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ORIGINAL PAPER

Mediating Suicide: Print Journalism and the Categorization of Queer Youth Suicide Discourses

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Abstract This article undertakes textual analysis to examine some of the ways in which knowledge around sexuality-related youth suicide and its causes are produced and made available through news media discourses and news-making processes. Four categories of sexuality-related suicide discourses were identified in news stories and features over the past 20 years: statistical research that makes non-heterosexuality implicit as a cause of suicide; stories about deviancy, guilt, and shame; suicide survivor stories; and bullying/harassment of non-heterosexual persons by individuals in schools and other institutions as suicide cause. Through processes of news production and meaning-making, use of expert opinions of primary definers, experiential accounts, reliance on citations of quantitative data, private accounts given as entertainment, and the newsworthiness of suicide as drama, public knowledge on queer youth suicide is guided by contemporary journalism. In all cases, the underlying relationship between heteronormativity, mental health, depression, and despair were frequently excluded in news journalism on queer youth suicide.

Keywords Queer youth · Suicide · News · Discourse · Bullying · Sexual orientation

Introduction

Although it has been argued that historically the reporting of sexuality-related youth suicide in news media is remarkably scant (Rofes, 1983), the limited coverage plays a very significant role in making available particular discourses, concepts, and frameworks for understanding the relationship between non-heteronormative (lesbian/gay/bisexual) sexuality and suicide risk. Through the professionalized relationship between news media producers and industries, institutions, the public, and administrative bodies from which they draw their media sources, print journalism's framing of sexuality-related suicide has a potential function in guiding policy development, health communication methods, and funding on this pertinent issue for youth safety and health maintenance.

News media structure societal discourses by "structuring the thresholds of thought, knowledge, and communication" (McCoy, 1993). In the case of print media, the journalistic codes of ethics and self-regulation (Henningham, 1993) contribute to public knowledge through "agenda setting," whereby particular discourses which make queer youth suicide intelligible and known to a wider public are disseminated, while other approaches and perspectives remain unavailable. Conflicting information and ideas, regardless of whether they are conservative or radical, grounded in scientific sources or moral discourses, tend to be suppressed, marginalized or proffered as "incorrect" ways of thinking (Boyd-Barrett, 1995). Knowing the extent to which news media have a role in creating public awareness of an issue such as youth suicide is important for understanding the conceptual framework in which health, intervention, and policy development occurs. Likewise, understanding how news media set the tone and make particular ways of thinking about sexuality-related suicide both available and unavailable is important to developing strategies which address, combat, fund, and develop networked approaches to reducing suicide risk among younger non-heterosexual persons.

For nearly 20 years, it has been well-understood in policy, psychology, sociology, pediatrics, and other research that non-heterosexual younger persons are at greater risk of suicidal

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behavior, ideation, thoughts, and acts than those of youth identifying as heterosexual (Gibson, 1989; Hegna & Wichstrøm, 2007; King et al., 2008). There have been improvements over the past two decades in the social situations and environment for younger non-heterosexual persons that have been thought to contribute to suicidality, particularly in the areas of media representation (Padva, 2004), legal protections against discrimination (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009), protections against harassment (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). However, the prevalence of suicide among non-heterosexual youth remains high (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009; Zhao, Montaro, Kgarua, & Thombs, 2010). There is, however, no uniform agreement in the suicide literature on specific causes which range from environmentally-induced clinical depression to the effects of intolerance (McAndrew & Warne, 2010). That is, while public attitudes continue a liberal shift towards positive tolerance and acceptance of non-heterosexuality across a range of institutions, the higher frequency of suicide attempts and mental health concerns among current lesbian, gay or bisexual youth in a range of countries is a matter of continuing concern for both health policy and research. In both cases, public news discourse on sexuality-related suicide has an influential function in producing and disseminating knowledge, theories, and approaches to queer youth suicide and organizing the public imagination of the relationship between non-heterosexual sexualities and suicidality.

This article examines the rationales offered for queer youth suicide in news media reports where a linkage between suicide and sexuality has been inferred. Representative of the themes which emerge in more widespread news coverage in Anglophone countries, the article draws predominantly on news stories and features printed in the Australian Fairfax media group (*The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*) from 1990 to 2010, with a view to showing not only the themes, categories, and discourses of queer youth suicide made available, but how particular shifts in recent years reflect changing attitudes toward the public importance and causes of sexuality-related youth suicide. These papers represent the dominant Australian city-based news, produced as broadsheets and representative of quality journalism and diverse editorial views.

The purpose of this article was to present research which critically assesses what is included inside and outside of media frames concerning causal claims for queer suicide and suicide attempts. Below, I provide a short discussion of the theoretical approach underpinning the textual analysis and the methods by which news articles were selected, coded, and analyzed, and how this has resulted in four identifiable categories of queer youth suicide reporting. It then presents textual analyses of representative samples from each of these categories, in order to demonstrate in each case how the relationship between suicide and sexuality was framed in the production and dissemination of news media.

Sexuality, Suicide, and News

The media reporting of sexual minority issues has often been controversial. Gross (1991) made the important point that while right-wing conservatives and anti-gay Christian fundamentalists have attacked networks for what they consider to be overly favorable attention to gay people, much of that attention involves the portrayal of lesbian/gay persons, groups, and organizations in ways that reinforce rather than challenge prevailing negative stereotypes (Gross, 1991). A long campaign of lesbian/gay activism sought to improve news and journalistic media's depiction of sexual minorities in the latter part of the 20th century (Montgomery, 1981), shifting beyond marginalization through either invisibility or sensationalism. As a result, more positive coverage of non-heterosexual identities, themes, and concepts has begun to appear in fictional and entertainment media (Cover, 2000), however news media continue to report issues related to non-normative sexuality within relatively narrow discursive frameworks. The concepts which make particular sexualities intelligible and coherent are governed by news-making processes which include news values that generate the applicability of a story to the public.

At the same time, media reporting of suicide has been understood as complex and sometimes problematic for more than a century (Stack, 2005), with concerns that depictions of suicide can lead readers to attempt suicide—a phenomenon often referred to as "contagion" (Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003) or "imitation." While suicide reporting is known to have some impact, such as through normalizing suicide as a solution to a crisis (Wilson & Lunn, 2009), the extent to which media depictions are directly causal of subsequent suicides is unknown (Pirkis & Blood, 2001). As a result of news media's caution over suicide imitation, only certain kinds of suicide story appear regularly in the media and these are suicides that occur in a public space, that involve a public figure such as a celebrity, politician or official, that are likely to impact on public policy or that are otherwise deemed newsworthy (Coyle & MacWhannell, 2002). The ways in which suicide is reported in non-fictional stories in the press is, therefore, guided by dominant news values and newsworthiness (Blood, Pirkis, & Holland, 2007; Manning, 2001). Thus, reporting on queer youth suicide is, in this understanding, tacitly regulated through codes of news production, whereby conflict and novelty can be understood as reasons for the selection and coverage of topics that appear in professional news media.

In investigating the ways in which news media report sexuality-related youth suicide, it is important to acknowledge that the news practices in which both non-heterosexual sexualities and suicidality are reported—and how these have changed over time—are joint influences on how this sometimes-controversial topic is handled. Textual analysis provides one of the most coherent ways in which to understand how the genres of news, features, and investigative reporting produce different ways of framing queer youth suicide causal factors. A textual analysis

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working from a cultural studies approach suggests that it is not the transmission of ideas through content alone which produces meaning, but the ways in which those meanings are produced in cultural contexts (Carey, 1988). From a cultural studies perspective, media texts are encoded ideologically and decoded variously in the process of reading (Fiske, 1989; Hall, 1993). A cultural approach to a text's meaning acknowledges that it operates within particular discourses or ways-of-knowing, which institutionalize and regulate meaning (Wodak & Meyers, 2009). For the present study, this involved analyzing representative media articles to group and classify media stories into common themes.

Classification of Queer Youth Suicide Reporting

A database search was conducted of all Fairfax Media titles (which includes the city-based broadsheets *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and the *Newcastle Herald*, among others) for articles containing the terms "suicide" or "youth suicide" together with the terms "gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer" appearing in print between January 1991 and April 2011. Features and news articles were included; the results did not produce any Letters to the Editor. The search produced 198 results. After the exclusion of false responses (produced, for example, where the term suicide coincided with name "Gay") and book, theatre and film reviews, 57 articles remained. Articles were coded and categorized by the author on the basis of a first-run textual analysis, in which the basic theme, ostensible purpose and article type were identified, followed by use of terms and analysis of context.

Coding and textual analysis resulted in four identifiable categories of news reporting on sexuality-related suicide. The first and oldest form emerged in the early 1990s, and included news stories which reported a statistical relationship between queer youth and suicide, referring typically to a queer population or sexual subculture as being vulnerable and at risk. The second, which was most frequently found in the feature article genre, can be referred to as the "deviancy" or "difference" of queer suicide, involving in-depth personality stories and relying on interviews in order to relate suicide as the result either of guilt or shame over sexual non-normativity. These frequently focused on adult queer suicide, but often referenced queer youth suicide as a related issue, regardless of whether the article's tone was gay-positive or cautiously condemnatory. The third category focused on the suicide survivor, discussing challenges faced by one or more specific queer youth, and invariably mentioning that the person had seriously considered or attempted suicide. Within this category, suicide attempts were posited as the result of endemic social problems, such as entrenched heterosexism, and the majority demonstrated the ways in which the institutionalization of anti-queer sentiment in secondary schools related to suicide risk. The fourth category appeared in the press subsequent to the high-profile suicide of university student Tyler Clementi and the media reports on several sexuality-related suicides during late 2010. The way in which news stories are presented in the articles articulated a relationship between sexuality-related suicide and specific acts of bullying. Importantly, the rhetoric of bullying here indicated a shift away from institutionalized and cultural formations of heterosexism and instead "individualized" causal factors by suggesting that suicide was the direct result of the harassing behavior of a small number of individuals targeting a non-heterosexual younger person.

The four frameworks represent the dominant available ways for thinking about queer suicide (and, particularly, queer youth suicide) in news media. Table 1 shows the rate and year clusters of the four categories. The temporal shifts in the dominance of any of the categories were tested by recording the year of publication, the average year for each category, and noting any clusters. Category 1 had a mean year of 2003, with two clusters being in the mid-1990s and in 2010. Category 2 had a mean year of 1997, the majority appearing between 1991 and 1999, with only three occurring after the year 2000. Category 3 had a mean year of 1998, the largest cluster in 1997 alone. Category 4 produced a mean year of 2009, with most articles appearing in 2010, and three early pieces between 2001 and 2006. There was thus a clear shift from articles which focused on deviancy, guilt, and shame (the dominant category of gay-negative reporting) towards those which invoked the suicide survivor motif, towards those which addressed bullying as a causal factor, with a relatively even spread of articles citing or mentioning various suicide statistics across the period up to 2011. The remainder of this article will provide a discussion on key features and implications of the four categories of sexuality-related suicide reporting that emerged through textual analysis.

Suicide Statistics Reporting: Queer Vulnerability

A significant portion of news stories on sexuality-related youth suicide over the past two decades have focused on the reporting of queer youth suicide statistics, including stories about other queer issues which reiterate youth suicide statistics. In almost

Table 1 Categories of sexuality-related suicide reporting

Category	*N*	Mean year of articles (clustering)	Causal rationale
Statistics	9 (16%)	2003	Non-heterosexuality
Deviancy/difference	16 (28%)	1997	Shame and guilt
Suicide Survivor	13 (23%)	1998	Culture of heterosexism
Bullying	19 (33%)	2009	Individual peer behavior

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all cases throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, queer youth suicide news stories cited Gibson's (1989) United States administration study on gay and lesbian suicide that "gay youth are 2 to 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people" and that they "may comprise up to 30 percent of completed suicides annually." Drawing on prior work of Jay and Young (1977) and Bell and Weinberg (1978), these statistics, only recently in question in suicidology, entered the public sphere predominantly through news reports that either (1) reported the release of these or updated statistics or (2) utilized the statistics in a report on another aspect of youth suicide or youth sexuality issues. Although Gibson's study was issued in 1989, it was not until the mid-1990s that Australian and other Anglophone mainstream news sources covered the issue of sexuality-related suicide, predominantly for the reason that the report itself was not significant news impacting on a broad readership. Rather, during that period, the reporting of any issue related to homosexuality was unlikely unless it related to celebrity or scandal (Moritz, 1992). While journalistic reporting of the queer youth suicide rate helped create public awareness of a social and health issue, the uncritical and non-investigative forms through which they were cited were problematic in that many of the reports produced the notion that non-normative sexuality was *in itself* causal of suicide risk.

For example, a report in *The Age* cited the statistics and made the link between non-heterosexuality and vulnerability to suicide in the title "Young gay men greater risk of suicide: study" (Dow, 1996). The story was linked to the National Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Bisexual Health Conference held in Sydney in October 1996. This article pointed out that the conference was told that "almost five in six young gay men studied had had suicidal thoughts" (Dow, 1996). As a news piece, there was little capacity for in-depth analysis of statistical research or critical commentary on the causes of queer youth suicide; rather, it established a link between sexual non-normativity and suicide ostensibly by stating that "homosexuality was under-reported as a cause of suicide," establishing a knowledge framework of linearity in which queer identity is itself the source of suicidal behavior.

A short feature in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by Jopson (1997) was titled "Being Gay is a Big Factor in Youth Suicide" and began with the link "About one in three gay American teenage boys attempts suicide and Australia probably has the same rate; it's just that nobody has asked." The story presented material from an interview with Gary Remafedi, visiting professor of pediatrics from the University of Minnesota. Remafedi made the point that a national conference on youth suicide he had been attending in Canberra had too little focus on lesbian/gay youth suicide issues. The statistics form the thematic backbone of the narrative to justify the topic of queer youth suicide as social problem. Remafedi's presence at an Australian conference provided the article with newsworthiness and timeliness and it was this to which the statistics were tagged. The utilization of a suicide theorist presents what Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Robert (1978) referred to as a "primary definer" who, by virtue of being an accredited source within a hierarchy of credibility, was positioned to have his or her definitions of an event or phenomenon accepted. In the case of this feature, the notion that non-normative sexuality leads to a greater suicide risk is authenticated by the relationship between Remafedi as primary definer and the 1989 suicide statistics.

In some cases, the use of statistics on sexuality-related youth suicide were not the main focus of the story but were re-circulated through (sometimes tenuous) links between the rate and the topic, often a piece on queer youth issues. These included a spate in 2002 and 2003 when age of consent laws for same-sex sexual activity were debated and eventually changed in New South Wales, whereby several articles included mention of the high rates of suicide among lesbian/gay youth, particularly if the piece was slanted towards the arguments for change in the laws (McGrory & Cerise, 2003). Similarly, a 2004 story in *The Sunday Age* on the New York Harvey Milk high school for lesbian and gay adolescents discussed first the camp behavior of students encountered at the school gates, but went on to relate the school's role in providing a safe learning environment. The story discussed queer vulnerability and reiterated the statistic that "two in five attempt suicide" (Clarke, 2004). The reiteration of such statistics produced a conception of the link between sexuality and suicide as timeless and unchanging, again problematically reinforcing the underlying notion that non-normative sexuality is itself causal. Other articles during the period also cited statistics uncritically (Gough, 2004); indeed, by the mid-2000s, it had become *de rigeur* to state youth suicide statistics in any article that dealt with queer youth either as the story or as a matter related to another topic on youth.

Deviancy and Guilt; Difference and Shame

Articles that were identified in the second category presented sexuality-related suicide as the basis for reporting but, using an investigative feature mode, discussed the experiences of difference and distinction of sexual minorities as either deviancy or novelty, presenting one or other as a causal factor in suicide attempt or ideation. Deviancy is often a reason for reporting individual suicide attempts among a population or community: "deviation from what are assumed to be shared norms and values (held by the reader) such as drug addiction, being charged with, or in prison for, a criminal offence such as murder, fraud, etc. are implicated as motives for suicide" (Coyle & MacWhannell, 2002). Importantly, stories of *completed* suicides, whereby the cause was framed as deviancy, were exclusively the stories of adult gay men—although they often referred to queer youth as a suicide problem. Stories of suicide ideation or unsuccessful *attempts* were almost exclusively about younger persons and frequently related to the novelty or difficulty of living a queer

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life. Through the genre of investigation, these reports present alternative ways of thinking about the reasons behind queer suicide, linking suicidality with either *guilt* (for deviant adults) or *shame* (predominantly for youth). This draws on a master narrative in which adult men's non-normative sexuality is seen as cause for guilt while women's and children's sexualities are produced through the concept of victimhood and innocence (Malón, 2010).

The case of New South Wales Justice David Yeldham is an important example of the framing of adult queer suicide causes relating to deviancy. However, many articles also depicted the life and background of the judge as associated with a combination of shame due to intolerance and guilt produced in the revelation of a secret double-life of closeted homosexuality. A significant public figure and supreme court judge, Yeldham was named in the New South Wales parliament in October 1996 by an anti-pedophilia crusader as being homosexual and a potential pedophile; he committed suicide the following month in response to the revelation of his private homosexuality in the public sphere. Although not identified as a pedophile, Yeldham was known to have engaged in male–male public sex and to have paid male sex-workers, some of whom may have been under the age of consent.

Shame and guilt over public revelation of closeted homosexuality has been articulated as a cause of gay suicide in the middle of the 20th century in which people felt forced to "choose between what they perceive to be a life of ruin and disgrace as an exposed homosexual and ending their life through suicide" (Rofes, 1983). Marr's 1,402 word article appearing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in late 1996 examined the case that led to Yeldham's suicide in the wake of the controversy, but focused predominantly on some of the activities Yeldham had attempted to keep private. The piece dealt with the ways in which the revelation of the private matter of a homosexual life and an enforced "coming out" could lead to suicide, but ironically did so by discussing that private homosexual life. Marr's motivation here was clearly to provide more accurate information about Yeldham in the midst of the hysteria of a moral panic around sexual deviancy and to separate the judge's secrecy from acts of sexual crimes. One passage is poignant here:

> There is knowing and knowing. Many lawyers knew, many gay men knew, and, once word began to circulate eight months ago that the royal commission was interested in Yeldham, many journalists knew. The news was spread widely by those complaining that this ex-judge had been gently handled by the commission's lawyers…. But it seems Yeldham's family may never have known…. He thought they would be dismayed, upset. He wasn't fearful of rejection, but he had lived the second life so long they'd know he was lying to them all along. The longer he lived the lie, the bigger it became. (Marr, 1996)

A traditional connection between shame and sexual non-normativity is re-asserted here, but it is a complex set of linkages. On one level, this is the shame of a closeted homosexual of an older stereotype, preferring his family to be unaware of his sexual activities. At another, it is the concern of a highly public individual to maintain the privacy of his sexual life. On one hand, this is about homosexuality, but on another the suicide is given meaning through guilt over secrecy from Yeldham's family, exacerbated by the collapsing of "homosexual" and "pedophile" in the accusations against him (Scheper-Hughes & Devine, 2003). Marr's article, then, attempts to locate the character of Yeldham against the backdrop of these tenuous if complex linkages constituted in competing narratives around sexuality, shame, guilt, privacy and the law. Rather than normalizing his non-heterosexuality, however, it unwittingly framed it as deviant through the combination of guilt and the revelation of private matters, thereby producing a causal link between guilt and suicide. Additionally, the question of privacy is central to the ways in which this category of reporting operated. The feature article genre, which investigates that which is not publicly known about a notable figure, operates both to provide information to the public (Gauthier, 2002) and to be read through the consumption of revelation as entertainment (Archard, 1998). There was a collapsing of shame and guilt in the case of articles on Yeldham's story, whereby they required the reader to disentangle these through consuming his privacy in order to determine whether his suicide is being discussed as the result of deviancy revealed or shame caused by broader cultural intolerance of non-heterosexual behaviors.

Youth-focused news articles on suicidality also operate within this mode, but without expressing non-heterosexuality as ostensibly deviant and guilt-ridden. Instead, queer suicide is depicted as caused by sexual difference and other youth-specific obstacles that result from a lack of tolerance. They communicate the "private" experiences of non-heterosexuals within the context of shame-related suicidal ideation. As with guilt, shame has been noted as a causal factor in queer youth suicides (Lester, 1997; McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008). Where guilt-driven suicide has been given meaning through individual blame, shame-driven suicide is predicated on the idea that social intolerance causes the subject to attempt suicide as the solution to intolerable emotional pain (Shneidman, 1985). What occurs, then, is the use of investigation into private feelings that produces a logic whereby shame-inducing intolerance leads to the suicide of non-heterosexual youth.

This was demonstrated by a lengthy 1999 feature article in *The Age* of 1700 words that discussed the newly-released book of Australian lesbian/gay coming out stories—true stories by politicians, sports stars, and others. The article opened with the following narrative:

> She didn't want to die, she just wanted to see herself bleed. She was only 12 the first time she took a razorblade

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> to her wrists. […] At first, Jess Langley didn't know why she was "different" from the other girls at school, just that she was. For a while she thought she was just a slow learner when it came to boys. By 14, she was pretty sure she was a lesbian. She wasn't happy. (Curtis, 1999)

The piece discussed editor of the anthology, Erin Shale, her own experience as a high school counsellor, and the fact that the motivation for writing the book occurred when she sat by the hospital bed of a young male student who had attempted suicide. The article followed this discussion with a second in-depth narrative about a gay teenager:

> Travis Macfarlane was 13 when he [realized] he was gay. He was 14 when he first tried to kill himself: "I played football and did all the things guys are supposed to do. I was so good at being 'straight'." […] Macfarlane, now 23, was devastated the day, in the school corridor, when a friend started calling him gay. "It still hurts me. I felt like I was being crucified. I was thinking, 'I know it's bad to be gay, but I didn't ask to be like this. You're my friends and you're doing this to me.' I was so angry with them, I was thinking, 'I'm trying to be straight, give me a chance. I thought this gay thing must be so bad if even my friends feel like this. What would mum think?'" (Curtis, 1999)

Importantly, each of the personal extracts began with an account of a suicide attempt in order to present queer youth experience as bordering on the unbearable. Both extracts related a narrative of shame as private pain. They present shame and self-loathing as the reasons behind their suicide attempts or self-harm whereby shame was presented as the cause of suicide—and intolerance as the cause of shame. As with the statistics reporting, linearity was established, although in this case non-heterosexual vulnerability is not being made available to be read as a direct cause of suicide or likely to lead to it.

The Suicide Survivor: Heterosexism

A third identifiable category of media reporting concerns younger persons who have attempted and survived suicide. Many of these involved the stories of young non-heterosexual persons who were depicted as "crusaders" in attempting to redress intolerant environments, suing their schools or workplaces for promoting a culture of extensive heterosexism and discrimination. Often, the stories were notable for the fact that they work within a liberal regime of social change and articulate a suicide attempt, overcoming depression or unhappiness as part of the motivation for seeking change personally. Articles in this category of reporting presented a positive outlook on sexuality-related suicide, whereby activism and institutional change were predicted to be that which overcome heterosexist environment of schools and workplaces. Heterosexism as a cultural formation was emphatically expressed in these articles as the primary social cause of queer youth suicide.

For example, a 1997 article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* discussed the story of 14-year-old Christopher Tsakalos who had taken the NSW Department of School Education to court for failure to protect him against homosexual vilification and violence. Before naming the complainant and prior to discussing the legal case, the feature article began with a narrative about harassment, name-calling in the school grounds ("faggot or poofter"), and violence against those who do not conform to "the stringent sexual norms of the Australian schoolyard" (Passey, 1997). The piece articulated the problem of an institutional environment which fosters homosexual vilification and related this as among the causal factors for gay and lesbian youth suicide. The feature also explored Tsakalos' individual case, referring to the specifics of his suicide attempts—as the article put it, "he has tried to commit suicide three times and says this was a plea for help" (Passey, 1997). Tsakalos' attempts were not the core of the article; instead it focused on the lawsuit and vilification more generally. However, the depiction of suicide attempts was presented as "evidence" of the need for social change, thereby constructing a causal link between heterosexism in the institutional environment and suicide as its outcome.

Unlike the previous two classifications of sexuality-related youth suicide reporting, neither sexual identity itself nor the internalization of guilt or shame were represented as causal; rather, causal factors were centralized on the culture of heterosexism, particularly as it is institutionalized in secondary school environments. Heterosexism has been defined as the normatized position of entitlement or privilege based on claims or being heterosexual, resulting usually in the denigration or stigmatization of non-heterosexual persons, behaviors, relationships and communities (Walton, 2006). Heterosexism validates different-sex coupling and in schools and produces tacit and sometimes explicit intolerance of alternative sexualities (Walton, 2006). The articles in this category depict schools as maintaining an environment in which non-heterosexual persons become vulnerable to themselves. Suicide, then, is understood as the result of "minority stress" or "gay-related stress" (Russell, 2003) whereby cultural formations of prejudice and discrimination institutionalized in the school environment position the young queer subject to consider suicide as a means of escape or an end to victimization (Fenaughty & Harré, 2003).

Similar articles in this category focused on the institutional environment of schools, presenting a culture of heterosexism that result from a lack of positive supports for young non-heterosexual students. More than half of the articles in this category were published in 1997, which is slightly prior to the increased interest in the development of anti-vilification and anti-discrimination policies in Australian school in the early 2000s (Ferfolja, 2007). These articles also produced a knowledge framework in which queer youth suicide is the result of a lack of supportive environment in schools. This view is coterminous

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with more recent work on sexuality-related suicide which has argued that the social conditions of the everyday environment are dominant among risk factors. Hatzenbuehler (2011) tested this view by developing an index of the social environment surrounding queer youth, which included the presence of anti-discrimination and queer-specific anti-bullying policies and the presence of other support mechanisms in schools. He found that in negative environments which lacked these, the rate of queer youth suicide attempts was 20% higher than in positive and supportive environments.

Individualizing the Causes: Bullying

Very recently, a new framework for reporting sexuality-related suicide has emerged subsequent to North American Rutgers University student, Tyler Clementi, taking his life on September 2010. Clementi's death was followed by a spate of reports on queer youth suicide that depicted bullying as a causal factor. These formed the fourth category of news reports. An article in *The Age* in early October 2010 reported that the 18-year-old jumped from the George Washington Bridge after his roommate remotely used a webcam to capture footage of Clementi during an intimate encounter with another male in the room and broadcast it live. The roommate was charged with invasion of privacy for using the camera to view and transmit a live image (Foderaro, 2010).

The article did not discuss issues around Clementi's sexuality other than the fact that his sexual identity was not well-known by others in the dorm, although the report did refer to hints on his Facebook profile and a Twitter message showing the roommate thought Clementi was gay. Nor did the article make reference to heteronormativity or institutionalized heterosexism in the university environment. Rather, it articulated the cause of the suicide as the result of the roommate's bullying via acts of humiliation and did so through a quote from the chairman of a local gay rights group: "We are sickened that anyone in our society…might consider destroying others' lives as a sport" (Foderaro, 2010). This quote, which is the only phrase discussing causes or reasons, individualized the root of sexuality-related suicide as the act of "any one" destroying a life or treating another person's private activities as a game. Later articles did, in fact, open up the question of heterosexism, with quotes from other Rutgers students stating that, if Clementi had been in bed with a woman, there would have been no cause for suicide. Other students, however, suggested that it was not related to any anti-queer sentiment but "a prank gone wrong, rather than an anti-gay persecution" (The Age, 2010).

Subsequent news articles on queer youth suicide maintained the focus on bullying, whether discussing either Clementi's death or the handful of other suicides that occurred in September and October 2010. For example, a feature story in *The Age* a week later reported the establishment of the *It Gets Better* YouTube video site developed by columnist Dan Savage. It referred to completed suicides of "teens who were believed to be victims of anti-gay bullying," and quoted an interviewee stating that until recently he had thought "even kids who were bullied now had online communities or other ways of feeling hope about their identities" (Italie, 2010). The trend indicated here is that queer youth suicide is discussed within a framework of individual harassment. This was confirmed in the narrative when, two weeks after Clementi's suicide, a 13-year-old shot himself after coming out: it was reported that he had been "taunted at his middle school" (McKinley, 2010). It was also reported that in September 2010 another 13-year-old hanged himself after being "unable to bear a relentless barrage of taunting, bullying and other abuse at the hands of his peers" (McKinley, 2010). Clementi's death was described as "just one of several suicides in recent weeks by young gay teenagers who had been harassed by classmates, both in person and online" (McKinley, 2010). Finally, other stories on queer youth throughout the remainder of the year have cited the problem of small-scale bullying, including one about the Victorian government's pre-election policy to fund a "Safe Schools Coalition" to share resources and combat homophobia in schools. The article discussed some individual cases of openly gay students bullied at school where bullying took the form of exclusion, verbal and physical abuse, broken bones, graffiti on lockers, and students who have "attempted suicide when the homophobic attacks became too much" (Tomazin, 2010).

Bullying can best be defined as a subset of aggressive behavior intending to cause physical and/or psychological pain to the recipient. Usually, it is unprovoked, repetitive, and the bully is stronger or is perceived to be stronger than the recipient (Kalliotis, 2000). Research on anti-queer bullying has indicated a number of effects which may lead to suicidal thoughts or behaviors. These include psychological distress (Espelage & Swearer, 2008) and reduced social well-being (Hegna & Wichstrøm, 2007) resulting from bullying in school environments. In thinking critically about the ways in which these recent news stories posit bullying as causal of queer youth suicide, it is important to consider both how heterosexism works alongside aggressive bullying and the framework by which the recent news articles have erased heterosexism and heteronormativity from knowledge on sexuality-related suicide. It has thus been linked with suicide and self-harm in the sense that participants in bullying (both aggressors and recipients) are at significantly increased risk of mental and physical health issues and have greater propensity for depression. Current research, however, maintains that it is "impossible to make causal inferences or conclusions that experiencing bullying increases suicide risks" (Kim & Leventhal, 2008).

Some recent research has explored the relationship between homophobia and bullying, and shown how aggressive bullying behavior makes use of homophobic epithets directed not only at queer youth but any youth as a form of abusive rhetoric

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(Espelage & Swearer, 2008). That is, anti-queer speech is understood to be used as a tool of bullying. At the same time, other researchers have suggested that homophobia motivates bullying behavior (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2009), indicating that bullying, then, is a mechanism for enacting and reinforcing homophobic and heterosexist societal attitudes. There is no consensus on whether bullying causes homophobia or the opposite, although it may be inferred that the relationship between the two is likely to be mutual and dynamic. However, as Walton (2006) has pointed out, the term and concept of *homophobia* "suggests an individualized pathology," thereby marginalizing from knowledge on queer youth the problem of cultural and institutionalized heterosexism which makes non-heterosexual behaviors, identities, and expressions non-normative and thereby available for harassment. Similarly, Michaelson (2008) indicated that schools which incorporate issues around entrenched homophobia under anti-bullying policies effectively place the burden of responsibility on victims rather than on the ways in which the institution perpetuates unjust power structures and the marginalization of non-normative difference.

Discussion

This article used textual analysis to uncover some of the ways in which knowledge around sexuality-related youth suicide and its causes are produced and made available through news media discourses and news-making processes. Four categories of sexuality-related suicide discourses emerged in news stories and features over the past 20 years, with each presenting different rationales for the causes of suicide attempts and completions: statistical reporting that implied a link between non-heterosexuality and suicide as a logical outcome; stories that depicted guilt over deviancy or shame over difference as causal; suicide survivor stories which represented suicide attempts as caused by institutional cultures of heterosexism; and bullying of non-heterosexual persons by individuals as suicide cause.

It is not suggested that these four frameworks operate individually or that cultural knowledge on queer youth suicide is produced wholly within non-fictional news accounts. Rather, the public imagination of sexuality-related youth suicide is governed by different and sometimes competing discourses and several different mediums operating in tandem. However, through the news production processes and the ways in which news values are produced by expert opinions of primary definers, experiential accounts, reliance on citations of quantitative data, private accounts given as entertainment, and the newsworthiness of suicide as drama, public knowledge on queer youth suicide is guided by contemporary journalism. Absent in the reports on queer suicide during the past 20 years are the following: articulation of governance, health and youth policy, and discussion of the relationship between suicide and mental health, depression or social work intervention. The ways in which the frames operate to produce or make invisible knowledge around queer youth suicide causes has significance for the study of sexuality, youth, and self-harm. Importantly, through news production and news readership conventions, the four frames also make invisible their own mechanisms of framing, thereby each presenting the more simplistic depictions of queer youth suicide causes as "truth."

The first category identified the ways in which queer youth suicide statistics operate to create a causal link between non-heterosexuality and suicide attempts or completions as its direct outcome. In addition to the ways in which articles reporting or utilizing sexuality-related suicide statistics offer sexuality as the cause of suicide or suicide risk, the unproblematized citation of statistics represented queer youth *in general* as vulnerable and at-risk (Savin-Williams, 2001). This results in two additional issues in how queer youth themselves are represented. Firstly, the experience of queer and non-heterosexual youth is eradicated from the knowledge framework in these articles, articulating queer youth as without agency. Lived experience, self-perception, and diverse ways of conceiving of sexual selfhood tend in such reports to be written out of consideration or drawn upon to support the statistics by arguing that all queer youth lives are "vulnerable lives." Secondly and relatedly, they rely before the numeric count on an unproblematized and essentialist concept of sexual identity, reiterating the idea of homosexual youth as fixed and innate, which may not necessarily be reflective of actual lived sexual experience, desire, and attraction of younger persons (Cover, 2005; Zhao, Montaro, Kgarua, & Thombs, 2010).

There are two issues for public knowledge on queer youth suicide that emerge from statistical reporting that posits non-heterosexuality itself as a primary factor in suicidality. Firstly, there is the assumption in much research that the vulnerability to suicidal behaviors for queer youth is the result singularly of sexuality, rather than looking to the fact that sexuality is one facet of identity—an important and sometimes fraught one for adolescents in general—located within a complex of other formations of identity and selfhood. This is part of what Fuss (1989) has identified as the "synecdochical tendency to see only one part of a subject's identity (usually the most visible part) and to make that part stand for the whole."

This ignores the opportunity to think through the conditions of queer youth as one in which there is interaction between different facets of identity (such as gender and ethnicity, but also personal experience), different contexts in which identity is performed, and different institutional settings that vary in response and valuation of non-normative aspects of subjectivity. Secondly, the presentation of queer youth as being at risk of suicidal behavior *per se,* without regard to other factors both environmental and psychological, reinforces the notion that queer youth are vulnerable because they are queer—that is, not because of specific or general social conditions, contexts,

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and experiences. Positing a sub-population as vulnerable because they are in a minority has the tendency to remove any sense of agency from that group as a whole (Meyer, 1996), leaving the subjects at-hand as knowable only though that vulnerability. Neither vulnerability to suicidal behaviors nor resilience that prevents them are built-in factors of a person or group, whether categorizable as part of a minority or not.

Stories that were identified in the deviancy/difference category produced a linear causality of suicide by articulating suicide as the direct result of either guilt (in the case of queer adults) or shame (in the case of queer minors). As with statistics reporting, the singularity of cause was proffered, although the narratives in this category structured queer suicide as a series of steps from non-normative sexuality to the experience of deviancy or difference to the affect of shame or guilt to attempted suicide. Importantly, this category classified the *responsibility* and *agency* for suicide attempts and completions differentially in terms of age: while adult deviancy-guilt constructs responsibility for suicide at the hands of the individual, youth difference-shame more insightfully disseminates the role of intolerance and homophobia as factors in suicidal thinking.

The category of suicide survivor articles, which made use of narratives of youth suicide in order to present heterosexism and homophobia as significant risk factors, were the most insightful in terms of correlating youth suicide with intolerance or lack of acceptance at institutional, policy or social levels. By articulating queer youth suicide as "evidence" of the hardship experienced by a young queer person who had survived suicide attempts, the articles produced the concept that queer youth suicide is an outcome of heterosexism. Importantly, this form of reporting politicizes queer youth suicide by establishing a relationship between the institutionalized culture of heterosexism in schools and queer youth vulnerability and risk. It produces a discourse which recognizes the impact of cultural formations on queer youth and argues for policy-driven change. At the same time, suicide attempts in this category of reports are represented as a sort badge of pride or a sign expressing the hardship of minority subjecthood in a discriminatory environment. Suicide is given, then, as part of the motivation for instances of political action, and it is utilized to authenticate queer youth as young persons living potentially unlivable lives in hostile environments.

The fourth category depicted bullying as the primary causal factor in queer youth suicide attempts and completions. Problematically, these articles, which are clustered in 2010 and early 2011 following the high-profile suicide of university student Tyler Clementi, framed queer youth suicidality within individualized causes. By *not* invoking the ways in which cultures of heterosexism are infused in school institutions, as the previous category had done, the causes of suicide risk are made attributable to a "few bad apples." Two elements are erased in a discourse which posits suicide as a rational response to bullying within a cause-and-effect linearity: (1) the broader cultural framework of heteronormativity in which bullying of those expressing or suspected of non-heterosexual behaviors, attractions or identities occurs; and (2) mental health issues, depression, anxiety, and other factors exacerbated by stresses produced by living in heteronormative social environments. Research has indicated that bullying may be a contributing factor or a trigger; however, the articles in this category resignified bullying as the cause itself. The effect of this most recent classification of news articles is to enact a shift from considering youth suicide as the result of heteronormative cultural frameworks that are difficult to eradicate, instead presenting accountability for suicide not on heterosexism but on the small minority of individuals whose bullying is authorized by that heterosexism, leaving the root social causes of queer youth suicidality unproblematized.

In chronological terms, news narratives discussing queer youth suicide have shifted the ways in which causal factors are related over the past 20 years from those which made non-heterosexuality or endemic shame responsible for suicidality to depictions of institutional heterosexism and societal attitudes as causal to those which focused on specific acts of bullying. This has a number of implications for how queer youth suicide is understood in the public sphere, particularly in terms of the ongoing concerns around politicizing the topic for cultural transformation and institutional or social change (Cover, 2010). The shift away from the framing of queer youth suicide through statistics that inadvertently articulated the cause as non-normative sexuality, as well as the guilt and shame discourses that underpin suicide reporting of queer persons as deviant or different, towards the suicide survivor stories which invoke heterosexism as core to the problem of sexuality-related suicide was a positive move in terms of going beyond reporting and arguing for social change. However, the more recent articles which invisibilize institutional and cultural problems rather than acknowledging that anti-queer bullying has its roots in those cultures is of concern, as it leaves heterosexuality represented as normative and heterosexism as a timeless fact. By individualizing the problem, accountability rests not with institutions, social structures or available ways of thinking about sexuality, but with individuals. This, of course, implies that any form of intervention will be with individuals rather than institutions or discourses, allowing the issues at the core of queer youth suicide to remain.

While an exhaustive quantification of queer suicide news items categorizing how suicide is constructed differently from other, non-sexuality-related suicide stories would be beneficial to the field in the longer term, this study was interested only in identifying the discourses made available in non-fictional print accounts of sexuality-related suicide and self-harm. The study of sexuality and youth would benefit from continued interrogation of the ways in which a range of media forms, from news to entertainment to online communication, contribute to the public and cultural understanding of queer youth suicide and its causes. Investigation of this sort has ongoing benefits for policy formation, funding, health planning and the development of prevention and intervention techniques.

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