its height at the most private stage – the event-driven story – and at its least at the action-as-memorial stage. The exception would be the journalist who has developed a relationship of trust with the bereaved and feels a responsibility to them. It should be acknowledged that the bereaved have volunteered to tell their stories, and that this is a brave act at a time when they may wish to retreat from the world. Expressing their grief may help them but it also helps others, their community and wider society. From their experiences we learn to recognize that bad things happen routinely, that people – both the relatives and wider society – seek public recognition of a lost life, that an unexpected and usually violent death can be a devastating loss to a community and that publicly marking a death is an important ritual which journalism can fulfil to some extent in the growing absence of religious or traditional ceremony.

Conclusion

The death knock news story is a construction of personal grief, not a therapy session. The narrative does contain a high emotional content but it tells a story that is structured within its communicative framework, one that readers recognize as containing familiar core narratives with which they can connect. It provides public recognition of the family's grief and of the intensity of their suffering, that 'unyielding anguish, emptiness and continuing loss'. The story they tell recounts the life of the deceased and could be perceived as an obituary for the ordinary citizen but it extends beyond a factual account of the deceased's achievements and character. Through their grief statements the bereaved also tell us about themselves and how they manage their trauma. By participating in the death knock story they memorialize their loved one and humanize the taboo of death. Through their expressions they subliminally inform us about the fragility of life, the need to take care, the importance of sharing and empathy. The death knock story provides us with the facts of a person's death but it also enables the journalist to record for posterity the emotions of those left behind, thus providing a more rounded understanding of individual loss. Journalists can be perceived as participating in the mourning process by performing the function of official archivists, moving from being a traditional detached recorder of facts to a more attached expresser of emotions. They take the bereaved's representations of the deceased and craft them into a coherent narrative, where, unlike other platforms for mourning such as Facebook and death notices that provide a fragmented narrative of diverse tributes, the journalist tells an articulated story of the death, the life and the loss. It would seem that in reporting stories of death the journalist is adopting the role of professional scribe, who can eloquently express the feelings and attitudes of those affected by the loss. Death knock stories do authentically reflect the stark despair of a secular culture's encounters with death through the bereaved's grief statements, but they are set within context by journalists selecting information to shape the finished story. Thus, the death knock story in its various formats can be seen as moving towards a social construction of bereavement.

Such stories enable journalists to participate fully in contemporary public representations of grief, often manifested in such forms as online tribute sites, roadside memorials and personal campaigns. In a broader context they can help the public to find meaning in

the grieving process and to understand an essentially chaotic world. People want to know how others feel about significant events in their lives because they want to try to unravel how they might feel if it happened to them. Death knock news stories help us to make sense of our experiences but they also give a voice to the bereaved who want the world to recognize how much they miss their loved one.

Note

- 1 PN1 was from the *Cambridge Evening News*, 28 September 2010; PN2 from the *Gloucestershire Echo*, 1 October 2010, p.2; PN3 from *The Express*, [Scottish edition], 18 September 2010, p.9; PN4 from the *Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph*, 27 September 2010, p.2; and PN5 from the *Uttoxeter Post and Times*, 1 October 2010, p.17, all accessed via the Nexis UK online database.

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