Enduring and competing news frames: Australian newspaper coverage of the deaths by suicides of two Melbourne girls.

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 Abstract: This paper investigates the use of enduring news frames by Australia's metropolitan press in reporting on the deaths by suicides of two 16-year-old Melbourne girls. Reportedly, the girls had been adherents of the "emo" subculture (or "emotive" after the style of music and fashion) and had posted messages and photographs of themselves on the internet. News coverage of individual suicide is uncommon in Australia unless there are compelling news values that promote the story onto the news agenda; namely the status of the person, the location of the death, the unusual or bizarre nature or the death, or the editorial decision that publishing the story is in the public interest. We position the Australian government's media guidelines, Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness*, as a source of preferred news frames. The analysis documents that the news coverage of this tragic event involved typical enduring news frames of reporting risk, including the role of the internet in the suicides, the intrinsic danger of adolescence, parental responsibility for their children's welfare, and fear associated with youth subcultures. These enduring news frames reflect broader societal narratives and discourses regarding new technologies, and the vulnerability of adolescents to themselves and to each other. The initial news frame of the "fear of youth subcultures" was contested in later newspaper reports, particularly by the news frame of adolescence as intrinsically a time of high risk for young people. This was closely linked to parental/carer responsibility for these adolescents. The "fear of the internet" – although sometimes dismissed in newspaper features – persisted in much coverage. Metropolitan newspapers inconsistently followed the Australian government's media guidelines, especially by failing to provide readers with critical context about the links between mental illness and suicidal ideation.*

Introduction

On Sunday 22 April 2007, two 16 year-old girls from Melbourne's outer-east were discovered in the Dandenong Ranges National Park by a passer-by. The girls had hanged themselves. Reportedly, both had been adherents of the 'emo' youth subculture (or 'emotive' after the style of music and fashion) and had posted messages about their life and the subculture on the internet. This tragic event captured media attention and subsequent public focus because of the young ages of the girls, the suggestion that the internet was linked to their deaths, concerns about parental responsibilities and the internet, the fear that the deaths were part of an internet-inspired suicide pact, and fear associated with youth subcultures. During 2006 and the first months of 2007, no other death by suicide attracted as much newspaper coverage, news features and editorials than this tragic event (Blood et al., 2008, p. 36). Australian newspaper reporting of death by suicide by individuals is uncommon unless there are compelling news values that promote the story onto the news agenda. These news values normally include the status of the person, the unusual location or nature of the death, or the editorial decision that publishing the story is in the public interest (Pirkis, Burgess, Blood & Francis, 2007; Blood, Pirkis & Holland, 2007; Francis et al., 2004; Pirkis et al., 2002).

Theoretical approach – enduring news frames

News framing analysis, which underpins this study, elaborates how media professionals package or portray information for audience reception (Tannen, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Gitlin, 1980; Gamson 1989; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). A news story's frame, often signalled in the headline, directs the reader to what is in the frame and not to attend to what is excluded. Reese's (2001, p. 11) definition of news frames proposes that they are socially shared and persistent over time, and work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world. (Also see, Gamson, 1989, 1992; Tuchman, 1978).

Entman (1993) argues that the emphasis given to information in a news story (and subsequent audience salience of that information) results from the placement of that information, or its prominence in the story, or from its repetition, or association with

culturally familiar language and symbols. Entman positions framing research as a fruitful, developing research program but criticizes researchers for their 'scattered conceptualization' that hinders paradigm development. In response, D'Angelo (2002) promotes news framing as a multiparadigmatic research program comprising three paradigms: cognitive, critical, and constructionist. (p. 875). Our approach adopts a constructivist framework, following Gamson (1992, p. 2); journalists are information processors who create "interpretive packages" that both reflect and add to the "issue culture" that sets parameters for public debate and opinion. Newspaper audiences, of course, can accept, misinterpret, ignore, or even resist the chosen news frame. Obviously, we are not implying that either chosen news frames or alternative, competing news frames are necessarily adopted by actual readers. We do, however, offer theoretical suggestions as to how this may occur by focussing on newspapers' routine use of enduring news frames. McCallum (2007; 2006), for example, found that audiences used news frames as an important cultural resource for understanding complex social and political issues.

Various labels have been used to describe different types of news frames and their potential impacts. Reese (2001, p. 13), for example, identifies *strategic frames* that organise not just one news story but invite audiences to evoke deeply held cultural understandings that go beyond one news story or event. Strategic frames are usually considered in investigating the power of various stakeholders in influencing the news agenda (e.g. Miller & Riechert, 2001). Gamson (1989) writes of *deep frames* that are older or traditional, taken-for-granted and more generalizable than *shallow frames* that are focused on a specific event, or are recent and specific, perhaps even ephemeral. Reese (2001, p. 13) notes Wolfsfeld's (1997) labelling of *meta-frames* (such as law and order) that are said to distil the essence of the story meaning and evoke in audiences a larger set of meanings applicable to the current story. Similarly, Terkildsen, Schnell & Ling (1998, p. 48) label *metasymbols* as the overarching frame that stakeholders in policy disputes use to describe and position their organisation and its cause. Metasymbols such as jihad, pro-life or pro-choice, they argue, become over time "powerful global metaphors that stand as surrogates for an interest groups" goals or ideology. Clearly, these different labels used to classify news frames are not mutually exclusive.

A related conceptualisation is Kitzinger's (2000, p. 75) *media template* used to investigate source–media–audience relationships. She defines a media template as a frame that over time becomes a dominant key reference point that is transposed from one event to other events: "Routinely used to highlight one perspective with great clarity, templates serve as rhetorical shorthand, helping journalists and audiences to make sense of fresh news stories."

These observations about framing reflect a long tradition of systematic investigations of the social and cultural values in news (eg: Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989; Gitlin, 1980; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978; Fishman, 1978). Schudson (1995, p. 14) conceptualised news and journalism as a cultural system comprising beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world and audiences: "News as a form of culture incorporates assumptions about what matters, what makes sense, what time and place we live in, what range of considerations we should take seriously."

We propose that some news frames are *enduring* and are routinely used by editors and journalists in active transpositions from one event to new events in order to make sense out of the current event; that is, to signal to audiences what's at stake (after Goffman, 1974, p. 8). We draw on Reese's (2001, p. 11) concept of the *strategic frame* but choose to foreground the enduring temporal nature of some news frames (that potentially can organise more than one event) rather than seeing the frame (or supporting framing devices) as a strategy among competing stakeholders, including news workers. We draw on Kitzinger's (2000) conceptualisation of the media template but also on her ideas about risk and news discourse (Kitzinger, 1999) and our previous research on news media portrayals of mental illness (Blood et al., 2005; Blood & Holland, 2004; Blood, Putnis & Pirkis, 2002).

Like all news frames, enduring frames are culturally contingent; that is, they are dependent upon a repertoire of supporting cultural and social assumptions that are widely held by editors, journalists and audiences. But enduring news frames evoke in

journalists, editors and audiences consistent cultural meanings despite changed circumstances, events and immediate conditions.

For every frame, there is a potential *counter or competing frame*. Terkildsen et al. (1998, p. 47) observe that all news frames are contested. Contemporary journalism's desire to seek balance, fairness or impartiality means that news stories, as a single story or as a series of stories, are structured to include opposing or counter-views and this imposition of dualism may also serve to structure a complex event with many competing viewpoints in terms of what is seen by the editor and journalist as the dominant view—and the dominant counter-view (Terkildsen et al., 1998, p. 47; 59).

Newspapers play a key role in framing news about mental health issues, and in re-framing the messages they receive from interest groups and stakeholders—including medical and health professionals, consumers and lay publics. But news framing research has focused on the news media's portrayal of mental illness (e.g. Cross, 2004; Sieff, 2003; Olstead, 2002; Blood et al., 2002; Nairn, Coverdale & Claasen, 2001; Philo, McLaughlin & Henderson, 1996; Wearing, 1993; Hazelton, 1977) with few studies examining news coverage of suicide. Pirkis et al., (2002) identified characteristic frames of moral tales, unusualness (including unusual methods of death by suicide), and in murder-suicides a characteristic frame of moral outrage, especially when children had been murdered by parents who later took their own lives.

Preferred media frames

Several governments have introduced resource kits or guidelines in attempt to foster responsible reporting of suicide and mental illness. In Australia, *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002) provides advice and resources for journalists and editors. In our analyses, we position this resource as a source of preferred news frames. This resource, which was developed in consultation with medical and health professionals, government, and the media industries, includes issues for journalists and editors to consider when reporting and portraying death by suicide. These include: avoiding sensationalist headlines or language; avoiding

explicit reporting of the method of suicide, and the scene of the suicide; acknowledging the link between mental illness and suicide by placing the story in context; and providing helpline information about access to medical and counselling services. The resource also cautions journalists about interviewing the bereaved, who may themselves be at risk, and urges journalists to follow their organization's codes of practice on privacy (Dare et al., 2007; Blood et al., 2008; also see Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess & Skehan, 2006).

Data Sources

Data for this study are drawn from a larger project, which examined twelve months of Australian news coverage of suicide, and mental health and illness, between September 2006 and August 2007 (Dare et al., 2007; Blood et al., 2008). Data comprised news items in all metropolitan and regional newspapers, and a sample of broadcast items. The project followed a similar baseline project in 2000-01 (Pirkis et al., 2002). This paper focuses on 78 Australian metropolitan newspaper items on the deaths of the two Melbourne girls reported between 23 April and 6 May, 2007. Our purpose is not to content analyse these items but rather to focus on news framing of the incident.

Initial Press Coverage

The first reports of the deaths appeared on Monday 23 April in all eastern metropolitan newspapers. Headlines in *The Age*, *Herald Sun*, *The Canberra Times*, *Launceston Examiner* and the *Border Mail* framed the story as a tragic discovery following the week long search for the missing girls:

- "Teens found dead" (Cunningham & Dowsley, 2007, p. 6). (*Herald Sun*).

- "Missing teenage girls found dead in bushland" (Oakes, 2007b, p. 2). (*The Age*).

- "Bodies of girls found in bush" (2007, p. 4). (*The Canberra Times*).

- "Two teenage girls found dead" (2007, p. 11). (*Launceston Examiner*).

- "Police find girls' bodies" (2007, p. 11). (*Border Mail*).

Although prominently featured, none of these news stories appeared on the front-page and none included 'suicide' in the headline. *The Age* story reported that "police say there are no suspicious circumstances": code for death by suicide. The *Herald Sun* reported simply that both girls had taken their own lives. The *Canberra Times, Border Mail* and *Launceston Examiner* reported that it was understood that the girls had been found hanging from tree branches in bushland. With the exception of the brief report in the *Border Mail*, all of these newspapers included helpline information for readers, including Lifeline, Kids Help Line, *beyondblue*, Mensline and Victorian Statewide Suicide Help.

Both *The Age* and *Herald Sun* news stories included reference to the MySpace site on the internet that had been used by the girls to post messages to friends. The *Age* story also reported in paragraph eight of an 18 paragraph story that the two girls were part of the 'emo' subculture and said "fans are classified as introverted, sensitive, moody and alienated and are derided by other subcultures for self-pitying poetry commonly posted on MySpace website". But other initial metropolitan newspaper reports on 23 April 2007 used very different news frames:

- "'Freedom bid' girls found hanged in bush" (Davis, 2007, p. 3). (*The Australian*).

- "Let us be free: web clues to teen death pact" (Oakes, 2007a, p. 5). (*The Sydney Morning Herald*).

- "Two teenage girls in bush suicide pact" (2007, p. 2). (*The Daily Telegraph*).

The Australian played up the MySpace website angle and used a posting from one of the girls, Jodie Gater, as the lead paragraph to support the headline and the chosen 'internet fear frame': "One of the two girls found hanged in bushland east of Melbourne yesterday had written on her website: 'Let Steph n me be free'."

Thus, the method of death was signalled to readers in the first sentence of the story. The report included helplines for Lifeline, Kids Help Line and Suicide Prevention Crisis Line.

Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* framed its coverage as a 'suicide pact' as revealed in the headline. But it was not until the 11th paragraph of this 13 paragraph story that readers learnt of the *MySpace* website posting by Jodie Gater about wanting to "be free". The items did not include helpline information for readers.

The *Telegraph's* broadsheet morning competitor, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, was more explicit in coverage with a lead paragraph that supported the dominant frame of 'suicide pact' linked to the 'internet fear' frame: "At just 16 Jodie Gater and Stephanie Gestier appear to have made an unimaginable pact. On her MySpace web page, Jodie had written: 'let Steph and me b free'."

The second paragraph of the item told readers that "it was understood that Jodie and Stephanie had hanged themselves, after posting apparent farewell messages on the internet." The story continued with reference to the 'emo' subculture. *The Sydney Morning Herald* story did not include helpline information.

Re-framing the deaths

The following day (24 April), metropolitan newspapers around the country re-framed the story more explicitly around agency; that is, in the sense of who was to blame for the deaths.

- "Teenage girl wrote poetry on her suicidal thoughts" (2007, p. 4). (*The Canberra Times*).

- "Teen posts odes to suicide on internet. Teen cries for help lost in cyberspace" (Nolan, Duncan & Best, 2007, p. 4). (*The Courier Mail*).

- "Teen death pact poem: school friends wrote on website: it's all over" (Nolan & Duncan, 2007, p. 11). (*The Daily Telegraph*).

- "'It's over for me, I can't take it'—tragic last words of *MySpace* suicide girls" (Cubby & Dubecki, 2007, pp. 1-2). (*The Sydney Morning Herald*).

These newspaper items emphasised the supposed human-interest value of the suicides by detailing highly emotional MySpace messages. Messages posted on the site by family and friends of the girls following their deaths were also reported in detail in several newspapers. These reports usually included photographs of the girls that they had posted of themselves onto MySpace sites.

There was no reference, or even suggestion, that the two girls might have been depressed, despite evidence that identifies depression as a major risk factor for suicide. For example, *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002) asks journalists and editors to consider the context of suicide in order to inform and educate their audiences. Recognising the strong relationship between mental illness and suicide risk—such as the evidence of depression as a suicide risk factor—can help to place death by suicide into a wider context.

More specifically, mental health expert opinion appeared only twice in the initial *Australian Associated Press* (*AAP*) newswire reports. But this opinion was neglected in the initial newspaper coverage on 23 April. In contrast, an initial *AAP* newswire report was headlined: "Teenage pair's friends now at risk: psychologist" (2007, 23 April, *AAP*). Psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg, an ambassador for *beyondblue*, was quoted as telling Southern Cross Broadcasting: "We know that having someone close to you commit suicide is a risk factor in and of itself." Later in the *AAP* report, Dr Carr-Gregg was quoted as saying that a joint suicide pact between girls was rare and it was unusual for girls to kill themselves. He also noted that the method of death was unusual for girls: "So my only conclusion is that they must have been depressed", he told *AAP*. But this alternative counter news frame—buried in the *AAP* report—did not appear in initial metropolitan newspaper coverage.

The 'internet fear' frame was coupled with a predictable enduring frame that resonated easily with audience knowledge and understandings: the fear of youth subcultures; in this case the 'emo' subculture. The internet was positioned as a conduit for young people—seen as high risk—who themselves could influence others to self-harm or suicide—that is, as a source of suicide contagion. This double framing

was plainly evident in *The Age's* treatment of the story on 24 April. The front-page story was headlined: "Lost in cyberspace: Fears that new networks are breeding grounds for real-life tragedies" (Dubecki, 2007a, p. 1).

The lead paragraph directly supported the frame: "The deaths of two teenage girls in an apparent suicide pact has raised fears of copycat self-harming behaviour, influenced by youth subcultures and their use of on-line networking" (Dubecki, 2007a, p. 1). The story quoted Dr Michael Carr-Gregg as stating the girls' suicides could act as a catalyst. In the fifth paragraph of this 15 paragraph story—accompanied by photographs of the girls taken from their *MySpace* web postings—George Patton, Professor of Adolescent Health at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital, was quoted as saying that "the internet intensified the risk of suicide contagion". In the 12th paragraph of this 15 paragraph story there is direct link between suicide contagion and the 'emo' youth subculture. The story stated that: "Self-harm, a risk factor for suicide, has become common among adolescents, particularly girls in emo and goth cliques" (Dubecki, 2007a, p.1). Professor Patton was quoted as saying that between one in 10 and one in 20 girls aged about 14 and 15 engaged in forms of self-harm. This generalised statement is presented in the context of the risk of youth subcultures represented in internet websites such as *MySpace*.

A competing frame to the enduring frames of "internet fear" and "youth subcultures" was buried later in *The Age* story. In the second last paragraph, Dr Carr-Gregg was quoted as saying that it "was simplistic to blame suicide on the subcultures" (Dubecki, 2007a, p.1). The final paragraph stated that both experts agreed that parents need to communicate with their teenage children but Dr Carr-Gregg was quoted as saying that the internet was a significant risk factor: "Don't let them disappear behind this emotional firewall called MSN" (Dubecki, 2007a, p.1). This privileged the 'internet fear' news frame coupled with the 'fear of youth subcultures' frame.

The Sydney Morning Herald's April 24 front page and page two news stories were headlined:

- "'It's over for me, I can't take it'—tragic last words of MySpace suicide girls" (Cubby & Dubecki, 2007, p. 1).

- "Lost in a tragic web: Internet death pacts increasing worldwide" (Cubby, 2007, p.2).

The reference to "MySpace suicide girls" was, arguably, the most insensitive media label used in press coverage of the event. Often quoting unsourced statistics, the report said that internet suicide pacts were rare but that "the disturbing trend has increased dramatically since the first known case in Japan in 2000". In this news item, it is 'internet death pact' that is used as the dominant frame – a clear signal to readers. Direct reference was also made to 'emo' and Goth youth subcultures in the 7th paragraph. The story said that friends—"many of them members of the same Goth and emo subcultures as the two Melbourne girls"—had flooded *MySpace* when South Australian teenager Carly Ryan was found dead earlier in the year. But the South Australian teenager's death involved murder. Was internet 'stranger danger' being transposed to 'internet suicide fear' and fear of youth subcultures?

In continuing the dominant news framing of the event—'fear of the internet' and 'fear of youth subcultures'—*The Sydney Morning Herald's* continuation of the story on page two was again insensitively headlined: "Last words of the MySpace suicide girls" (Cubby & Dubecki, 2007, p. 2). The newspaper also published some personally intimate photographs of Jodie Gater kissing her boyfriend Allan with the copy "I luv you sooo soo much Allan" and a sign "RIP Jodie & Steph" that included a heart symbol (Cubby & Dubecki, 2007, p. 2). Both the sign and photograph had been posted on the girl's *MySpace* web site before their deaths. No helpline or other information about how to access mental health services was included with the story.

The Daily Telegraph, *The Courier Mail*, *The Canberra Times*, the *Launceston Examiner* and *Newcastle Herald* gave similar treatment to the story on 24 April. But in contrast to the frames set in *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* and other newspapers, Australia's largest circulation newspaper, Melbourne's *Herald Sun*

covered the story on 24 April with a competing news frame. The newspaper's headline reported: "Family can't explain their tragic loss". (Dowsley, Cunningham & McRae, 2007, p. 3).

The news story was framed by the 'unexplained tragic loss' and is noteworthy for two reasons. First, by reporting messages posted by friends of the dead girls the report challenged the widely reported 'emo or emotional music subculture' membership by the dead girls. Secondly, two other reports gave significant context to the event: firstly, a page three report headlined, "Stay close and watchful" (Rose, 2007, p. 3) framed the story as 'how to help'. A separate box told readers that "If you are worried about someone committing suicide, take these steps". Warning signs, the complex context of suicide, and what parents and friends could do, were summarised in dot-point style in the separate help box that detailed access to helplines, and to websites for *SANE Australia*, *beyondblue* and the depression advice site, ybblue. Clearly, in response to the two girls' deaths by suicide an editorial decision was made to provide readers—presumably, especially parents of school-aged children—with information on how to access appropriate medical and counselling advice. The last line of the report promotes the 'Expert View' published later in the newspaper. Secondly, 'Expert View' was a report, headlined "Suicide Syndrome" (Carr-Gregg, 2007), written by adolescent psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg that detailed research evidence about risk factors for suicidal ideation and how to recognise them in a young person. The report directly challenged the 'fear of youth subculture' frame. The report explicitly linked suicidal ideation and suicide to mental illness, particularly depression, as well as to factors such as negative life events. Warning signs and what to look for in young people who may be distressed were detailed. The report also shifted the 'fear of the internet' frame to one of parental responsibility:

Newspaper features

Many follow-up newspaper feature items were published on 28 and 29 April, 2007—the weekend following the initial news coverage of the tragedy. Issues previously canvassed were again examined in longer news features: the internet as a source of danger, parental responsibilities and the internet, the internet and potential suicide

contagion. But adolescence as intrinsically a time of high-risk of mental illness, self-harm and suicide appeared to become more prominent in these weekend features. Discussion on the internet was overwhelmingly about 'teenager danger' rather than the competing – and frequently reported on the news—'stranger danger'. The items included:

- Teenagers' secret world. An adolescent subculture and the net have been focus of blame after an apparent suicide pact involving two 16 year old girls. But is such finger pointing justified. (Dubecki, 2007b, p. 3) (28 April, *The Age*).

- "Logging into children's lives" (King, 2007, p. 36). (28 April, *The Courier Mail*).

- "Planet Girl is in crisis" (Allen, 2007, p. 52). (28 April, *The Courier Mail*).

- "Inside the minds of teens" (Dowsley, 2007, p. 3). (28 April, *Herald Sun*).

- "When a kid shuts down" (Weiss & Houghton, 2007, p. 113). (28 April, *Herald Sun*).

- "School bullies on girls' sad road to oblivion" (2007, p. 1). (28 April, *The Sydney Morning Herald*).

- "Finding the silver lining beneath the black eye shadow" (McMahon, 2007, p. 13). (28 April, *The Sydney Morning Herald*).

- "Future uncertain: the hard road to independence" (Elder, 2007, p. 12). (29 April, *The Sunday Age*).

- "'I tried to talk them out of it'" (Healey, 2007, p. 8). (29 April, *Sunday Herald Sun*).

- "It's not us who suck, it's the world" (O'Dwyer, 2007, p. 53). (29 April, *Sun Herald*).

For many of the features, the underling theme was again agency—with news features seeking to understand why the two girls had taken their own lives, and the nature of the lives they led. As an exemplar, we focus on the first mentioned *The Age* feature. This news feature directly challenged—on the surface, at least—the dominant news frames of the previous week. Quoting statistics that more than 2100 Australians die by suicide each year, the feature said that most are dealt with in anonymous grief by their

families. The feature asks why the deaths of two teenage girls from apparently normal, middle class families have "shoved aside the veil of secrecy" (Dubecki, 2007b, p. 3). . To answer the question, Dr Michael Carr-Gregg's earlier comment was repeated; it is very unusual for girls to kill themselves and "particularly kill themselves in this way". The feature continued:

> Neat answers were demanded; two symbiotic culprits were found. The spotlight was quick to fall on the girls' supposed identification with the 'emo' youth subculture, along with the bogeyman of the internet as a conduit to the dark recesses of teenagers' brains. (Dubecki, 2007b, p. 3)

The feature discussed the 'emo' subculture and quoted Dr Carr-Gregg as stating it was "a huge stretch of the imagination" to say that followers are at risk of suicide. The feature suggested that the opposite may be true; teenagers experiencing suicidal ideation may be attracted to such youth subcultures. But the message was ambivalent because the feature quotes adolescent psychologist Professor George Patton that young people who identify with gothic youth subcultures have high rates of self-harming behaviour—an identified risk factor for suicide.

Despite the headline, sub-headline, and the reference to the "bogeyman of the internet", the feature was also ambivalent about the internet. Professor Patton is quoted as saying that "the internet is a powerful new medium" that allows marginalised youths who are at risk of suicide to come in contact with similar young people. Overseas experience from the U.S. and from Japan of suicide and the internet was detailed. The feature concluded with a warning to parents to police their children's use of the internet. Helpline information was included with the feature. But other than the information provided by Professor Patton about self-harming behaviour no other information about the link between mental illness and suicide was provided.

Subsequent coverage

A significant news report emerged in late May from the television program *60 Minutes* and *AAP* that again blamed the internet as the causal agent in the deaths of the two girls, and put the story back onto the news agenda: "Suicide pact teen's

parents sickened by website" (2007, 20 May, *AAP*). The report was based on an interview with Jodie Gater's parents broadcast on the National Nine Network *60 Minutes* program (Bartlett, McNab & Howes, 2007) on 20 May. The *AAP* report said the parents were "sickened" by the fact that their daughter was able to get explicit information—"step-by-step instructions"—about how to kill herself from the internet. The report contained helpline information. Newspaper coverage headlines the next day included:

- "Suicide heartbreak" (2007, p. 2). (21 May, *The Canberra Times*).

- "Death pact teen's dad 'shocked'" (2007, p. 12). (21 May, *Ballarat Courier*).

- "Website sickens parents" (2007, p. 9). (21 May, *Geelong Advertiser*).

- "Parents get internet shock" (2007, p. 10). (21 May, *Northern Territory News).*

- "Suicide girls got instructions from internet site, says father" (Kontominas, 2007, p. 7). (21 May, *The Sydney Morning Herald*).

Only the reports in the *Ballarat Courier* and the *Geelong Advertiser* published helpline information for readers—despite the information's inclusion in the original *AAP* newswire report.

A key feature of the *60 Minutes* program was the role the internet played in the girls' deaths. Jodie's father and *60 Minutes* reporter, Liam Bartlett, explicitly detailed the method of the suicides with verbal and visual descriptions. Visuals showed the scene of the deaths and the tree used by the two girls to kill themselves. These details, the visualisation of the scene, the lack of appropriate viewer warning, and the central interview with the bereaved parents, led the Hunter Institute of Mental Health, SANE Australia, the Mental Health Council of Australia, among others to lodge a formal complaint to the Australian Communications and Media Authority. The complaint has not yet been adjudicated.

Conclusion

The news coverage of this tragic event reflects typical media templates (Kitzinger, 2000) of reporting risk including the use of familiar enduring news frames of the role of the internet in the suicides, the intrinsic danger of adolescence, parental responsibility for their children's welfare, and fear associated with youth subcultures. These enduring news frames—fear of the internet, and of youth subcultures—reflect broader societal narratives and discourses regarding new technologies, and the vulnerability of adolescents to themselves and to each other.

But initial news frames were contested in later newspaper reports. Competing frames around the 'emo' youth subculture appeared quite early in newspaper reporting of the deaths by suicides. But a replacement, alternative news frame then appeared; adolescence as intrinsically a time of high risk for young people. Yet the 'fear of the internet'—although sometimes dismissed in newspaper features—persisted in much coverage as the way to tell the story of this tragic event. The media implication that both the internet and youth subcultures caused the deaths of the two young girls was a short-lived phenomenon; a typical news-media-led 'moral panic' (Critcher, 2006; Cohen, 1973). Yet the news media's routine use of enduring news frames, such as internet fear, and fear of youth subcultures, enables both journalists and audiences to maintain a limited and restricted set of meanings that resonate with widespread cultural understandings.

Our analysis reveals that Australian newspapers inconsistently followed the advice in the Australian government's media resource, *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002)—a source of competing and alternative frames for this coverage. In particular, the inclusion of critical context about the links between mental illness and suicidal ideation were generally not mentioned or downplayed. A comprehensive evaluation of compliance by the Australian press (and broadcast media) to the guidelines can be found in Dare et al. (2007) and Blood et al (2008).

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