

Deaths in the news 1956-2006

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Abstract

This paper examines coverage of deaths in Australian newspapers in 1956 and 2006, using a detailed quantitative content analysis of six major metropolitan dailies in 1956 and seven in 2006. It examines changes over time and differences between papers. One long-term trend has been for newspapers to impose greater comprehensibility in the way they report events. There is little evidence in either the frequency or prominence of stories to support the idea that news coverage has become more negative, although more violent causes of death now constitute a higher proportion of stories. There has been considerable but circumscribed movement towards the newspapers becoming more cosmopolitan in their coverage of death stories, but there are still substantial differences in the way deaths in the rest of the world are reported, compared with Australia and the West.

Journalism largely consists of saying “Lord Jones is Dead” to people who never knew Lord Jones was alive.

G. K. Chesterton
English author and mystery novelist (1874-1936)

When the prominent literary figure and social commentator G. K. Chesterton wrote this, he probably had in mind the English newspapers of record. The liberal press, which had emerged in the 19th century, at its best kept governments to account, but at its most pedestrian simply recounted the actions of officialdom and served as the diary of the establishment. Reporting the deaths of national leaders and prominent people was one of their staples. At the same time, however, the penny press and yellow press had also developed, and in their pages the reporting of the deaths of less eminent personages figured more frequently, especially when the deaths were a result of horrific crimes, accidents and disasters. These papers were more likely to report the death of Lord Jones’s parlour maid, but only if she had met a grisly end.

While the reporting of deaths has been a constant of the news media, so too has the controversy accompanying it. This has especially been true with international news. Moeller (1999) wrote a deservedly influential book on how the media add to compassion fatigue. Many studies have concluded along similar lines to Hanusch (2008), that the news most values those “close to us”. Adams (1986) studied American television coverage of 35 natural disasters, and included

such measures as the minutes of TV per estimated 1000 deaths. He found coverage varied greatly in different areas of the world, and that it correlated with factors such as distance from New York and the number of US tourists who visited the area, as well as characteristics of the event, notably early estimates of the number of deaths. A recent study concluded that there is a “clear link between the volume of reportage and the global economic impact of these events” (Adam, 2006).

There are many variants of the self-deprecating journalistic expression of which Adams (1986, p. 114) quotes an American example: “One dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth 50 Arabs, who are worth 500 Africans.” Or, as British journalist Martin Kettle put it, “six Brits, 60 Frogs, and 600 more remote aliens” (in Walter et al., 1995, p. 587). Nevertheless the self-mocking irony of such formulations is as informative as their content, suggesting there are countervailing factors at work as well.

Domestically, the greatest controversy has surrounded the coverage of suicide in the media (Putnis et al., 2002; Pirkis et al., 2002). There has been intense debate with strong arguments on both sides about whether news coverage encourages copycat suicide attempts. Following a suicide by a waitress after bullying at work, 2010 Australian of the Year Professor Patrick McGorry praised the resulting media coverage and suggested that media guidelines on reporting suicide may be too conservative (Metherell, 2010).

In reporting other types of fatalities, ethical issues and controversies also frequently arise. What journalists call “the death watch” can involve issues of intrusion into others’ grief and invasion of privacy. Tabloid newspapers are often criticised as sensationalising violence. A distinction should be made here, however, and can be illustrated by two controversial headlines about homicides from Rupert Murdoch’s *New York Post*. After Murdoch purchased the paper in 1976, he brought to that city a cruder reporting than it had experienced in recent decades, and so attracted great criticism. One of its most infamous headlines was “Headless body in topless bar”; another was “Son of Sam – no one is safe”, at a time when notorious serial killer Son of Sam was committing his murders (Leapman, 1983, p. 106). The first is a clever tabloid headline. Presuming it is accurate, it raises only issues of sensationalism and taste, but the second is simply inaccurate. Despite the drama of the murders, any New Yorkers’ actual risk of being murdered was only negligibly greater than before or after the reign of Son of Sam.

The present study is based on a quantitative content analysis of the coverage of deaths in Australian newspapers. It can only very partially explore the many controversies surrounding the reporting of death in the news. However, it can ground such discussions in more reliable data than is often done.

Moreover, examining the coverage of death – this recurring staple of news – is one way to examine both changes and constancies in news coverage. Because it involves editorial decisions about how to respond to a broadly common range of events, or at least common types of events, it also is one way of examining differences between news organisations. Quantitative data can further illuminate the foci of news coverage and thus give insight into the values and priorities of news.

In doing this, it allows us to chart the social picture of the world conveyed by the news, and so provides some insight into social ideologies. For example, in the news media of apartheid South Africa, white people whose deaths figured in the news normally did so as individuals with names, addresses, jobs and grieving families, while blacks typically remained anonymous and their deaths were not reported with the same humanity. The Media Monitoring Project, an NGO, published a report which showed how this was true on the SABC, which in the midst of the change to a democratic era was responsive to such criticisms. Unfortunately, soon after this there was a terrible train accident with 55 deaths: the new, reforming SABC read out all 55 names (Kantor, 1994).

Design

This article explores the reporting of death in major Australian newspapers in 1956 and 2006. It is part of a larger study, the primary purpose of which is to study changes in Australian newspaper reporting, especially political and international reporting, in the first 50 years of television. The papers studied are the major Sydney and Melbourne broadsheets and tabloids, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Age* and *The Sun* (by 2006 entitled the *Herald Sun*), two major monopoly regional dailies (*The Courier-Mail* and *The West Australian*), and in 2006 the national daily, *The Australian* (which began in 1964). For each newspaper, one constructed week was studied: that is, six days, one each of the days Monday from Saturday, drawn randomly from six months of the year, every second month from February through December.

This provided 36 papers for study in 1956 and 42 in 2006. Within the resources available, this sample allows us to contrast patterns of coverage in the two years, 50 years apart, and to make comparisons between the papers. However, six days each year is still a limited basis for generalising, and it is possible that some quirks in the news on the days randomly selected – although well separated from each other and in key respects as representative of the year as any six days could be – could skew the results.

The sample includes all stories which involved a death as more than a passing reference. Its focus was on deaths which figured in news coverage, defined broadly to include references in features, editorials and opinion columns, but not in letters to the editor or advertisements. Neither did we include obituaries, which in recent times have become a regular feature of quality newspapers (Starck, 2008).

Has news coverage of deaths increased?

There are two opposing hypotheses about changes in the amount of coverage of death-related stories. One derives from the widespread conventional wisdom that news has become more negative; that bad news is the best news, and that over the years the news media have become more inclined to accentuate the negative. On the other hand, some cultural theorists have argued that in an increasingly secular age, death has become a taboo. The most influential of these theorists, Philippe Aries, argues that “everything goes on as if nobody died any more”, and that “death no longer makes any sign” (cited in Walter et al., 1995, p. 583). Other theorists, including Anthony Giddens and Norbert Elias, have made similar claims. After examining British newspapers’ coverage of the “peacetime deaths of private UK citizens who were not, prior to their deaths, public figures”, Walter et al. found that in fact the press focus is very much on the emotional impact of events (and that the reporters covering them are often also emotionally affected) (1995, p. 584). They conclude that the theoretical assertions about “the repression of death in modernity should be treated with considerable caution” (1995, p. 594).

Although the time span of the analysis of the cultural aspects of death explored by theorists such as Aries is much longer than half a century, to the extent that an increase in secularisation occurred over the 50 years from 1956, there is no sign in this data that it was accompanied by declining coverage of deaths in the news, and so this study’s data support the findings of Walter et al. But equally the data offer little support for the idea that there has been a change in the opposite direction either. If the news media had become more negative over these five decades, one should find more stories involving deaths or that they were reported more prominently.

In terms of the numbers reported, there is a slight increase (Table One). Taking the six papers which existed in both 1956 and 2006, the number of stories involving a death increased from 301 to 415. Nevertheless, over the period the size of newspapers increased by a much larger factor, from an average of 31.7 pages to 128.9, and an average area of 48.1 thousand square centimetres to 161.3 (Tiffen, 2010, p. 6).

Table 1: Numbers of stories involving deaths

	SMH	DT	Age	Sun	CM	WA	Aust	Total
1956	51	52	46	57	53	42	..	301
2006	52	84	73	71	64	71	70	485

SMH = Sydney Morning Herald; DT = Daily Telegraph; Sun = Melbourne Sun News-Pictorial, now Herald Sun; CM = Courier-Mail; WA = West Australian; Aust = The Australian.

Nor were stories involving a death reported more prominently in 2006. Indeed, *prima facie* the reverse is true, with the number of page one stories in 2006 as a percentage of all such stories having declined to less than one-fifth the percentage in 1956 (Table Two). Similarly, the percentage appearing in the first five pages of the paper declined to about one-third. While in 1956 no death-related stories were reported from page 21 on in the paper, in 2006, 31 per cent were reported this far back. Indeed in the *Herald-Sun*, *Courier-Mail* and *West Australian*, more than half of all death-related stories were positioned on page 21 or later.

However, this apparent decrease in prominence is essentially explained by changes in the size and presentation of the newspapers. The reduced percentage appearing in the first five pages is partly due to the greatly increased size of the newspapers. They often carry international stories involving deaths on pages devoted to international news, which now come further back in the paper.

Similarly, page one has changed dramatically in appearance over the decades, with the number of stories appearing on the page declining substantially. The number of articles appearing on the front page dropped from an average of 8.2 to 3.2 over the 50 years. *The Sydney Morning Herald* dropped from 12.8 to 4.5, and *The Daily Telegraph* from 4.2 to 1.5 (Tiffen, 2010, p. 11).

Table 2: Page placement of stories involving deaths

Page 1 stories (% all stories involving deaths)

	SMH	DT	Age	Sun	CM	WA	Aust	Total
1956	15.7	11.5	17.4	3.5	37.7	19.0	..	17.3
2006	9.6	1.2	5.5	1.4	1.6	4.2	5.7	3.9

Pages 1-5 (% all stories involving deaths)

	SMH	DT	Age	Sun	CM	WA	Aust	Total
1956	76.5	32.7	67.4	47.4	87.8	69.0	..	62.8
2006	36.5	14.3	21.9	14.1	15.7	18.3	25.7	20.2

So, apparent changes in the number and placement of stories involving death are principally an artefact of changes in the size and format of newspapers themselves. The safest conclusion would be that there has been no substantial change – either towards a higher or lower priority – in how such stories are viewed.

Increasing comprehensibility of coverage

Many death-related stories, for example, many of those appearing from page 21 on in 2006, seem to be included in order to perform a journalistic duty, registering an important event but covering it in a brief story without elaboration or exploration. The proportion of news briefs remained stable over the half-century. In 1956 they comprised 17 per cent, and in 2006 16 per cent of all death-related stories.

Despite this constancy, a series of individual changes taken together adds up to newspapers being more active players in conveying fatal events than they were half a century ago. They are more willing to impose their own priorities and interpretations, and more willing to give their readers a more comprehensive and comprehensible view of the fatal event than in the past.

This is seen most simply in the length of stories. Even despite the continuing high proportion of news briefs, death-related stories have become substantially longer. Their average length has more than doubled, from 161 words to 343. In the process, the differences between different types of newspapers have become more pronounced. As the table also shows, perhaps surprisingly, regional newspapers (*The West Australian* and *Courier-Mail*) have the shortest average length of stories, with the metropolitan tabloids (*Daily Telegraph* and *Sun/Herald Sun*) around one-third longer. The average length of stories in the three broadsheet papers is almost double that in the regionals. Similarly in 1956, the great majority of death-related stories in all papers were less than 250 words – the overall average of 82 per cent fell to 46 per cent in 2006. But it was the three broadsheet papers that in 2006 had a substantial number of stories longer than 500 words, around 30 per cent compared with about 10 per cent in the others.

Table 3: Length (mean number of words – all death-related stories)

	SMH	DT	Age	Sun	CM	WA	Aust	Total
1956	225	169	146	122	131	182	..	161
2006	350	258	393	212	308	340	555	343

Another common assertion is that there is less straight reporting in newspapers now. Not only is there more commentary and opinion, but also more interpretation embedded in the reporting, and more tendency for the media to impose their own priorities on the events reported. The current quantitative methodology does not allow us to probe the more qualitative aspects of these claims. But the data do provide evidence of change. The largest number in both years were news stories (80 per cent and 73 per cent), but with a rise from 0 to 11 per cent in features and columns. In 1956, 73 per cent of stories involved an event which had recently happened and was being freshly reported; in 2006 this was down to 52 per cent, with a corresponding rise in stories involving a death that had happened some time ago, with the paper reporting its consequences, follow-ups, and so on. This is still event-centred reporting, but gives some sense that journalists now follow events over a longer course of time.

There was an increase in single stories reporting more than one incident (from 12 per cent to 30 per cent of death-related stories), and from more than one location (2 per cent to 14 per cent). Sometimes such groupings of events may have occurred for aesthetic reasons of layout, but sometimes they involve editorial discretion in linking what are regarded as related or similar incidents.

Similarly in 1956, there were only eight stories in total that examined patterns of death, while in 2006 there were 28 such stories. In both years, traffic accidents were the most common focus for stories examining patterns of death – providing 75 per cent or six out of eight stories in 1956 and 24 per cent of the stories in 2006, with homicides (20 per cent) comprising the next most common topic of these stories.

A final indicator of the increased depth in reporting is the number of death-related stories in which someone – either the newspaper or more usually a source quoted in the story – mentions policy implications raised by the fatality. As Table Four shows, this increased almost three-fold between 1956 and 2006, from 8 per cent to 22 per cent of relevant stories.

Table 4: Mention of policy implications

(% Yes, some mention in all death-related stories)

	SMH	DT	Age	Sun	CM	WA	Aust	Total
1956	20	4	7	4	6	10	..	8
2006	21	16	33	35	14	11	21	22

So, taken together, a series of individual changes – length of story, more variety in article types, more following through of death-related stories over time, more stories reporting more than one fatal event and from more than one location, more stories on patterns of death and more canvassing policy implications – add up to a substantial change in practice, where the newspapers engage in more active processing of the events upon which they are reporting.

Where did deaths in the news occur?

There has been some tendency for the reporting of deaths to become more cosmopolitan. This is reflected in a greater spread of where deaths are reported from internationally, and in more stories involving both Australian and international aspects. The percentage of death-related stories originating from an international location rose from 41 per cent to 53 per cent. Similarly, the percentage of relevant stories involving both Australian and international dimensions rose from 7 per cent to 19 per cent.

As could be expected, the distribution of these stories has shifted somewhat in line with Australia's changing involvement in the world. The foreign country with the single most death-related stories in both years is the United States and, interestingly, that proportion – about one in five – has barely changed overall. The traditional links with Britain, the Commonwealth countries of New Zealand and Canada, and Western Europe show a decline in the proportion of relevant stories – a drop from 39 per cent to 16 per cent – as these countries and regions have become less important to Australia (the UK dropped from 20 per cent to 9 per cent). The shift of focus to Asia – approximately a doubling, to just over a quarter of all international death-related stories – is substantial, although if anything somewhat less than might have been predicted. Similarly, the focus on the Middle East as an increased source of these stories (6 to 15 per cent) is explained both by the violent conflicts there and the way it has become a pivot in geo-political tensions.

Interestingly, while the geographic spread of death-related stories has increased internationally, reflecting the greater globalisation of society and the media, this is not true for the reporting of deaths inside Australia. Indeed, the relative concentration on home state death stories has increased, and the home concentration is greatest in the two largest states. Other parts of Australia have not become more newsworthy despite changes in transport and communication that have brought them closer to each other.

The picture of deaths in the news

News will always fail any test of representativeness because it is sensitive to the properties of individual events rather than social patterns. Moreover, news is often defined as the unusual, the unexpected, “man bites dog” sort of event. It is not surprising, then, that when we compare news coverage of deaths with patterns of real world fatalities, we find many deviations. However, the comparison of the two illuminates news practices and the peculiarities of the picture of the world conveyed by the media. Moreover, while the unrepresentative nature of news may be inevitable, and from an institutional viewpoint understandable, that does not mean it is without important consequences. An American study (Combs & Slovic, 1979) showed that public errors in the perceptions of the relative frequency of causes of death are skewed towards those that claim media attention. In the Australian newspapers, stories involving homicides in 2006 outnumbered deaths from suicides by more than three to one (Table Five). What proportion of the public would know that, as a cause of death, suicide is about eight times as prevalent in Australian society as homicide and even surpasses deaths from traffic crashes (Tiffen & Gittins, 2009, pp. 216, 224, 226)? And what policy consequences follow from the mix of media attention and public perception?

In news stories, the causes of death are, not surprisingly, skewed towards the dramatic. However, this tendency further increased over the 50-year period analysed in the study. The relatively

infrequent causes of death in the news (suicides, natural disasters, man-made disasters and other causes) all remained broadly stable, while the four major causes showed substantial movement in both directions. Natural causes (illness, and so on) – the major cause of death in society – represent only a small percentage of deaths in the news, and that percentage decreased considerably from 17 per cent in 1956 to 10 per cent in 2006.

Similarly, deaths from accidents also showed a substantial decline, from 37 per cent to 21 per cent. When we disaggregate this further, we find that the more prosaic and less sensational types of accidents have shown the most marked decline in the proportion of stories. Car crashes (9 to 6 per cent), pedestrians killed by cars (5 to 0.6 per cent), work-related accidents (4 to 0.4 per cent), domestic fires (3 to 0.2 per cent) and drownings (8 to 3 per cent) all showed declines. Only drug overdoses (0.4 to 1 per cent) and unusual or bizarre accidents (2 to 5 per cent) showed increases. While one must be cautious in generalising from such small numbers on the basis of six news days per year, the general trend seems clear.

In contrast, the percentages of reporting of the two violent causes of death have increased. Crime doubled as a percentage of death-related stories between 1956 and 2006, from 19 per cent to 38 per cent. Deaths from war and political violence rose more modestly, from 15 per cent to 20 per cent of relevant stories. These findings are the first in this study to lend credence to the idea that the news media have become more negative or sensational.

Table 5: Reported causes of death

% of causes of death attributed in stories

	1956	2006
1 Natural causes, illness	17	10
2 Accidents	37	21
3 Crime	19	38
4 Suicide	2	2
5 Natural disaster	2	2
6 War, political violence	15	20
7 Large-scale man-made disaster	1	2
8 Other	7	6

The increase in stories involving deaths from collective political violence is one reason why the number of stories involving multiple deaths has increased. The other main type of cause of death associated with such stories involves natural disasters. In 1956, 67 per cent of stories involved a single fatality, down to 41 per cent of stories by 2006. On the other hand, stories reporting a catastrophe, defined here as an event apparently involving 30 or more deaths, rose from 8 per cent to 19 per cent.

In both years, as would be expected, whether the deceased are named in the news varies directly with the number dying. When a single fatality is reported, 90 per cent of 1956 stories gave the victim’s name, as did 85 per cent in 2006. In both years, the same general trend is clear. So in 2006, as the number of fatalities in a story rises from one through five, the percentage naming the victims drops steadily – 83, 76, 60, 40, 24.

The people dying in the news tend to be disproportionately male and young. In 1956, of those deceased whose gender was apparent, males outnumbered females 3.6 to 1 (66 per cent compared with 19 per cent of stories), while in 2006 this had declined to 1.8 to 1 (48 per cent compared with 27 per cent). In 1956, in stories where the age of the deceased was apparent, one-quarter of victims were aged 30 to 55 and another quarter 56 to 75. In 2006, even though life expectancy had increased substantially over the period, the ages of those whose deaths were reported were younger – one in six were young adults and one in three aged 30 to 55.

Sometimes the newsworthy aspect is the fatal event; at other times it is the person who has died. In both years, stories reporting deaths of well-known people formed less than one in five death-related stories – in 1956, 14 per cent; in 2006, 18 per cent. There was no substantial difference in length or placement between stories reporting the deaths of already publicly known people and those previously unknown. The most substantial difference is that already known or famous people have more routine or natural causes than previously anonymous people whose deaths are reported. In the reporting during 1956, known people died of diseases and natural causes 70 per cent of the time. For unknowns the figure was only 9 per cent. In 2006, the difference was less pronounced – 36 per cent compared with 4, with knowns also outnumbering unknowns in deaths from accidents (35 – 18 per cent). This is consistent with an early observation by Connell (1977) that powerful and well known people more often figure in the news doing normal things, while unknown people figure in the news mainly in extraordinary circumstances, such as being victims of crimes or accidents.

The most anonymous deaths are those occurring in the foreign countries which are reported least often in Australia. This data feeds into the scholarly critiques of “whose suffering counts” and “valuing those close to us” referred to in the introduction. The attention given to the rest of the world increased substantially across the 50 years. The data are based upon the primary location of the relevant stories – those based in Australia, the West (defined as English-speaking and West European democracies) and the rest of the world, which includes everywhere else. The overwhelming majority of the time – more than 95 per cent – the country from which the newsworthy event is reported is also where it occurs, but sometimes the story involves, for example, an Australian view of what is happening elsewhere, or an Australian response.

The proportion of death-related stories in both Australia and the West declined compared with those reported from the rest of the world. However, when we examine particular aspects of the stories, we find that the stories from Western countries in several ways parallel those reported from Australia, while those from the rest of the world are distinctive. So while a strong majority of Australian-based stories named the deceased, and a clear majority of Western-based stories did, only a minority of stories from the rest of the world did. Although that proportion rose in the five decades, it is still much lower than in the West.

The causes of death from the various areas show a similar pattern, with the news menu of deaths from Western countries being much closer to the Australian one than deaths from the rest of the world. Deaths from illness and natural causes in 1956 were almost never reported from the rest of the world. They declined substantially from Australia and the West by 2006, and showed a rise in the rest of the world. But this is explained by more deaths involving epidemics, and especially deaths from AIDS. The proportion of deaths from accidents decreased in all three regions, but remained least reported from the rest of the world. In contrast, stories of deaths from crime increased everywhere, although most especially in Australia and the West.

The one area where the cause of death is far more prevalent in reports from the rest of the world is where death resulted from war and political conflict. In both years, these represented 42 per cent of deaths from the rest of the world, and more than double the percentage from Australia and the West. It should be pointed out that in fact the substance of these stories involved the rest of the world even more than the numbers suggest, as those stories originating in Australia and the West largely concerned conflicts occurring elsewhere in the world. Similarly in 2006, while 26 per cent of relevant stories from the rest of the world involved catastrophes, compared with 5 per cent originating in Australia and 8 per cent in the West, nearly all of these catastrophes actually occurred in developing countries, and all the Australia-based stories, for example, involved an Australian response to what had occurred elsewhere. It should be remembered that this can be interpreted in two ways – namely that coverage of the rest of the world has a disproportionately high amount of disaster news, but also that there is now more concern in the Australian press about what happens in those countries.

Differences between newspapers

In many ways these changes are shared across all the newspapers studied, but in conclusion we note some pertinent differences between the papers. The differences in length between different types of newspapers had become much greater. In 1956 the concentration on death-related stories in different parts of the world showed a fairly close grouping, but by 2006 there was more of a spread, with the broadsheet papers giving more attention to international stories, and especially those occurring outside the West. Similarly, in attention to stories involving violent causes of death, the newspapers have moved in opposite directions. While the tabloid and regional newspapers have barely increased their proportion of stories stemming from war and political violence, the quality papers have. All papers have increased the relative proportion of stories of deaths stemming from crime, but the quality papers less than the other two, with the regional paper showing the sharpest increase. The differences between the types of papers should not be exaggerated, but the tabloids and regionals do have a more parochial set of priorities, and perhaps in their shorter stories present a more frightening view of the deaths occurring in the world.

Conclusion

The data reported above, based on 786 news stories, chart substantial changes in the coverage of death. Many of these changes are in line with improvements in Australian journalism, especially in the broadsheet papers, with increasing length of stories, and more attention to patterns of events and their policy implications.

In both the number and prominence of stories involving deaths, there is no evidence that the news media have become more negative. On the other hand, there has been an increased emphasis on deaths by violent means. Over time, the pattern of deaths in the news has become even less representative of the causes of death in real life.

Australian newspaper coverage of deaths has become more cosmopolitan. At the simplest level this suggests a greater involvement in humanity beyond Australian shores. Although there are many ways in which the rest of the world now figures in Australian coverage of deaths, it is still apparent that broadly the same news values govern coverage of death in Western countries as in Australia, but that coverage of deaths in the rest of the world has a more distinctive pattern. Part of this stems from the actual nature of deaths occurring there, with, for example, more deaths occurring from natural disasters and collective political violence than in the West. On the other hand, these deaths still are more likely to remain anonymous and impersonal.

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